Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, welcome in Brussels.

I also congratulate Bangladesh for taking the leadership of the group of LDCs.

It is of course an honor for my country, Belgium to co-chair together with Turkey the group of friends of the LDCs.

Belgium’s active support for the LDCs is a leitmotiv in our approach to implement the new sustainable development agenda, exactly as it was one of our top priorities during the process of its genesis.
In September, in New York, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They expressed their commitment to a transformative agenda that puts a premium on an integrated approach and aims to leave no-one behind – including the world’s least developed countries.

L’Agenda 2030 tend à promouvoir une croissance économique durable et inclusive, une protection sociale et un environnement sain. Tous ces thèmes sont prioritaires pour les PMA (pays les moins avancés).

D’emblée, la première étape, pour chacun d’entre nous, est d’intégrer les nouveaux objectifs mondiaux à l’intérieur de nos stratégies de développement nationales respectives, de développer des indicateurs adaptés aux contexte national et cohérents au niveau mondial et de mettre en place des mécanismes de suivi appropriés mais aussi de consolider les capacités statistiques nationales et de prévoir des mesures de suivi régional et mondial.

C’est vrai pour la Belgique, comme c’est vrai pour chacun de vos pays.

Comme l’a dit à juste titre un membre de mon cabinet : encore aujourd’hui, nous sommes TOUS des pays en développement, qui tentons de cerner quelles sont les mesures appropriées à prendre pour l’horizon 2030.

Toutefois, n’oublions pas que les PMA font partie des pays les plus fragiles. Ils sont affectés de manière disproportionnée par les défis environnementaux, les
urgences sanitaires, les catastrophes naturelles, la pauvreté et la faim et le chômage des jeunes.

Ils doivent industrialiser et diversifier leurs économies, tout en veillant à rendre leur agriculture durable, rien de moins que cela.

But LDCs are not just characterized by their challenges. They represent enormous reservoirs of untapped potential. We have to unlock this potential and create chances for the benefit of the more than 880 million people who live in the 48 countries that are classified as LDCs.

That’s why we as development partners in a spirit of global partnership should do more by channeling more ODA to LDCs.

We are encouraged that the Addis Ababa Action Agenda has brought a qualitative and quantitative change in the ODA approach to LDCs. It is in the same vein that Belgium decided to direct 50% of its official development aid to the LDCs and recommends other donors to do so as well.

I am convinced that as an international community, we can and should reverse the current adverse trend in ODA allocation to your countries’ group.

Of the 14 partner countries who will receive Belgian ODA henceforth, twelve are LDCs and 8 are fragile states.
Allow me to highlight two of Belgium’s priorities for 2016 with respect to the LDCs.

First, we will focus on the development of the private sector in the South. Sustainable inclusive economic growth is a prerequisite for sustainable development and the private sector has a key role in this.

We should share our knowledge and expertise and invest in sustainable local economic growth in developing countries, while fully respecting the principle of untied aid.

At the same time, we expect LDCs to take a lead in creating and mobilizing all resources including domestic ones. This is an effort in which we can also partner, through our participation in the IMF’s Topical Trust Fund for Tax Policy and Administration from this year onwards.

Secondly, we want to focus on digitalization as a catalyst for development, for it creates opportunities for people, companies and governments. To understand what this means we will look into strengthening civil society, support state-building and peace-building structures, promote good governance and increase local capacity while making fuller use of development data analysis.

The point here is to go from big data to conversational data – data about things that directly matter to people, specific in nature, and in real time so we can act upon current rather than upon past trends.
UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has called for strong global commitment to the success of the climate change summit after the successful organization of financing for development and 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, as they all reinforce each other.

Governments are discussing in Paris a universal and meaningful climate change agreement, which should ensure an inseparable linkage between climate change impacts, global progress and poverty.

It is obvious that the LDCs’ natural capital is being degraded at an ever increasing speed, inter alia because of the effects of climate change. This in turn jeopardizes people’s well-being and hampers future economic growth.

For those reasons, Belgium remains committed to supporting both adaptation and mitigation activities in the developing world, in particular the LDCs. Belgium strongly endorses “an ambitious legally binding agreement under the UNFCCC in Paris in 2015, applicable to all Parties”, building further on the fact that the EU goes beyond its 2020 reduction target and is working on implementing its 30% reduction commitment by 2030.

In this context I would like to reiterate my support to the invaluable work done by the UN office of the High Representative of the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small Island developing states.
The destruction caused by Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu is only the latest in a long string of devastation that SIDS have endured and which unfortunately they will continue to endure as long as climate change is not adequately addressed. Belgium also remains committed to the implementation of the new, people-centered disaster risk reduction strategy which was adopted in March this year at Sendai.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Belgium and Benin have recently been appointed to oversee intergovernmental consultations on the Comprehensive High-level Mid-term Review of the Program of Action for the LDC’s, which was adopted four years ago in Turkey.

To underscore our commitment to your countries my delegation recently organized a side-event on LDCs special needs during the “Financing for Development” summit in Addis Ababa and another one on environmental challenges for LDCs in the implementation of Agenda 2030, in New York, in the margins of the Post-2015 Summit.

In April 2016, Belgium will also organize a high level seminar of the UN Development Cooperation Forum. In this context, too, my country has called and will call for more attention to the financing needs of the LDCs and it will welcome innovative ways to help mobilize funds.
“I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member”, Groucho Marx famously said. That rule clearly does not seem to apply to LDC group members. However intricate the criteria for access to the club may be, once in, members tend to cherish a few of the benefits that come with its status.

Worse, a few of these trappings may become hurdles to actual graduation.

We have collectively and repeatedly committed to see half of your countries graduate by 2020, and you are best placed to tell us whether that horizon is in sight.

But more often than not, certain countries shy away from the actual graduation prospect for fear it may leave them overexposed to a new situation, with stiffer competition and less advantageous treatment in a number of ways on the world’s financial and goods markets.

Even if there is no blatant evidence of such adverse effects in the case of a few recently graduated LDCs, the call for a “smooth transition” is a legitimate one, and that is why Belgium presided over a working group on precisely that subject in the UN headquarters in New York until a few years back.

It is also an element that we as donors have to continuously keep writing into the software of our international development policies: we do not want you to remain ‘least developed’ forever, but even less do we want you to relapse after a hard landing out there.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude with words of the late Nelson Mandela. “Poverty is not an accident. It is man-made and can be removed by the actions of human beings,” he said.

Indeed, we can break the vicious cycle of poverty. But then we have to act.

I wish you all very fruitful and inspiring discussions here in Brussels that en vigorate all of us to pass to action.

Je vous souhaitez à tous des discussions fructueuses et inspirantes ici à Bruxelles. J’espère qu’elles nous motiveront à passer à l’action.

Thank you.