

**The Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries
Istanbul, 9-13 May 2011**

Concept Note

Reducing vulnerabilities, responding to emerging challenges and enhancing food security in the Least Developed Countries

Introduction

The least developed countries (LDCs) are acutely vulnerable to a variety of external shocks, including global financial and economic shocks, and natural disasters. In 2001, the Brussels Programme of Action noted that the LDCs are characterized by a series of structural weaknesses, vulnerabilities and constraints such as limited human, institutional and productive capacity; acute susceptibility to external economic shocks, natural and man-made disasters; limited access to social services and to natural resources; poor infrastructure or the lack of access to information and communication technologies. The BPoA also noted that dependence on a single export commodity and lack of diversification of the LDCs' economies made them particularly more vulnerable to adverse internal and external economic shocks and to a variety of natural shocks, including natural disasters. The LDCs were identified to be susceptible to global environmental phenomena such as the loss of biological diversity and adverse effects of climate change. The BPoA also noted that food insecurity was the most typical face of poverty for both urban and rural people in LDCs. Such vulnerabilities generate considerable uncertainties and impair the development prospects of these countries, and they tend to affect the poor most, in particular women and children.

As the development decade of the Brussels Programme of Action for the LDCs has come to a close, it is important to review the progress that has been made in reducing vulnerability to climate change, natural disasters, external economic shocks, improving food security and conflicts; identify the major constraints; and identify priorities for a renewed partnership in their support.

Situational Analysis

Although between 2000 and 2008, the LDCs, as a group, experienced an average economic growth of 6 per cent per year, structural transformation and economic diversification have been very limited and the vulnerability of LDCs and their exposure to external shocks has not been reduced. As a result, LDCs continue to be vulnerable to trade shocks due to commodity price volatility and other external shocks. In fact, the vulnerabilities of LDCs have increased, with serious concerns about food insecurity, climate change and climate variability, higher frequency of natural disasters with unprecedented human displacement and increasing high food prices, fuel, economic and financial crises.

Climate change is exacerbating desertification, land degradation, and loss of biodiversity, forests and other natural habitats. Climate change has also led to increased food insecurity; increased energy constraints; rising sea level, and degrading coastal livelihoods, infrastructure and environment, lead to migration flows

(both internal and cross-border) and impair development prospects. Most LDCs are located in sensitive regions, with Small Island Developing States (SIDS) being the most affected due to their low elevation, even posing a threat to their physical existence. Climate change brings heightened occurrences of extreme events such as floods, cyclones, tornados, storm surges, landslides, droughts, heat stress, malaria, earthquakes and sea level rise. The particular hazards brought by these events are often not new; however, their intensity, magnitude and unpredictability have increased significantly in the recent past.¹

The reports of the regional meetings held in Africa and Asia-Pacific to review the progress in implementing the BPoA indicate that the impact of climate change threatens to wipe out or reverse development gains in many LDCs, in a number of cases posing a threat to their physical existence.² The reports note that the economies of most LDCs rely heavily on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, other natural resources and tourism. They further indicate that the impacts of climate change on these sectors are particularly high for the poor, who tend to live in environments that are most susceptible to droughts, floods and other extreme weather events.

Climate change has negatively impacted on agricultural productivity in LDCs. LDCs in South Asia have experienced losses of 30 to 40 percent in agricultural productivity due to the adverse impact of climate change³. By 2020, in some African LDCs, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50% thereby severely compromising food and nutrition security³. In Malawi, climate change has caused poor crop yields or total crop failure leading to food shortages, malnutrition and disease; disruption of hydroelectric power generation as a result of siltation; droughts and floods, resulting in low fish production and loss of biodiversity (fisheries contribute 4% of GDP and over 60% of animal protein intake in Malawi); and great impact on women who travel long distances to fetch water⁴. LDCs lack adaptive and mitigation capacity to address climate change.

LDCs are acutely vulnerable to a variety of natural shocks. The frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and climate variability in LDCs (e.g., droughts, extreme temperature and floods) have been increasing over the past decade, with five times as many such incidents occurring during the period 2000–2010 as during the period 1970–1979⁵. The number of people in LDCs affected by these extreme events

¹UNFCCC background paper to the UN LDC IV pre-conference event on “Reducing vulnerability due to Climate Change, Climate Variability and Extremes, Land Degradation and Biodiversity Loss: Environment and Development Challenges and Opportunities for LDCs, held in New York on 28 February 2011.

