



Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

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Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020

I. Introduction

1. The least developed countries, consisting of 48 countries with a total population of 880 million, represent the poorest and weakest segment of the international community. Least developed countries are characterized by constraints such as low per capita income, low level of human development, and economic and structural handicaps to growth that limit resilience to vulnerabilities.

2. In the decade since the adoption of the Brussels Programme of Action in 2001, least developed countries have made some progress in economic, social and human development. In this regard, we welcome the efforts made by least developed countries themselves and their development partners. However, there is no room for complacency, as more than 75 per cent of the least developed countries' population still live in poverty. It is a matter of deep concern to the international community that only three countries have graduated out of this category so far in the past three decades.

3. The least developed countries continue to have the lowest per capita incomes and the highest population growth rates. They are the most off track in the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, and are at the bottom of the Human Development Index rankings. Least developed countries have been unable to overcome their economic vulnerability and structurally transform their economies or build resilience against internal and external shocks and crisis.

4. Least developed countries' productive capacity is limited, and they have severe infrastructure deficits. Similarly, least developed countries continue to struggle with improving human and social development. Some least developed countries lack adequate governance capacities and institutions, including those emerging from conflict.

5. An evidence-based appraisal of the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 confirms



that a more strategic, comprehensive, and sustained approach based on ambitious, focused and realistic commitments is required to bring about structural transformation in least developed countries that fosters accelerated, sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development and helps least developed countries meet long-standing as well as emerging challenges.

6. Since the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the international economic and development landscape has been evolving, with an expansion of the number of partners and actors and more complex aid, economic and financial architecture.

7. In addition, new challenges have emerged. The international community has been challenged by multiple and interrelated crises, including the ongoing impact of the financial and economic crisis, volatile energy and food prices and ongoing concerns over food security, as well as the increasing challenges posed by climate change and the loss of biodiversity, which all have increased vulnerabilities and inequalities and have adversely affected development gains in least developed countries.

8. Solidarity, cooperation and partnership with the least developed countries, the poorest, most vulnerable and weakest countries and their people are not only moral imperatives, they are also economic and political ones. Least developed countries represent an enormous human and natural resource potential for world economic growth, welfare, prosperity and food and energy security. A successful renewed and strengthened global partnership that effectively addresses the special needs of least developed countries will contribute to the cause of peace, prosperity and sustainable development for all.

9. In addition to the outcomes of previous United Nations Conferences on the Least Developed Countries, the Millennium Declaration, the Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Plan of Implementation), the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development and the outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals have reaffirmed that least developed countries deserve particular attention and well-targeted support measures to eradicate poverty, accelerate economic growth, achieve sustainable development and overcome their vulnerabilities.

10. The Programme of Action for the decade 2011 to 2020 represents the enhanced commitments of the least developed countries, which have the ownership of and primary responsibility for their own development, and their development partners to a renewed and strengthened global partnership.

11. This partnership also includes the United Nations system, including the Bretton Woods institutions, other multilateral institutions and regional development banks, within their respective mandates.

12. Guided by the spirit of solidarity with least developed countries, developing countries, consistent with their capabilities, will provide support for the effective implementation of the Programme of Action in mutually agreed areas of cooperation within the framework of South-South cooperation, which is a complement to, but not a substitute for, North-South cooperation.

13. The private sector, civil society and foundations will be encouraged to contribute to the implementation of the Programme of Action in their respective areas of competence in line with least developed countries' national priorities.

II. Review of the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action

14. The Brussels Programme of Action was based on seven commitments aimed at significantly improving the human conditions of people in least developed countries, through providing a framework for a strong global partnership. Its overarching goal was to make substantial progress towards halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger by 2015 and promote sustainable development in least developed countries. Significant and steady growth of gross domestic product (GDP) was seen as the main requirement for reaching the overarching goal.

