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Groups of countries in special situations: follow-up to the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

Economic and Social Council 2025 session

Agenda item 12 (b)

Implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits: review and coordination of the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries

Follow-up to the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report provides information on the implementation of Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the decade 2022–2031 (General Assembly resolution [76/258](#), annex) during its third year and is submitted pursuant to Assembly resolution [79/218](#) and Economic and Social Council resolution [2024/18](#). In the report, the Secretary-General examines progress made towards the objectives of the Programme of Action, highlights key developments in its implementation framework and offers strategic recommendations for accelerating advancement towards its goals during this critical phase of implementation. The underlying data are contained in the statistical annex to the present report.^a

^a Available at www.un.org/ohrlls/statistical_annex_sg_report_2025.

* [A/80/50](#).

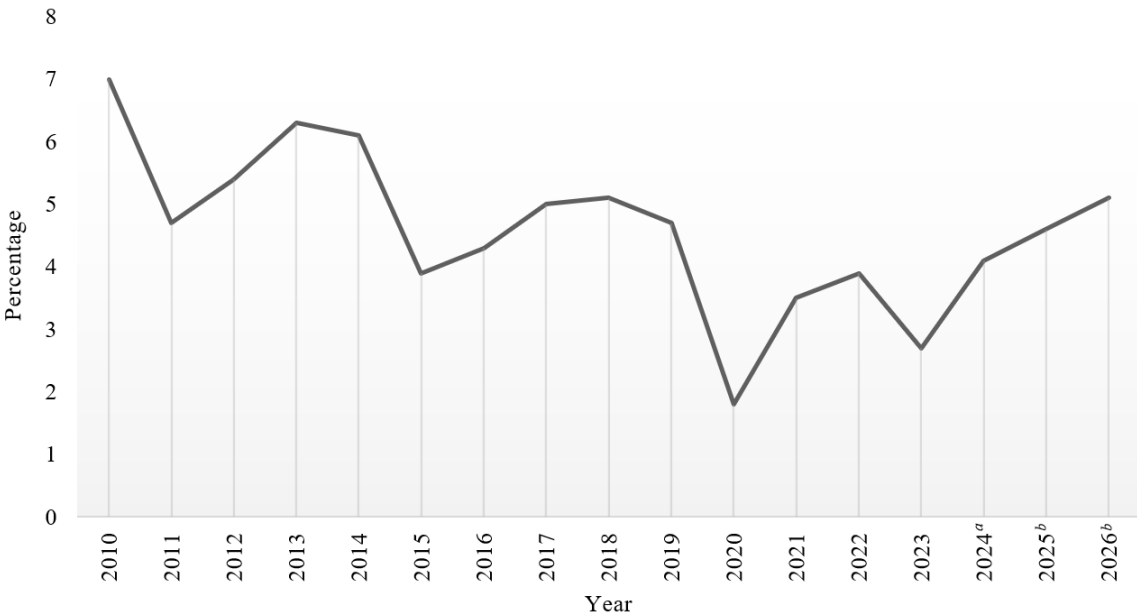
** The present report was submitted for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.



I. Investing in people in least developed countries: eradicating poverty and building capacity to leave no one behind

1. Progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals remains insufficient, with extreme global poverty returning to levels prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic by 2024, affecting 9.7 per cent of the global population, or 692 million people.¹
2. While this marks some recovery from the setbacks of the pandemic, least developed countries continue to face disproportionately high poverty rates, with nearly one third of their populations still living below the international poverty line.²
3. Debt burdens, high unemployment, especially among young people, and the increasing frequency of climate disasters further contribute to the high levels of poverty in least developed countries.
4. Furthermore, economic growth in least developed countries remains well below the 7.0 per cent target set in the Sustainable Development Goals, a benchmark last achieved in 2010. In 2024, gross domestic product (GDP) growth in least developed countries rose to 4.1 per cent,³ up from 2.7 per cent in 2023, with the recovery of international tourism. While growth prospects for 2025 indicate further improvement, persistent conflicts in some least developed countries, geopolitical tensions, rising external public debt and the lack of fulfilment of official development assistance (ODA) commitments are likely to undermine the long-term growth prospects and economic stability of least developed countries.

Figure I
Real gross domestic product growth in least developed countries, 2010–2026



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, based on estimates and forecasts produced with the World Economic Forecasting Model.

^a Partially estimated.

^b Forecast.

¹ World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025 (United Nations publication, 2025).

² Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database, accessed on 15 January 2025.

³ World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025.

5. Addressing these challenges requires urgent and more effective global cooperation to foster economic growth, accelerate the energy transition and advance sustainable development.

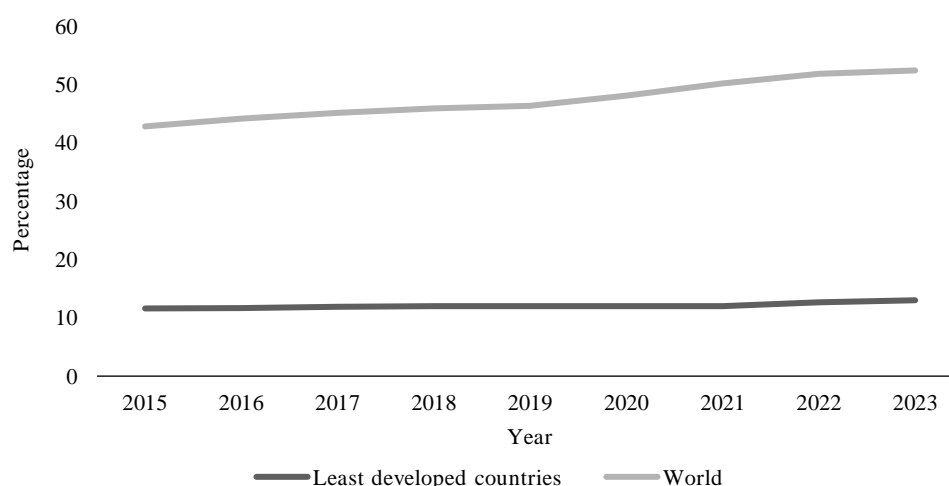
Universal social protection

6. Efforts to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems in least developed countries have shown modest progress, particularly in expanding and sustaining coverage for vulnerable populations.

7. The proportion of children and households receiving child or family cash benefits in least developed countries increased from 12.7 per cent in 2021 to 13.4 per cent in 2023, reflecting a gradual improvement in social protection measures. However, coverage remains significantly below the 2023 global average of 28.1 per cent.⁴ Similarly, the proportion of the population with any social protection cover in least developed countries increased modestly from 11.6 per cent in 2015 to 13 per cent in 2023, compared with the global rise from 42.8 per cent to 52.4 per cent in the same period. This persistent gap underscores the need for stronger policies and increased investment in social protection systems in least developed countries to enhance coverage, strengthen resilience and support inclusive development.

Figure II

Proportion of population with at least one social protection benefit, 2015–2023



Source: Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database, available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database>.

Investing in young people and education

8. The youth population (aged 15–24) in least developed countries stood at 236.5 million (18.6 per cent) in 2024, with the proportion of the population aged 0–24 amounting to 695.8 million (58.6 per cent), representing a critical demographic for driving economic growth, innovation and sustainable development. However, severe educational disadvantages continue to hinder their potential, perpetuating cycles of poverty.