²Africa and Asia-Pacific Reports of the Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries.

³ Noted in the UN LDC IV pre-conference event organised by FAO, in collaboration with the UN-OHRLLS, IFAD and WFP “Enhancing Food Security through Agricultural Development and Access to Food and Nutrition” held in New York on 16 December 2010.

⁴ Noted in the UN LDC IV pre-conference event organised by UNFCCC and OHRLLS on “Reducing vulnerability due to Climate Change, Climate Variability and Extremes, Land Degradation and Biodiversity Loss: Environment and Development Challenges and Opportunities for LDCs, held in New York on 28 February 2011.

⁵United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2010). The Least Developed Countries

has almost doubled, rising from 100 million during the period 1970–1979 to 193 million over the period 2000–2010⁵. Natural disasters such as floods, excessive rainfall, droughts, and cyclones have resulted in massive loss of life, displacement and long-term negative social, economic and environmental consequences for vulnerable societies⁶. Most LDCs do not possess the capacity or necessary infrastructure including early warning system to prevent and minimize the effects of natural disasters, and therefore risk assessments should shape capacity development plans in and with fragile states.

Food and energy crises and the global financial and economic crises have combined to present an unprecedented new challenge to LDC development. The BPoA period witnessed an increase in food insecurity and dependence on food imports. Many least developed countries are net food importers, which increases their vulnerability to drops in export earnings and capital inflows resulting in an increase in food insecurity. For example, imports accounted for more than 30 per cent of grain supplies in 12 African least developed countries⁷. Nearly half of the least developed countries are considered by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as experiencing a food crisis requiring external assistance or being at risk of crisis owing to high food prices, which are likely to remain higher and more volatile than in the past decade⁷. In most LDCs 32% of their population is undernourished and 70% of the food-insecure live in rural areas, being nomads or pastoral communities.

Food insecurity is partly exacerbated by population growth, poor control over water use, limited access to land, limited use of fertilizers and improved seeds, disease on livestock and crops, inadequate supply, transport and storage logistics, commodity speculation, conflict and climate change. Agriculture has always received inadequate prioritisation and investment by both LDCs and development partners and agricultural productivity in the LDCs is very low. Migration from rural areas to seek off-farm employment as an income supplement is having a negative impact on household food security and reduced agricultural productivity particularly for smallholder farmers. This needs to be reversed by heavily investing in agriculture in line with the Maputo Declaration of at least 10% of African LDCs budget so as to improve agricultural productivity. Strengthening of social protection and insurance mechanisms are also essential in addressing the challenge of food insecurity.

Half of the LDC are in or emerging from conflict. The effects of conflict on the economy, the disruption of the social fabric and the political instability adds to the fragility and vulnerability of the LDCs. Internal conflicts affect agricultural production which leads to food insecurity and malnutrition. Widening inequality and a sense of injustice makes economic hardship less tolerable. Socio-economic transformation is central to progress on the objectives of the BPoA, the draft IPoA and the MDGs, which can only be achieved under a peaceful and stable environment

Report 2010: Toward a New International Development Architecture for LDCs.

⁶ UNFCCC background paper to the UN LDC IV pre-conference event on “Reducing vulnerability due to Climate Change, Climate Variability and Extremes, Land Degradation and Biodiversity Loss: Environment and Development Challenges and Opportunities for LDCs, held in New York on 28 February 2011.

⁷ UN (2010) Report of the Secretary-General on Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010

The international community acknowledges the need to address interconnected vulnerabilities and take advantage of the opportunities presented by the emergence of new players and by the new political realities that are shifting the economic decision making process from North to South and from West to East. It also recognizes the need to step up efforts aiming at reducing global stresses that precipitate conflict and develop regional approaches to violence and other threats, such as natural disasters, that spill across borders. Without an effective and coordinated international response, these challenges will worsen the vulnerability of LDCs and prevent them from meeting the MDGs and internationally agreed development goals.

Addressing vulnerabilities and responding to challenges: Priorities for the Decade 2011-2020 and beyond

In line with the MDGs, it is important that the draft Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) aims at halving the proportion of people living in poverty and suffering from hunger by 2015 and substantially reduce further by 2021. It should endeavour to promote human dignity, ensuring human security and fostering inclusive human and social development and gender equality, the empowerment of women, and women's full enjoyment of all human rights.