15. Economic and social development was better during the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action than during the previous decade, despite large differences among individual least developed countries. Some least developed countries achieved growth rates exceeding 7 per cent annually, but in many least developed countries growth remained significantly lower and some least developed countries experienced negative growth rates. During the decade, least developed countries' participation in international trade was increased, although their share in global trade still remains marginal.

16. The least developed countries made some progress towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in the field of universal primary education and gender equality in school enrolment, while many least developed countries are off track in the rate of progress towards the target of reducing child mortality and improving maternal health. Large imbalances within and between countries persist in terms of the human and social goals of the Brussels Programme of Action with respect to gender, rural-urban populations and other disadvantaged groups.

17. Least developed countries have also made some progress towards good governance, especially with respect to efforts to embed and institutionalize democratic governance in their own processes and with respect to the empowerment of women.

18. While the Brussels Programme of Action has had a positive role to play in the development process of the least developed countries, the specific goals and action of the Brussels Programme of Action have not been fully achieved. The improved economic performance in some least developed countries had a limited impact on employment creation and poverty reduction. In many least developed countries structural transformation was very limited, and their vulnerability to external shocks has not been reduced.

19. Changes in the sectoral composition of GDP have been much slower in many least developed countries than in other developing countries. In particular, the share of manufacturing, which has been the driving force of economic development in many middle-income countries, has increased only slowly.

20. Many least developed countries are net food importers, which has increased their vulnerability to rapid declines in export earnings and capital flows. Multiple, interrelated global crises and challenges, such as increased food insecurity, volatile energy and commodity prices, and the global financial and economic crisis partly reversed development gains that least developed countries achieved over the years.

21. The implementation of development strategies in least developed countries improved and development partners increased their contributions during the period of implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. Progress has also been made in addressing the needs of least developed countries regarding financial and technical assistance, trade capacity, market access and debt relief, though not all commitments and targets have been fully realized.

22. While the least developed countries have made considerable efforts to mobilize domestic resources for their development, most of them still face a huge financing gap, and ODA continued to be the largest source of external financing for the development of least developed countries. The aggregate ratio of official development assistance (ODA) to gross national income (GNI) for Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members increased from 0.05 per cent in 1997-1998 to 0.09 per cent in 2008, but remained well below the 0.15-0.20 per cent target. An increasing share of aid went to the social sectors, rather than building physical and economic infrastructure.

23. The share of least developed countries' exports in international merchandise trade increased from 0.62 per cent in 2002 to 1.08 per cent in 2008. Progress has been made towards fulfilling commitments on duty-free quota-free market access for products originating in least developed countries in conformity with the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration adopted by the World Trade Organization in 2005. However, full realization is yet to be achieved. Some countries have or made considerable efforts to implement simple and transparent rules of origin for least developed country products, but other serious obstacles to trade remain, including non-tariff barriers that are inconsistent with World Trade Organization rules and obligations and supply-side constraints, in particular lack of infrastructure and modern technologies and energy deficiency.

24. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) have had a positive impact on development in many least developed countries, though not all least developed countries are eligible. However, owing to increased lending and borrowing during the financial crisis, debt distress continues to be a major concern for least developed countries.

25. Foreign direct investment flows to least developed countries have also increased substantially, but without a visible impact on structural change. The investment-to-GDP ratio target of 25 per cent set in the Brussels Programme of Action was met only partially by a few countries. Foreign direct investment flows remained concentrated on extractive industries, with non-resource attracting sectors receiving a limited share of overall foreign direct investment flows to least developed countries.

