

**Opening Remarks by the
Minister of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development
Hon. Dr. Gale T.C. Rigobert**

**Final National Results Workshop
*Development of Minamata Initial Assessments in the Caribbean Project***

It gives me great pleasure to welcome *all* of you here this morning and in particular, two very important groups of people – representatives from the Basel Convention Regional Centre for Training and Technology Transfer for the Caribbean and students and teachers from secondary school students across Saint Lucia. Staff of the Departments of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development, thank-you for your efforts which have made today's event possible.

This gathering is the culmination of a two-year project which began in August 2016. The Project, titled *Development of Initial Minamata Initial Assessments for the Caribbean* was the result of interest, expressed by several Caribbean Governments, inclusive of Saint Lucia, to get support for ratifying the Minamata Convention on Mercury. The project was implemented in collaboration with the Basel Convention Regional Centre for the Caribbean.

Today, I express on behalf of the Department of Sustainable Development, our excitement at sharing with you, information on the Minamata Convention on Mercury – the world’s first global agreement to address contamination from a heavy metal, as well as an overview of the findings of the Project.

Mercury or quick silver, is a useful but toxic metal and has been part of our planet for millions of years, but industry and human activity in the last hundred years, has exposed us all to it. The dangers of mercury were tragically exposed in Minamata Bay, Japan, where the most severe mercury poisoning disaster in history, took place took place over a period ranging from 50 to 86 years ago. Highly toxic mercury spilled into the Bay over time and accumulated in fish and shellfish that were later eaten by people. More than 17 000 people died of mercury poisoning and thousands more were affected. Mercury is toxic to human health, posing a particular threat to the development of the child in the womb and early in life. Populations who eat contaminated fish, those who use mercury at work, and people who live near

a source of mercury pollution or in colder climates where the dangerous heavy metal tends to accumulate, are most vulnerable.

Each year, almost 9,000 tonnes of mercury are released into the environment. Everyone is at risk because mercury contamination has spread to the remotest parts of the earth and can be found in everyday products, including cosmetics, lightbulbs, batteries and tooth fillings.

Although it took time, the global community recognised mercury as a global pollutant of major public health concern in the year 2002 and sprang into action to ensure that the Minamata Bay tragedy is never repeated and human exposure to mercury is minimized. Saint Lucia has been part of the process.

October marked the fifth Anniversary of the adoption of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. Since its adoption by the International Community in 2013, the Minamata Convention has garnered the commitment of 101 countries. Saint Lucia intends, by the end of this year, to formally signal to the international community, its commitment to addressing mercury pollution. The findings of the Minamata Initial Assessment Project played an

important role in supporting Cabinet's decision to approve Saint Lucia's accession to the Minamata Convention; and so, I wish to acknowledge, with deepest appreciation, the contribution of members of the National Working Group for the Project in ensuring its successful execution.

As you contemplate the information that will be later presented to you, I invite you all to consider your role in identifying and responding to local challenges to implementing the obligations of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. Remember, whether as a country, sector, community, organisation or as an individual, we can play our part by just changing what we buy and use!