

Regional Meeting of Asia and Pacific Least Developed Countries for the Midterm Comprehensive Global Review of the Implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action for the decade 2001-2010

Overview

The Brussels Programme of Action (BPoA) for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) for the Decade 2001–2010 provides specific goals and targets along with action-oriented commitments in seven critically important areas: (1) fostering a people-centred policy framework; (2) good governance at national and international levels; (3) building human and institutional capacities; (4) building productive capacities to make globalisation work for LDCs; (5) enhancing the role of trade in development; (6) reducing vulnerabilities and protecting the environment; and (7) mobilizing financial resources.

An important and unique feature of this Programme of Action is that it clearly indicates complementary actions between LDCs and their development partners. The commitments undertaken and the actions identified in the Brussels Programme of Action, if fully and effectively implemented, will improve the difficult social and economic conditions faced by the LDCs.

This synthesis report on the implementation of the BPoA has been prepared by the United Nations Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS).

The synthesis was undertaken for the Regional Preparatory Meeting of Asia and Pacific Least Developed Countries for the Comprehensive Mid-Term Review of the Brussels Programme of Action, held in Bangkok, 14-15 March 2006.

The report draws on the information in the 12 national reports prepared by LDCs in the Asia and Pacific region and provides a broad overview of the progress made in the implementation of the BPoA over the past five years (2001-2005). It also outlines the various constraints faced by the LDCs and related actions taken by both LDCs and their development partners in order to implement each of the seven BPoA commitments.

Commitment 1: Fostering a people-centred policy framework

Despite economic growth averaging 6 percent per annum since 2001, the incidence of poverty in Asia-Pacific LDCs remains high. A notable exception is Maldives, which by 2004 reduced the number of people living on less than a dollar a day to less than 1 percent.

Over the past five years most of the 14 LDCs had prepared interim or complete poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) including the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2004 and Bhutan in 2005. However, a number of LDCs report that despite the strong pro-poor policies underscoring the PRSPs, the impact on poverty reduction remains weak. The formulation of Afghanistan's full National Development Strategy is expected to take place in 2006. Of particular concern cited are rural and infrastructure development. LDCs acknowledge that anti-poverty strategies are made more effective with solid government leadership and effective aid management. Furthermore, analysis shows that weak public sector and aid absorption capacity undermines the impact of PRSPs.

Commitment 2: Good governance at national and international levels

Several Asia/Pacific LDCs reported measures instituted by their countries between 2001-2005 towards good governance, highlighting efforts to promote democracy and human rights, public management reforms, combat graft, and protecting and empowering the most vulnerable, namely women and children. Five years since BPoA, several LDCs in the region, including post-conflict Afghanistan have adopted policies to ensure participation of the most vulnerable segment of society in decision-making.

GENDER

As part of the broader process of democratisation, a number of LDCs have adopted affirmative measures, such as reserved seats and quota, to ensure the participation of women in decision-making. Notable examples are Afghanistan where women are guaranteed 25 percent of seats in the Lower House and Lao PDR, whose National Assembly in 2003 adopted a constitutional amendment, which places emphasis on increasing responsibility on all sectors to promote the advancement of women, in all compliance with the Government's international commitments. In 2004 the

Government of Samoa appointed women government representatives from all villages to provide information and feedback regarding women's issues.

POLITICAL PLURALITY

Since 2001, Asia-Pacific LDCs have regularly held presidential, local and municipal elections. In Afghanistan, a number of significant steps towards political plurality were undertaken including the staging of two Loya Jirgas (Grand Councils) and Presidential elections in 2004.

Yemen is preparing to hold its second Presidential elections in 2006, while Bhutan is on the threshold of becoming a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party political system.

JUDICIAL REFORM

The promotion of justice has been at the forefront of the national development plans in all Asia/Pacific LDC with most either amending or adopting legislation to strengthen governance.

In 2003 Bangladesh undertook major reform in the civil procedure code with the objective of modernising court processes, reducing case backlog, expediting dispute settlement, and facilitating access to justice. According to the national report, the Money Loan Court Act 2003 provided money courts with exclusive jurisdiction over credit disputes and has vastly improved the loan recovery mechanism.

A new initiative to strengthen the Lao Bar Association and thereby the legal profession came into force in 2004. This aims to improve public awareness about the role of lawyers and the Bar. The Supreme Court, Office of General Prosecutors, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Security have their long-term strategies until 2020 and are currently in the process of developing a general strategy in the legal sector including better compliance with international conventions and agreements.

