**Introductory Statement**

**by**

**His Excellency Mr. Cosmos Richardson**

**Permanent Representative of Saint Lucia to the United Nations**

**At**

**The 37th session of the UPR Working group**

Madame President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

At the outset, my delegation extends its congratulations to you Madame President, on your election as President of the Human Rights Council and wish you the best during your tenure.

I extend warm greetings on behalf of the Government and People of Saint Lucia. It is my distinct honour to present the third cycle report of Saint Lucia to this 37th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) working group.

I acknowledge my colleagues from the Permanent Mission of Saint Lucia to the United Nations and from the Department of External Affairs in Castries, Saint Lucia who have joined me in this exercise and have contributed to this presentation.

Madame President,

Saint Lucia is a Small Island Developing State which, since our independence in 1979, has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to multilateralism and to fulfilling our international commitments and obligations, including honouring our responsibility to the advancement and preservation of the human rights of our citizens. It is in this spirit that we attach considerable importance to this exercise today, as we gather to give an account of our stewardship over the last five years, hold discussions with our international peers with a view to improving on our ability to protect the human rights of our citizens and others within our borders.

The Constitution of Saint Lucia, the supreme law of the land, guarantees that every person in Saint Lucia is entitled to certain basic fundamental rights and freedoms. Our aspiration is to ensure that all our citizens are afforded the opportunity to live fulfilling lives, where their fundamental rights and freedoms are respected and guaranteed. However, this requires a whole of society approach, including the engagement of civil society.

Madame President,

The last twelve months have undoubtedly been unprecedented times. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to massive disruption in our economies, especially the economies of Small Island Developing States, placed severe burdens on our fiscal positions, exacerbated the inequities in an already unequal international economic system both between and within states, and resulted in severe setbacks which threaten to reverse our hard-won development gains. Countries, like ours who depend on a narrow range of economic activities, have had to make choices between saving lives and livelihoods and other developmental initiatives.

The progress we had made towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals have been placed at a serious risk of reversal during this important decade of delivery. As a small island developing state, we are at the frontline of the adverse impacts of climate change, which is an existential threat to our growth and development. Extreme weather events are occurring with increased frequency and intensity. This threat also poses challenges to our ability to deliver on our human rights commitments including among other things, the preservation of inter-generational equity. Notwithstanding, these vulnerabilities, we remain committed to ensuring the protection of the rights and freedoms of our population, even amidst these unforeseen circumstances.

Madame President,

Since the last UPR review in 2015, Saint Lucia is pleased to report that some progress has been made in addressing important issues identified in that review, although significant resource constraints and challenges are still to be overcome.

For instance, while Saint Lucia has not established a fully functional National Human Rights Institution (NHRI), Government inaugurated the National Coordinating Committee for Human Rights in February 2019 as a pre-cursor to the NHRI. This committee also serves as the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow Up (NMRF) with a mandate to monitor and report on the national human rights situation. Spearheaded by the Department of External Affairs, the Committee includes representatives of Government Ministries such as Justice, Equity, Gender Relations, the Attorney General’s Chambers among others, in addition to Civil Society organisations.

As part of its outreach and public education activities, the Committee has embarked on several capacity building initiatives in collaboration with UN organisations and the Inter-American Human Rights System. One such initiative is the development of a syllabus for the inclusion of human rights in the Public Service Training Catalogue, to build a cadre of public servants who are attune to human rights issues.

Madame President,

During the period under review, Saint Lucia took tangible steps towards the ratification of international human rights treaties. In that regard, in June 2020, Saint Lucia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and acceded to its Optional Protocol. Additionally, in that same period, Saint Lucia acceded to the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Marrakesh Treaty, which facilitates access to published works by Visually Impaired Persons and Persons with Print Disabilities.

The ratification and accession to these instruments are part of a gradual process which Government recognizes are important and are in keeping with SDG target 10.2. Empowerment and inclusion are at the heart of the SDGs and the Government of Saint Lucia recognized the necessity to build on efforts to further empower one of the most marginalized demographics in its development agenda.

Further, the Government also initiated discussions with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, for the provision of technical assistance in the development of plans to ensure that the rights accorded in these instruments should have the full force of domestic law.

In continuing efforts to fulfil our international commitments in respect of the ratification of other human rights treaties, Government officials have participated in seminars hosted by the Convention Against Torture (CTI) Group of Friends in 2016, 2018 and 2020. This is being undertaken with a view to the eventual signing and ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT). Discussions with respect to the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are presently ongoing.

Madame President,

The supply of potable, clean water to some communities was highlighted during the 2015 review when reference was made to the commencement of a water supply re-development project. This project was concluded in February 2020. Access to clean water is a critical component of sustainable development as highlighted in Goal 6 of the SDGs. Its importance has been amplified during this global pandemic, particularly given that clean water is also essential in preventing and containing diseases.

Food and Nutrition Security is a critical element of policy, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the pandemic. Cognizant of the economic and social disparities that exist between children within the education system, and the impact that this can have on their educational advancement, the Government developed a draft School Feeding Policy for the decade (2020-2030), with the support of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This policy ensures that every school child at the primary and secondary level, will be provided with nutritionally balanced meals during the school day. The policy was approved by the Cabinet the last year.

SDG Goal number 2 requires that we collectively fight to reach zero hunger by 2030. The draft School Feeding Policy is one step being taken nationally to reduce and eventually eliminate hunger. There is still more to be done to address food insecurity which has become an even greater concern during the pandemic.

Increasing access to clean water and to nutritious food contributes to better health and welfare, increased opportunities for citizens, including children, women, and girls to achieve their full potential.

Madame President,

Gender equality and in particular the empowerment of women and girls is an underlying policy objective. We share the view that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive society.

Since the last review, some progress has been made in the quest to achieve full gender equality. One of the steps undertaken in this respect has been a review of the national mechanism for the advancement of women. The exercise was facilitated through the National Gender Equality Policy and Strategic Plan (NGEPSP) which targets among other objectives the mainstreaming of gender in Saint Lucia’s National Development.

In addressing gender equality in the school system, the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2015-2020, was enacted to increase the accessibility and affordability of education for all citizens, including the promotion of gender equality. Equal educational opportunities are available at the primary and secondary levels to all individuals. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of greater female enrolment compared to males, predominantly at the secondary and tertiary levels. While welcoming these trends, we are also mindful of the necessity of putting measures in place to ensure that our young males are not left behind and that all our youth have equal access to quality education to prepare them for the new world in which we live.

In 2018, the Education Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP) was launched with the mandate to make available more equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all. The project places a special focus on children with special needs and the provision of quality education to these children.

Education is vital in preparing youth for a future of multifaceted challenges such as digitalization and climate change, but within these challenges are also opportunities as we seek to shape a more sustainable future. In that regard, courses have been offered to expose our students to Science, Technology and Innovation (STI). A special portfolio of Innovation has been created within the Ministry of Education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated that we think outside the box and with the new reality of distance learning, we are confronted with a major challenge of ensuring that students, particularly those in vulnerable situations have access to the tools needed to continue their education within this new environment.

Madame President,

One of the growing global concerns is the increased risk of gender-based violence which have emerged during the pandemic. Increased economic and social hardships, along with restrictions on movement and the resulting isolation, are among the factors that have led to this phenomenon. Gender-based violence is one of the most persistent and under-reported crimes in Saint Lucia. Mindful of this reality, the Government of Saint Lucia has adopted a multisectoral approach in combatting this scourge.

In 2019, an Essential Services Programme was rolled out by the Division of Gender Relations in collaboration with the Women’s Support Centre. Under this Programme, frontline officers from public sector agencies who service communities were trained and provided access to information, other resources and skills, in order to be better prepared to provide support to victims and persons at risk of domestic violence.

Saint Lucia also benefited from the *Strengthening State Accountability Project* for ending gender-based violence in the Caribbean, which was made possible by UN Women and The Association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police (ACCP). This project entailed the creation of a data collection system, which collects data from the Royal Saint Lucia Police Force, the Women’s Support Centre, the Saint Lucia Crisis Centre and the Family Court.

Not all agencies are fully compliant with the systematic sharing of data and it was noted that there was limited capacity at the Division of Gender Relations to analyse and use the data gathered. Recent commitments from UN ECLAC to support data management in Saint Lucia will help improve the Division’s capacity and that of the Gender Focal Points.

A national consultation on gender-based violence was organized to initiate the necessary processes to catalyse systemic change. Consequently, a comparative review of existing legislation was completed in September 2019 as a first step towards strengthening the national legislative framework. The proposed legislation will clarify the definition of domestic violence, provide recourse for all victims of domestic violence regardless of marital status, living arrangements, sex and address other factors impeding access to justice within the existing legislation.

In engaging men as agents of change to address gender-based violence, the Family Court undertakes a Violence Intervention Programme known as *Partnership For Peace* which is a psycho-educational programme geared towards men who have been found guilty of acts of domestic violence.

Madame President,

The Government of Saint Lucia continues to prioritize the protection of children and youth. During the period under review, two critical pieces of legislation were adopted namely, the Child Justice Act and the Child (Care, Protection and Adoption) Act. A third Bill entitled the Status of Children Bill is currently being drafted and preliminary consultations are set to take place within the first quarter of this year.

In our continued efforts at protecting the rights of children, corporal punishment was abolished on May 1, 2020. However, this Executive Order is not aligned with Article 50 of the Education Act of 1999, which still outlines conditions for administering corporal punishment in schools. The Government of Saint Lucia is working towards making the necessary changes to eliminate this discrepancy.

Madame President,

The report also highlights the advances which we have made in facilitating access to justice, while noting that challenges still exist. These challenges include a shortage of facilities and High Court judges. Another challenge is the lengthy period of remand, which is due to a shortage of magistrates. We believe in the principle that “justice delayed is justice denied” and are in the process of implementing various strategies to rectify these deficiencies.

On a positive note, one important step forward in facilitating access to justice during the period under review was the reopening of the National Forensic Laboratory in 2017 after a two-year closure. This has served to expedite the processing of cases which involve the analysis of forensic evidence.

In presenting the 2015 review report, reference was made to an allegation of “unlawful killings” by officers of the Royal Saint Lucia Police Force in 2010 and 2011 during a programme to address a rise in criminal activity. These allegations arose from a report prepared by the CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS). Investigations into the matter had been delayed because of a vacancy in the office of Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) over a period of nine (9) months from December 2015. A DPP was appointed in October 2016 following which the matter was investigated fully, including the arrest and interrogation of those accused. All files on the issue are now with the DPP who will determine the next steps.

Madame President,

Alleviating poverty in all its forms and dimensions is an objective which continues to be a national priority. Likewise, addressing inequality, in all its dimensions, is essential to eradicating poverty, advancing social progress, and achieving sustainable development. In this context, greater emphasis has been placed on addressing the poverty situation in Saint Lucia by the Government, since the 2015 Universal Periodic Review. Consequently, Saint Lucia has facilitated a number of initiatives to reduce the level of poverty through the reform of the country’s social protection systems. These include but are not limited to; increased government support through the Public Assistance Program (PAP) which is the largest national Cash Transfer Programme.

Strengthening the social protection system in this unprecedented time is an absolute necessity in vulnerable countries like Saint Lucia as they must confront not only the health-related challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the associated social, economic, and environmental impacts.

As part of the COVID-19 response strategy, the Government of Saint Lucia devised an Economic Recovery Plan (ERP) to stimulate the economy and protect lives and livelihoods. The Plan included measures to preserve the social well-being of the population including a 40 per cent increase in the number of households benefitting under the Public Assistance Programme. This was in part made possible through the kind assistance of the Government of India, with a grant under the India-UN Development Partnership Fund for South-South Co-operation, the World Food Programme, other UN agencies and development partners.

Other initiatives under the ERP include:

* A short-term income support programme administered by the National Insurance corporation targeting certain categories of persons who became unemployed as a result of COVID-19;
* An increase in the value of cash transfers to beneficiaries of the foster care, child disabilities, and persons living with HIV programmes;
* The distribution of thousands of hot meals and food packages to poor and vulnerable households in partnership with local organisations.

Madame President,

As we focus on the subject of human rights, let us not for one moment lose sight of two issues that may not usually be taken into account in reviews such as this, but which have profound implications for our ability to protect the human rights of our citizens now and in the future. I refer to the existential threat posed by the phenomenon of climate change on the one hand, and secondly, the challenges that arise from the inequities in the international finance and development architecture.

Small Island States like Saint Lucia contribute the least to the causes of climate change. We are the lowest emitters by far; have the least carbon footprints, yet we are the most vulnerable, being at the frontline of these effects. That is why we continue our exhortations to the major emitters to raise their levels of ambition, to reduce carbon footprints and to further reduce and contain climate impacts in keeping with the Paris Agreement.

Even though we are among the lowest emitters, we are taking steps at the national level and within a regional context to reduce the impacts of climate. We have outlined some of these specific measures in the report. They are important not only because of their implications for present generations but also because of their potential impacts on the quality of life of future generations. Inter-generational equity implies the rights of future generations to enjoy a quality of life that is at least equal to what we enjoy today.

Madame President,

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the arguments which have been consistently made by Small Island States over the years, that the methodologies which have been used by international financial institutions to determine our accessibility to concessional finance for our development is flawed. The metric of GDP per capita ignores the vulnerabilities to which we are inherently subjected. The effect has been to constrain our ability to access financing for our development on relatively soft terms.

COVID-19 has resulted in a contraction in Saint Lucia’s economy of at least 20 per cent for the year 2020. It has further highlighted the inequalities which exist both within countries and among countries. Even as we celebrate the arrival of a vaccine, which we argued strongly should be “a global public good affordable and accessible to all including the most vulnerable”, the reality is that those who are endowed with resources are the first to benefit, while countries like Saint Lucia are relegated to the rear of the queue.

Madame President,

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate Saint Lucia’s commitment to upholding the human rights of our citizens and that of those within our borders. As a small island developing state, with substantial vulnerabilities to external economic shocks, the impacts of natural disasters and the effects of climate change, Saint Lucia recognizes fully that sustainable development with a focus on people, planet, prosperity, partnerships and peace must be at the core of our national plans and programmes, in order to meet the needs of present and future generations.

We took stock of the recommendations from the last review and made conscious efforts to address many of the recommendations. We are still faced with a myriad of challenges stemming from human resource and capacity constraints to financial limitations. Nonetheless, the Government of Saint Lucia will continue to work to ensure that the rights of all our people are protected.

The Government of Saint Lucia extends gratitude to our bilateral and multilateral partners who have helped us in addressing developmental needs and fundamentally upholding the rights and freedoms of our population.

We are grateful also, for the support received from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights during the last five years and express our full confidence in the leadership of Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet.

I thank you.