High-Level Meeting: Achieving Sustainable Graduation for Least Developed Countries

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INTRODUCTION

The Meeting on Achieving Sustainable Graduation for Least Developed Countries was organized jointly by the Office of High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS) and the Government of Bangladesh, in Dhaka on the 29th and 30th November 2017. The meeting was attended by approximately 150 participants including senior officials and experts from the Least Developed Countries, UN system, regional organizations, development banks, development partners, civil society and academia.

The High-Level Meeting assessed the potential impacts of graduation on the graduating countries, necessary preparations to fully adapt to the changing circumstances arising from the erosion of LDC specific support and how to accelerate the momentum of graduation to maintain the development trajectory of the country with a view to achieving the SDGs by 2030. During the meeting, speakers delivered intriguing lessons on the opportunities and challenges of LDC graduation.

The Meeting provided an opportunity to share experiences and best practices with representatives from countries facing similar development challenges. Moreover, it also served as a platform for development partners to understand better the needs and priorities linked to LDC graduation. The five substantive sessions discussed and offered solutions on achieving sustainable graduation for the least developed countries. This report summarizes the discussions that took place over the two-day meeting.

Detailed presentations made during the meeting can be accessed:
OPENING SESSION
The opening session was marked by the remarks of honorable and distinguished experts:

- **H.E. Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP, Hon’ble Foreign Minister of Bangladesh**
- **Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative, UN-OHRLLS**
- **H.E. Mr. Tofail Ahmed, MP, Hon’ble Commerce Minister of Bangladesh**
- **Ms. Susanna Wolf, Senior Programme Officer, OHRLLS**

**H.E. Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, Hon’ble Foreign Minister of Bangladesh**, expressed his appreciation to the UN-OHRLLS for co-organising the meeting, and welcomed all delegates and representatives to Dhaka. He stressed the importance of common development efforts for achieving graduation status, and the goals of the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) as well as the 2030 Agenda.

The Minister further highlighted that the socio-economic challenges encountered by LDCs differ from developed countries. Thus, it is crucial to understand and subsequently harness the challenges faced by LDCs particularly during and after their graduation. The necessity for support and assistance to the vulnerable countries must also be evaluated based on individual capacities, vulnerabilities and external shocks. These efforts will ensure sustainable socioeconomic progress in each country.

The Minister underlined two crucial challenges for LDCs that require adequate attention for achieving sustainable graduation. First, fragile state of LDC economies including doubling of the merchandise trade deficit of LDCs as a group. Second, the vulnerabilities created by climate change.

**Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative, UN-OHRLLS**, expressed her appreciation to the Government of Bangladesh for their kind hospitality, and to the Governments of Switzerland and Norway for their generous support for the organization of the High-Level Meeting. She welcomed all delegates and representatives to Dhaka.

Ms. ‘Utoikamanu underlined that while graduation is a great milestone in each country’s development path, it should not be regarded as a cut-off point. Instead it must be seen as a determined move towards sustainable development that is accompanied by structural transformation. In this regard, countries need to understand the vulnerabilities and challenges of their economies and proactively negotiate with their development and trading partners.

Ms. ‘Utoikamanu highlighted the importance of common efforts in identifying concrete means and ways to accelerate the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action. She noted that progress and potential towards achieving the ambitious objective of the IPoA of enabling half of the LDCs to meet criteria for graduation are both apparent. The trend is positive and an increasing number of LDCs are expected to meet the criteria in the next triennial review.

**H.E. Mr. Tofail Ahmed, MP, Hon’ble Commerce Minister of Bangladesh**, asserted Bangladesh’s vision towards achieving socio-economic betterment. He reiterated the economic
progress: Bangladesh being one of the fastest growing economies with a consistent growth above 6% per annum. As an LDC, Bangladesh benefits from various special facilities relating to trade such as preferential market access, special and differential treatment regarding WTO obligations, support for trade-related capacity building etc. The Minister noted, however, that Bangladesh is mostly benefiting from preferential market access including duty-free and quota-free (DFQF), Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), exemption from Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) obligations, export subsidies in the form of cash incentives. He then underlined the importance of enhancing overall trade-related capacity. Initiatives such as regional Free Trade Agreements, export diversification, sound regulations and infrastructure building will all play a key role in this regard.

