UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

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THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES REPORT 2015

Transforming Rural Economies

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UNITED NATIONS
New York and Geneva, 2015

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UNCTAD/LDC/2015

UNITED NATIONS PUBLICATION

Sales No. E.15.II.D.7

ISBN 978-92-1-112893-2

eISBN 978-92-1-057413-6

ISSN 0257-7550

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What are the least developed countries?

Forty-eight countries are currently designated by the United Nations as "least developed countries" (LDCs). These are: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Yemen and Zambia.

The list of LDCs is reviewed every three years by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), a group of independent experts reporting to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Committee, in its report to the Council, may recommend cases of addition to the list, or graduation from LDC status. The following three criteria were used by the Committee in the latest review of the list, in March 2015:

(a) A per capita income criterion, based on a three-year average estimate of the gross national income (GNI) per capita, with a threshold of $1,035 for possible cases of addition to the list, and a threshold of $1,242 for cases of graduation from LDC status.

(b) A human assets criterion, involving a composite index (the Human Assets Index) based on indicators of: (i) nutrition (percentage of undernourished population); (ii) health (child mortality ratio); (iii) school enrolment (gross secondary school enrolment ratio); and (iv) literacy (adult literacy ratio).

(c) An economic vulnerability criterion, involving a composite index (the Economic Vulnerability Index) based on indicators of: (i) natural shocks (index of instability of agricultural production; share of victims of natural disasters); (ii) trade-related shocks (index of instability of exports of goods and services); (iii) physical exposure to shocks (share of population living in low-lying areas); (iv) economic exposure to shocks (share of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in the gross domestic product (GDP); index of merchandise export concentration); (v) smallness (population in logarithm); and (vi) remoteness (index of remoteness).

For all three criteria, different thresholds are used for identifying cases of addition to the list of LDCs, and cases of graduation from LDC status. A country will qualify to be added to the list if it meets the admission thresholds on all three criteria and does not have a population greater than 75 million. Qualification for addition to the list will effectively lead to LDC status only if the Government of the relevant country accepts this status. A country will normally qualify for graduation from LDC status if it has met graduation thresholds under at least two of the three criteria in at least two consecutive triennial reviews of the list. However, if the three-year average per capita GNI of an LDC has risen to a level at least double the graduation threshold and if this performance is considered sustainable, the country will be deemed eligible for graduation regardless of its score under the other two criteria. This rule is commonly referred to as the "income-only" graduation rule.

Four countries have so far graduated from LDC status: Botswana in December 1994, Cape Verde in December 2007, Maldives in January 2011 and Samoa in January 2014. In March 2009, the Committee recommended the graduation of Equatorial Guinea. This recommendation was accepted by the Council in July 2009, and endorsed by the General Assembly through a resolution adopted in December 2013. The same resolution also stated the Assembly's endorsement of the Committee's 2012 recommendation to graduate Vanuatu from LDC status. Equatorial Guinea and Vanuatu are scheduled to be taken off the list in June 2017 and December 2017, respectively. In the March 2015 review of the list of LDCs, the Committee recommended the graduation of Angola, by virtue of the "income-only" graduation rule. In March 2012, the Committee recommended Tuvalu's graduation from LDC status. In the absence of endorsement by the Council, this recommendation has remained without effect.

After a recommendation to graduate a country has been endorsed by the Council and the Assembly, the graduating country benefits from a grace period (normally three years) before graduation effectively takes place. This period, during which the country remains an LDC, is designed to enable the graduating State and its development and trading partners to agree on a "smooth transition" strategy, so that the loss of LDC status at the time of graduation does not disrupt the socioeconomic progress of the country. A "smooth transition" measure generally implies extending to the graduated country, for a number of years after graduation, a concession to which it had been entitled by virtue of its LDC status.

Acknowledgements

The Least Developed Countries Report 2015 was prepared by UNCTAD. Contributors to this Report are: Rolf Traeger (team leader), Maria Bovey, Agnès Collardeau-Angleys, Piergiuseppe Fortunato, Christian Kingombe, Mariangela Linoci, Irene Musselli, Mauricio Pinzon Latorre, Daniel Poon, Madasamyraja Rajalingam, Kasper Vrolijk, David Woodward and Simonetta Zarrilli (the LDC Report team). The work was carried out under the overall guidance and supervision of Taffere Tesfachew, Director, Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes, who also made significant inputs to the structure and contents of the Report.

An ad hoc expert group meeting on “Transforming rural economies” was held in Geneva on 22–23 July 2015 to peer-review the Report and its specific inputs. It brought together specialists in the fields of structural transformation, agricultural productivity, rural economic diversification, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, domestic/regional production chains, gender issues in the development process and policies to accelerate rural development. The participants were: Uma Rani Amara (International Labour Organization – ILO), Elvis Beytullayev (ILO), Tadele Ferede (University of Addis Ababa), Faouzi Gsouma (African Union – AU), Carla Henry (ILO), Susan Isiko (AU), Claude Kana (AU), Alfredo Lazarte-Hoyle (ILO), Georges Namekong (AU), Moazam Mahmood (ILO), as well as the members of the LDC Report team and the following UNCTAD colleagues: Bineswaree Bolaki, Lisa Borgatti, Junior Roy Davis, Mussie Delelegn, Pierre Encontre, Jan Hoffmann, Stefano Inama, Benjamin McCarthy, Erica Meltzer, Shin Ohinata, Tansug Ok, Patrick Nwokedi Osakwe, Daniel Owoko, Henrique Pacini, Laura Páez, Bruno Rogério, Amelia Santos-Paulino, Antipas Touatam and Anida Yupari.

Participants at a distance who provided written comments or elicited them from colleagues were: Mark McGuire (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – FAO), Rob Vos (FAO) and Frank van Rompaey (United Nations Industrial Development Organization – UNIDO).

Thomas Reardon (Michigan State University) prepared a background paper for the Report.

Ratnarkar Adhikari (Enhanced Integrated Framework – EIF – Secretariat), Anders Aeroe (International Trade Centre – ITC), Federica Alfani (FAO), Monica Castillo (ILO), Panagiotis Karfakis (FAO), David Kucera (ILO), Justine Namara (EIF), Chandan Sapkota (Asian Development Bank), Constanze Bianca Schultz (EIF), Marie-Claire Sodergren (ILO), Terje Tessem (ILO) and Mito Tsukamoto (ILO) met with the LDC Report team, shared material or data, or provided written contributions.

Erica Meltzer edited the text. Sophie Combette designed the cover. Stefanie West and Maria Bovey provided secretarial support.

Madasamyraja Rajalingam did the overall layout, graphics and desktop publishing.

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