In Cambodia, a clear plan of action for judicial and legal reform has been adopted, while the Solomon Islands has reported that since 2003, with the assistance of the international community, there has been an improvement in the legal system. Although Samoa has established a Law Reform Commission, a commissioner is yet to be appointed.

The Panel with Exclusive Jurisdiction over Serious Criminal Offences was established in Timor-Leste. Past human rights abuses have also been addressed by truth commissions established in Timor-Leste.

Bhutan reported that since 2001 major reforms have also taken place in the judicial system. In 2001, the National Assembly adopted the Code of Civil and Criminal Procedures. The country's national report noted a gradual shift in the composition of judges from Buddhist institutional background to modern law graduates. There was also an attempt to bridge the modern legal system with the traditional system.

COMBATING CORRUPTION

A number of Asia/Pacific LDCs reported wide-ranging measures to combat corruption. National anti-corruption strategies were enacted in Yemen, Tuvalu, Timor-Leste, Lao PDR and Samoa.

In 2004, an Anti-Corruption Commission Act was passed by Parliament in Bangladesh, providing the Commission with a mandate to prevent corrupt practices and investigate specific offences. Cambodia reported it was finalising an anti-corruption law.

Between 2001-2005, a number of LDCs acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. During the reported period, Afghanistan became party to key international conventions against narcotics and organised crime including the new Central and South Asia Counter-Narcotics Security Working Group.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Good governance requires adherence to international standards in the area of human rights. In the period 2003-2004, Timor-Lest acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment. During 2003-2004 period, Afghanistan, Kiribati and Timor-Leste acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Bhutan and Nepal submitted their country reports on their compliance with it. In 2004, all Asia-pacific LDCs were States parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Commitment 3 – Building human and institutional capacities

Progress in achieving poverty reduction and economic growth in the LDCs depends, to a great extent, on human capital, access of people to nutrition, health, education, sanitation, safe drinking water and on their social integration. The BPoA contains 18 quantifiable goals and targets in these areas.

POPULATION GROWTH

Most Asia/Pacific LDCs have adopted policies designed to decrease their population growth and at least two thirds have adopted policies and programmes to address adolescent fertility. However, several LDCs in the region acknowledge that fertility levels and the population growth rate remains very high.

Lao PDR reported that high population growth and increasing interest in educating their children shown by small ethnic groups living in small and isolated villages have increased the demand for educational services

Although, the under-five mortality rate remains the high, some Asia/Pacific LDCs reported progress. Notably, Maldives has successfully reached the under-five mortality target of 45 per 1,000 live births and maternal mortality now stands at 78 per 100,000. Yemen reported a marginal improvement in fertility health.

By 2005, the infant mortality rate had been reduced to 60 per 1,000 live births and child mortality to 80 per 1,000 live births. Improving accessing to health in Timor Leste has been challenges given the dispersal of communities.

EDUCATION

Over the past five years, progress in the area of education has been mixed. Although the net enrolment in primary education increased over the period under review, with the most dramatic changes observed in Maldives, Lao PDR, and Bangladesh, LDCs acknowledge, the quality of education needs to be improved. The major challenge facing the education sector is the training of teachers. Moreover, the number of pupils who drop out before reaching high school remains high.

All Asia/Pacific LDCs reported that they needed to improve capacity and educational standards, especially at secondary level.

ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION

Between 2001-2005 access to water and sanitation has improved in most LDCs in the region but governments note that a gap between urban residents and their rural counterparts exists. Access to safe drinking water in reached 84 percent in Bhutan up from 78 percent in 2000. The Government expects 100 percent coverage by 2007. Bangladesh reported that it had already achieved the Millennium Development Goal in respect to ensuring access to pure drinking water.

Commitment 4: Building productive capacities to make globalisation work for the least developed countries

Since the BPoA declaration in 2001, a number of LDCs have geared up their efforts to deregulate agricultural markets, provide a greater role for the private sector, attract investments and promote new agricultural technology (Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Yemen).

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

Growth of agricultural production and a vibrant agricultural sector are of particular importance for the least developed countries, where poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Several LDCs have adopted policies to deregulate agricultural markets, provide a greater role for the private sector, attract investments and promote new agricultural technology. The development of high-value agricultural products features prominently in the recent PRSPs of Nepal and Bhutan.

Efforts of the least developed countries were supported by their development partners. The International Trade Centre of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD/World Trade Organisation) provided support to silk production in Cambodia and jute production in Bangladesh.

