

Making progress on sustainable development, four least developed countries tapped to graduate from ranks of poorest

Bhutan, Kiribati, São Tomé and Príncipe and Solomon Islands recommended for graduation from the UN least developed country category

New York, 15 March — With increasing national earning power as well as access to better health care and education, four countries—Bhutan, Kiribati, São Tomé and Príncipe and Solomon Islands—will be recommended for graduation from the least developed country (LDC) category, the United Nations Committee for Development Policy (CDP) announced today.

“This is a historic occasion,” said Professor Jose Antonio Ocampo, Chair of the Committee for Development Policy. “In the 47 years since the start of the Least Developed Countries category, only five countries have previously left the list.” He added that two more countries, Vanuatu and Angola, are scheduled for graduation in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

“If the recommendation is endorsed by ECOSOC, 2018 has the potential to be a momentous year, increasing by more than half the total number of LDC graduates. Never before have so many countries been identified at a single review of the Committee for Development Policy,” noted Ocampo.

The Committee’s recommendations follow increases in the national income in all countries, as well as improved education and health. The Committee found that Government development policies, as well as an improved global economic environment and the coordinated efforts of the international community have driven the progress.

For Bhutan and São Tomé and Príncipe, per capita GNI tripled, the under-five mortality rate declined and gross secondary enrolment more than doubled from 2003 to 2018. During that same period, the per capita GNI doubled for Solomon Islands while the country’s gross secondary enrolment rate almost doubled.

While in Kiribati the per capita income almost tripled and it continues to perform very well in health and education since 2003, the country remains one of the most environmentally vulnerable LDCs due to its exposure to climate change. For this reason the CDP has recommended that Kiribati’s graduation is contingent on the creation of a category of countries facing extreme vulnerability to climate change and other environmental shocks. Kiribati and other extremely vulnerable countries should receive support targeting their specific vulnerabilities to climate change and other environmental shocks.

The LDC category is assessed using three criteria: human assets (health and education targets), economic vulnerability and gross national income per capita. Countries must meet two of the three criteria at two consecutive triennial reviews of the CDP to be considered for graduation. CDP will send its recommendations to ECOSOC (the UN Economic and Social Council) for endorsement, which will then refer its decision to the UN General Assembly.

Bhutan, Kiribati, São Tomé and Príncipe and Solomon Islands each continue to meet the gross national income per capita and human assets criteria but not the economic vulnerability criterion.

“It’s good to see development efforts bearing fruit, but it is important for the international community to keep supporting these three countries in ways that will enable them to reduce their economic vulnerability in years to come,” said Committee for Development Policy member Professor Diane Elson of the University of Essex.

The Committee acknowledged the Bhutanese government’s request for graduation to become effective after the conclusion of the 12th National Development Plan 2018-2023, which will serve as the country’s strategy for transition to non-LDC status.

The graduating country has a grace period (normally three years) before graduation effectively takes place. This period, during which the country remains an LDC, is designed to enable the country and its development and trading partners to agree on a “smooth-transition” strategy, so that the planned loss of LDC status does not disrupt the socioeconomic progress of the country.

Mr. Thinley Namgyel, Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission, Bhutan, said the transition period “presents a unique opportunity to mainstream the transition strategy into the national development plan and incorporate our obligation to fulfill the target of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.”

In the case of São Tomé and Príncipe the Committee noted the Government’s request for a preparatory period longer than the standard three years. “The country could use the extended preparatory period to embark on the transition process and to engage its trading and development partners and the United Nations system,” said Ocampo.

“The prospect that we may be graduating from the list of LDCs is a positive step in our development path. It encourages us to be more bold in our approach to implementing the SDGs and our own National Development Strategy,” stated Mr. Rick Nelson Houenipwela, the Honourable Prime Minister of Solomon Islands.

The Committee found that while Nepal and Timor-Leste also met the criteria for graduation, they were not recommended for graduation at this time due to economic and political challenges. These countries may again be considered for graduation at the next triennial review of the Committee for Development Policy in 2021 if they still meet the criteria.

Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Myanmar met the graduation criteria for the first time but would need to meet the criteria for a second time at the next triennial review in 2021 to become eligible to be considered for graduation.

About the Committee for Development Policy:

The Committee for Development Policy is a subsidiary body of ECOSOC. The CDP provides inputs and independent advice to ECOSOC on emerging cross-sectoral development issues and on international cooperation for development, focusing on medium- and long-term aspects. The Committee is also responsible for reviewing the status of LDCs and for monitoring their progress after graduation from the category. More on the CDP may be found at www.cdp.un.org.

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