9. Education completion rates in least developed countries remain significantly below the global average, reflecting persistent challenges in educational access, retention and quality. In 2023, the primary education completion rate in least

⁴ See the statistical annex to A/78/80-E/2023/64, available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs>.

developed countries was 65.5 per cent (68.9 per cent for girls and 62.2 per cent for boys), compared with a global average of 87.9 per cent. At the lower secondary level, completion rates drop to 44 per cent (44.9 per cent for girls and 43.1 per cent for boys), well below the global average of 77.6 per cent. The gap widens further at the upper secondary level, with 22.7 per cent completion in least developed countries (22.2 per cent for girls and 23.1 per cent for boys), in stark contrast to the global figure of 59.4 per cent.⁵

10. The gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education is significantly lower in least developed countries (11.2 per cent) than at the global level (43.3 per cent). The proposed online university for least developed countries is aimed at increasing access to high-quality education, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. In a report to be submitted to the General Assembly at its eightieth session, the Secretary-General will elaborate on the modalities of the online university.

Equal participation of women and girls in social, political and economic life

11. Least developed countries have made some progress in advancing gender equality and ensuring the equal participation of women and girls in social, political and economic life through legal and policy reforms. In 2023, legislative advancements promoting women's empowerment were enacted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, South Sudan and Uganda.

12. A notable example is the National Elections Act, 2012 (Amendment) Act, 2023 of South Sudan, in which it is mandated that at least 35 per cent of national legislators be women, strengthening women's political representation and participation in decision-making processes. In 2024, the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (single and lower chambers) stood at 26.8 per cent in least developed countries, slightly surpassing the global average of 26.4 per cent⁶ and up from 23.1 per cent in 2020.

13. Despite these gains, women and girls in post-conflict and conflict settings remain particularly vulnerable due to displacement, disruptions in healthcare, and deep-seated systemic inequalities.

14. Female labour force participation in least developed countries declined slightly from 42 per cent in 2020 to 41 per cent in 2024.⁷ The informal nature of employment remains a significant barrier to women's economic empowerment, limiting their access to labour protection and social security.

Hunger and malnutrition

15. Hunger and malnutrition remain pressing challenges in least developed countries, exacerbated by conflicts, climate change, economic shocks and fragile food systems. In 2023, 57.3 per cent⁸ of the population in least developed countries was food-insecure, as a result of rising food prices, displacement, disruptions in agricultural production and extreme weather events.

16. Malnutrition among children remains a serious concern. The latest data show that 7 per cent of children under 5 years of age suffer from moderate or severe wasting, posing long-term risks to human capital development. In addition,

⁵ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>.

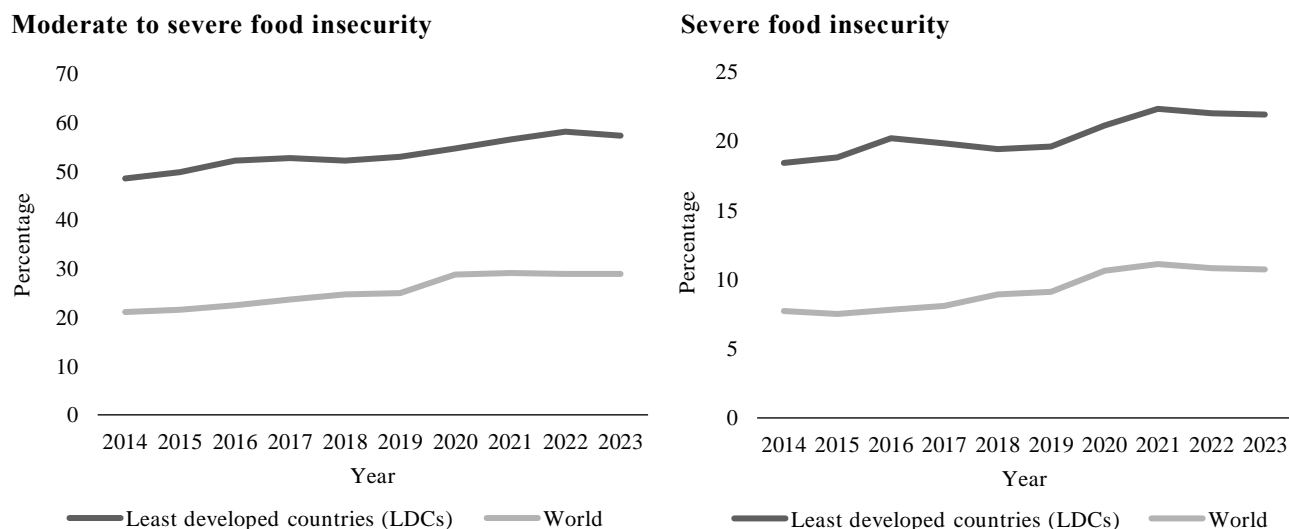
⁶ See the statistical annex to A/78/80-E/2023/64.

⁷ Weighted averages based on modelled estimates of the International Labour Organization.

⁸ Suite of food security indicators of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Available at www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/FS.

undernourishment in least developed countries stood at 22.1 per cent in 2022, more than double the global rate of 9.2 per cent.⁹

Figure III
Prevalence of food insecurity in the population, 2014–2023



Source: Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database.

17. To help address these challenges, the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States is mobilizing resources for implementing the Doha Programme of Action deliverable on the Food Stockholding Mechanism for the Least Developed Countries to enhance food security in those countries. The Government of Qatar is providing financial support, which will be implemented in cooperation with United Nations agencies and other partners. In 2025, the second United Nations Food Systems Summit Stocktaking Moment will offer a significant opportunity to advance food security, combat malnutrition and drive sustainable food systems transformation in least developed countries.

Promotion of health and well-being¹⁰

18. Least developed countries have made notable progress in expanding healthcare services and reducing maternal mortality. The number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births decreased from 439 in 2015 to 376 in 2020. In 2023, 75 per cent of births in least developed countries were attended by a skilled health professional, up from 73 per cent in 2022. However, this remains below the global average of 86 per cent.

19. Efforts to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services continue, but progress has been slow. In 2024, only 60 per cent of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) in least developed countries had their family planning needs met with modern methods, unchanged from 2023 and significantly lower than the global average of 78 per cent.

20. Birth registration rates also saw a modest increase from 47 per cent in 2022 to 50 per cent in 2023 but were still lagging behind the global average of 78 per cent.

⁹ See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>.

¹⁰ See the statistical annex to A/78/80-E/2023/64.

Water and sanitation

21. Access to safely managed water services remains a major challenge in least developed countries. In 2022, only 37.5 per cent of their populations had access to safely managed drinking water, a modest increase from 36.6 per cent in 2020 but still far below the global average of 72.9 per cent.

22. Similarly, access to safely managed sanitation services in least developed countries improved slightly from 24.4 per cent in 2020 to 26.7 per cent in 2022. However, this remains less than half of the global average of 56.6 per cent, leaving a significant portion of the population without adequate sanitation facilities.