Ms. Susanna Wolf, Senior Programme Officer, OHRLLS, delivered a keynote presentation on graduation. Ms. Wolf reiterated the IPoA goal in enabling half of LDCs to meet the threshold for graduation by 2020. She explained the three graduation criteria; GNI per capita, Human Assets Index, and Economic Vulnerability Index.

Ms. Wolf noted that progress has been made but more comprehensive steps must be taken. Samoa (2014) and Equatorial Guinea (2017) have graduated after the adoption of the Istanbul Programme of Action. Vanuatu and Angola are scheduled to graduate in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

Ms. Wolf also described the graduation process. In the review process, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) determines threshold levels on each of the three criteria to identify the countries to be added to or graduated from the category. The thresholds for graduation are higher than for inclusion. In the identification process, the HAI and EVI thresholds are fixed by the Committee.

To become eligible for graduation, a country must reach threshold levels for graduation for at least two of the aforementioned three criteria, or its GNI per capita must exceed at least twice the threshold level, and the likelihood that the level of GNI per capita is sustainable must be deemed high. After a country has become eligible for graduation for the first time, an ex-ante impact assessment and a vulnerability profile are produced and delivered to the Committee as inputs for its deliberations. To be recommended for graduation, a country must be found eligible at two successive triennial reviews by the CDP.

A country graduates from the LDC category three years after the GA takes note of the ECOSOC endorsement of the recommendation of the CDP. During this three-year period, the country remains on the list of LDCs and continues to benefit from the special support measures associated with LDC status. The smooth transition strategy is to be implemented only after the actual graduation of the country.

SESSION 1: Comprehensive Transition Strategy for Sustainable Graduation
This session discussed the main challenges and opportunities faced by the least developed countries in achieving a smooth transition during the graduation process. The discussion emphasized on how a graduating country can develop a comprehensive transition strategy to ensure sustainable graduation with the support of development partners.
The UN Resident Coordinator (RC) for Bangladesh stressed that comprehensive strategy for a specific country must map out the potential challenges and opportunities arising from graduation. The RC expressed the need for economic transformation to higher value-adding and productivity areas is a necessity and also the need to invest in people.

The RC noted that Bangladesh is a success story among the LDCs with respect to its economic transformation. For instance, Bangladesh’s continuous reforms in human resource policies by raising female and young labor force participation generated higher productivity.

She then noted that LDCs should opt to diversify their economies and engage with private sector stakeholders to help creating jobs and generate more revenue through broadened tax base. The introduction of a progressive tax may benefit LDCs.

The representative of the Secretariat of the Committee for Development Policy provided an overview of the graduation process and described the roles of relevant partners. He underlined the importance of increased information and coordination about the available international support measures (ISMs) and knowing what happens when they are phased out. The role of the CDP is central as it monitors development progress and reports to ECOSOC. CDP’s initiative such as the LDC portal which aims to provide information on existing LDC-specific support measures during transition is essential.

He then discussed the implementation of smooth transition strategy and underlining the need to avoid abruptly stopping support, and need to phase out ISMs in accordance with country’s needs.

The CDP representative also noted that the potential benefits of graduation should be more clearly defined, and there is room for more South-South cooperation and increased communication between recent and prospective graduates.

Furthermore, the UN LDC graduation task force will become an important forum for coordination and providing advice on LDC graduation.

The representative of Samoa shared some of the nation’s experience linked to its graduation in 2014. Natural disasters in 2012 delayed graduation from the LDC category. Thus, it is crucial for countries to have strategies for unforeseen external shocks.

He then noted that after graduation, Samoa’s socio-economic performance improved. However, the country is and will always be a SIDS. In other words, its economic fundamentals and its competitive advantage remain the same.

The representative of Samoa underlined that to ensure successful implementation of the various global programmes, there needs to be a localized and contextualized development strategy for each country instead of implementing the universal blueprint.