26. There are some important lessons learned for the new Programme of Action from the reviews of the Brussels Programme of Action at national, regional and global levels:

(a) Greater ownership and leadership of least developed countries is indispensable, including the integration of the Programme of Action into national development strategies, plans and programmes, and identification of authorities to oversee implementation, as well as multi-stakeholder engagement by parliamentarians, civil society organizations, the private sector, and executive branches;

(b) Some international support measures generated only limited results, as they were insufficient in scope and scale to achieve the goals and objectives of the Brussels Programme of Action and the specific needs of the least developed countries. In some cases there were implementation difficulties and a lack of policy coherence and consistency. International support measures should be strengthened in terms of higher priority and specific targeting of least developed countries;

(c) Treating least developed countries as a group on the basis of their low per capita income, human asset development and economic vulnerability remains the fundamental premise for special measures in their favour. This Programme of Action needs to fully take into account the specific geographical constraints and vulnerabilities of each least developed country, including small island and landlocked least developed countries, least developed countries with mountains and fragile ecology, low-lying coastal least developed countries, those with extreme dependency on primary commodity exports, low agricultural productivity and food insecurity, climate and environmental vulnerability, energy insecurity and least developed countries emerging from conflict;

(d) The multiple crises created a new consciousness regarding instabilities and vulnerabilities of the global economy. It is important to refocus attention on structural transformation of least developed countries through increasing productive capacity and diversification and strengthening home-grown development paths;

(e) Better integration of the Programme of Action into aid, trade and development strategies of development partners is also crucial for its successful implementation and coherence of policies;

(f) In addition to the development partners, the developing countries, consistent with their capabilities, can contribute to the implementation of the new Programme of Action within the context of South-South cooperation, as a complement to, but not a substitute for, North-South cooperation;

(g) The development strategy for the next decade should complement the export-led growth strategies by focusing on the strengthened role of domestic productive capacity, diversification, enhanced investments, infrastructural development, building technological capacity, building and strengthening the capacity of least developed country private sector that can stimulate enhanced and sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and structural transformation. There should be increased attention to agriculture and rural development and to food and nutrition security. Regional integration, including in infrastructure, should also be given greater prominence;

(h) Priority areas for support should be targeted, better matching these areas with goals and targets, and specific means and tools to reach them should be identified;

(i) Focus on issues like good governance at national and international levels and the fight against corruption, respect for human rights, gender issues, building institutional capacity, social protection and social services and environmental concerns is important to a broad approach to poverty eradication;

(j) Enhanced financial resources are important to bring about structural transformation and to achieve sustainable development and poverty eradication in least developed countries, as well as other goals of this Programme of Action. The quantity, quality and predictability of resources should be addressed, as well as the best ways to use dedicated regional and global facilities and mechanisms to provide support to the least developed countries;

(k) More effective representation of least developed countries in decision-making at the global level could improve the international environment for the development of the least developed countries. Wider recognition of least developed country status could stimulate and facilitate better integration of the Programme of Action into development policies;

(l) Monitoring and follow-up should not focus only on goals and targets, but also on actions, to strengthen the principle of mutual accountability.

III. Renewed and strengthened partnership for development

Objectives

27. The overarching goal of the Programme of Action for the decade 2011-2020 is to overcome the structural challenges faced by the least developed countries in order to eradicate poverty, achieve internationally agreed development goals and enable graduation from the least developed country category.

28. Guided by the overarching goal, national policies of least developed countries and international support measures during the decade will focus on the following specific objectives with the aim of enabling half the number of least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2020:

(a) Achieve sustained, equitable and inclusive economic growth in least developed countries, to at least the level of 7 per cent per annum, by strengthening their productive capacity in all sectors through structural transformation and overcoming their marginalization through their effective integration into the global economy, including through regional integration;

(b) Build human capacities by fostering sustained, equitable and inclusive human and social development, gender equality and the empowerment of women;

(c) Reduce the vulnerability of least developed countries to economic, natural and environmental shocks and disasters, as well as climate change, and enhance their ability to meet these and other challenges through strengthening their resilience;

(d) Ensure enhanced financial resources and their effective use for least developed countries' development, including through domestic resource mobilization, ODA, external debt relief, foreign direct investment and remittances;

(e) Enhance good governance at all levels, by strengthening democratic processes, institutions and the rule of law; increasing efficiency, coherence,

transparency and participation; protecting and promoting human rights; and reducing corruption, and strengthen least developed country Governments' capacity to play an effective role in their economic and social development.