Migration and mobility

23. Least developed countries continue to be major sources of international migration, with 48.3 million people migrating from them and 16.3 million migrants residing within their borders.¹¹ Their migration and mobility patterns vary widely, reflecting diverse national and regional circumstances and challenges. In addition, least developed countries bear a disproportionate burden of internal displacement, hosting 44 million internally displaced persons out of a global total of 75.9 million.¹² Despite representing only 15 per cent¹³ of the global population, least developed countries account for 57 per cent of internally displaced persons. While conflict and violence remain the primary drivers of displacement, climate change further exacerbates the situation. Natural disasters have displaced more than 8 million people in 2023, compared with 14 million displaced by conflict and violence during the same period.¹⁴

24. Four of the five countries with the highest levels of conflict- and violence-related displacement are the Sudan (6,039,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (3,772,000), Myanmar (1,298,000) and Ethiopia (794,000).¹⁵

25. These overlapping crises not only trigger initial displacement but create cyclical patterns of vulnerability, in which poverty, food insecurity and sociopolitical marginalization trap millions of people in protracted displacement situations with diminishing prospects for sustainable solutions.

Governance and peacebuilding

26. Ongoing conflicts in several least developed countries are severely undermining governance, peacebuilding and the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action. A total of 24 least developed countries were classified as fragile and conflict-affected in 2024.¹⁶ Some of the most critical situations include the devastating conflict in the Sudan, persistent armed group activities and intercommunal violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the escalating confrontations in Myanmar following the seizure of power by the military in 2021.

27. Conflicts in least developed countries, often driven by political instability, governance issues and unresolved social grievances, underscore the urgent need for

¹¹ See World Population Prospects 2024.

¹² See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2024 (Geneva, 2024).

¹³ According to data from the Migration Data Portal of the Global Migration Data Analysis Centre of the International Organization for Migration.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Global Report on Internal Displacement 2024.

¹⁶ See World Bank, "Classification of fragile and conflict-affected situations", available at www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/classification-of-fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations.

comprehensive governance reforms and peacebuilding initiatives aligned with the Doha Programme of Action. Strengthening institutions, promoting inclusive decision-making and addressing the root causes of conflict remain critical to fostering stability and enabling sustainable development.

II. Leveraging the power of science, technology and innovation to address multidimensional vulnerabilities and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

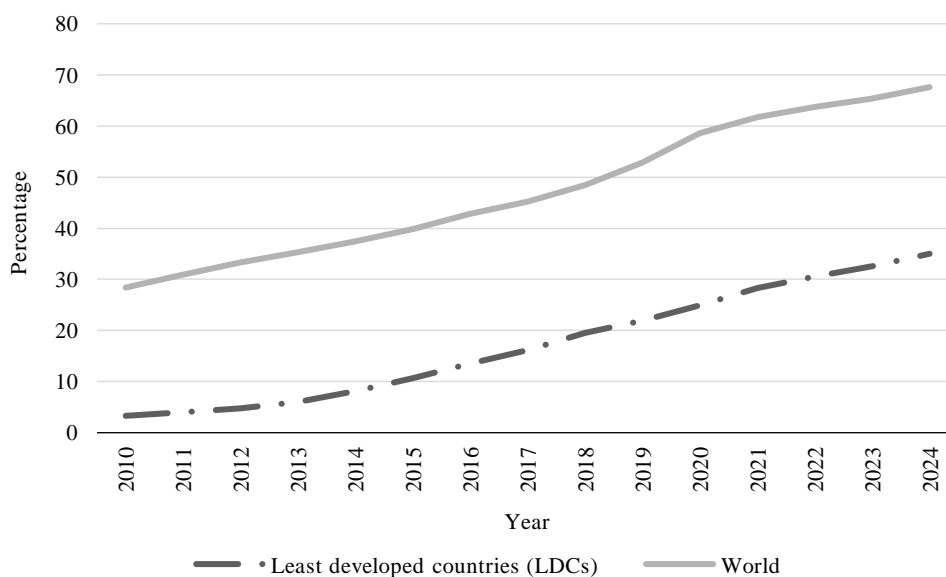
28. Science, technology and innovation are essential catalysts for sustainable development in least developed countries, particularly given their demographic advantage, with 58.6 per cent of their 1.27 billion population under 25 years of age, a potential powerhouse for digital transformation.

29. Although science, technology and innovation is a focus area of the Doha Programme of Action, least developed countries continue to lag significantly across all key science, technology and innovation metrics.

30. Internet penetration in least developed countries was about 30 per cent in 2022, recently rising to 35 per cent, compared with over 60 per cent globally. This represents a perpetual digital divide that hinders economic transformation.

31. Moreover, the gender digital divide is widening in least developed countries, with gender parity in Internet use declining from 0.74 in 2019 to 0.70 in 2023. Affordability remains a major barrier to digital inclusion. Despite the target of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development of making connectivity costs less than 2 per cent of monthly gross national income per capita by 2025, three quarters of least developed countries still face mobile broadband costs exceeding 5 per cent of gross national income per capita, putting basic connectivity beyond reach for millions.

Figure IV
Proportion of population using the Internet, 2010–2024



Source: International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures – Focus on Least Developed Countries* (Geneva, 2023).

32. Research and development investment remains below 0.8 per cent of GDP, far from the global average of 2 per cent and the recommended 1 per cent benchmark, constraining technological adoption, innovation ecosystems and structural transformation.

33. Least developed countries also face other barriers to technological diffusion, including isolation from global research networks, limited domestic scientific capacities and critical shortages of skilled researchers. In 2022, least developed countries accounted for only 0.71 per cent of the scientific and technical articles published worldwide, up from 0.58 per cent in 2020. This represents just 27.5 articles per million people, a stark indicator of the persistent knowledge production gap. Governments, financial institutions and the private sector need to enhance research and development efforts in these countries.

34. The educational foundation for technological advancement in least developed countries remains severely underdeveloped, with upper secondary enrolment at 44 per cent, significantly limiting the development of advanced technical skills. This educational deficit correlates with low digital adoption rates, as secondary education strongly predicts Internet usage.¹⁷

35. In terms of innovation, least developed country residents and non-residents filed a total of 356 patent applications in 2023, in comparison to approximately 3.6 million globally. Innovation metrics further highlight technological disparities, with patent filings heavily concentrated in just a few least developed countries. Bangladesh accounts for 54 per cent, Cambodia for 12 per cent and Yemen for 10 per cent, while leading African least developed countries Madagascar and Zambia contribute just 6 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively. In addition, 49,067 trademark applications were filed in least developed countries in 2023, compared with 11.6 million filed in the rest of the world.

36. Information and communications technology has become a global innovation catalyst, driving transformative advances across multiple sectors. Patent publications related to the technology have grown significantly. The world's seven largest research and development investors in 2020 were all information and communications technology companies, highlighting the strategic importance of digital technologies. However, least developed countries face a widening innovation gap. In 2022, while companies in high-income countries had begun to integrate advanced digital technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence, many micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in least developed countries lacked computers or Internet access. This digital inequality undermines competitiveness despite international commitments under the Doha Programme of Action to enhance digitalization and broadband connectivity in these vulnerable economies.