The representative of Denmark articulated the importance of Official Development Aid (ODA) for many LDCs. Denmark is one of the few countries to meet the global 0.7% ODA target. However, he highlighted the importance of establishing and strengthening partnerships with the private sector.
The representative of the WTO shared views on transition strategy and acknowledged the anxiety in which some LDCs fear the sudden reduction of support measures (i.e. DFQF market access to be stopped). The WTO is working to ensure that the multilateral trading system supports LDCs throughout the graduation process.

As part of the transition process, some preferential and differential treatments will be lost. However, graduating LDCs can request specific waivers to comply with WTO rules. To do this, strong leadership and sound preparation of the transition is needed; to anticipate the needs and challenges arising from graduation, to devise appropriate strategies, and to limit the adjustment costs.

**SESSION 2: Seizing the Momentum of Graduation to Achieve the SDGs: Prospects and Challenges**

This session discussed the momentum of graduation which encompasses many aspects including opportunities and challenges, phasing out of LDC specific support measures, and reducing reliance on external support.

Professor Guillaumont from FERDI first highlighted that the aim of the LDC category is to cease to exist in the end, through assisting LDCs to move out of the trap of low income and high vulnerability. He then noted that compared to previous decades, when LDCs feared graduation as it meant the loss of special and differential treatments and support measures, LDCs are now aiming at graduation.

He noted that addressing vulnerability and increasing resilience, including to climate change, should be a major component of the transition. As an effort to reinforce smooth transition, it would be beneficial to utilize the LDC graduation criteria for aid allocation. This allows taking into account vulnerability when needed, and other criteria including climate change.

Professor Guillaumont then underlined that graduation is a goal for all LDCs and graduation policy is development policy. Structural transformation leading to higher productivity is essential for a sustainable graduation. Similarly, it is needed for all LDCs, especially for those that are far from the eligibility to graduation, and far from the SDGs as well.

The representative of ESCAP highlighted the low regional economic cooperation and integration in the Pacific and South Asia. In this regard, ESCAP is focusing on enhancing integrated markets, seamless connectivity and financial cooperation while addressing shared vulnerabilities in the region. Furthermore, trade facilitation and cross border paperless trade can lower cost and to a certain extent compensate for the loss of special and differential treatment resulting from LDC graduation.

In addition, the regional financial markets and initiatives to lower tax competition can mobilize additional resources for development in LDCs.

The representative of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) highlighted that the International Support Measures (ISMs) have worked well for Bangladesh, and the nation will experience certain loss in support, especially in the trade area, after its graduation. As of now, the benefit reaped from DFQF market access amounts to an equivalent of USD 1 billion. Holding other factors constant, if Bangladesh were to meet graduation criteria in 2018,
Everything But Arms and Ammunition (EBA) will be available until 2027. The CPD representative further described the consultative mechanism to be a good opportunity to seek global support. For Bangladesh the implementation of various policies in the field of technological advancement, skills endowment, productivity enhancement and higher competitive strength would reinforce the nation’s ambition to become a pioneer in the digital economy.

The representative of UNCDF stressed the importance of promoting local development for equitable economic growth and building human endowments. Moreover, local development through fiscal decentralization and financial inclusion can support graduation. Thus, it is necessary for LDCs to start utilizing domestic capital to finance local development. This can be achieved through unlocking the value of public assets to finance investment, crowding in private sector to make complementary investments, and employ a strategic budget of ODA to incentivize the use of domestic capital.

The representative from DESA/CDP Secretariat presented their upcoming online tool, GradJet, which provides information related to graduation. The tool also recommends several activities in preparation for graduation, including but not limited to collecting information on ODA and exports and analyzing the impact of graduation.

During the interactive discussion, it was pointed out that graduation and development strategies need to be linked at subnational level. It was also underlined that graduation is not an end in itself and that regional integration, financing gap and existing capacity gaps need to be emphasized more.

SESSION 3: Forging Partnerships for Sustainable Graduation
This session discussed the role of partnerships in achieving sustainable graduation. Key questions on how to adapt to the post-graduation realities, the importance of international support to graduating LDCs and the various ISMs for the life after graduation were presented.