IMPROVING ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

Adequate physical infrastructure (roads, railways, ports etc.) is crucial for a vibrant economy, the promotion of trade, reducing poverty and the social integration of the poor

In an effort to improve transport infrastructure, Lao PDR has received substantial external support. The country reported that most primary highways and major airports are in fair to good conditions although much needs to be done to improve secondary and tertiary roads. The East-West Economic Corridor connecting Vietnam with Thailand via central Laos is scheduled for completion soon. Construction of the section through Lao PDR of the North-South Corridor from Kunming to Chiang Mai has commenced with financing from the People's Republic of China, Thailand and the Asia Development Bank.

In Afghanistan the "ring" road which encircles the country is under construction with the assistance of the donor community, while large-scale programmes to rehabilitate farm-to-market access roads are underway. Solomon Islands highlighted that with the support of the European Union seven new wharves were completed in 2005. Additionally, funding from Japan enabled the country to upgrade only international airport.

The Government of Maldives has pressed ahead with the rehabilitation of the infrastructure destroyed by the 2004 tsunami.

Samoa reported that road networks covering the two main islands have been completed under a World Bank financed infrastructure asset management project.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Information and communication technology (ICT) can improve delivery of services; promote trade, business, governance, foreign investment, employment and rural development and social inclusion of the poor. The paradox of asymmetrical globalisation, however, is that ICT has also widened the gap between the poor and the rich.

Between 2001-2005 tele-density and Internet penetration has almost doubled in the LDCs, although the digital divided between LDCs and developed countries remains stark.

In 2003 Samoa approved a national ICT strategy, while a new telecommunication Act was passed which prescribes the new regulatory role of the government.

In Nepal, the national IT policy has been revised with a focus on cyber regulation, e-governance, and e-commerce. Telephones have more than tripled since 2002.

Commitment 5: Enhancing the role of trade in development

Utilizing trade potential fully is arguably the most daunting challenge for many LDCs, heavily dependent on primary commodities for their export earnings. The share of the LDCs in the world trade remains below 1 percent.

MARKET ACCESS

Preferential market access and special and differential treatment of LDCs have been the cornerstone of the Brussels Programme of Action and the Doha and Millennium declarations. Despite intervention to improve market access under the Generalized System of Trade Preferences (GSTP) and through special trade preferences for least developed countries, such as the European Union's 'Everything But Arms' initiative almost half of the market access preferences granted under these schemes remain under utilised by LDCs, owing to supply side constraints, lack of trade-related capacity and non-tariff barriers, notable rules of origin and product standards.

The expiration of the WTO Agreement and Clothing in January 2005 raised serious concerns among the least developed countries specialising in textile and clothing

exports. Preliminary studies suggested Asia LDCs, with the strongest textile export specialisation could be most seriously affected.

Integrating the least developed countries into the global economy requires their voice and effective participation in the rule-based multi-lateral trading system. However, their accession to WTO has been hampered by policy issues related to the adjustment of development strategies, implementing instruments and legislative frameworks of LDCs to WTO requirements; insufficient expertise, resources and infrastructure required for accession negotiations., So far, only two least developed countries (Nepal and Cambodia) have joined WTO in post-Doha period. Yet six LDCs in the Asia-Pacific region remain in different stages of the accession process (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Lao PDR, Samoa, Vanuatu and Yemen).

The International Trade Centre continued the export-led poverty reduction programme, aimed at integrating poor communities into international markets in for example in Cambodia. The ITC World Trade Net Programme, aimed at facilitating business community participation in the world trading system, currently covers three Asian LDCs, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal

Commitment 6: Reducing vulnerability and protecting the environment

Since 2001, Asia/Pacific LDCs have increasingly focused on measures to improve environmental sustainability. Countries are at different stages in the development of institutional frameworks for comprehensive disaster risk reduction because some embraced the need earlier; others are yet to understand the implications, while others lack the capacity to design them.

Timor-Leste reported that “slash and burn” methods and extensive logging have created soil erosion, but there was a steady progress was being made to combat this phenomenon. The Government has also established an Inter-Ministerial Commission for Natural Disasters whose focus is the strengthening capacity to deal with disasters.

Bangladesh has drawn up a Five-Year Strategic Plan for the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (2004-2008). The plan is a collaborative effort of the Government and the development partners.

In Samoa the Ministry of natural Resources and Environment was restructured to take up meteorological services, watershed management and natural disaster management and forestry. Furthermore, in 2004 a legal framework for the management and control of unsustainable types of land use was created through the Planning and Urban Management Act.

In an effort to alleviate Tuvalu's vulnerability to natural disasters, the Government has established a National Disaster Office in collaboration with regional organisations. There are, however, concerns about the lack of technical staff and resources to manage the National Disaster Plan.