37. E-commerce offers transformative potential for least developed countries by overcoming traditional trade barriers and enabling global market access. However, the connectivity gap risks widening economic disparities. Encouragingly, mobile technology adoption has facilitated leapfrogging, promoting digital inclusion and financial access. Strategic global partnerships and forward-thinking policies in least developed countries are fostering innovation ecosystems and science, technology and innovation investments, supporting targeted capacity-building initiatives.

38. The Technology Bank for the Least Developed Countries represents a cornerstone initiative in bridging the technological divide, conducting systematic technology needs assessments that identify sector-specific technological requirements aligned with sustainable development priorities. With 13 such

¹⁷ See www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/lde/D-LDC-ICTLDC-2018-PDF-E.pdf.

assessments completed to date, this mechanism ensures that technology transfer interventions are targeted at high-impact sectors where transformative change is most achievable.

39. Complementing these efforts, the Partner2Connect Digital Coalition has mobilized more than 300 pledges worth \$19 billion for least developed countries as of December 2024, investments poised to catalyse digital transformation and substantively narrow connectivity gaps.

III. Supporting structural transformation as a driver of prosperity

40. The Doha Programme of Action commits to promoting and supporting inclusive and sustainable structural transformation as a driver of prosperity and resilient sustainable development in the least developed countries.

41. Least developed countries face persistent challenges from climate change, geopolitical tensions and the lingering impacts of the pandemic that continue to hinder their economic progress and efforts towards structural transformation. Furthermore, tight fiscal space and mounting debt burdens in least developed countries further constrain their ability to invest in productive capacities essential for structural transformation and robust economic growth.¹⁸

42. The agriculture sector employs more than half of the population in the least developed countries, constituting the primary source of income in rural areas. Most of those countries are yet to establish strong linkages between agriculture and its industrial and service sectors, due to limited access to finance and investment for agro-industrial development, inadequate infrastructure for storage, processing and transportation, and insufficient technological innovation and skills development.

43. The global manufacturing landscape increasingly favours technology-intensive processes, with the largest shares in global manufacturing value added in 2022 comprising computers and electronics (13.1 per cent), food products (10.1 per cent), machinery (8.3 per cent), chemicals (7.9 per cent) and motor vehicles (7.5 per cent).¹⁹ In stark contrast, manufacturing in least developed countries remains concentrated in low-technology and labour-intensive industries – primarily apparel, agroprocessing and non-metallic products, with pharmaceuticals representing one of their few footholds in high-technology sectors.

44. In 2023, least developed countries reported manufacturing value added per capita of \$167, glaringly below the global average of \$1,912 and highlighting a substantial productivity gap. While the manufacturing value added growth rate of least developed countries (5.6 per cent) exceeds the global rate (2.8 per cent), the contribution of manufacturing value added to GDP in least developed countries remains relatively modest (14.5 per cent, versus 16.7 per cent globally). Furthermore, the share of medium- and high-technology industries in manufacturing value added is only 8.4 per cent in least developed countries, compared with 46.1 per cent globally. This gap reflects not only technological disparities but also fundamental challenges in productive capacity, infrastructure, and human capital development. Despite the slow progress, the commitment of least developed countries to structural

¹⁸ See World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025.

¹⁹ United Nations Industrial Development Organization, *International Yearbook of Industrial Statistics 2024* (Vienna, 2024).

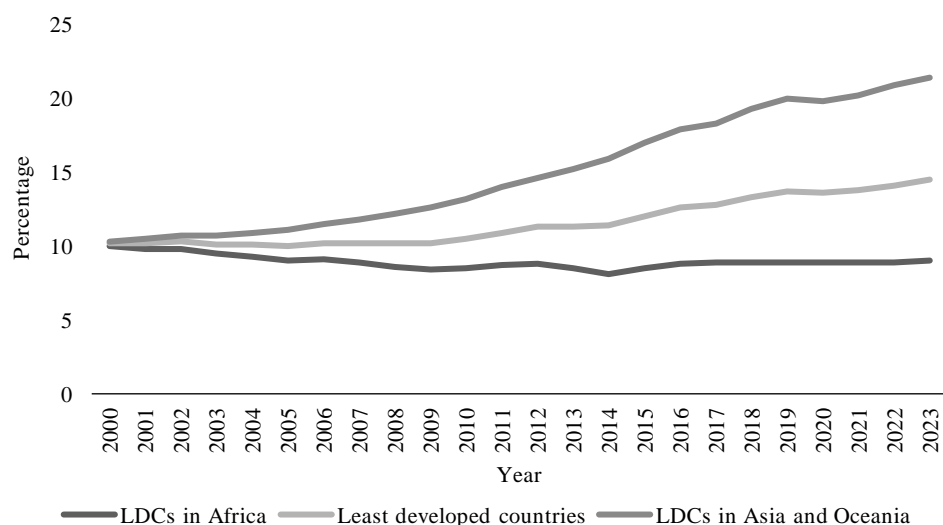
transformation is reflected in the steady growth in their manufacturing value added, indicating that their manufacturing sectors are gradually catching up.²⁰

45. This positive trajectory is further underscored by the rise in the share of manufacturing value added in GDP across all least developed countries from 14 per cent in 2023 to 14.5 per cent in 2024. In addition, sustained growth in the manufacturing sectors is reflected in manufacturing value added per capita, which rose from \$125 in 2015 to \$169 in 2023, representing a 35 per cent increase.²¹

46. However, while this progress is encouraging, the current pace is insufficient to meet the Sustainable Development Goal target of doubling the share of manufacturing in GDP by 2030. Achieving this ambitious target requires an annual increase in that share by 0.4 percentage points, yet the actual average increase in least developed countries has been approximately half that rate, at 0.2 percentage points.²² This shortfall highlights the need for accelerated policy interventions and increased international support.

47. Significant regional disparities persist within the least developed country group. Asian least developed countries have made notable progress in transitioning towards higher-productivity activities in the manufacturing sector, whereas African least developed countries account for the smallest share of global manufacturing value added, underscoring the need for targeted support to accelerate industrial development across all regions.

Figure V
Share of manufacturing value added as a proportion of GDP, 2000–2023



Source: United Nations Industrial Development Organization data, available at <https://stat.unido.org/data/table?dataset=sdg&country=LDC>.

48. In 2022, manufacturing accounted for 7.7 per cent of total employment in least developed countries, with women holding 43 per cent and men 57 per cent of these jobs. Regional disparities exist, notably with Asian least developed countries having a higher share of manufacturing employment, at around 10 per cent, than the African least developed countries, at 5.4 per cent. However, the sector remains dominated by low-technology industries, accounting for 84 per cent of total manufacturing value

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

added. This underscores the need for technological upgrading to create higher-productivity jobs.

