



Framework for the Programme of Action for least developed countries *

The Committee reiterated its recommendation that the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries adopt the theme “Expanding productive capacity for sustainable development” as an organizing framework for the new programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030. The proposed framework is derived from evidence-based analysis carried out by the Committee

and other key United Nations entities. Its adoption would provide the basis for an integrated and coherent approach to the formulation of the policy actions needed to overcome key challenges faced by the most disadvantaged countries. It would contribute to ensuring that no country is left behind, thereby furthering a key element of the decade of action and delivery for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The new programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030, to be adopted at the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, which will be held in Doha in March 2021, will be critical for improving the lives of millions of people in the most disadvantaged countries and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the success of the new programme of action will ultimately depend on the actions by least developed countries and their development partners, the choice of a suitable organizing framework is an essential precondition for a successful programme of action.

As reported in 2019 (see E/2019/33), the Committee recommends that the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries adopt the theme “Expanding productive capacity for sustainable development” as the organizing framework. The framework has been developed by the Committee over the period 2015–2017,¹ on the basis of analytical studies

which built on the work of UNCTAD and other organizations. The limited development of productive capacities has been identified as a root cause of the persistent challenges facing least developed countries, including insufficient progress in resilience building, the failure to create decent and productive jobs and limited technological upgrading. In its work, the Committee identified five policy areas that are critical for building productive capacities. These include: (a) building development governance capabilities; (b) creating positive synergies between social outcomes and productive capacities; (c) establishing conducive and macroeconomic and financial frameworks; (d) developing industrial and sectoral policies that promote technological upgrading and structural transformation; and (e) providing adequate international support. In the light of the increasing importance of climate change and other environmental shocks for the productive sectors, the Committee suggests including environmental policies as a sixth pillar of the policy framework rather than

¹ See, in particular, www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/expanding-productive-capacity-lessons-learned-from-graduating-least-developed-countries/.

* Excerpt from Committee for Development Policy, Report on the twenty-second session, See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2020, Supplement No. 13 (E/2020/33)

subsuming it under sectoral policies. The environmental dimension would not only cover climate and other environmental risks for productive activities, particularly those affecting the most vulnerable populations, but also opportunities arising from decarbonization and other necessary global policy shifts.

The advantages of the coherent framework proposed by the Committee is that it facilitates integrated and synergistic policy actions by requiring that, in all actions associated with the framework all critical linkages are taken into account. Alternative approaches, such as a listing of unconnected priorities, risk missing critical synergies and trade-offs, even if productive capacity is included as a priority. Hence, such alternatives could contribute to suboptimal outcomes such as increased education levels without job opportunities for the youth, or debt-financed infrastructure geared towards unsustainable production structures.

The proposed framework ensures that the programme of action is founded on solid analysis and adapts policies that have already been successfully implemented by least developed countries that are in the process of graduation or have already graduated. As shown by the various pathways to graduation from the least developed country category, the proposed framework is also flexible enough to capture the heterogeneity within least developed countries, avoiding the fallacy of a one-size-fits-all approach. The linkages between the expanding productive capacity and least developed country graduation also further contributes to ensuring

continuity between the current Istanbul Programme of Action and the new programme of action, as bringing the issue of least developed country graduation to the political forefront is arguably one of the main achievements of the current programme.

Moreover, the framework will enable least developed countries to address critical emerging issues. It allows, for example, the alignment of the programme of action with the 2030 Agenda, because of the intrinsic linkages between expanding productive capacities and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. If implemented successfully, it contributes to advancing the development of the most vulnerable countries, thereby ensuring that no country is left behind.

The framework also reflects the upcoming changing geographical composition of the least developed country category. Difficulties in expanding productive capacity, which limits the ability of least developed countries to benefit from international support measures, such as least developed country-specific preferential market access, is the main factor as to why most least developed countries in Africa have made less progress towards graduation than their peers in Asia and the Pacific.

Finally, the framework will facilitate the effective monitoring of progress in the implementation of the programme of action, benefiting from existing initiatives for measuring productive capacities developed, among others, by UNCTAD and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).