



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Restoring the conditions for SDG progress in African countries, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries

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Secretariat Background Note

Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) are characterized by undiversified economies, weak public health services, low productive capacities, inadequate digital connectivity, and limited resources to mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19. Of the 46 countries classified as LDCs, 33 are in Africa; half of the 32 LLDCs are also located in the Africa region.

While some progress has been made toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in LDCs and LLDCs, and across the Africa region, even before the COVID-19 pandemic many countries were not on track to achieve the SDGs, and in some cases were regressing. The ongoing pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and structural inequalities, adversely impacting human health, economies, and education. Debt levels are rising. Resilience is threatened by sparse social protection, food insecurity, and low coverage of advanced infrastructure such as reliable energy and broadband Internet, as well as limited fiscal space. Socio-economic inequalities are widening, and disproportionately affecting women and girls. The pandemic has disrupted value chains and paralyzed key sectors such as tourism, and the devastating effects of climate change are hindering recovery efforts.

Regional level action initially helped to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in many of these countries. The African Union's collective efforts promoted coordinated and coherent action across many sectors, and cases of COVID-19 remained relatively low. Yet as of June 2021, cases are rapidly rising in a number of LDCs and LLDCs. Although the vaccine is being distributed, rollout has been slow and a minuscule proportion of vaccinations is occurring in low income countries. Some LDCs and LLDCs have not yet been able to begin



Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development



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vaccinating at all. There is rising concern that health care systems are unprepared and do not have the capacity to handle a surge of critically ill patients.

Most of these countries are severely affected by the global recession resulting from the pandemic, and fiscal stimulus packages are not adequate to ensure a sustainable and resilient recovery. In the LDCs, stimulus packages have averaged only 2.1 per cent of their GDP—one-ninth of the global average. In Africa, 17 countries are in debt distress or at high risk of distress, with three landlocked LDCs (Chad, Ethiopia and Zambia) seeking debt relief under a new G20 framework. The extension of the moratorium until December 2021 under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) is providing some support, but additional targeted debt relief and further concessional financing are needed, beyond debt servicing suspension.¹

The real GDP of LDCs increased by 4.8 per cent in 2019 and is estimated to decline by 1.3 per cent in 2020 due to disruption caused by the pandemic. For LLDCs, the annual GDP growth is estimated at -2.4 per cent in 2020. From 2017 to 2020, the proportion of products exported by LDCs that receive duty free treatment has remained stagnant at 66 per cent.² Limited export diversification has heightened the vulnerability of both LDCs and LLDCs to the impact of the pandemic on global trade. LLDCs have been impacted by cross-border restrictions and border closures, given their lack of direct access to seaports and dependency on transit transport to access international markets. According to the World Trade Organization, as of April 2020 LLDC exports were 40 per cent lower than in April 2019, which is almost twice the COVID-19 induced decline for world exports. LLDC exports continue to decline by as much as 8 per cent, while global exports grew by 7 per cent. The pandemic's economic impact has also worsened poverty and within-country inequality.

Bridging the digital divide is more important than ever to ensure a sustainable recovery and restore conditions for progress, yet LDCs and LLDCs are lagging behind with regard to the development of information and communication technologies and infrastructure. As of 2019, slightly over half of the world's population was connected to the Internet, compared

¹ [World Economic Situation and Prospects, as of mid-2021](#)

² [2021 Report of the Secretary-General on Progress Toward the SDGs](#)





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with only 20 per cent of people in LDCs and 27 per cent in LLDCs, and fixed broadband networks are almost completely absent, with only 1.3 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.³ Access to 4G mobile broadband connectivity lags significantly in LLDCs—at 43 per cent, compared to 85 per cent globally—particularly due to very low access in rural areas.

Some countries have reported on a broad range of economic and fiscal policies and measures to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, including digital transfers and support to micro-small and medium enterprises, but many of these will substantially widen fiscal deficits and increase debt levels for these countries.

To restore conditions for progress and ensure a sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic, innovative partnerships and institutional mechanisms are desperately needed to finance COVID-19 responses, support economic transitions and social protection, and ensure the participation of women and youth. Recovery strategy must emphasize creation of sustainable jobs. Highly indebted economies must be allowed to benefit from official debt relief or generous debt standstills, as well as debt restructuring. The need for continued support from international partners is more important than ever, including through commitments on additional grants and concessional financing, including ODA, as well as trade, long-term investment, and technology capacity building.

Tailored responses suitable to local conditions and strengthened by international cooperation that prioritize the social and economic needs of women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, refugees and displaced persons must be central to recovery plans and strategies. Broader development needs and population wellbeing must be considered, and inclusion of the contributions of youth, women and vulnerable groups is critical for shaping the narrative, and building a more resilient economic and social fabric. Harnessing the lessons learned from COVID-19 pandemic will facilitate building a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive future for Africa, LDCs and LLDCs. Financial safety nets, public-private partnerships, strengthened science for decision-making, early warning systems for various types of

³ Ibid.





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shocks and debt swaps for SDG investments are all tools for recovery.⁴ Investing in sustainable infrastructure is a mainstay of strategies for realizing the SDGs and the necessary financial resources should be mobilized, with international support. Enhancing support to national data and statistical systems to strengthen their capacity for data collection and the provision of timely and disaggregated data is also crucial for effective COVID-19 response.

Preparations are currently underway in advance of the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5), which will convene from 23 to 27 January 2022 in Doha, Qatar, and is expected to adopt a new ambitious 10-year programme of action for the LDCs.

Proposed guiding questions:

- How can COVID-19 stimulus packages be designed and directed at supporting a sustainable and resilient recovery in Africa, and in LDC and LLDCs outside the region? How can they be bolstered by the international community?
- How could longer-term economic and fiscal policies and measures mitigate the social and economic effects of the pandemic, without increasing debt levels?
- What is being done to prioritize the needs of women, children, refugees, displaced persons, and other vulnerable populations? How are women and youth being engaged in sustainable recovery efforts?
- Where can we point to examples of innovative partnerships in critical sectors such as trade, investment, technology capacity building, food security, grants and concessional financing?
- What role can the UN play in ensuring a coordinated and comprehensive response to the ongoing crisis? How can we ensure access to the vaccine in these countries?
- What critical new commitments should be included in the outcome of LDC 5?

⁴ [OHRLLS: State of the LDCs 2021: Building back better in response to COVID-19](#)

