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IDENTIFICATION OF THE LEAST DEVELOPED AMONG
THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Report of the Secretary-General

INTRODUCTION

1. Since the adoption of General Assembly resolution 2724 (XXV) on 15 December 1970 which, inter alia, affirmed the

"urgency of identifying the least developed among the developing countries in order to enable the countries so identified to benefit as early as possible from the special measures in their favour adopted in the various forums, particularly those incorporated in the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade",

the question of identification of the least developed among the developing countries has been considered in United Nations bodies by both independent experts and representatives of Governments. Prepared in response to the above resolution, the present report provides some idea of the progress made on this important question.

I. CONSIDERATION BY INDEPENDENT EXPERTS

2. The Committee for Development Planning, an advisory body of 18 experts, examined the special problems of the least developed among the developing countries at its seventh session, held at Geneva from 22 March to 1 April 1971.^{1/} The Committee recognized that, in the face of paucity of data, it was not easy to

^{1/} Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Fifty-first Session, Supplement No. 7 (E/4990), paras. 41-83.

formulate objective criteria for identifying the least developed among the developing countries. It felt, however, that some rational criteria and procedures had to be devised in order to give a concrete expression to the political will to implement special measures in favour of those countries. In its judgement, as a first step in international action to adopt special measures, a simple method would be the most practical.

3. Following that reasoning, the Committee selected three principal criteria for identification of the least developed among the developing countries, namely, (a) per capita gross domestic product at market prices of \$100 or less, (b) share of manufacturing in the gross domestic product of 10 per cent or less and (c) literacy rate - proportion of the literate persons in the age group of 15 years and more - of 20 per cent or less. In its judgement, the per capita gross domestic product serves as a general indicator of the dimensions of poverty and over-all development; the share of manufacturing in total output provides an idea of the extent of structural transformation of the economy; and the literacy rate indicates the size of the base for enlarging trained and skilled human resources. The Committee employed these criteria in a somewhat flexible manner. It expressed the opinion that the list of the least developed among the developing countries should include not only those countries which satisfied all three criteria, but also those which satisfied two out of three criteria provided the figure for the third criterion exceeded the cut-off limit, suggested for it by the Committee, by only a small margin. In considering borderline cases, the Committee also took into account the average rate of growth of the gross domestic product in real terms during the past few years as well as special circumstances which might have distorted the recent picture of development.

4. These considerations led the Committee to suggest that the following countries could be classified among the least developed among the developing countries.^{2/}

Africa

Botswana, Burundi, Chad, Dahomey, Ethiopia, Guinea, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Upper Volta;

^{2/} The Committee considered only States Members of the United Nations and the self-governing Territories associated with them.

Asia and Oceania

Afghanistan, Bhutan, Laos, Maldives, Nepal, Sikkim, Western Samoa, Yemen;

Latin America

Haiti.

5. The Committee recommended that whatever general list of least developed countries was adopted for the Second United Nations Development Decade, it should be reviewed and, if necessary, revised on the occasion of the mid-Decade review. It suggested, moreover, that the question of identification should be given further study within the United Nations system with a view to refining the scheme of classification and the related criteria.
6. The Committee was careful to note that a general list of least developed countries, such as the one proposed by it, would not rule out the use of different classifications for special purposes. It suggested that in specific areas the competent organizations of the United Nations system and other intergovernmental bodies should elaborate their own criteria and procedures for identification and the appropriate measures needed within their respective fields of competence. In the regional context, in particular, the Committee felt that the identification of least developed countries for special treatment might well be based on criteria different from those recommended by it for the general list.
7. An ad hoc Group of Experts on Special Measures in Favour of the Least Developed among the Developing Countries, which was convened at Geneva from 26 April to 5 May 1971 in pursuance of resolution 68 (X) of the Trade and Development Board,^{3/} came to the conclusion that the Committee for Development Planning had taken a major step forward by focusing specific attention on the "hard core" least developed countries and that the recommendations of the Committee concerning a list of such countries could serve as a starting point for special international action in their favour. At the same time the Group of Experts expressed the belief that the list proposed by the Committee must be interpreted in a flexible way and in accordance with the circumstances surrounding its use at any given time.

^{3/} "Report of the ad hoc Group of Experts on Special Measures in Favour of the Least Developed among the Developing Countries" (TD/B/349).

8. The Group also reached the conclusion that it was not useful at present to elaborate further on the conceptual, statistical and other difficulties with the Committee's definition, which had already been discussed by the Committee. The Group of Experts expressed the opinion, however, that in future refinements of criteria it would be useful to add certain other indicators and possibly some modifications in the criteria currently employed. Like the Committee for Development Planning, the Group of Experts also urged periodic reconsideration of the list of least developed countries.

II. CONSIDERATION IN INTERGOVERNMENTAL FORUMS

9. The recommendations of the Committee for Development Planning were considered by the Economic and Social Council at its fifty-first session in July 1971.^{4/} On 30 July 1971, the Council adopted resolution 1628 (LI) in which it commended the Committee for its technical work that helped to identify the least developed among the developing countries. It requested the General Assembly to take a decision at its twenty-sixth session concerning an agreed list of those countries on the basis of the work of the Committee and the reports to be submitted to the Assembly at its twenty-sixth session by the Trade and Development Board, through the Economic and Social Council, and by the Secretary-General. The Council also recommended that the Secretary-General and the concerned organizations of the United Nations system should continue to examine, as part of the work on the review and appraisal of progress during the Second United Nations Development Decade, the economic and social advancement of the least developed countries, keeping in view the possibility of modifications in the list of those countries at the time of the comprehensive mid-term appraisal in 1975.

10. The report of the ad hoc Group of Experts was considered by the Trade and Development Board at its eleventh session, held from 24 August to 21 September 1971.^{5/} On 18 September 1971 the Board adopted resolution 82 (XI) by

^{4/} Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 3 (A/8403), chap. VI.

^{5/} For the report of the Trade and Development Board on its eleventh session, see TD/B/385. The printed version will appear in Supplement No. 15 to the Official Records of the twenty-sixth session of the General Assembly (A/8415).

which, inter alia, it approved, without prejudice to future consideration, the list of countries identified as the hard-core least developed countries by the ad hoc Group of Experts and the Committee for Development Planning. The Board stated that the list might provide useful guidance for action by Governments and interested international organizations. It also specified that this initial list should be reviewed in the light of future work. The Board requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to work out a detailed and a comprehensive action-oriented programme, within UNCTAD's competence, for the implementation of the relevant provisions of the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade in favour of the least developed countries and to present that programme to the third session of UNCTAD in 1972. Among the various decisions set forth in the Board's resolution, it would be of particular interest for the General Assembly to note that the Board invited the Assembly to draw the attention of other organs of the United Nations system to the course of action taken in UNCTAD with a view to initiating similar activities in their respective areas of competence.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

11. The foregoing account suggests that a great deal of progress has been made in recent months on the question of identification of the least developed among the developing countries. The question has been examined during 1971 by two expert bodies and, prior to the twenty-sixth session of the General Assembly, the recommendations of experts were reviewed by two major intergovernmental organs. The problems facing the least developed countries are grave and call for urgent solutions. It would hardly be appropriate to delay the launching of suitable programmes in their favour until technical analyses have answered all queries relating to the identification of those countries. It would also seem that there could scarcely be a difference of opinion on an initial list of countries which appear as least developed on virtually all meaningful counts. A decision by the General Assembly at its twenty-sixth session on an initial list of the least developed among the developing countries should assist Governments and, in their areas of competence, the international organizations concerned in working out without delay measures and programmes of action in favour of those countries in the framework of the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade.
