

**Opening Statement by**

**Ms. Rabab Fatima**

**XXX**

**at the**

**High-level Expert Group Meeting on Online University or**

**Equivalent Platform for STEM Education for the Least**

**Developed Countries**

**3 June 2025, 10:00, Conference Room 5**

**His Excellency Mr. Lok Bahadur Thapa, Chair of the Group of LDCs,**

**Distinguished Experts,**

**Dear Colleagues,**

**I am very pleased to welcome you all to the High-level Expert Group Meeting on an Online University or Equivalent Platform for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) - one of the most timely and forward-looking deliverables of the DPOA.**

**At the outset, I thank all of you for joining us here in New York as well as virtually from around the world. You are all leading experts in this field and bring to this meeting a wealth of experience and expertise. Your presence reflects our shared commitment to addressing the educational and digital divide that continue to hold back millions in the LDCs.**

**Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues,**

**Education, especially higher education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is central to sustainable development. It is a critical enabler for building productive**

**capacities, driving innovation, and achieving structural transformation. Yet, for too many in the LDCs, access to higher education remains out of reach.**

**The challenges are daunting.**

- Gross tertiary enrollment in LDCs stands at just 11%, compared to 40% globally.**
- Nearly 67% of the LDC population is offline, without access to the digital infrastructure that supports modern learning.**
- During COVID-19 pandemic, only a fraction of the LDCs were able to transition to online education. For instance, 29% of higher education institutions in Africa were able to make that transition, compared to 85% in Europe.**
- The working-age population in LDCs is projected to double by 2050. Yet LDCs account for just over 20% of global graduates in STEM disciplines.**

**These numbers tell a stark picture - of limited opportunities, unrealized potentials, and widening inequalities.**

**As the former Permanent Representative of Bangladesh and co-facilitator of the DPOA, I had the privilege of working with Ambassador Bob Rae of Canada to build consensus around the idea of an online university for LDCs.**

**The DPOA recognizes the transformative potentials of an Online University in bridging educational gaps, empowering youth, and strengthening human capital foundation for long-term development.**

**It was clear then - as it is now - that this initiative has the power to:**

**Expand access to graduate and post-graduate education, by eliminating traditional barriers of geography and cost.**

**Ensure inclusion and equity, especially for students in remote areas and for women and girls.**

**Build strong academic networks - within the global South and through North-South cooperation; and**

**Promote quality and global recognition through robust accreditation mechanism, enabling graduates to compete in international job markets.**

**These are all achievable, if we act with urgency, unity, and strong partnership at all levels.**

**We already have a solid foundation upon which to build. We aim to leverage the experience and expertise of the United Nations University, while drawing lessons from successful models both within and beyond the UN system - such as the Commonwealth of Learning, the Virtual University of Senegal, or the University of the People. These initiatives offer scalable and replicable approaches that can inform our collective efforts and help identify strategic areas for new investments and partnerships.**

**Excellencies,**

**As we begin our discussions today, I encourage you to be both bold and practical. We have a unique opportunity to work together and find a model that is ambitious yet grounded in the realities of LDCs.**

**Allow me to conclude with three areas that I believe are essential as we move this discussion forward:**

**First, we need a comprehensive mapping of existing online education initiatives to identify best practices, avoid duplication, and explore and assess, how they can be integrated or aligned to inform the design of a unified, LDC-focused platform.**

**Second, we need to establish a credible governance and accreditation mechanism that ensures quality and global recognition, while allowing contextual adaptation through collaboration with national systems and global academic networks.**

**Third, we need to mobilize sustained political, technical, and financial support - from governments, donors, international organizations, and the private sector - to ensure long-term success and ownership by the LDCs themselves.**

**I am confident that with such a distinguished panel of experts with us here, we will have a very rich discussion, and make significant progress to advance this important DPOA deliverable.**

**I look forward to your insights and recommendations, and I wish you a productive meeting.**

**Thank you.**