The Istanbul Conference offers an opportunity to rethink the approach to managing vulnerabilities, respond to challenges and enhance food security and nutrition by learning from and considering the needs, priorities and capacities of the affected countries.

The very existence of vulnerabilities represents a major structural obstacle to development. The starting point for managing them is an appreciation of the changing nature of risks and vulnerabilities. Such understanding can highlight growth and poverty reduction pathways and opportunities. It is therefore critical to reach a consensus on the priorities to be addressed and the areas that have the greatest potential for a multiplier effect. In particular, the roundtable should consider the following:

- *What are the most critical vulnerabilities?*
- *How do we integrate socio-political dimensions (especially food insecurity) within the larger context of strategies for LDC development?*
- *What are the mechanisms that the IPoA should incorporate to face the challenges and harness the opportunities?*
- *How can we increase resilience to shocks by enhancing partnerships and collaboration?*

As part of possible new approaches, the inter-active debate may consider the need for the Istanbul Programme of Action to:

- Adopt a rights-based approach to reducing vulnerabilities, responding to emerging challenges and enhancing food security;
- Be adaptive and flexible enough to consider indigenous and non-traditional responses to new challenges and allow for the integration of local and national

needs of each LDC while providing an overall international framework for support and cooperation;

- Better integrate peace and security elements, including better appreciation of economies of conflict and lessons learned from peacebuilding experiences that focus on promoting pro-poor growth, ensuring access to basic services and accelerating socially inclusive, equitable and sustainable development;
- Place more emphasis on the need to dramatically increase the capacity of governments, civil society organizations and the private sector to deal with vulnerabilities and the economic, political and social aspects of fragility, including enhancing capacity on crises management and risk reduction;
- Provide for better coherence and coordination between LDC governments and their development partners, including the UN system and other organizations, in their responses and increased investment to face critical challenges to respond to political, social and economic vulnerabilities from a rights-based approach;
- Ensure better integration of the responses and mechanisms of regional and subregional institutions (including regional financial institutions) into national development programmes especially in the areas of risk reduction and mitigation, food security, political stability and cross-border challenges.
- Adopt social protection measures, including social safety nets for the most vulnerable

Some of the potential priority undertakings for inclusion in the new PoA that can help build the resilience of the LDCs to vulnerabilities to climate change, natural disasters, food insecurity, external economic shocks and

1) Food security and nutrition

- Adopt a comprehensive approach to the most urgent needs, such as the growing demand for food in regional and global markets, and to the long-term development of sustainable food systems that can withstand external shocks, while minimizing the impact of agriculture on forests for instance by developing regional food stocks or making food reserve agreements.
- Invest in smallholder farmers, particularly women farmers, and promote the implementation of green development strategies which include the creation of safety nets for the hungry poor and direct interventions to improve nutrition.
- Support agriculture through farm input provision (fertilizers, credit, improved seeds and water management, etc) to contribute to production increase and food security
- Devise investment schemes to channel remittances into rural and agro-industrial projects in cooperation with financial intermediaries (credit unions, micro-finance institutions) and other rural service providers).

2) Climate change

- Step up the provision of financial, technological and capacity-building assistance to enable LDCs to address climate change challenges by enhancing public-private partnerships, putting in place effective adaptation and mitigation strategies and disbursing the funds committed at the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen and reaffirmed at the sixteenth session in Cancun.
- Ensure mainstreaming of climate change considerations (especially adaptation measures) into LDCs national development frameworks and plans and promote environmentally friendly development policies including the leapfrogging into green and sustainable development.

3) Disaster risk reduction

- Commitment to budget allocation for preparedness and risk reduction and mitigation in accordance with the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) with a view to integrating the dynamic element of climate change into disaster risk reduction and preparedness strategies.
- Integration of disaster risk reduction strategies into national development and climate change adaptation strategies to meet the internationally agreed development goals.

4) Reducing external economic shocks

- Strengthening risk mitigation strategies including social protection policies especially for the most vulnerable.
- Creation of national crisis mitigation and stimulus facility to reduce vulnerability to price and demand shocks, build resilience and provide stimulus in times of down turns
- Strengthening insurance schemes for the pooling of risks from economic shocks and natural disasters.
- Establishment a “crisis mitigation and resilience building fund for LDCs” to enable them to respond to various external and internal shocks.