Session: OPENING SESSION # 1

Objectives:
To create an occasion for discussion, contemplation, and decisions on school safety among Ministers of Education, School Safety Focal Points and key stakeholders.
To update the Caribbean Regional Roadmap on School Safety
To reassert commitment to the Caribbean Safe School Initiative by nations from the Region

Session Format:
Opening Remarks
Powerpoint Presentation of the CSSI
Official Photo Op

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Welcome Remarks

1. Hon. Curtis King, Minister of Education and National Reconciliation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Outgoing Chair of the Caribbean Safe School Initiative

As outgoing chair, Min. King remarked that the last few years have been a challenge for Ministries of Education (MOEs) across the Region and beyond because of multiple hazards. In particular, COVID-19, forced MOEs to integrate online instruction into the curriculum. The gaps exposed during the pandemic exacerbated learning loss and highlighted the importance of face to face instruction. This led to a greater focus on School Safety throughout the Region.

The systemic nature of risk and cascading effects has been overwhelming. It calls for heightened focus on the CSSI, he said.
This year’s forum is being held at the same time when the global conversation is on achieving the 2030 SDGS. It brings together key stakeholders. Min. King said he looked forward to the update on the Regional Roadmap and also asked attendees to indicate where gaps still exist. He called for a strengthening of commitment and a renewed pledge to take the CSSI forward.

As he passed the baton to incoming chair drs. Rodolphe Samuel, St. Maarten’s Minister of Education, Mr. King said “I reaffirm my commitment to this initiative on School Safety and express my thanks to everyone for the support and experience I gained in advocating for School Safety. I trust that we will have fruitful interactions and we will leave this forum armed with new ideas to further advance the CSSI while forging stronger relations and new partnerships to enhance the education product.”

2. **Mr. Jean-Paul Ngome Abiaga, Programme Coordinator for the Natural Sciences and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of the UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean & Acting Head of UNESCO IOCARIBE Secretariat in Cartagena**

We must work together to tackle the critical issue of Disaster Risk Reduction in the Caribbean Region. Disasters cause significant losses on the economy, livelihoods, public health, infrastructure and degradation of biodiversity in the Region. Global projections show disasters will continue to increase; our responses must be aligned. An entire generation of learners and future workers have already been affected by education loss. Over 60% of the population is made up of youth under the age of 30, therefore, regional cooperation is key on Disaster Risk Mitigation and Management strategies.

Environmental education is a key driver in resilient communities. UNESCO remains mobilized to respond and assist countries in furthering the CSSI. Mr. Abiaga added that “we must listen to the voice of the youth and promote involvement in DRM ... for the safety of the school’s eco system.” He reaffirmed that the CSSI can always depend on UNESCO.

“In a moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams. I trust that this forum will build bridges,” he concluded.

3. **Ms. Ruth Custode, Education Specialist, UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office**

We are all well aware that young people have much to contend with despite their resilience and optimism. Studies show that 175 million people are likely to be affected by disasters worldwide and the Caribbean is no exception. 80% of teaching time was affected by COVID 19 and although blended learning was available, the effect of learning loss has been significant.

World Bank Research predicts that the economic cost of learning loss stemming from COVID-19 will result in 17 trillion United States Dollars in lifetime earnings among a generation of school children if corrective action is not taken. We don’t have to allow natural disasters to become personal shocks on our children, Ms. Custode stated, adding that “our children are the leaders of tomorrow societies; we have to secure their education.”

She offered two recommendations to the Forum:

1. Listen to children, they have the right to be heard on issues that concern them… they need to stay centre stage
2. Be prepared, we need to anticipate disaster events before they happen, secure infrastructure and plan long term. Develop action plans in your national countries that can be supported by UNICEF.
4. **Mr. Raul Salazar, Chief of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDPR), Regional Office for the Americas and the Caribbean**

This event is impactful as it comes in a post COVID 19 era. Key stakeholders must rally around the idea of having conversations on how we can integrate to become resilient in the face of systemic risk.

There have been significant global losses in education achievement since COVID-19. Nearly 10% or 101 million children in grades 1-8, fell below the reading capacity of proficiency in 2020, largely due to COVID-19.

“The reality of this post-pandemic world underscores both the need of building resilient education systems and also infrastructure that is fit for purpose to these current complexities.

