Ministerial Meeting of African LDCs on “Structural Transformation, Graduation and the Post-2015 Development Agenda”

Jointly organized by
The Government of Italy and UN-OHRLLS
Milan, Italy
8, 9 and 10 June 2015

CONCEPT NOTE

BACKGROUND

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) represent the poorest and weakest segment of the international community. They comprise more than 880 million people (about 12 per cent of world population), but account for less than 2 percent of world GDP and about 1 percent of global trade in goods.

The Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA)¹ adopted at the Fourth UN Conference on LDCs in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2011 constitutes an ambitious agenda by the international community with the overarching goal to overcome the structural challenges faced by the LDCs in order to eradicate poverty, achieve internationally agreed development goals and enable graduation from the LDC category.²

The IPoA sets an ambitious objective of enabling half the number of LDCs to meet the criteria for graduation by 2020. The IPoA is the first global programme of action for LDCs containing a section on "graduation and smooth transition", recognising the need to consolidate development gains and ensure that they do not slide back into the category. Furthermore the Istanbul Declaration recognizes "that the graduation process of LDCs should be coupled with an appropriate package of incentives and support measures so that the development process of the graduated country will not be jeopardized”.

This is the first time that an entire group of countries has resolved to exit from a category defined by poverty and vulnerability. The adoption of the IPoA graduation goal is thus a watershed event in the history of the UN in the field of development. Reaching it will entail structural socio-economic

² For more information on the criteria used for the identification of countries as LDCs, see http://unohrlls.org/about-ldc/s/criteria-for-ldcs/
transformations in countries that have been largely left behind in the implementation of the MDGs. Indeed, graduation represents the achievement of a major milestone for LDCs’ development, as it means not only poverty reduction but also structural transformation, resilience building and sustainable development.

**ANALYSIS**

While between 1971 and 2014 only 4 countries graduated out of the LDC category, namely Botswana, Cape Verde, Maldives and Samoa, recent progress with respect to economic and social as well as political indicators in a number of countries has enabled a greater number of LDCs to reach the thresholds of graduation. It has to be noted that the factors behind reaching the graduation thresholds differ considerably across these countries.

Graduation, to be sustainable, should not only be looked at in terms of reaching the cut-off points of the three criteria defining LDCs; it should also be recognised that graduation is closely linked to overcoming the main challenges of LDCs, namely abject poverty, high vulnerability to various shocks and limited capacity. Thus graduation strategies should not be seen in isolation but be an integral aspect of overall development strategies of LDCs and international development partnership. For graduation, LDCs will require strong national leadership together with appropriate strategies accompanied by equally strong global support and partnership.

It is encouraging that a growing number of LDCs have announced their ambition to graduate from the LDC category. They have started working towards graduation, including by developing a graduation strategy with the support of their development partners. Recent studies have concluded that with current development trends or slightly accelerated progress only around one quarter of the LDCs will reach the graduation criteria by 2021. Thus, it is clear that in order to achieve enhanced number of graduation, business as usual will not be sufficient. In this context GA resolution 68/224 requests all relevant organizations of the United Nations system, led by OHRLLS, to extend necessary support to aspiring-to-graduate or graduating LDCs in the elaboration of their graduation and transition strategies. It furthermore calls on development and trading partners to support LDCs in terms of support to graduation strategies and provision of smooth transition measures.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING**

The Ministerial Meeting of African Least Developed Countries will be held on 8, 9 and 10 June 2015 in the context of the *Expo Milano 2015*, the universal exhibition that Italy will host from May to October 2015 on the theme: “Feeding the Planet – Energy for Life”.

The overall objective of the Ministerial Meeting of African Least Developed Countries is to support African least developed countries to achieve internationally agreed development goals, including the attainment of the goals and targets of the Istanbul Programme of Action, and in particular to make progress in poverty eradication, peace and development for graduating from the LDC category.
In this context, the meeting will aim at building the capacity of national stakeholders, including policy makers, to implement and mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action into national development policies and budget processes, to establish linkages to the post-2015 development agenda and to step up preparations towards graduation and smooth transition. Furthermore, it is expected that substantive presentations and discussions in a less formal setting will facilitate knowledge sharing and consensus building on the main priorities of the African LDCs in the post-2015 development agenda, with a specific focus on accelerated sustainable development towards graduation. This would lead to increased and more active LDC representation in the relevant post-2015 meetings and conferences, which in turn will ensure that the specific needs and concerns of LDCs are better articulated at various international forums, and that LDCs will not be left behind.

It is planned that the outcome of the meeting will directly feed into the processes leading to the Post-2015 development agenda, including the Third UN Conference on Financing for Development, and will substantively inform the midterm review of the IPoA.

