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**Least developed countries: United Nations collaborative contribution to the  
implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action**

Background paper prepared jointly by  
UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS (coordinator), UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

## **Introduction**

In the decade since the adoption of the Brussels Programme of Action, many LDCs have made progress on economic, social and human development indicators, but the goals of the Programme have not been fully achieved. Long-standing challenges remain and new ones have arisen. The 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) calls for a renewed focus on: strengthening productive capacities; striking a balance in the allocation of resources between economic and social sectors; and building resilience. Continuing population growth in LDCs is raising the stakes for national and international efforts to reduce poverty, to create full, productive and remunerative employment, and to ensure food, water and energy security. The challenge continues to be to achieve sustainable, human development, to help build countries in which citizens have access to decent jobs and education, and are able to lead healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.

In their 2011 sessions, the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP) adopted decisions to integrate the implementation of the IPoA into their respective programmes of work. The efforts focus on: (i) helping governments foster balanced, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, responsive to human development needs; and (ii) strengthening the ability of LDCs to deal with external shocks.

The purpose of this paper is not to lay out new policies, but to stimulate discussion of policies and programmes. The paper looks at challenges, tasks, United Nations collaborative actions and lessons learned in four areas: building national capacities to deliver basic services; mainstreaming the IPoA in national plans and programmes; helping youth develop; and strengthening resilience, including to climate change. Detailed explanations have been avoided in favour of succinct observations and examples. In the conclusion, the paper poses a few questions to guide discussion. More detailed examples of United Nations collaborative responses to the challenges of LDCs are provided in the annex.

## **Four Tasks**

The Istanbul Programme lays out eight priority areas for action along with several subtopics, including: infrastructure building, energy access, disaster risk reduction, human capital enhancement through health measures, and the empowerment of women and youth. For the purposes of discussion this paper focuses on four of the tasks that must be accomplished if LDCs are to achieve their overall goals.

### *Build national capacities for effective delivery of basic services*

Human beings without access to clean water, basic education, decent sanitation and health care cannot survive and develop. This, in a sense, is the first, prerequisite task: to provide such services, and to help countries develop the institutions and staff necessary to provide these services in a sustainable, equitable and effective fashion. Statistics show that women and youth are among the most affected by the lack of access to these services. Additionally, progress in this area will help achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### *Mainstream IPoA in national plans and programmes*

Neither economic nor human development can be imposed on foreign countries. The LDCs themselves will need to take ownership, incorporating the IPoA goals in their national plans and sub-national programmes, identifying institutions and leaders for implementation, and engaging parliamentarians, civil society and the private sector in the work. Additionally, the Programme should be integrated into relevant global processes, including Rio+20, activities related to the MDGs, and the post-2015 development agenda.

### *Help youth develop*

Between now and 2050, the population of LDCs is set to double, and, every day, more than 30,000 young people will be entering the labour force. LDC economies will need to create a great deal of productive, remunerative employment. Young people's participation in the development of their countries needs to be supported by helping them develop their capacities and by increasing their social protection and their access to essential social services, including sexual and reproductive health care.

### *Strengthen resilience, including to climate change*

LDCs continue to be particularly vulnerable to food, energy, financial and economic crises; to natural disasters and the effects of climate change; and to armed conflicts. To develop successfully and sustain the gains they are making they need to increase their resilience to such shocks.

## **Examples of United Nations collaborative action**

The six agencies have been working to address many of the challenges outlined above. This section presents examples of their work.

### *Building national capacities*

- Among the joint initiatives addressing the social impacts of the global financial and economic crisis, the **Social Protection Floor Initiative** works to achieve a minimum level of access to essential services and income security for all. For instance, in conjunction with this initiative, the Rwandan Government with support from UNDP, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies has established programmes in health, education, housing, social assistance and other sectors in order to improve Rwandans' living conditions.
- UNFPA, in collaboration with other United Nations agencies, is helping LDCs include human rights and gender analysis in the design of all health and population-dynamics programmes. This will **reduce social and cultural barriers** to women's participation in their own health decisions, and increase demand for sexual and reproductive health and family planning services. Additionally, countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Madagascar and Benin have received financial and technical support to combat maternal and infant mortality and to provide contraceptive services.
- An increasing number of programmes focus on knowledge transfer to build national capacities. For example, UNOPS is working on the establishment of partnerships with

leading world organizations to provide LDCs **tailor-made capacity development products**. In 2011, UNOPS partnered with the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply to design procurement capacity development products and provide certifications to individuals and entities in LDCs to improve the effectiveness of public spending.

