THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES IN FACTS & FIGURES

FEBRUARY 2024
What are the Least Developed Countries?

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are a group of 45 United Nations Member States characterised by their low socio-economic development and high vulnerability to external shocks. These countries are largely agrarian economies that suffer from low investments and productivity. There are 33 LDCs in Africa, eleven in Asia and the Pacific and one in Latin America.

Bhutan was the last LDC to graduate on 13th December, 2023. Previous to that, Vanuatu graduated on 4th December, 2020.

For more info see: www.un.org/ohrlls

Doha Programme of Action (DPoA)

The Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) for the Decade 2022-2031 was adopted in March 2022 as a successor to the Istanbul Programme of Action. Full implementation will help the LDCs to address the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting socio-economic impacts; return to a pathway to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); address climate change; and make strides towards sustainable and irreversible graduation.

The final text was adopted during the first part of the LDC5 conference on 17th March 2022 and was endorsed by the General Assembly through resolution A/RES/76/258 on 1st April of that year. The second part took place in Doha between the 5th and 9th of March, 2023. There, world leaders gathered with civil society, the private sector, young people and more to build the plans and partnerships to deliver on the promise and ambition of the DPoA over the following decade. Download the DPoA at the conference website: un.org/ldc5
Progress on the implementation of key focus areas of the Doha Programme of Action

The COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the global economy in 2020. Estimates for that year showed 32 million people in LDCs pushed into extreme poverty. More than half of all people living in extreme poverty (377 million) in 2020 lived in LDCs, and average real GDP growth in LDCs fell sharply from 4.74% in 2019 to 1.56% that year. It had increased to 4.4% in 2022 but remained well below the 7% growth target.

Annual Real GDP growth in LDCs (percentage)

Source: World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023
**Focus area I:** Investing in LDCs to leave no one behind

**Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women:** LDCs have consistently demonstrated a reduction in adolescent birth rates in recent years, with double-digit declines seen in 25 out of the 45 countries. Likewise, they narrowed gender gaps in secondary school enrolments – including a double-digit decrease in twelve of the 45. However, despite an aggregate fall of 13% in adolescent birth rates, teen motherhood remains common in many LDCs.

**Investing in youth and education:** In 2022, 21.9% of children in primary-school-age were out of school in the LDCs, more than double the world average. Although the literacy rate rose from 57% to 66% between 2013 and 2023, more than 360 million people in LDCs still lack basic reading and writing skills.

**Promoting maternal and child health and wellbeing:** The overall fertility rate dropped to 3.96 births per woman in 2022. By 2021, 59% of women of reproductive age in the LDCs had their family planning needs met with modern methods, which was still well below the world average of 76.8%. The infant mortality rate, at 44.8 per 1000 live births, is 62% higher than the world average of 28.2. In 2019, 1.4 million infants died before reaching their first birthday, many from preventable or treatable conditions, such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria.

**Universal Social Protection:** People in the LDCs enjoy lower levels of social protection compared to other developing nations. Only 14% are covered by at least one area of social protection, excluding healthcare and sickness benefits. Only 6.2% of the labour force (and just 4.2% of women in the labour force) actively contributes to a pension scheme, compared to 53.1% (and 55.6% respectively) in other developing countries. The high degree of informality in the economies of the LDCs limits the expansion of social safety nets.

**Water, Sanitation and Hygiene:** In 2022, only 37% of people in LDCs had access to basic drinking water services, compared to 73% of people globally. In order to achieve universal access to safe drinking water in the LDCs, there would have to be a 20-fold increase in current rates of progress. The proportion of the population in LDCs with access to basic hygiene facilities increased from 29% in 2015 to 34% in 2022, but this remains far below the world rate of 75%.

---

1. [https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2023-wash-households](https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2023-wash-households)
Focus area II: Leveraging the power of Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development of LDCs

While three quarters of people in the LDCs are covered by a mobile broadband network, only about 36% use it, compared to 93% in high-income countries. Citizens of LDCs (residents and non-residents) filed only 1,357 patents in 2020, compared with 875 in 2011. As a share of global figures, that number is almost zero. The UN Technology Bank for LDCs plays a significant role in advancing Science, Technology, and Innovation and bridging the digital gap between those online and offline.