Commitment 7: Mobilizing financial resources

It is worth noting that LDCs accounted for most of the OECD/DAC aid (41.1 percent) and European Union aid (47.1 percent) in the period 2002-2003. In 2003, 92 percent of OECD/DAC aid was untied and 94.7 percent of bilateral aid to LDCs was provided in grants, a total of 0.08 percent of donors' GNI/ODA, a modest increase over 2002. It is projected that OECD/DAC aid to LDCs will further increase in 2006, in light of the commitments made by individual countries. The Paris High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held from 28 February to 2 March 2005, also signalled the determination of donors to improve effectiveness by monitoring progress on ownership, aid alignment, harmonisation, managing for results and mutual accountability.

The share of net foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to LDCs has increased, reaching almost 5 percent in the period 2003-2004. A number of countries have also succeeded in attracting South-South FDI (Nepal) from neighbouring developing countries, owing to favourable investment climate.

Workers' remittances have recently emerged as an important source of external finance for development. They are currently a primary source of external finance to several least developed countries. In 2004 they were quite significant for Bangladesh, Kiribati and Samoa.

Although micro finance and micro credit can be a powerful tool for increasing production, growth and poverty eradication, still the vast majority of poor people in the LDCs do not have access to micro finance services owing to the policy and

regulatory environment, insufficient access to information, lack of collateral, and weak human and institutional capacities. In most of the LDCs, with exception of Bangladesh (5 percent) the penetration rates hardly exceed 1 percent.

Several least developed countries, with the support of donors, have also made sustained efforts to improve their investment and economic governance. Investment guides executed by UNCTAD have enabled the beneficiary countries to improve their investment framework, adapt to changing policy environment at the national and international levels and enhance perceived images of these countries as investment locations.

The Way Forward

The challenges in implementing the seven commitments of the Brussels Programme of Action are enormous and complex. The first task ahead is to strengthen the partnership between the LDCs and their development partners and to ensure that the constraints and problems of implementation which bedevilled the implementation of the previous two PoAs will not be repeated.

The second challenge is to mobilize all stakeholders and actors in development, both at the national and international level, to fully and effectively implement the commitments of the PoA that fall under their respective mandates and competence.

Although LDCs in the Asia/Pacific region acknowledge that some progress has been made, there is consensus that overall progress in meeting the goals has been slow and uneven. Five years after the Brussels Declaration, LDCs are concerned that their progress has not been sufficient to achieve the goals of the Programme of Action and its objective of eradicating poverty and achieving sustained growth and sustainable development in LDCs by 2010.

Essentially, three overarching obstacles were identified by LDCs in the 12 national reports received.

LDCs reported that the **challenges of capacity-building** and **resources mobilization** could, to some extent, be remedied by strengthening the partnership between the LDCs and their development partners, the very foundation of the Brussels Programme of Action.

LDCs urged developed countries to fulfill their commitments on overseas development aid, debt relief, trade and technology transfer, fully and expeditiously, to enable the least developed countries to achieve the goals of the Brussels Programme of Action by 2010.

Furthermore, LDCs recommended that the **Brussels Programme of Action be integrated in the development policies, strategies and programmes of the development partners of the LDCs**, including monitoring and reporting.

For effective implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action, **there should perhaps be more focused consideration of some of its elements**. Rural development and agriculture should be brought more to the centre of the development efforts of LDCs. In addition, the development of ICT and of health services, and the production of consumer durables should be actively pursued by LDCs.

Other recommendations include addressing ongoing marginalisation of LDCs. It was suggested that all United Nations reports on economic and social items should include, in the analysis of global development trends, a group of countries classified by the United Nations as LDCs to ensure monitoring of their development in a broader context.

Civil society, including NGOs, and the private sector should encourage their constituencies to enhance the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action both at the national and at the global level.

LDCs also highlighted that special international support measures, such as preferential market access and special and preferential treatment of the LDCs under WTO provisions, need to be expanded and deepened bearing in mind bearing in mind the supply-side constraints of the least developed countries. Enhanced market access for least developed countries' products to other developing countries could also contribute to the expansion of their trade opportunities. All efforts should be made to reach a successful outcome of the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations no later than 2006 and the effective implementation of the Doha Development Agenda, which included inter alia, special treatment of the LDCs.

LDCs also expressed that full cancellation of the external debt of HIPC least developed countries and significant debt relief for the non-HIPC least developed countries are critical to enable them to reduce poverty and achieve sustained growth.

Furthermore, debt relief needs to be placed in a broader development agenda that includes stronger national policies, more targeted and predictable development assistance and an enabling international environment for growth.

However, the national reports recognize that the responsibility for domestic development continues to lie with the LDCs themselves.

END