Principles

29. The following principles will guide the implementation of the Programme of Action, based on a strengthened framework of partnership for successfully achieving its objectives:

(a) **Country ownership and leadership.** The ownership of and the leadership and primary responsibility for their own development lie with least developed countries. Least developed countries have the right and responsibility to formulate and execute their own coherent economic and development policies and strategies and identify their own national priorities, including striking a balance in the allocation of resources between economic and social sectors. Development partners should support least developed countries in the design and the implementation of their development strategies;

(b) **An integrated approach** in which the development process in least developed countries should be viewed in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The promotion of policy coherence and consistency of the international economic, financial and trading systems with the aim of increasing the quantity, quality and effectiveness of least developed country-focused international support measures and mechanisms is of key importance. The implementation of the Programme of Action should be integrated into all relevant international processes;

(c) **Genuine partnership** and solidarity with understanding and recognition that the least developed countries, as the most vulnerable group of countries, need effective national policies, enhanced global support and appropriate mechanisms at all levels for the achievement of the goals and objectives of this Programme of Action;

(d) **Result orientation.** The success of the Programme of Action will be judged by its contribution to internationally agreed development goals and targets and enabling the least developed countries to graduate. The process of identification, monitoring and assessment of progress in implementing actions and realizing the goals and objectives of the Programme of Action will contribute to enhancing mutual accountability and effectiveness of development cooperation;

(e) **Peace and security, development and human rights,** as pillars of the United Nations system and the foundation for collective security and well-being, are interdependent, interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Development requires and strengthens freedom, peace and security, good governance, respect for all human rights, including the right to food, the rule of law, gender equality, respect for nature and an overall commitment to just and democratic societies. The particular challenges faced by some least developed countries regarding conflict and their human, economic and social implications need to be recognized and their stability enhanced. In an interdependent and interconnected world, each member of the international community has stakes in common security, prosperity and welfare. The eradication of poverty and hunger in least developed countries, among others, would contribute towards ensuring global stability and prosperity in a sustainable manner;

(f) **Equity** at all levels is indispensable for the pursuit of long-term prosperity and the realization of all the internationally recognized human rights, including the right to development by all. Development strategies and programmes of least developed countries and their partners should strive to enhance the participation and empowerment of the poor and marginalized in their own development and benefit the most vulnerable, ensuring social justice, democracy, gender equality and sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development;

(g) **Voice and representation.** The international economic system and architecture should be inclusive and responsive to the special development needs of least developed countries, ensuring their effective participation, voice and representation at all levels;

(h) **Balanced role of the State and market considerations,** where the Government in least developed countries commits to design policies and institutions with a view to achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth that translates into full employment, decent work opportunities and sustainable development. The State also plays a significant role in stimulating the private sector towards the achievement of national development objectives and creates an appropriate enabling stable, transparent and rules-based economic environment for the effective functioning of markets.

Renewed and strengthened partnership for development

30. The Istanbul Programme of Action is based on commitments, accountability and partnership between least developed countries and their development partners to undertake concrete actions in a number of interlinked areas. This requires supportive and integrated policies across a wide range of economic, social and environmental issues consistent with the objectives of this Programme of Action.

31. Each least developed country will translate policies and measures in the Programme of Action into concrete measures by integrating this Programme of Action into the national and sectoral development strategies and plans. It is recognized that the increasing interdependence of national economies in a globalizing world and the emergence of rules-based regimes for international economic relations have meant that the space for national economic policy, that is, the scope for domestic policies, especially in the areas of trade, investment and international development, is now often framed by international disciplines, commitments and global market considerations. It is for each Government to evaluate the trade-off between the benefits of accepting international rules and

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