LDC5
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CONFERENCE ON THE
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High-level Thematic Round Table 1

Investing in people in least developed countries to leave no one behind

March 5, 2023
Doha time: 14:00 - 17:00

Thematic Roundtables Hall

Concept Note

#LDC5

Background

Investing in people in the LDCs to ensure no one is left behind entails supporting their right to fulfill their potential as citizens, contribute to their societies, and enjoy the opportunities to lead the life they value. The United Nations has placed human development at the center of its mission since its founding. Article 55 of the Charter sets out the goal of achieving "higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development". The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development renewed this commitment with the overarching principle of leaving no one behind. The principle of equality among nations and peoples justifies the need to prioritize the unique needs of the LDCs in international efforts to promote equality and opportunity.

The promise of human development is the cornerstone of international efforts to support the LDCs in overcoming their structural constraints, and Member States anchored it firmly on the Doha Programme of Action of the Least Developed Countries (DPoA). The UN development agenda's success lies in translating this promise into reality in the LDCs.

Recovering from COVID-19

The share of the poor in the LDCs as a share of the world was already growing before the pandemic. Estimates for 2018 show that the 334 million people living in extreme poverty in LDCs represented 46.3% of all people living in extreme poverty in the World[1]. The impact of COVID-19, in addition to the compounding effects of climate change and conflict, poses a serious challenge to poverty reduction efforts in the LDCs.

Health systems in LDCs are chronically underfunded and struggle to provide essential public health interventions. The containment measures taken to limit the spread of the epidemic, and the ensuing economic impact of such actions, adversely affect economic activity and have a long-lasting negative impact on the economic structure, hitting hard workers and small and medium businesses operating in the informal economy.

In addition to the loss of income, adopting coping strategies by the poorest adversely affects various dimensions of human development. Vulnerable populations with limited income sources resort to more affordable calories. They are compelled to substitute food that is high in micro-nutrients and vitamins for alternatives with higher caloric content; thus exacerbating undernourishment. Remote learning opportunities for students impacted by lockdowns had been limited in LDCs, where schools in the most impoverished areas lack minimal infrastructure and equipment. Girls fell behind or did not return to schools after prolonged lockdowns, and there werereports of increased gender violence across the globe. The underlying structural features that constrain the abilities of LDCs to promote sustainable development also amplify the devastating impact of the pandemic.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls

Reducing the gap between economic opportunities of men and women, promoting political participation; eliminating all forms of violence against women; ensuring the right to sexual and reproductive health; and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are rooted in the foundational values of the United Nations and constitute important objectives in themselves. The DPoA is cognizant of the barriers that

women and girls still face, such as a lack of access to inclusive and quality education and digital skills. Empowering women and girls can lead to significant societal gains. Countries that have experienced the integration of women into formal employment have seen an increase in economic output and prosperity. For LDCs, achieving the SDGs and other internationally agreed development goals passes through empowering women and girls in all social, economic, and political spheres.

Investing in youth

Current demographic projections indicate that by 2030 one in five youth in the world will be born in an LDC. Providing access to skills, training, and quality education are essential to help fulfilling fundamental human needs that expand the individual's agency, capabilities, and ability to participate as a full member of society. Access to education opportunities constitutes an essential aspect of structural transformation in the LDCs, which has become even more relevant with the rise of the digital economy. Fostering entrepreneurship, particularly in the services sector, and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital economy and measures to support entrepreneurship require scaled-up support and resources.

Education

Before the pandemic, LDCs attained higher enrollment rates at the primary level. However, challenges remain. In 2019, 16.2% of children in primary-school-age are out of school in the LDCs. Access to quality education is necessary to promote better human development outcomes and is a crucial factor in addressing the long-term limitations preventing economic growth through higher value-added activities. Greater focus on increasing training opportunities and the acquisition of skills for teachers at all levels as well as better access to electricity, adequate Internet connectivity, and equipment, such as personal computers, constitutes the next step in supporting LDC efforts to provide a future for their youth.

Enrollment rates in secondary and tertiary education remain stubbornly low. Facilitating access to secondary and tertiary education is key to creating a skilled workforce supporting higher and more inclusive growth. For women and girls, higher participation in political and economic life starts with access to higher education. The share of girls out of school in primary education was 17.89% in 2019 in LDCs, almost double the world average of 8.96%, which calls for greater efforts to ensure that all girls have equal access to educational opportunities at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

The DPOA recognized these challenges and agreed on concrete targets, commitments and deliverables to tackle them. It provided the Secretarty-General with the mandate to undertake a feasibility study for establishing an online university to support online graduate and post-graduate university-level education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Universal Social Protection

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of social protection systems. The instruments used in advanced economies to limit the spread of COVID-19 through lockdowns and mobility reduction measures were possible due to strong social safety nets that were either existing or put in place through large public support packages. A comprehensive public response of similar magnitude is not available to LDCs. Social

protection levels are lower in LDCs than in other developing countries, and only a low share of those living in extreme poverty can access social protection. Existing programmes are underfunded and provide limited support that do not cover the needs of those reached. The weight of the informal sector in the economies of the LDCs, which constitutes the source of the majority of employment, limits the expansion of social safety nets. While in the short term, the focus should be on assisting LDCs in addressing the most immediate effects of the pandemic, supporting them to expand social protection programmes can help bring stability and build resilience to vulnerable communities in the medium- and long-term. The levels of social protection required to end poverty in the LDCs cannot be achieved through the mobilization of domestic resources alone but necessarily requires sustained and predictable external support.