The representative of the European Commission provided an overview of EU development cooperation under the new European Consensus on Development. Aid will be tailored to specific circumstances including to particular challenges faced by graduating countries.

Furthermore, the Everything But Arms (EBA) framework of the EU, which grants duty-free, quote-free access for all products except arms and ammunition to LDCs, is extended for 3 years after graduation from LDC status. After that, the country may benefit from Standard GSP or GSP+ depending on the fulfilment of the applicable criteria.

The representative from Norway discussed the gender perspective in the graduation process and flagged that graduation might have different effects on women and therefore, the role of women in graduation needs to be thoroughly addressed. She then underlined Norway’s continued support to countries after graduation.

The representative of Senegal stated that partnerships with all stakeholders are necessary at all levels for sustainable graduation. The objective has to be to forge financial and inclusive partnerships in all the priority sectors including social, agricultural, energy infrastructure and information technology sector. Both human capital and innovation are crucial in this regard as well as for achieving structural transformation.
The public sector’s role is to create an enabling environment through sound regulations and policies, in which it promotes an inclusive partnership that involves all segments of society to actively play a role in ensuring sustainable development.

The representative of the World Bank (WB) elucidated a comparison of LDC criteria with LIC and IDA eligibility. He noted that Bangladesh is among the largest recipients of the International Development Association (IDA) amounting to $4.4 billion. With respect to the IDA graduation process, the WB representative explained that if Bangladesh’s GNI per capita exceeds the operational threshold for a third consecutive year, the country will be classified as an IDA gap country starting in FY19. Countries in gap status continue to access IDA resources, but on less concessional terms. This implies a higher interest rate than the interest-free IDA financing, but the rate is still concessional and significantly lower than alternative sources available in external and domestic markets for Bangladesh. He then mentioned that there are 9 cases where a reversal of IDA graduation has occurred.

The representative of LDC Watch provided an overview of developments of LDC’s growth and poverty, and highlighted that LDCs are still facing significant challenges. Evidently, graduation does not automatically lead to continued development progress. It is essential for graduating countries to grasp the concept of smooth transition that includes avoiding a reversal of development progress. To this end, partnerships are needed in the areas of technology, climate change adaptation, diversification, trade, energy, poverty, structural transformation, and connectivity. Support for negotiation capacity needs to be prioritized.

During the interactive discussion it was highlighted that the fear of the unknown associated with LDC graduation at all levels must be addressed thoroughly and strengthened partnerships have a key role in this regard. Fostered partnerships within countries, regions as well as with the diaspora are needed, including South-South cooperation. This could help to diversify trading partners and broaden the economic base to prepare for the loss of LDC specific support.

SESSION 4: Country Case Studies and Support for Sustainable Graduation

This session discussed the performance of recent LDC graduates in coping with post-graduation realities and sustaining their economic growth and development. The discussion assessed the need for more international support measures for graduated countries that have experienced progressive reductions and lost access to LDC-specific funding sources.

The UN Resident Coordinator for Cabo Verde reiterated UNDP’s role in facilitating the consultative group and being a key partner to ensure alignment with the SDGs, developing roadmaps for smooth graduation and leveraging the work of UN Funds, Programmes and Specialized Agencies.

UN Agencies collaboration on sustainable graduation is specific but not limited to the areas of social cohesion, building national capacities to deliver basic services (access & quality), job creation and fiscal base, strengthening resilience including to climate change, and assist in linking SDGs to national development schemes.

The Resident Coordinator of Cabo Verde also discussed creating transition benchmarks and measures, enhancing support among UN agencies, banks and the international community as well as the introduction of special
provisions for some country categories (i.e. SIDS).

The representative of the National Planning commission of Nepal highlighted Nepal’s progress and efforts to graduate from the LDC category. The country has set a target of graduation by 2022. Out of the three criteria for graduation, HAI and EVI seem to be closest to the threshold. However, Nepal’s GNI per capita of $862 (2016) is still far from the $1242 threshold. Strong macroeconomic policy options have been the national focus to bridge the gap.

Nepal’s economy relies heavily on importing petroleum products and labor exports. The lack of diversification translates to a high risk of vulnerability to external shocks. The country has established a national development plan that encompasses strategies to assist exporters to become more competitive through improved connectivity, enterprise development, trade facilitation and foreign direct investment.