### *Mainstreaming IPoA*

- The United Nations Development Group, **MDG Acceleration Framework (MAF)**, helps Governments and development partners identify the bottlenecks blocking sustained and inclusive MDG progress and devise ways to overcome them. It breaks down silos separating sectors, MDGs and disciplines, in favour of an evidence-based, cross-sectoral and problem-solving approach. In 2010 and 2011, the MAF was adopted in 14 countries including 8 LDCs: Burkina Faso, Chad, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mali, Niger, United Republic of Tanzania, Togo and Uganda. By the end of 2012, the Framework is slated to be adopted by 20 additional countries, including the LDCs Benin, Central African Republic and Lesotho.
- The **Joint United Nations Programme to Address Violence against Women in Bangladesh** is an example of joint action to reach the IPoA goal of increasing the empowerment of women. One programme strategy focuses on policies and the implementation of laws and conventions. Activities include enhancing the capacities of Government, improving the quality and dissemination of information related to gender and violence against women, and providing support to non-governmental organizations and civil society.
- Looking forward, all United Nations system organizations will be supporting national-level mainstreaming and implementation of the Istanbul Programme, through **country-coordination mechanisms**, such as United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs), through advocacy for the LDCs' **national development plans and strategies**, and through interaction with **line ministries**. The agencies can also encourage the involvement of the private sector and civil society in the implementation of the Programme. Under the leadership of the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS), the six agencies contribute to inter-agency task forces on social protection schemes, resource mobilization, crisis mitigation and resilience building, and on indicators for the monitoring of the IPoA.

### *Helping youth develop*

- At the 2011 **United Nations High-level Meeting on Youth**, more than 25 heads of United Nations entities signed a joint statement which commits them, inter alia, to supporting a comprehensive youth development agenda at the country level. This includes strengthening the capacities of national institutions and youth-led organizations for effective youth participation, with an emphasis on the most marginalized.
- The UN-Women **African Young Women Leadership Programme** will, inter alia, help young women gain professional and entrepreneurship experience. This will include mentoring and career coaching. Scholarship and internship programmes will be

developed in partnership with universities and research institutes in Africa and will engage the private sector, development agencies and small and medium-sized enterprises.

- Since 2009 the **Regional Programme for Social Cohesion and Youth Employment** has been bringing together UNDP, ILO, UNESCO and UNIDO to help 12 sub-Saharan countries design macroeconomic policies that promote youth employment and help youths develop their skills. The programme operates in Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

### *Strengthening resilience*

- Through the **Supporting Integrated and Comprehensive Approaches to Climate Change Adaptation** programme, UNDP, in partnership with UNIDO, UNICEF, UNOPS and WFP, is helping 20 African countries, including LDCs, address climate change risks and opportunities in their national development plans.
- In Malawi UNFPA has been conducting a pilot case study on the links between **population dynamics and climate change**. The goal is to help rapidly growing urban settlements cope with climate change. Together with the Government and United Nations partners, UNFPA is marshalling small-area census data, and identifying links between food security, urban and peri-urban agriculture, access to water, housing and disaster risk reduction and response.
- In Uganda the government and the United Nations have launched a **Joint Programme on Climate Change** under the leadership of WFP and the participation of UNEP, OCHA and UNFPA. The programme builds capacities at the national, district and community levels for climate change adaptation and mitigation. National interventions focus on policy and planning, finance, advocacy, lessons learned and research. At the district and community levels, training packages are supported by advocacy campaigns reaching out to households.
- UN-Women has begun a six-year programme (July 2011-June 2017): "Securing the rights and livelihoods of rural women in the context of the food crisis and climate change". One pillar of the programme will address **rural women's access to solar energy** as an adaptive technology for climate change mitigation, an opportunity to access jobs in the green energy sector, and a source of energy for rural women's agribusinesses.

### **Lessons learned**

As members of the Boards prepare to discuss United Nations collaborative action to assist LDCs, it will be helpful to have in mind not only the challenges and tasks, and some examples of successful programmes, but also some of the lessons that have been learned as a result of past efforts and analysis. The items offered below do not comprise an exhaustive list, but are meant to stimulate thought and discussion.

