Despite considerable progress by many least developed countries in improving education, health care, fresh water sources, sanitation and energy, a steep climb lies ahead in achieving universal access to these standard-of-living basics.

More than half of the population in LDCs still lives in extreme poverty, with large numbers of underweight children, high maternal mortality rates, and constrained access to water, sanitation and energy. Huge gaps between urban and rural areas, rapidly expanding populations, and persistent inequalities with respect to gender and ethnicity further hamper fulfilment of the 2001 Brussels Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries and of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Here are some of the latest facts and figures* on efforts to move towards universal access to essential services:

**EDUCATION**
- Primary school enrolment ratios in the least developed countries jumped from just over 52 per cent in 1991 to almost 79 per cent in 2008 — but are still far short of the MDG target of universal enrolment.
- Girls’ secondary school enrolment ratios in LDCs improved substantially from 58 girls to 81 girls for every 100 boys between 1991 and 2008. But according to the 2011 Report of Eminent Persons acting on behalf of the least developed countries, only about a quarter of LDC secondary school-age children were enrolled in school.
- In Bhutan, the Gambia and Myanmar, more than 50 per cent of children were enrolled in secondary school in 2008 — close to the average enrolment rate in non-LDC countries.
- Literacy rates of 15-24 year olds increased from 56 per cent in 1985-94 to almost 70 per cent in 2005-8. But the gap between men (75 per cent) and women (65 per cent) in the most recent period remains significant. It should also be noted that literacy rates vary widely among the 48 least developed countries.

**HEALTH**
- In ten LDCs (Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Mali, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Zambia), more than 50 per cent of the population were using insecticide-
treated bed nets to prevent malaria between 2007 and 2009, and five LDCs (Eritrea, Madagascar, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Zambia) reduced their confirmed malaria cases or malaria admissions and deaths by more than 50 per cent in recent years. [World Malaria Report 2010, WHO]

- Against steep odds, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Laos, Liberia, Madagascar, Nepal and Timor-Leste have reduced their child mortality rate by 50 per cent or more since 1990. However, according to the Eminent Persons, child mortality rates are falling much more slowly in the LDCs overall than in other low or lower-middle income countries.

- The percentage of the population aged 15 to 49 with HIV in the least developed countries has dropped only slightly, from 2 per cent in 2002 to 1.8 per cent in 2008. But the proportion of HIV-infected people who received antiretroviral drugs in LDCs grew from just 13 per cent in 2005 to 46 per cent in 2008.

- The percentage of women aged 15 to 49, married or in union, who were using contraception in LDCs more than doubled in the last two decades, from 17 per cent in 1990 to 31 per cent in 2007.

ENERGY

- More than 70 per cent of people in the least developed countries lack access to electricity.
- More than 80 per cent of the population in the LDCs primarily rely on solid fuels such as wood, charcoal and dung for cooking and heating, compared to 56 per cent in the developing world overall, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Every year, 2 million people worldwide die from indoor air pollution caused by burning solid fuels.

WATER AND SANITATION

- Just 62 per cent of the population in least developed countries were able to access safe drinking water in 2008. While 80 per cent of urban residents had access to safe drinking water, the rate was only 54 per cent in the countryside.
- Only 36 per cent of the LDC population were using adequate sanitation facilities in 2008.