Access to electricity

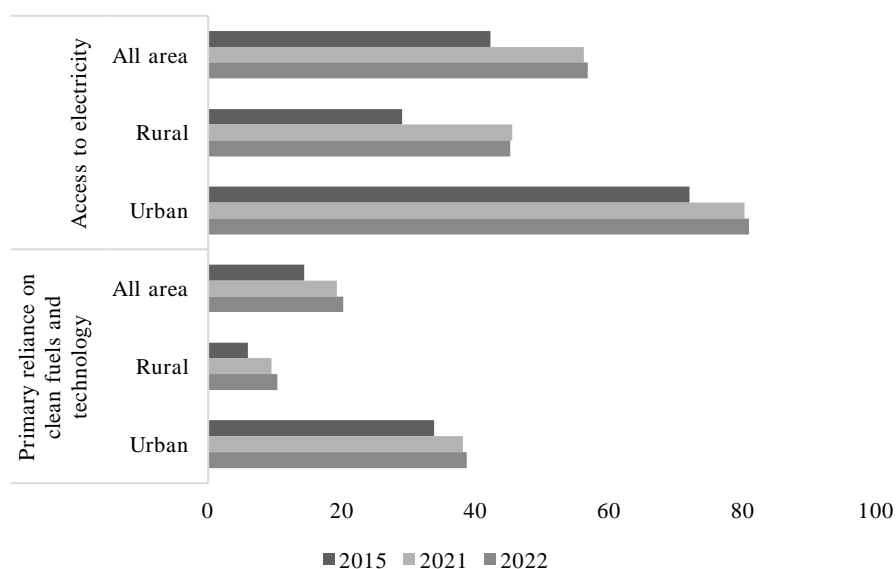
49. Access to and the sustainable supply of energy remain crucial components for structural transformation. However, the energy access gap remains a major challenge for least developed countries, creating a significant barrier to their development. Access to electricity in those countries reached just 57 per cent in 2022, representing minimal growth from 56 per cent in 2021. Even more concerning is the growing urban-rural divide, with rural energy access declining from 45 per cent to 44 per cent during the same period.

50. In 2022, only 20 per cent of least developed country populations primarily used clean fuels and technology for cooking, and just 10.3 per cent of people in rural areas had access to those resources. Under the Doha Programme of Action, 50 per cent of annual financing flows are targeted at bringing clean cooking and electricity to least developed countries. However, those flows have remained low, limiting the overall progress achieved in access to electricity.

Figure VI

Proportion of least developed countries with access to electricity and primary reliance on clean fuels and technology

(Percentage)



Source: Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database.

51. The disparity in renewable energy infrastructure between the figures for least developed countries and global averages reveals the magnitude of the development challenge. In 2022, global renewable energy generating capacity reached 424 watts per capita, while only 39 watts per capita was reached in least developed countries, less than one tenth of the global average.²³

52. At current annual growth rates, least developed countries would require approximately 41 years to reach renewable energy deployment levels similar to the

²³ International Energy Agency and others, *Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report 2024* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2024), chap. 3.

2022 average of other developing countries (293 watts per capita).²⁴ This timeline is incompatible with the Sustainable Development Goals and climate commitments, highlighting the need for more proactive capacity-building and technology transfer initiatives.

53. International public financial flows supporting clean energy in least developed countries showed modest improvement, growing by 8 per cent, from \$2.1 billion in 2021 to \$2.3 billion in 2022. However, this positive trend is undermined by the declining share of total international public financial flows, which fell from 17 per cent to 15 per cent, well below the historical average of 21 per cent.²⁵

54. Achieving meaningful structural transformation in least developed countries requires establishing robust cross-sectoral linkages that promote technological advancement, innovation, and productivity growth. Despite the clear benefits of such linkages, least developed countries face substantial implementation challenges due to limited productive and technological capacities, inadequate infrastructure and persistent market access restrictions.

IV. Enhancing international trade of least developed countries and regional integration

55. International trade remains a critical driver of economic development for least developed countries, yet they continue to face significant challenges in fully leveraging the global trading system. In 2023, their share in global merchandise exports reached 1.17 per cent, up from 0.59 per cent in 1995.²⁶ While this marks progress, it remains well below the Doha Programme of Action target of doubling least developed countries' share of global exports by 2031. Furthermore, the outlook for global trade has deteriorated sharply due to a surge in tariffs and trade policy uncertainty.²⁷

56. Merchandise exports of least developed countries have experienced substantial growth, increasing almost elevenfold from \$24 billion in 1995 to \$258 billion in 2023. However, this growth has been concentrated among a few countries and sectors. The top 10 least developed country exporters accounted for 75 per cent of all merchandise exports of those countries in 2023, up from 67 per cent in 1995. Bangladesh led least developed country exports in 2023, accounting for 22 per cent of the total, followed by Angola at 15 per cent and Cambodia at 9 per cent.²⁸

57. The product composition of least developed country exports has remained largely unchanged over the past three decades. Primary products still account for about half of their merchandise exports, with the share remaining stable at around 53 per cent between 1995 and 2023. However, some shifts have occurred within this category. The share of fuels decreased from 23 per cent to 18 per cent, while shares of food and agricultural raw materials dropped from 23 per cent to 9 per cent and from 11 per cent to 2 per cent, respectively. In the manufacturing sector, the share of clothing in least developed country exports increased from 14 per cent in 1995 to 25 per cent in 2023, indicating some progress in value-added exports.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The Energy Progress Report 2024, chap. 5.

²⁶ World Trade Organization, document WT/COMTD/LDC/W/73.

²⁷ See www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/trade_outlook25_e.pdf.

²⁸ WT/COMTD/LDC/W/73.

²⁹ Ibid.

58. Services exports from least developed countries have grown significantly, increasing nearly ninefold from \$5 billion in 1995 to \$43.5 billion in 2023, fully recovering to pre-pandemic levels. The pandemic has reshaped the structure of the countries' commercial services exports. For instance, travel exports declined from 52.3 per cent of their services exports in 2005 to 37.7 per cent in 2023. Conversely, the share of transport in their services exports rose from 20.5 per cent in 2005 to 33.3 per cent in 2023, primarily fuelled by a robust annual increase of 12 per cent in air transport exports. Notably, digitally delivered services exports from least developed countries reached an estimated \$8.4 billion in 2023, growing at an annual rate of 9 per cent from 2005 to 2023.

59. Market access conditions for least developed countries have improved over the years. As of 2023, Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland offered 100 per cent duty-free market access, while the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland offered 99.8 per cent duty-free coverage. Some developing countries, such as Chile, China and India, also grant significant duty-free market access ranging from 94.1 per cent to 99.6 per cent.

60. In 2024, Canada informed World Trade Organization members of the extension of its General Preferential Tariff and Least Developed Country Tariff schemes until 31 December 2034.

61. Regional integration and South-South cooperation continue to offer significant opportunities for least developed countries to expand trade. The African Continental Free Trade Area and other regional initiatives have the potential to boost intraregional trade for African least developed countries.

62. E-commerce and digital trade present new opportunities for least developed countries to participate in international trade. However, least developed countries face significant digital divides that limit their ability to harness these opportunities, including low usage levels. Aid for Trade remains a critical mechanism for addressing the countries' trade-related constraints and enhancing their integration into the global economy. In 2022, Aid for Trade support to least developed countries reached a record \$14 billion in disbursements.³⁰ However, this represented a smaller share of total Aid for Trade than in 2021, which was at odds with the goal of doubling Aid for Trade disbursements to least developed countries from 2018 levels by 2031.

V. Addressing climate change, environmental degradation, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and building resilience against future shocks for risk-informed sustainable development

63. Least developed countries are among the most vulnerable countries, disproportionately exposed to crises, including health epidemics, commodity price fluctuations, economic downturns, and natural hazards and extreme weather events, all of which are exacerbated by climate change. These compounding challenges have worsened food insecurity and undernourishment across least developed countries while simultaneously reducing fiscal space and foreign direct investment (FDI) and exacerbating debt burdens. Building comprehensive resilience to these multiple shocks and crises is the first line of defence for protecting lives and livelihoods.

³⁰ See www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/a4tatglance2024_e.pdf.

Climate vulnerability and climate finance

64. Least developed countries contribute merely 3.3 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions yet suffer disproportionately from climate change impacts that threaten their development trajectories.³¹ This inequity is stark considering that global emissions reached a record 57.4 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2022, rising by a further 1.9 per cent in 2023.³² More than two thirds of global climate-disaster-related deaths occur in least developed countries, despite their minimal responsibility for the crisis. While major economies continue to expand their carbon footprint, least developed countries struggle to secure adequate adaptation and resilience financing – highlighting the urgent need for targeted climate finance mechanisms that address this fundamental injustice and support those facing the most severe climate impacts.

65. The Green Climate Fund has expanded its support for least developed countries, with total funding reaching \$4.6 billion as of February 2025, representing nearly 30 per cent of its global portfolio. This marks an increase of approximately \$500 million over the past year, compared with a total of \$3.7 billion in September 2023. Through its Readiness and Preparatory Support Programme, the Fund has approved 231 grants covering 32 least developed countries, of which 179 single country grants totalling \$100 million have been disbursed.

66. In 2024, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) provided a total of \$701.73 million for least developed country projects in climate change finance, including \$209.17 million for mitigation from the GEF trust fund and \$492.56 million for adaptation from the Least Developed Countries Fund. Since its inception, the Facility trust fund has approved \$1.3 billion for national projects in least developed countries, accounting for 14 per cent of Facility trust fund finance, while the Least Developed Countries Fund has provided more than \$2 billion, bringing the combined total to over \$3.3 billion for national climate change projects in least developed countries. As at 31 December 2024, 18 least developed countries had fully utilized the entire \$20 million available to them under the Least Developed Countries Fund cap per country in the eighth GEF replenishment cycle, while 15 least developed countries had partially accessed the cap and 14 are yet to access the Fund in the eighth GEF replenishment cycle.

67. The Adaptation Fund had approved a cumulative total of \$1.25 billion for 183 projects from its creation in 2001 until the end of 2024, with approximately half benefiting least developed countries and small island developing States. At the twenty-ninth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 11 contributors made new pledges of approximately \$133 million to the Fund with an agreement to pursue efforts to at least triple annual outflows from 2022 levels by 2030.

68. Weather-related hazards remain the primary cause of economic losses from natural hazards in least developed countries, with the countries consistently identifying food, water, ecosystems and infrastructure as their most climate-vulnerable sectors. Adaptation in agriculture and livestock is of primary importance for the least developed countries, with direct implications for food security and economic stability.

69. Progress continues to be made in the national adaptation plan process, established in 2010, with the Least Developed Countries Expert Group under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change providing ongoing support. At the twenty-ninth Conference of the Parties, the Expert Group provided a

³¹ See <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/supporting-climate-action-least-developed-countries>.

³² See https://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/report_2024.

progress report on the updated technical guidelines for the national adaptation plan process, reflecting work on the global goal on adaptation as well as the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. As of January 2025, 22 least developed countries had submitted national adaptation plans to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change secretariat, out of a total of 59 developing countries.

70. However, significant challenges persist in accessing funding for national adaptation plan formulation and implementation, including limited institutional capacity, insufficient technical expertise and complex accreditation procedures.

Disaster risk reduction and multi-hazard early warning systems

71. Least developed countries experience disproportionate impacts from disasters – 2.5 times greater than the global average according to data for 2023. From 2014 to 2023, disaster mortality per 100,000 population in least developed countries was 2.05 compared with a global average of 0.82. Reported direct economic losses as a percentage of GDP between 2015 and 2022 were 2.39 per cent, as compared to a global average of 0.32 per cent.

72. Important progress has been made in the Early Warnings for All initiative of the Secretary-General, with the world at its highest levels of reported early warning coverage since 2015.

73. Under the initiative's Systematic Observation Financing Facility, funding approval had reached \$115 million for 31 of the 44 least developed countries as of January 2025, with 12 least developed countries advancing to the investment phase. However, approximately \$200 million in additional financing is urgently needed for 2025 and 2026.

74. The Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems initiative – currently covering 39 least developed countries – continues to provide critical support for preparing national plans, meteorological and hydrological services, forecasting products and risk data tools.

75. A comprehensive 2024 study on the status of multi-hazard early warning systems in the least developed countries, prepared by the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, in cooperation with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the World Meteorological Organization, found that fewer than half of the least developed countries reported having multi-hazard early warning systems, although many acknowledged having single-hazard or sector-based early warning systems, and none possessed fully compliant observational networks.

76. The study served to identify needs for strengthened risk governance, improved disaster risk knowledge, and enhanced operational infrastructure.

77. To address these challenges, the Government of Qatar, through the Qatar Fund for Development, is providing financial support to the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States for implementing the Doha Programme of Action deliverable on resilience-building measures in the least developed countries, which will be implemented in cooperation with United Nations agencies and other partners.

VI. Mobilizing international solidarity, reinvigorated global partnerships and innovative tools and instruments: a march towards sustainable graduation

78. Making significant progress on the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will require innovative approaches, including increased concessional financing, blended finance, and better alignment of private investments with national development priorities. Adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution [78/322](#), the multidimensional vulnerability index can serve as a tool for informing development cooperation policies and improving access to concessional financing.

Strengthening domestic resource mobilization and combating illicit financial flows

79. Domestic tax revenue is a critical pillar for sustainable development financing by least developed countries, offering more predictable resources than external sources. However, the median tax-to-GDP ratio in least developed countries stands at just 13.2 per cent, well below the 15 per cent threshold generally considered necessary for delivering basic State functions. Notably, this is significantly lower than the 16.3 per cent in other developing countries and 23.2 per cent in developed nations.

80. Efforts to mobilize domestic resources continue to be hindered by shallow tax bases, inefficient tax administration, reliance on volatile commodity exports and costly external debt. These challenges are further exacerbated by the global crises that disproportionately affect least developed countries.

81. Illicit financial flows, complex tax administration systems, and misuse of transfer pricing mechanisms by multinational corporations continue to erode tax bases and undermine domestic revenue mobilization. The digitalization of tax systems, as highlighted in the Doha Programme of Action, presents opportunities to enhance compliance, efficiency and transparency in revenue collection. Automated platforms for tax filing, payment and auditing can reduce revenue leakage and curb corruption. However, limited infrastructure and technical capacity in many least developed countries pose significant implementation challenges.

International public and external finance to contribute to sustainable development in least developed countries

82. ODA remains a vital component of external financing for least developed countries, yet commitments remain unfulfilled. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ODA flows from official donors fell by 7.1 per cent in 2024, the first decrease in ODA since 2019. Preliminary estimates show that net bilateral ODA flows from Development Assistance Committee members to the least developed countries amounted to \$35 billion, a fall of 3 per cent in real terms compared with 2023. The grant element of ODA continues to decline from its peak in the 2000s. Despite the call in the Doha Programme of Action to increase budget support, which is a more predictable and flexible form of aid, implementation remains limited.

Remittances

83. Remittances to least developed countries continued to grow, totalling \$65 billion in 2023, with an average share of 6.89 per cent of GDP, surpassing the global average of 5.5 per cent. However, dependency on remittances varies widely within the least developed country group, with remittances exceeding 10 per cent of GDP in 10 least

developed countries and 20 per cent in 5 (Nepal, the Gambia, Lesotho, the Comoros and Yemen). However, sending remittances to least developed countries remains prohibitively expensive, significantly hindering the potential benefits for recipient families. As of 2024, the average cost of sending remittances to least developed countries stood at 7.4 per cent, more than double the Sustainable Development Goal target 10.c of 3 per cent by 2030 and exceeding the global average of 6.4 per cent.

Debt sustainability and the need for a transparent debt architecture

84. The total external debt stock of least developed countries has surged to \$585.9 billion in 2023 – a threefold increase since 2010 and equating to 38.7 per cent of gross national income. Total debt servicing costs have become unsustainable, consuming 14.2 per cent of export earnings in least developed countries by 2023, nearly double the 2014 figure. The average interest payments of least developed countries on total external debt increased by almost 50 per cent between 2022 and 2023, further intensifying their debt vulnerabilities.

85. Addressing this crisis demands responsible borrowing and lending frameworks and coordinated debt relief mechanisms for least developed countries. Operationalizing the proposed debt sustainability support service for least developed countries and small island developing States could integrate debt restructuring, concessional financing, and resilience-linked instruments such as climate-resilient debt clauses and debt-for-nature swaps.

Foreign direct investment

86. FDI remains a key source of external finance. Despite global FDI growth over the past three decades, least developed countries have struggled to attract significant inflows. In 2023, they received \$31.3 billion in FDI, down from \$37.6 billion in 2015 and representing only 3.6 per cent of total FDI inflows to developing countries and 2.4 per cent of global FDI. This is only a slight increase from the 1.8 per cent share in 2015. Foreign direct investment flows remained highly concentrated, with the top five recipients (Cambodia, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Uganda and Senegal, in that order) accounting for about 50 per cent of the total inflows.

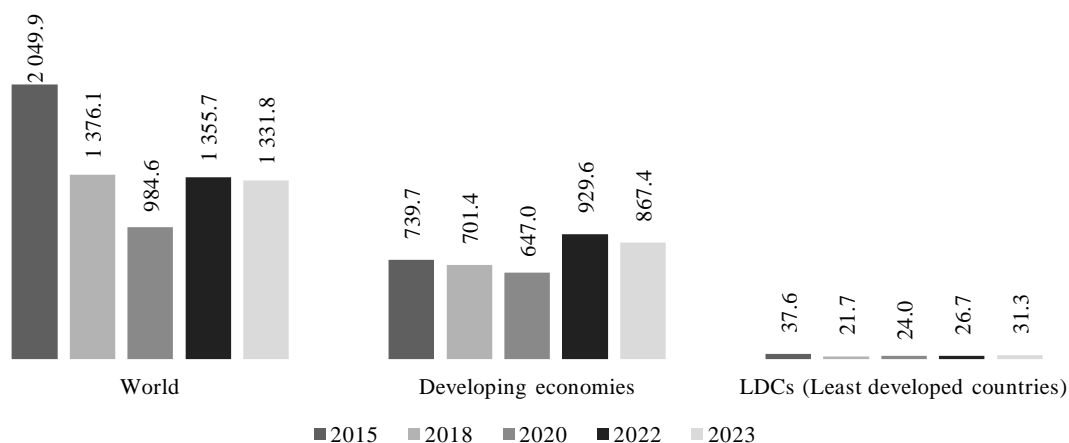
87. Foreign direct investment often bypasses least developed countries due to perceived risks in the form of political instability, weak infrastructure and limited market size. The recent consolidation of all World Bank Group guarantee products under the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency³³ is a positive development that should facilitate access to least developed countries for investors seeking to de-risk mitigation tools and catalyse private capital inflows for sustainable development.

88. As envisaged in the Doha Programme of Action, the establishment of an international investment support centre for least developed countries would bring unique added value to the field of FDI cultivation, with the aim of realizing a strategic, comprehensive and integrated approach to the demand and supply of FDI-related technical and financial assistance to Governments of least developed countries.³⁴

³³ Since 1 July 2024, the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency has hosted the World Bank Group Guarantees platform for all guaranteed products offered by the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and the Agency for the purpose of simplicity, efficiency and speed.

³⁴ The findings emerging from the feasibility study on an international investment support centre for least developed countries are elaborated upon in the corresponding report of the Secretary-General (A/79/505).

Figure VII
Inflows of foreign direct investment
(Millions of United States dollars)



Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. See https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diaeiainf2023d2_en.pdf.

Graduation and graduation support

89. In the Doha Programme of Action, ambitious targets have been set for least developed country graduation and support, with recent developments demonstrating tangible progress. Sao Tome and Principe became the second country to graduate from the category after the adoption of the Doha Programme of Action, in December 2024, following Bhutan the previous year. Also in December 2024, the General Assembly decided that Cambodia and Senegal would graduate from the category in 2029. Some 14 least developed countries are now at different stages in the graduation pipeline.

90. While graduation marks an important milestone in a country's sustainable development trajectory, it also poses considerable challenges, as least developed country-specific international support measures cease after graduation. The critical need for smooth transition measures and sustained international support post-graduation is emphasized in the Doha Programme of Action.

91. The Sustainable Graduation Support Facility offers country-specific, partnership-based global support, serving as a key stepping stone for graduating and graduated countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The Facility needs to be rapidly and fully operationalized. The Inter-agency Task Force on Graduation of Least Developed Countries, chaired by the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, should continue to rally the United Nations system in support of each graduating least developed country and ensure better coordinated provision of joint initiatives to facilitate a smooth transition out of the category.

VII. Follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action

92. Effective implementation of the Doha Programme of Action demands rigorous monitoring at the national, regional and global levels to ensure mutual accountability between least developed countries and their development partners. Responding to these challenges, the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed

Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States has developed comprehensive guidelines for mainstreaming and monitoring the implementation of the Programme of Action, building upon the 2024 road map for its accelerated implementation. The guidelines provide policymakers with practical approaches and tools to align national development strategies with Programme of Action priorities and establish robust monitoring mechanisms, incorporating country-level experiences and lessons learned from successful interventions.

93. From 24 to 26 July 2024, the Office organized a targeted capacity-building workshop in Istanbul, Türkiye, for national focal points and policymakers. The initiative has yielded measurable results, with nearly half of all least developed countries now either having fully integrated the Doha Programme of Action into their national development plans or actively reviewing existing mechanisms to mainstream its implementation by the end of 2024.

94. The first Asia-Pacific biennial regional review of the Doha Programme of Action was held in Phnom Penh on 4 and 5 December 2024. The review served to assess progress, identify emerging challenges and recalibrate strategies for least developed countries in the region.

95. The network of least developed country national focal points and its annual meeting have become an established mechanism for the voluntary annual review of the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action. The Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States conducted an independent external evaluation of the effectiveness of the support provided to the network with the aim of enhancing its support, better tailoring programmes to boost the capacity of the national focal points and optimizing the institutional arrangements for the implementation of the Programme of Action.