#### *To build national service-delivery capacities*

- Do not ignore infrastructure. Physical access to health services and to safe, healthy and inclusive learning environments can be improved through the rehabilitation of roads and

of basic services facilities, including schools, hospitals, laboratories, mobile clinics, and water and sanitation infrastructure.

- Promote equitable access to primary and secondary education and to sexual and reproductive health services. In areas with food insecurity and low rates of school attendance, cash transfers, school feeding and food for training have proved to be effective ways of bringing the most disadvantaged to school.
- Good data leads to effective planning. Regular and timely high-quality data disaggregated by sex, age, location and ethnic groups can help identify gaps and disparities, prioritize interventions, monitor progress and assess results.

#### *To mainstream the Istanbul Programme*

- Develop the capacities of leaders and technical staff. This can include: leadership development programmes; incentives for attracting and retaining qualified professionals in key institutions; and developing mechanisms for engaging stakeholders at all levels. Technical training is needed in areas such as planning, budgeting and procurement, and in the tracking and management of aid flows.
- Seek synergies with the MDG acceleration effort. Many of the goals of the IPoA are in harmony with the MDGs. Addressing the bottlenecks blocking MDG progress will also help advance the Istanbul Programme.

#### *To help youth develop*

- Support broad-based economic growth. Commodity markets need to be diversified and the productive capacities of agriculture and manufacturing need to be supported. The needs and future of the job market and of business must be kept in mind.
- Improve vocational training curriculums and the facilities available for such training. Businesses should be involved, providing apprenticeships and internships.
- Use local labour to carry out United Nations-assisted projects. For example, infrastructure repair projects can provide both youth employment and new business opportunities for local communities, including in post-conflict and post-disaster environments.
- Integrate social protection schemes with policies to create jobs and stimulate inclusive and equitable economic growth. Youth need to be involved in the preparation of the policies and implementation of programmes that affect them, and interventions should reach the full range of youth — including girls, indigenous and minority groups, and those with disabilities.

#### *To strengthen resilience, including to climate change*

- Transition to greener, low-carbon and climate-resilient economies. By building on synergies between the fight against poverty and action to address climate change, LDCs can promote climate-resilient development. The emergence of new and innovative development financing mechanisms and technology transfer offers opportunities. Specific

measures should be taken to ensure they have the potential to benefit all countries and women and men equitably.

- Address the connections linking climate change, infrastructure and communities. Sound design of climate-proof productive and social infrastructure is essential to prevent and manage natural disasters induced by climate change, to increase the resilience of communities, and to protect local and national assets.
- Foster the development of social protection systems, including by promoting investment in adequate nutrition to ensure human resilience.
- Ensure necessary resources are available. It is important that the climate financing pledged for developing countries in Copenhagen materializes. Investments in disaster risk reduction and preparedness pay off.

## Conclusion

This paper has touched on four major tasks facing LDCs: building national capacities for effective delivery of basic services; mainstreaming the Istanbul Programme in national plans and programmes; youth development; and reducing vulnerabilities including those related to climate change. As the agencies learn from previous experiences and move forward, several questions merit consideration. These include:

1. Given the mandates of the six agencies and the focus areas outlined in the present paper, how can the agencies better support the enhancement of LDCs' productive capacities? In what areas should the United Nations increase its support or change its role?
2. "Least developed country" should not be a permanent status. What should the United Nations be doing differently to help governments make the next step and to increase the number of LDCs graduating?
3. How can the United Nations facilitate technical cooperation and information exchange to spread the use of best practices and take advantage of available knowledge?
4. What policies and practices will need to be revised so the poorest and most vulnerable segments of societies can also participate and benefit from progress?
5. How can the IPoA contribute to and align with current MDG acceleration efforts? What synergies can be found between the Programme and the post-2015 agenda?
6. How to ensure the full integration of the IPoA in United Nations programmes of work and what systems should the United Nations put in place to report satisfactorily?
7. Given the broad scope of the Programme, how can the United Nations support the identification of priorities at country level and bring key LDC issues to the attention of the international community?
8. How can the United Nations further improve its coordination mechanisms so that support for LDCs becomes more collaborative?