Hunger and malnutrition

With record food prices in 2021 that could further increase owing to the armed conflict in Ukraine and the cascading crises of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and climate change, there is a risk that hunger will increase further in the coming years. Notwithstanding the commitment of the international community to foster food security, good nutrition, and sustainable agriculture, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals and the DPoA, the number of people living in extreme poverty remains very high. The poverty gap between the LDCs and the rest of the world is also widening.

Half the LDCs experienced food emergencies for at least 13 consecutive years during the 42 years from 1981 to 2022. Of those countries, 10 experienced a continuous food emergency for at least 22 years. The situation is particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa, home to 33 of the 46 LDCs.

Severe food insecurity, malnourishment, and the impact of food emergencies put a risk the achievement of the SDGs by LDCs, especially SDG1 and SDG2. Coordinated actions are needed to support LDCs in Asia and Africa to avoid further catastrophic consequences. The DPoA recognized the need to address severe food insecurities in LDCs and initiated a process to establish a dedicated stockholding system for LDCs. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has already prepared a report on this mechanism.

A broad range of measures can help improve food security in the LDCs, including enhancing productivity and reducing post-harvest losses. Investment in agriculture needs to increase, including for necessary yield-increasing inputs, such as irrigation, chemical fertilizers, and improved seeds, as well as storage and local transport. Such measures should be complemented by food stockholding and alternative means to address food emergencies in the LDCs.

Promoting health and wellbeing

High maternal mortality in LDCs reflects the challenges of providing quality health services to vulnerable groups. Access to professionals, medication, and basic hygiene can reduce maternal mortality substantially. In addition, preventing early pregnancy can reduce maternal mortality, as complications in pregnancy and childbirth are higher among adolescent girls.

Despite significant progress, the human toll caused by the infant mortality rate remains disproportionately high at 44.8 per 1000 live births, 62% higher than the world average of 28.2. In 2019, 1.4 million children

died before reaching one year of age in the LDCs, many from preventable or treatable conditions, such as pneumonia, diarrhea, and malaria. Reducing child mortality can be achieved by establishing preventative and curative interventions that target the leading age-specific causes of death and the most vulnerable populations. This entails access to vaccination to prevent infectious diseases, better nutrition, and improved health services[2].

Access to sexual and reproductive health is critical to achieving the SDGs, the goals agreed upon in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and other internationally agreed goals. Meeting the need for modern contraception and sexual and reproductive health services and ensuring sexual and reproductive health care of the best quality, based on scientific evidence and made available to all, is central to poverty reduction and achieving the SDGs in the LDCs.

Non-communicable diseases are responsible for a large share of deaths globally[3]. These include cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, and diabetes. LDCs need more resources to build up their health, education, and social protection systems to address the double burden of disease from high maternal mortality or elevated levels of undernourishment with a simultaneous rise of obesity, diabetes, and other diseases more common in more developed countries.

COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the interconnectedness of all people, regardless of their position, geographical location, nationality, or belief. The roll-out of vaccination campaigns worldwide has also laid bare the inequalities between groups of countries, as illustrated by the meager number of vaccines administered in LDCs. Supporting the production of vaccines or essential medical supplies and equipment in LDCs should be a vital component of the global response against COVID-19 and any other future pandemic. Countries that already possess the necessary capabilities to produce vaccines should be provided with access to relevant technologies. In the medium term, countries that do not possess the necessary capabilities to produce vaccines or essential medical equipment should be supported to develop them domestically or in concert with partners at the regional level.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation is connected to human development and well-being dimensions. Preventable illnesses such as diarrhea result from poor access to a safe drinking water source. Regular hygiene is one of the essential tools to prevent contagious diseases such as COVID-19. In the LDCs, 35.5% of the population lacked access to basic drinking water services, compared to 10.4% worldwide. More strikingly, 65.25% of the population was not using safely managed drinking water services in 2017. The situation is worse in rural areas, where 73.84% of the people did not use safely managed drinking water, and 72.35% did not have access to basic handwashing facilities on-premises.

Guiding Questions: Speakers, panelists, and participants when intervening should be guided by the following five pertinent questions:

1. What actions by different stakeholders could contribute to the eradication of poverty in the LDCs? How can a system of food stockholding envisaged in the DPoA contribute ro reducing hunger?

2. How can the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the LDCs be promoted? What are successful strategies to improve the participation of women in economic and political life?
3. How can job opportunities for young people in LDCs be enhanced? How can youth be leveraged to maximize the impact of the demographic dividend in LDCs? What role can an online university envisaged in the DPoA play in this respect?
4. How can social protection programmes be designed and scaled up in a sustainable manner to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized people ?
5. How can national systems in LDCs be strengthened to provide improved outcomes in education, health, sanitation, access to safe drinking water and hygiene? How can institutions supported in LDCs deliver better accountability and transparency?