96. Meanwhile, the Office has intensified its efforts to strengthen the support mechanism for least developed countries in mainstreaming and monitoring the Doha Programme of Action. This includes the establishment of an evaluation and monitoring framework, structured support to the national focal points, deeper engagement with the resident coordinator offices in least developed countries and optimized institutional arrangements for timely and effective follow-up and monitoring of the Programme of Action.

97. In the road map for the accelerated implementation of the Doha Programme of Action, specific actions are outlined for relevant stakeholders, with a view to ensuring that commitments in favour of the least developed countries lead to concrete deliverables that would facilitate achieving the goals of the Programme of Action.

98. Private sector engagement has emerged as a critical implementation pathway, with tangible progress observed in initiatives launched at the Private Sector Forum of the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Doha in 2023. These include programmes to enhance digital connectivity across least developed countries and dedicated funding for job creation and social entrepreneurship targeting young people in least developed countries.

Preparatory process for the comprehensive high-level midterm review of Doha Programme of Action

99. In its resolution [79/218](#), the General Assembly, recalling paragraph 309 of the Doha Programme of Action, welcomed the generous offer of the Government of Qatar to host the comprehensive high-level midterm review and decided to elaborate on the modalities of the review at its eightieth session. The review will serve to assess progress, identify constraints in the implementation of the Programme of Action by

least developed countries and their development partners, and reaffirm the global commitment to the development of least developed countries. In addition, it will give rise to concrete recommendations to ensure timely and effective implementation for the remainder of the decade, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

100. The intergovernmental process will entail preparations at the national, regional and global levels. National reports of the least developed countries, undertaken in a broad-based and inclusive manner with the support of the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, and two regional reviews, one for Africa and one for Asia, are expected to shed light on key accomplishments and critical constraints in delivering on the targets and commitments of the Doha Programme of Action, with special emphasis on progress in the implementation of the deliverables as well as on meeting the graduation criteria.

101. The Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States will fully mobilize the United Nations system in the preparatory process through the existing Inter-Agency Consultative Group for Least Developed Countries. Consultative Group partners will prepare sectoral appraisals and organize pre-conference events in their respective fields of competence as further inputs to the comprehensive high-level midterm review. All stakeholders of the Doha Programme of Action are invited to effectively participate in and contribute to the preparatory process as well as the review itself. Member States, non-governmental organizations, civil society, the private sector and academic institutions will provide input to the review.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

102. While some progress has been made, economic growth remains below Sustainable Development Goal targets, with widespread poverty, low education completion rates and high food insecurity. Comprehensive measures are needed to accelerate the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action and the Goals. Key strategies include enhancing economic growth, combating inequality, bridging the digital divide, improving rural energy access and increasing global trade participation. Effective debt management and enhanced international cooperation are also crucial.

103. The international community should support the full operationalization of the five key deliverables of the Doha Programme of Action, namely exploring the feasibility, effectiveness and administrative modalities of a system of stockholding or alternative means; an online university or other equivalent platforms; an international investment support centre; a sustainable graduation support facility; and comprehensive multi-hazard crisis mitigation and resilience-building measures for least developed countries.

104. Member States and development partners should significantly increase investments in education infrastructure, teacher training and gender-responsive policies to address the alarming education completion gap in least developed countries.

105. Governments should strengthen social protection systems and expand coverage for vulnerable populations, with a particular focus on reaching those living in poverty, through sustainable financing mechanisms and improved delivery systems. Development partners should enhance support for maternal and reproductive health services in least developed countries while strengthening birth registration systems to ensure universal coverage and improve data availability for evidence-based policymaking.

106. Governments, financial institutions and private sector entities should increase research and development investments in least developed countries towards the international benchmark and address the widening digital divides, including the gender digital divide, through targeted interventions for women and girls. The international community should support coordinated technology transfer initiatives focused on expanding Internet connectivity and technological capacities in least developed countries, enabling their meaningful participation in the digital economy, as many small and medium enterprises currently lack basic digital access.

107. Development partners should increase targeted support for building digital ecosystem and e-commerce readiness in least developed countries, addressing the severe Internet penetration gap that significantly limits participation in digital trade and global value chains.

108. Member States should prioritize industrial diversification in least developed countries, focusing on expanding the share of medium- and high-technology industries in manufacturing value added while strengthening linkages between the manufacturing, agriculture and services sectors. It is also vitally important to expedite the operationalization of the international investment support centre for the least developed countries to address declining FDI trends in those countries and foster investments aligned with national development priorities.

109. The international community should increase investments in energy infrastructure in least developed countries, particularly in rural areas where energy access rates have declined, prioritizing renewable energy solutions to bridge the significant capacity gap compared with global averages.

110. The international community should prioritize duty-free and quota-free market access for least developed countries and enhance Aid for Trade initiatives, addressing the concerning stagnant trend in the share of least developed countries in global exports.

111. The international community should increase climate finance to least developed countries, particularly for adaptation, where needs remain critically underfunded, while accelerating support for least developed countries that have yet to submit national adaptation plans.

112. Development partners and Governments should strengthen both domestic and international efforts to scale up resource mobilization in least developed countries by implementing comprehensive tax reforms that enhance transparency, efficiency and compliance. This should include supporting the digitalization of tax administration systems to reduce leakage and expand the tax base, establishing robust legal frameworks to combat illicit financial flows and tax avoidance practices, particularly by multinational corporations, and fostering international tax cooperation through enhanced information exchange mechanisms.

113. Development partners should increase ODA to least developed countries to fulfil their commitments and address the debt crisis through coordinated liquidity provision or debt relief mechanisms where needed, noting the unsustainable burden upon many least developed countries from allocating more resources to debt servicing than to essential social services such as education and health.

114. Development and trading partners and the United Nations system should continue to provide tailored support to graduating and recently graduated countries through effective smooth transition measures and avoid abrupt reductions in ODA, least developed country-specific trade preferences, special and differential treatment, Aid for Trade or other technical and financial assistance.

115. Least developed countries should accelerate efforts to mainstream the Doha Programme of Action into national development strategies, utilizing the guidelines for mainstreaming and monitoring developed by the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States and building upon the progress of many least developed countries that have already integrated or are reviewing mechanisms to mainstream the Programme of Action.

116. The Office is requested to implement paragraph 301 of the Doha Programme of Action through the Inter-agency Consultative Group to strengthen the coordination of United Nations system support for least developed countries in conflict and post-conflict situations, particularly for those experiencing the highest levels of displacement, with a view to enabling them to fulfil the criteria for graduation.

117. The comprehensive high-level midterm review of the Doha Programme of Action in 2027 will serve as a critical platform to assess progress, identify constraints and recalibrate strategies for accelerated implementation. Member States, the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders should actively participate in the preparatory process at the national, regional, and global levels. To inform the global assessment, the review should build upon national reports of least developed countries, undertaken in an inclusive manner with resident coordinator and country team support, and upon regional reviews. I request the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States to fully mobilize the United Nations system through the Inter-Agency Consultative Group for Least Developed Countries, with partners providing sectoral appraisals and organizing pre-conference events as targeted inputs to ensure that the midterm review serves as a meaningful catalyst for renewed global commitment to least developed countries during the second half of the implementation period for the Programme of Action.