Focus area III: Structural transformation as a driver of prosperity in the LDCs

Agriculture: Employment in agriculture in the LDCs has steadily declined over the years, though it continues to employ nearly half of the population and constitutes the primary source of income in rural areas. There is consequently significant potential to advance structural transformation by creating links with the industrial and service side of agricultural activities. Nevertheless, the scale of the agriculture sector also reflects the need for LDCs to diversify their economies to build resilience.

Productive Capacity: The core task of increasing national economic output requires an approach combining enterprise development, skills formation, formalization and the application of new technologies – all of which figure extensively in the Doha Programme of Action. Existing large enterprises can have a role to play internationally in building their profile in global supply chains, as well as supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to increase their productive capacity domestically.

Energy: Access to electricity in the LDCs increased substantially from 37.8% in 2012 to 56.25% in 2021. However, there remains a large disparity between rural and urban areas: 80.28% in towns and cities and only 45.48% in rural areas. To bridge this gap, more investment is required in both electrical grid and off-grid solutions.
Focus area IV: Enhancing the participation of LDCs in international trade and regional integration

Trade and Commodities: Between 2017 and 2021, LDCs’ exports of goods and services grew at an annual rate of 5.1%, slightly faster than the rest of the world at 4.9%. In 2021, in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, LDCs’ share of world exports of goods and commercial services was 0.93%, while for imports it was 1.3%, similar to the previous year. But overall in 2021, the value of LDCs’ services exports remained 32% below pre-pandemic levels. The LDC share of world commercial services exports declined from 0.53% in 2020 to 0.49% in 2021, demonstrating that the effects of the pandemic were more pronounced in LDCs than elsewhere.

Focus area V: Addressing climate change, environmental degradation, recovery from the pandemic and building the resilience of LDCs against future shocks

As some of the most vulnerable member states to various types of shocks, climate change affects the least developed countries more than most – and may significantly affect LDCs’ ability to achieve SDGs. International agreements through the UNFCCC COP processes have been made on financial assistance, technology development, and technology transfer to help improve LDCs’ resilience against climate change. The DPoA reinforces these agreements and commitments.
Focus area VI: Mobilizing international solidarity, reinvigorated global partnerships and innovative tools and instruments: a march towards sustainable graduation

Domestic Resource Mobilization: The Least Developed Countries have the lowest median tax-to-GDP ratios, which, since 2015, declined to around 12%. The DPoA target is for this number to reach at least 15% in all LDCs by 2032 to enable self-sustainability.

Development Cooperation: In 2020, gross Official Development Assistance (ODA) disbursements constituted 5.6% of LDCs’s GDP on average, a significant increase from previous years. ODA contributes a larger share of the financing mix of the LDCs than for other groups, making them more vulnerable to fluctuations. The average share of gross national income (GNI) provided as ODA to the LDCs from OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors remained relatively stable at around 0.1% over the past decade. Six DAC donor countries met the target of disbursing 0.15% or above to the LDCs in 2021, down from ten in 2011. DAC donors allocated 27% of their total ODA to LDCs.

External Debt: The average external debt of LDCs rose from 41% of GDP in 2011 to 54% in 2022. As of November 2023 6 LDCs were classified as in debt distress while 15 LDCs are at high risk of debt distress. A further deterioration of this situation is expected.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Foreign Direct Investment in LDCs remains a small share of global FDI flows, at about 1.6%. FDI to LDCs recorded a slight uptick in 2021, reaching $26 billion. However, recent figures from UNCTAD show a dramatic 16% drop in FDI to LDCs in 2022. The adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are expected to have long-term effects on specific sectors such as transportation and tourism.

Remittances: Remittance flows to LDCs had increased relatively rapidly from US$28.2 billion in 2011 to US$52.1 billion in 2019, which corresponds to 3.6% of GDP. By 2022 remittances to LDCs increased to 4.1% of GDP, somewhat balancing the decline in other external resources.