The High adviser to the Sao Tomé and Principe’s Ministry of Finance, Commerce and Blue Economy highlighted the nation’s progress on the thresholds for graduation. Based on the GNI per capita, Sao Tomé and Principe has passed the threshold of $1242 since 2012. As for the HAI, Sao Tome and Principe has fulfilled the minimum threshold of 66 or above since 2015. However, the EVI remains outside of the threshold criteria. Given the current progress, Sao Tomé and Principe aims to graduate by 2021.

Two development plans have been put in motion, namely the Transformation Program of Sao Tomé and Principe for 2030 and the National Development Plan (2017-2021). The Transformation Program elaborates on the ambition to become a maritime and air hub in the gulf of Guinea. A deep water port is expected to be built as part of the plan.

The National Development Plan aims at accelerating the economic growth of Sao Tomé and Principe through further regional and global economic integration, good governance practices, economic and social infrastructure development including energy, transportation and telecommunications.

The representative from Vanuatu flagged that the nation’s geographical characteristics renders it as one of the world’s most vulnerable countries to natural hazards. Consisting of more than 80 inhabited islands located on the earthquake-prone “ring of fire”, Vanuatu often faces volcanic eruptions, cyclones, tsunamis, storm surges and landslides. The effect of climate change has materialised through the rise of sea level. Therefore, graduation from the LDC category will not change their status quo - given the natural disasters are not controllable but manageable to some extent.

Vanuatu acknowledged that graduation is inevitable; the country is committed to attain socio-economic progress, and has formulated a National Development Plan 2030 to ensure smooth transition from the LDC category. However, he highlighted that the eventual graduation will be a challenge for the nation on many development fronts including changing the mindset of its population.

The representative from Bangladesh’s Economic Relations Division highlighted Bangladesh’s progress towards graduation. The country has made progress in two of the three criteria, HAI and EVI, and expects to meet the criteria for graduation for the first time in the next CDP triennial review.

Currently Bangladesh benefits from numerous preferential treatments such as special and
differential treatment at the WTO, Generalized System of Preferences from the EU and Canada, special provisions in regional trade agreements (SAFTA, APTA, BIMSTEC), ODA and other bilateral trade initiatives. However, graduation will withdraw or reduce all the benefits above, which consequently will put pressure on Bangladesh’ competitiveness in the export markets.

To ensure smooth transition, Bangladesh has already established a National Task Force (NTF), comprising of relevant stakeholders, which assess the impact assessment study on graduation of Bangladesh and identify priorities for the development roadmap. Among the many challenges, the NTF will focus on climate finance, tax base, ODA, investment, remittance, productivity and good governance.

**SESSION 5: Tools for Sustainability of Graduation**

This session focused on the tools and strategies to achieve sustainable graduation that is accompanied by consistent structural transformation and lower vulnerability. In particular, the discussion revolved around how trade agreements, technological advancement and energy industry can foster economic growth.

The High Commissioner of Bangladesh for Sri Lanka stressed the need for forging new partnerships after graduation, including South-South cooperation and partnerships with the private sector to enhance strategic investment. Progressively, LDC economies must have greater connectivity, productivity and innovation. These can be attained through numerous ways, such as, but not limited to diversification, including into non-manufacturing sectors (i.e. finance industry, digital technology, etc.). Furthermore, he suggested seeking and proactively engaging with regional stakeholders such as Sri Lanka.

The representative of Kiribati informed about the development strategies and the collaboration with a large range of stakeholders to improve the well-being of the people, through providing basic services and infrastructure. He indicated that the obstacles Kiribati faces in its development include rapid structural transformation after independence, damage caused by climate change and poor management of public owned enterprises led to low provision of services. Furthermore, political tensions led to frequent reversal of plans disrupting progress. Also the geography of small islands with large oceans makes the provision of public services very costly.

The representative then noted that the people of Kiribati are now looking into more long-term plans instead of short political cycles, and Kiribati is ready to graduate from the LDC category. He suggested taking the economic vulnerability criterion more into account in the recommendation for a country to graduate, including considerations of extending the timeline.