Amidst the challenges, we now have examples of preparedness, resilience, response and recovery in the Region, such as the case of St. Maarten. It is encouraging to see that since the launch of the CSSI in 2017, the Forum has grown.

UNDPR foresees 22 countries signing the St. Maarten Declaration on School Safety at the end of the Forum as a great show of commitment.

“The CSSI is a global good practice that we would like to support to show the world what can be achieved when we work together to overcome the complexities of the world we are facing today,” he asserted.

Mr. Salazar also challenged the incoming chair to show how the Comprehensive Plan on School Safety can be expanded to sub regions and the Americas ahead of the next Forum in Uruguay in 2023.

The immediate future demands our most valiant efforts for safety and resiliency, he noted.

5. **Mr. Dennis Zulu, Acting United Nation Resident Coordinator in Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, St. Maarten and Suriname**

This review will help us chart the way forward as the Caribbean remains vulnerable to many different types of shocks. We need to make our schools resilient to these shocks, preparedness is key.

With only eight years remaining to meet the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, considerable progress must be made to achieve the milestones.

The CSSI was also invited to participate in the UN Forum in New York.

The UN remains committed to working with countries in the Region so that children can have the benefit of uninterrupted education that they deserve.

6. **Ms. Andria Grosvenor, Acting Deputy Executive Director, Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA)**

People matter and safety within our schools also matter. The Region knows all too well, the reality of hazard experiences and uncertainty. We are experiencing systemic risks with cascading effects with a level of socio-economic disruption.
Referencing the ECLAC Report 2000-2021, Ms. Grosvenor noted that the Caribbean experienced 326 disasters associated with natural hazards with the highest incidents in 2004 and 2017.

The State of the Caribbean Climate Report 2020 also confirms that all climate perimeters are changing:

1. Sea level rise is expected to reach or exceed 1 meter by the end of the century,
2. Air and sea surface temperatures are treading upwards
3. Global climate models suggest that the Region will be up to 17% drier by the end of the century.

The period 2020 to 2021 saw numerous effects and impacts such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes and flooding, all of which occurred in the midst of a global pandemic.

“The world as we know is changing and we need to prepare our children,” she stated.

Our Sustainable Development aspirations for the region will be forged in a future of uncertainty bringing to the fore the need to revamp, streamline and transform our systems including education so that we can build a culture of safety and reduce the vulnerabilities, exposure and inequalities that drive disasters.

Regional Actions to Advance Safe Schools
Hazard impacts affect the education sector and reinforce the critical importance of a safe schools’ program. Governments expend a significant amount of their budget in education. Therefore, efforts to make educational institutions more safe, green and sustainable can pay huge dividends if appropriately strategized, implemented and sustained.

The Safe Schools Program is a flagship initiative of CDEMA. Apart from gaining political support, implementing CSSF and bringing stakeholders together, CDEMA has mobilized more than 2.5 million USD dollars from the Caribbean Development Bank, UNICEF and the Government of Norway to advance school safety. A model education sector plan is forthcoming. More countries are encouraged to adopt and implement the Caribbean Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) Strategy and Programming Framework 2014-2024.

Recommendations for Accelerated Results

1. Create an enabling environment for the voice of the youth in DRRR strategies. This forum will give them the space to do so.
2. Contemplate on the new declaration and updated roadmap
3. Examine the 3 pillars of school safety with new eyes, imagination, innovation and a renewed determination.
4. Ensure connectivity with the new Caribbean School Safety model which is being developed to bridge the educational divide, enhance educational quality and enhance student success led by the Caribbean Development Bank, the Caricom Secretariat and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.
5. Empower the future generation to face the challenges that lie ahead
Hon. drs. Rodolphe E. Samuel, Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport of Sint Maarten & 
Incoming Chair of the Caribbean Safe School Initiative

As Minister of Education of St. Maarten, I am honored to take on the chairmanship of the Caribbean Safe School Initiative and thank my predecessors for leading the charge. St. Maarten has been actively working on school safety initiatives from 2018 after the devastating impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

In 2018 The Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth & Sport established the Safety and Emergency Management Committee (SEMC). The SEMC was commissioned to adapt the Comprehensive School Safety Framework at the national level; set up plans and strategies for safety and emergency management; continuous disaster preparedness and maintenance; and crisis management for the sectors Education, Culture, Youth & Sport.

We began the Education in Emergencies process and also the consultations towards the St. Maarten Roadmap in that same year.

After signing on to the Caribbean Safe School Initiative in 2019, we were further energized by the work being done regionally and this led to the appointment of Mrs. Mussington-Service as School Safety Focal Point as the Student Support Services Division is tasked with school safety implementation from 2018. We have made many strides on St. Maarten but there is still a lot to be done.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the urgency to address disaster risk and build resilience, to improve community's ability to maintain and restore vital services including education at multiple levels and across different sectors, ranging from the school curriculum, school staff training up to the Local National Disaster Offices/Departments and Ministries of Education;

We all take note that the human and financial cost of disasters is rapidly rising, trapping countries in a continuous cycle of emergency response, curtailing governments in their capacity to grow and develop, and impacting the right and access to education for all.

The Caribbean Safe School Initiative is five years old and even in the midst of disaster, we were able to think and re-imagine the impact that CSSI can make in our region. After 5 years of the Caribbean Safe School Initiative, we have been able to achieve much. But just to name a few,

- We were able to create awareness of the importance of school safety
- At the school level, a lot of work has been put into safety plans, procedures and drills
- Much more research and thought has gone into systemic approach issues and interconnectedness of our society as evidenced by COVID-19.

We need to keep in perspective the goals of the Comprehensive school Safety Framework, which calls us to take a participatory risk-informed approach to

1. Protect learners, educators and staff from death, injury, violence and harm in schools and other learning spaces.
2. Plan for education and protection continuity, and limit disruptions to learning in the face of shocks, stresses, hazards and threats of all kinds.
3. Promote knowledge and skills of learners and duty-bearers, to contribute to risk education, resilience building, and sustainable development.

We need to keep in perspective the short-term goal of protecting students, teachers and staff from loss of life and injuries in schools. We should also keep in mind the long-term perspectives for example the World Bank report pertaining to losses to GDP that come from school closures. We can impact the economic losses for our country by ensuring that our children are able to complete schooling in a way that they are sufficiently prepared to move on with their lives professionally as adults and can contribute to the development of their country. If we do not prepare our schools and the education sector, we run the risk of interrupting that development and in so doing trumping the development of each individual country.

This strategic long-term vision is extremely important as it helps us to continue to advocate for school safety. I mention this because we tend to concentrate on short term gains and at times lose sight of the long-term impact.

My vision for this Ministerial forum is that it

Cements the commitment of all Ministers of Education and their representatives to gather all of their knowledge & wisdom of needs and realities and reflect that in priority setting for school safety at the national level in the next three years.

And that we pay keen attention to the voice of the youth and the important contribution of School Safety Focal Points in advancing the school safety agenda.

As Chair of the CSSI, St. Maarten plans to take an active role especially as it pertains to championing for the involvement of youth and we look forward to their contributions to this process during the Youth Dialogue session.

As chair, I would also like to receive midterm progress feedback on the Roadmap implementation and take advantage of this being a regional initiative spearheaded by CDEMA in the monitoring of implementation. This is important as the CSSI makes a critical contribution to the implementation of the Comprehensive Disaster Management framework and we cannot wait until the next forum for progress updates.

As chair of the CSSI, I would also like to see an increased collaboration and communication among Ministers of Education and not wait for us to come together at the Ministerial Forums. I also call on my colleague ministers to support experts in the field implementing school safety by creating the right environment and conditions for them to implement the commitment made by us as ministers. I am glad that for the first time ever, we have dedicated a space for the School Safety Focal Points to discuss and be involved in this process. I am ecstatic that we are including a youth dialogue because we believe that the voice of youth is instrumental and their seat at the table is critical as we advance school safety.

This is a critical forum as the declaration is being revised. We are also updating the Roadmap and as such we need to cement school safety more in policy and secure regular funding for school safety. We also need to create more synergies among us by working closer with other sectors and with each other.
I want to recognize the hard work done by the Organizing Committee comprising of Focal Point for St. Vincent & the Grenadines, CDEMA, UNDRR, UNICEF Latin American and the Caribbean, UNESCO Caribbean Cluster Office, under the leadership of Olga Mussington-Service School Safety Focal Point St. Maarten and all others who have contributed to the planning of this forum.

As we officially open the CSSI 3rd Ministerial Forum here on St. Maarten, I want to leave you with the words of Former US President John F. Kennedy. And I quote: “We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

May our deliberations during this forum bear fruit as we advance school safety knowing that we all have school safety responsibilities, and each one of us have a role to play regardless of the position that we hold.

I thank you.