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ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE LEAST DEVELOPED
COUNTRIES THROUGH REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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I. Introduction

The United Nations Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2), adopted by the General Assembly on 18 September 2000, expressed the commitment of countries towards the elimination of extreme poverty and ensuring the right to development for everyone. Among its fundamental values, the Millennium Declaration noted that responsibility for managing worldwide economic and social development must be shared among the nations of the world and should be exercised multilaterally (para. 6).

In line with this Declaration, eight goals on development and poverty eradication, otherwise known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), were established. While each country was expected to achieve the first seven goals, the eighth goal was set as a measure of the international community's commitment. Despite significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in many developing countries in the Asian and Pacific region, overall attainment of the goals in the region, will be largely determined by the progress achieved by the least developed countries.

Since the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in the least developed countries may largely depend on our shared responsibility, the role of development cooperation at the regional level assumes importance for all countries in Asia and the Pacific. In addition, the least developed countries themselves form a diverse group of countries; the needs and challenges of each of these countries thus differ greatly. Given the significant differences in the situation of these countries, it will be useful to critically consider how various types and modalities of development cooperation from each member of the Commission could facilitate the attainment of these Goals.

II. The Millennium Development Goals and Brussels Declaration and Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010

The United Nations Millennium Declaration adopted by the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session, resolved to create an environment, both at national and global levels, conducive to development and the elimination of poverty (para. 12) and committed countries to address the special needs of the least developed countries (para. 15). In line with this Declaration, eight goals on development and poverty eradication, which need to be achieved by all countries by 2015, were set. These goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals, were aimed at (1) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieving universal primary education; (3) promoting gender equality and empowering women; (4) reducing child mortality; (5) improving maternal health; (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and (8) developing a global partnership for development. A framework of these eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators to measure progress towards the Millennium Development goals was adopted by a consensus of experts from the United Nations Secretariat and IMF, OECD and the World Bank.¹

¹ United Nations. "Road Map towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration" (A/56/326).

In line with the commitments made in the Millennium Declaration, the international community committed themselves to the eradication of poverty and improvement in the quality of lives of people who live in the least developed countries in the Declaration of the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries, Brussels, 14-20 May 2001. Guided by the principles set in the Millennium Declaration, the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 articulated the policies and measures that need to be implemented by the least developed countries and their development partners in order to ensure that these Goals are reached.²

III. The least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific

In the triennial review conducted in 2003 to determine countries to be added to or graduated from the list of least developed countries, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) based its identification of these countries on the three dimensions of a country's state of development, namely, (i) its income level, (ii) its stock of human assets and (iii) economic vulnerability.³ Gross national income (GNI) per capita was used as an indicator of income, the Human Assets Index (HAI) as an indicator of the stock of human assets and the economic vulnerability index (EVI) as an indicator of economic susceptibility.⁴ In addition, no country with a population exceeding 75 million was considered for addition to the list. The results based on LDC eligibility indicators for 14 least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific region are summarized in Table 1.

Since the establishment of the list of least developed countries in 1971, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kiribati, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have joined the original six regional least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific region. In addition, Timor-Leste was included in the list in December 2003. Clustered in South Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific region, the 14 least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific region vary widely, with four landlocked countries and seven island developing countries among them⁵.

² These commitments are (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 globalization work; (5) enhancing the role of trade in development; (6) reducing vulnerability and protecting the environment; and (7) mobilizing financial resource. United Nations. Report of the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, Brussels, 14-20 May 2001. (A/CONF.191/13)

³ United Nations. Committee for Development Policy: Report on the Fifth Session, 7-11 April 2003. Economic and Social Council. Official Records, 2003, Supplement No. 13.

⁴ The Human Assets Index (HAI) reflects (a) nutrition, measured by the average caloric consumption per capita as a percentage of the minimum requirement; (b) health, as measured by the under-five child mortality rate; and (c) education, measured by (i) the adult literacy rate and (ii) the gross secondary school enrollment rate. The Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI) reflects structural economic vulnerability through an average of five indicators: (a) merchandise export concentration; (b) instability of export earnings; (c) instability of agricultural production; (d) share of manufacturing and modern services in GDP; and (e) population size.

⁵ Least developed countries on the original list are Afghanistan, Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Maldives, Nepal and Samoa. Afghanistan, Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal are landlocked while Kiribati, Maldives, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are island developing countries.

Table 1. Criteria used in determining eligibility for least developed country status

Country	Population 2002 (in millions)	Per capita GNI (USD)	HAI	EVI	EVI (modified)
Afghanistan	23.3	523	11.6	50.1	49.0
Bangladesh	143.4	363	45.3	22.9	29.5
Bhutan	2.2	600	40.4	40.6	41.0
Cambodia	13.8	263	44.5	49.7	48.1
Kiribati	0.1	923	67.5	64.8	60.4
Lao PDR	5.5	297	46.4	43.9	43.4
Maldives	0.3	1983	65.2	33.6	37.5
Myanmar	49.0	282	60.0	45.4	45.6
Nepal	24.2	240	47.1	29.5	31.0
Samoa	0.2	1,447	88.8	40.9	50.8
Solomon Islands	0.5	657	47.3	46.7	49.1
Timor Leste	0.8	478	36.4	n.a.	n.a.
Tuvalu	0.01	1,383	63.7	70.3	67.3
Vanuatu	0.2	1,083	57.4	44.5	46.4

Note: Thresholds for inclusion in the list of least developed countries are population less than 75 million; a three-year average (1999-2000) per capita gross national income (GNI) less than US\$ 750; Human Assets Index (HAI) less than 55; and economic vulnerability index (EVI) greater than 37. A country must meet all the criteria. Thresholds for graduation from the list of least developed countries are a three-year average (1999-2000) per capita GNI greater than US\$ 900; HAI greater than 61; and EVI of less than 33. A country must meet at least two of the criteria for graduation. The modified EVI includes percentage of population displaced by natural disasters as a supplement to the data on the instability of agricultural production and has a threshold of greater than 38 for inclusion and less than 34 for graduation. *Source:* United Nations. Committee for Development Policy: Report on the Fifth Session, 7-11 April 2003. Economic and Social Council. Official Records, 2003, Supplement No. 13.

Among the 50 least developed countries in the world, Bangladesh is the largest in terms of population while Tuvalu is the smallest. Bangladesh and Myanmar account for nearly three-quarters of the total population in the least developed countries of the region, resulting in a larger population, on average, in least developed countries in Asia than in other regions (Figure 1). During this period 1990-2000, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) for least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific increased, on average, by one and half times and exports more than tripled, while the adult literacy rate increased from 60 per cent in 1990 to 71 percent in 2000, life expectancy rate rose from 58 to 62 years and infant mortality rate dropped from 77 to 55 (per 1,000 live birth). The average per capita GNI and average HAI of the least developed countries in the Pacific region are higher than the comparable figures for these indicators in least developed countries in Asia and Africa, and even surpass the income and HAI threshold for graduation in some cases.

IV. Challenges of the least developed countries

While the implementation of the Programme of Action is critical in order to foster sustainable development in these countries, the application of measures also must accommodate the different constraints faced by each country in order to be effective. In small countries with

dispersed population, there are distinct, small domestic markets and limited scope for large-scale agricultural, industrial or service-oriented production. As a result, concessionary finance and remittances from migrants continue to be lifelines to these highly dependent countries. Since domestic markets can be increased only through deeper economic integration with their neighbouring countries, least developed countries have joined regional organizations, such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Forum. Such economic integration, however, needs to be accompanied by greater integration in trade and transport networks and facilitation measures.

In a large least developed country with coastal access, the handicap resulting from their economic size and difficulty of access are minimal compared to that faced by a small island developing country. While the larger least developed countries may be able to take advantage of some of the trade related concessions rendered to these countries, their limited supply capacities often lead to dependence on a limited number of products for their exports and high cost of production. Their specific concerns, especially those concerning market access, may, furthermore differ from other developing countries. Constraints in a large country may also be more related to their difficulties in effectively implementing government policies throughout the country, given their institutional and resource constraints.

These constraints, with varying degrees of impact, thus affect efforts to assist these countries and their progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Since there is no typical least developed country, there is likewise no uniform prescription or strategy to address their problems.

V. Regional partnership for development

Among its fundamental values, the Millennium Declaration noted that responsibility for managing worldwide economic and social development must be shared among the nations of the world and should be exercised multilaterally (para. 6). The Declaration furthermore called on the industrialized countries (1) to adopt a policy of duty and quota free access for essential all exports from the least developed countries, (2) to implement the enhanced programme of debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries and to agree to cancel all official bilateral debts of those countries in return for their making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction and (3) to grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction (para. 15). Developed countries have held discussion on the need to establish benchmarks and measure their efforts, as well as establish coherence in their policies intended to assist the developing countries.

Yet, as the Brussels Declaration recognizes, the primary responsibility for development in least developed countries rests with the countries. If concrete and substantial international support from governments and international organizations in a spirit of shared responsibility is to be expected, the least developed countries must take appropriate action in areas outlined in the seven commitments of the Programme of Action. Without effectively addressing their share of the partnership, the best intentions and efforts by their development partners may not confer significant improvements to these countries.

Finally, while much focus on partnership has been placed on support from developed countries, the role of developing countries may be crucial. Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the least developed countries could be facilitated by measures implemented by developing countries in line with the eighth goal of the Millennium Development Declaration (Table 2). Since the economies of least developed countries of the region are furthermore intrinsically tied to those of their neighbouring developing countries, implementation of selected recommendations for the development partners, as contained in the Brussels Programme of Action, by the developing countries could also make a measurable impact.

Table 2. Targets set in Millennium Development Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Target 12. Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system (Commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction – both nationally and internationally).
Target 13. Address the special needs of the least developed countries (tariff and quota-free access for least developed countries' exports; enhanced programme of debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction).
Target 14. Address the special needs of landlocked countries and small island developing states (through the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly).
Target 15. Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term
Target 16. In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth
Target 17. In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
Target 18. In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications

Source: United Nations Millennium Indicators Database. (<http://millenniumindicators.un.org>)

Modalities for the regional partnership

Given the capacities and experiences of developing countries in Asia and the Pacific, it is essential to consider how these countries can become effective partners of the least developed countries. Under the existing modalities, development cooperation can be broadly defined as economic and technical cooperation. Economic cooperation refers mainly to cooperation in trade, investment and finance, while technical cooperation refers to a process whereby countries pursue their individual or collective development through cooperative exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how. The General Assembly has already identified China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Turkey as among the 22 pivotal countries to lead in the promotion and application of technical cooperation among developing countries

The Buenos Aires Plan of Action, endorsed by the General Assembly (1978), was aimed at promoting and implementing technical cooperation among developing countries. The Buenos Aires Plan of Action focuses on the enhancement of technical cooperation to increase the capacity of the developing countries and to develop their awareness and confidence in their capabilities. The report on new directions for TCDC (1995) furthermore recommended better integration of economic and technical cooperation, and adoption of a more strategic orientation focusing on trade and investment, debt, environment, poverty alleviation, production and employment, macroeconomic policy coordination and aid management. These activities should be initiated, organized and managed by developing countries themselves with their governments playing a lead role while involving public and private institutions, non-governmental organizations and individuals.

Technical cooperation activities may also be implemented through bilateral, multilateral, subregional, regional or interregional arrangements. Given that Asia and the Pacific countries are diverse in terms of size, economic and technical development, triangular cooperation, where technical cooperation among two or more developing countries that is supported financially by donor countries or by international organizations, is another possible modality. Under the second cooperation framework (2001-2003), focus has been placed on activities supporting developing countries in dealing with related problems and opportunities of globalization, such as regional and interregional initiatives aimed at engaging a large number of countries to work together to formulate policies, share information, agree on priorities and translate ideas into programmes. As such developing countries could be effective partners of the least developed countries towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals through these modalities.

Panel discussion

In order to facilitate the panel discussion the panelists could address the following questions in their presentation:

1. How can regional development cooperation lead to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific? What kind of cooperation will yield the largest impact?
2. What are the possible modalities for regional development cooperation? Can greater collaboration between developed and developing countries (development partners) in providing development cooperation increase the effectiveness of these programmes?
3. Since an effective partnership is the basis of any collaborative efforts, what must (a) least developed countries and (b) their development partners do to ensure effectiveness of regional development cooperation?
4. Since regional agriculture, trade, investment, migration, and other policies must be mutually supportive of the recipient countries development goals, how can policy coherence in regional development cooperation be ensured?

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