The representative of Bhutan highlighted that the nation has met two graduation thresholds in 2015 (GNI per capita and HAI) but not the EVI. In this regard, challenges remain, including high reliance on electricity exports to India and high vulnerability to climate change.

Access to sustainable energy can be a tool for sustainable graduation. In Bhutan, vast hydropower reserves serve the population and generate government revenue. It is expected that by end of 2017, the entire population will have access to electricity, which is subsidized for
poor and rural households. Bhutan also strives to enhance energy efficiency while continuously revising policies in the energy sector.

The challenges Bhutan faces with respect to enhancing access to modern energy include the mobilization of investment funds, especially for solar power plants as well as limited domestic markets. In going forward, it was proposed to look into preparing a forward-looking transition strategy, utilizing better the critical ISMs, initiating a discussion on the EVI threshold as a mandatory criteria and providing international support measures during the transition phase.

The representative from UN-OHRLLS stressed that the defining features of LDCs are primarily characterized by structural handicaps to sustainable development and growth, poor state of Science-Technology-Innovation (STI), vicious circle of poverty and vulnerability to external shocks.

Progress in STI serves as a crucial driver of rising prosperity and improved national competitiveness. Growth based on STI can effectively ease the post-graduation shocks and help countries to achieve full range of SDG agenda. Bangladesh’s high-tech export only amounts to 0.17% of manufactured exports (2011) while developed countries such as Denmark reaches up to 16% (2015) of manufactured exports.

R&D expenditure as percentage of GDP allocated for Cambodia (0.12%) is significantly different from developed countries such as Germany and Denmark, 3.01% and 2.88% respectively. These statistics demonstrate the poor state of STI in LDCs.

On the other side, it also conveys room for potential growth opportunities stemming from reforms in STI areas.

The operationalisation of a Technology Bank (TB) for LDCs, as postulated in the IPoA of 2011, is a prominent solution to tackle the low STI investment in LDCs. The objectives of the TB are to strengthen the STI capacity of LDCs and promote the implementation of national and regional STI strategies through cooperation among all stakeholders involved.

The TB’s work programme for 2018 includes conducting STI assessments and reviews for several LDCs, in close collaboration with the relevant UN agencies. These reviews will identify technological gaps and priority needs of LDCs.

Moreover, digital access to research and technical knowledge is in the agenda for 2018. This will facilitate and increase online access to scientific journals, books and databases at no direct charge. The aim is to enhance intra-LDC and international collaboration between research centers and universities.

CLOSING SESSION
The closing session was attended by the honorable and distinguished experts:

- Mr. Md. Shahidul Haque, Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh
- Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative, UN-OHRLLS
In the closing remarks, the Under-Secretary-General of High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing countries and Small Island Developing States, Ms. ‘Utoikamanu expressed her sincere appreciation to all the participants for their active contribution to the meeting.

The few keys messages from the two-day’s discussion include:

- LDC graduation did not change the fundamentals of the graduated countries’ economy, and there is a need to look at graduation as a positive milestone in their development path.

- Most graduated countries are still vulnerable, especially to climate change. This has to be addressed in the preparation for graduation and in the smooth transition strategies.

- Strengthening global partnerships are crucial for development and sustainable graduation. Development partners play a critical role in ensuring smooth transition for graduated countries.

- Key issues at country level for achieving sustainable graduation include building on synergies between the fight against poverty, increasing inequalities and social cohesion; local economic development & civil society participation, with focus on youth and women; strengthening the domestic private sector, value chains in key sectors (agribusiness, fisheries, tourism); improving the investment climate; job creation with focus on youth; and expanding the fiscal base.

The deliberations of the High-level meeting also fed into the Expert Group Meeting on UN support for graduation and smooth transition of LDCs, on the 14th December 2017. In addition, the discussions of the meeting will contribute to the Secretary-General’s report on Graduation and Smooth Transition that the OHRLLS is preparing in 2018.

The Co-Chairs summary of the High-Level Meeting, which was presented by Ms. Susanna Wolf of OHRLLS, and can be accessed at: