

ISTANBUL PROGRAMME
OF ACTION

**Progress in the
implementation of the
priority areas of the
Programme of Action
for the Least Developed
Countries for the Decade
2011–2020
(Istanbul Programme
of Action)**

**Africa regional
review of the Istanbul
Programme of Action**



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

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Contents

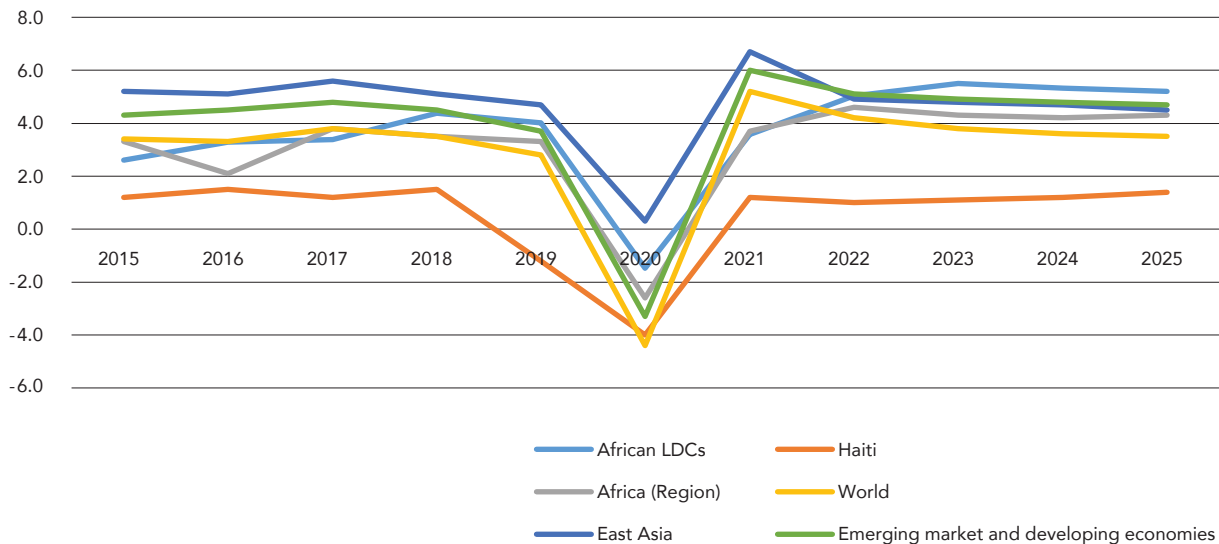
I. Graduation and the COVID-19 crisis in least developed countries.....	1
II. Progress made in the priority areas	5
A. Productive capacities (potential output) and structural transformation	5
B. Agriculture, food security and rural development.....	7
C. Trade and commodities	9
D. Human and social development	12
E. Multiple crises and other emerging challenges.....	16
F. Mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity-building	18
G. Good governance at all levels.....	20
III. Policy recommendations for recovery	23

Graduation and the COVID-19 crisis in least developed countries

1. The present report reviews progress made by least developed countries in achieving the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action), which aimed to enable half of the least developed countries to meet the criteria for grad-

uation¹ by 2020. As of 2020, 46 countries were classified by the United Nations as least developed countries, of which 33 (70 per cent) were African countries (table 1).² For a country to be eligible for graduation, it must attain at least two of the graduation threshold³ levels in two consecutive reviews

Figure I: Real gross domestic product growth (annual percentage change)



Source: International Monetary Fund, Data Mapper (January 2021). Available at www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO WORLD.

¹ United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, “Least developed countries Scheduled for Graduation”. Available at <http://unohrrls.org/about-lidcs/criteria-for-lidcs/>.

² *Least Developed Countries Report 2020: Productive capacities for the new decade* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.D.2).

³ The 2017–2020 multi-year review by the Committee for Development Policy proposed changes to the least developed country graduation criteria. (Committee for Development Policy Report on the twenty-second session, 24–27 February 2020), *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2020, Supplement No. 13 (E/20/33)*.

- (table 1). To date, three African countries – Botswana (1994), Cabo Verde (2007) and Equatorial Guinea (2017) – have graduated from least developed country status. Sao Tome and Principe is expected to graduate in 2024, while Angola has requested yet another postponement of graduation. The non-African least developed country graduates are Maldives (2011), Samoa (2014) and Vanuatu (December 2020).
2. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a challenge for future graduation prospects of least developed countries, as the containment and lockdown measures in response to the crisis have resulted in a slowdown in global economic activity and recessions in several countries. Policy responses to the pandemic disrupted supply chains and stymied consumer demand, particularly for travel, tourism and key commodities, including crude oil. Consequently, the commodity price index declined from 119.81 in the second quarter of 2019 to 91.73 in the same quarter of 2020. The petroleum price index also fell, from a high of 152.50 to 71.84 during the same period, before recovering slightly to 97 in the third quarter of 2020.⁴ The uncertainties resulting from the pandemic have also led to capital flight from
 3. The overall effect of these developments has been a slowdown in real gross domestic product (GDP) growth. In the three years preceding the pandemic, African least developed countries achieved steady, albeit modest, real average GDP growth of 3.9 per cent – slightly above the global average of 3.4 per cent and the average in Africa of 3.5 per cent. However, as a result of the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund projects real GDP growth of African least developed countries to contract by 1.5 per cent in 2020, before rebounding to 3.7 per cent in 2021. The projected recovery is almost half the global forecast of 6 per cent. In comparison with African least developed countries, more severe contractions are forecast for Africa (2.6 per cent) and the global economy (4.4 per cent) in 2020 (figure 1).
 4. Besides slower growth, the pandemic is expected to reverse gains achieved in recent years, particularly in areas of gender equality, poverty and reductions in inequality, thereby jeopardizing prospects for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The average poverty headcount ratio is expected to rise to 35.2 per cent, pulling an additional 22 million least developed

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