The Ministerial Meeting will explore concrete actions for structural socio-economic transformation of African LDCs with a view to achieving the goals of the Istanbul Programme of Action. In particular, the Meeting will aim at accelerating progress by these countries towards meeting the criteria for graduation. In this respect agriculture, food security and access to energy are crucial factors and will be at the core of the substantive discussions during the Meeting. The results of the Meeting will feed into the intergovernmental process related to the Post-2015 development agenda and the Third Conference on Financing for Development.

Mirroring the Expo main theme, the Ministerial Meeting will focus on two key issues that have been identified in the Istanbul Programme as critical drivers for growth, poverty eradication and progress towards graduation: food and energy. Chronic food insecurity in some African LDCs and unacceptably high levels of child undernourishment are magnified by demographic pressures, dwindling natural resources and the impact of climate change. Additionally, a crippling infrastructure deficit, particularly in energy and transportation, constitutes a binding constraint to realize African LDCs’ potential. The thematic focus of the Ministerial Meeting will investigate the linkages between food and agriculture, energy and infrastructure, as critical priorities for the LDCs in general and in particular for those in the African continent.

Contribution to ongoing intergovernmental processes

The Ministerial Meeting will take place at a defining moment in the history of global development cooperation, as the international community enters into the final negotiating stage on the elaboration of an ambitious and universal post-2015 development agenda that will culminate in the United Nations Summit in September 2015.

Furthermore, the Milan Meeting will be held just one month before the upcoming Third international Conference on Financing for Development in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2015,
where Member States will outline the principles of a holistic financing architecture to ensure that the necessary means of implementation form the backbone of the post-2015 Development Agenda.

In view of these two major ongoing intergovernmental processes, the Milan Ministerial Meeting is uniquely positioned to create an opportunity, away from UN Headquarters and the negotiating rooms, for the LDCs and their development partners to embark in an open dialogue to find a common understanding of how these processes can better integrate the key priorities, goals and targets of the IPoA and ensure that they reflect LDCs financing needs.

There cannot be a successful post-2015 development agenda without prioritizing the LDCs, as they face the toughest challenges, with the weakest capacity, in overcoming extreme poverty, building productive capacities and moving towards the graduation goal set in the Istanbul Programme of Action. It is crucial to ensure that their specific concerns and needs are mainstreamed at the front and centre of the post-2015 Development Agenda to ensure that LDCs’ priorities, including graduation, are fully and effectively incorporated.

Moreover, in facilitating a stocktaking exercise on progress, obstacles, challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the IPoA in African LDCs, the Ministerial Meeting will also serve as an important input to the preparatory process for the comprehensive high level midterm review of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme, scheduled to be held in June 2016. The Meeting should also provide concrete recommendations on how to enhance the implementation of agreed actions and on concrete initiatives that would accelerate the achievement of the IPoA goals.

Format of the Meeting

The Milan Ministerial Meeting is jointly organized by the Government of Italy and UN-OHRLLS. UN-OHRLLS will provide support to its substantive preparation and coordinate the contributions of the UN system. The Government of Benin as Chair of the LDC Group will play an important role in facilitating consensus building.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy will preside.

The Meeting will gather Ministers and other high-level government officials from all 34 African LDCs and Haiti, as well as representatives of development partners, UN System organizations, international and regional development banks and private sector. Cape Verde will be invited to share its graduation experience. Several lead contributors from governments, civil society and academia will also be invited.

The substantive sessions of the meeting will be chaired by participating ministers, heads of agencies and internationally reputed development experts. Experts will provide short introductions on the respective topics and the issues to be discussed. Key-note speakers will be drawn among well-known authorities on development and panelists will be drawn among participants. Interactive discussions will focus on concrete examples of successful strategies and best practices.
EXPECTED RESULTS

1. Concrete measures and detailed strategies identified as good practices in the outcome document of the meeting to accelerate progress towards graduation of African LDCs, including specific areas and sectors where greater focus and strong domestic and international support is required.

2. Increased knowledge and consensus of the main priorities of the LDCs for the post-2015 development agenda, with a specific focus on accelerated sustainable development towards graduation;

3. Increased and more active LDC representation in the relevant post-2015 meetings and conferences to make sure that the specific needs and concerns of LDCs are better articulated at various international forums, ensuring that LDCs will not be left behind;

4. Improved capacity of national stakeholders, including policy makers, to implement and mainstream the Istanbul Programme of Action into national development policies and budget processes to establish linkages to the post-2015 development agenda and to step up preparations towards graduation and smooth transition.