



THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES IN FACTS & FIGURES

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What are the Least Developed Countries?

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are a group of 45 United Nations Member States characterised by their low socio-economic development and high vulnerability to external shocks. These countries are largely agrarian economies that suffer from low investments and productivity. There are 33 LDCs in Africa, eleven in Asia and the Pacific and one in Latin America.

Bhutan was the last LDC to graduate on 13th December, 2023. Previous to that, Vanuatu graduated on 4th December, 2020.

For more info see: www.un.org/ohrls

Doha Programme of Action (DPoA)

The Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) for the Decade 2022-2031 was adopted in March 2022 as a successor to the Istanbul Programme of Action. Full implementation will help the LDCs to address the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting socio-economic impacts; return to a pathway to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); address climate change; and make strides towards sustainable and irreversible graduation.

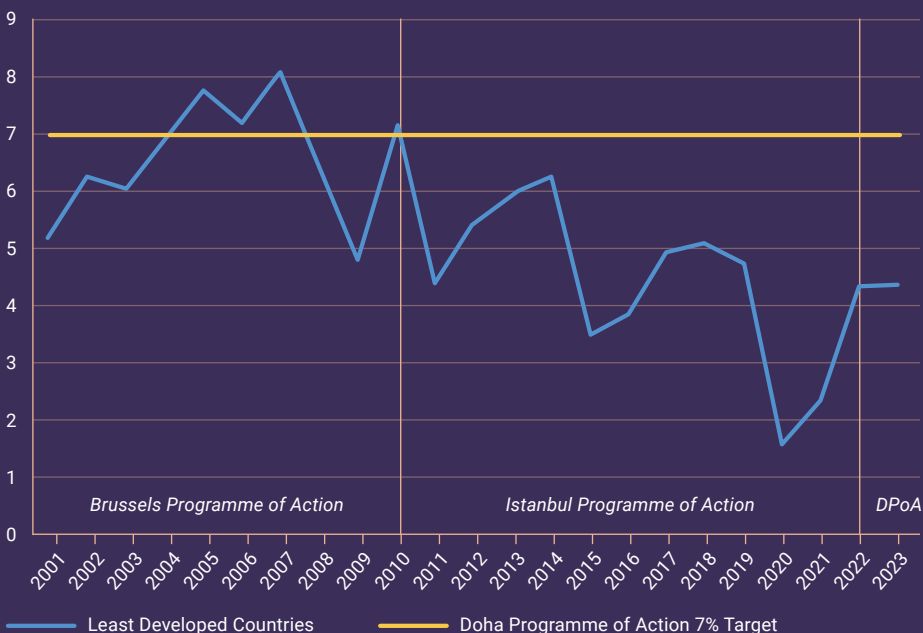
The final text was adopted during the first part of the LDC5 conference on 17th March 2022 and was endorsed by the General Assembly through resolution A/RES/76/258 on 1st April of that year. The second part took place in Doha between the 5th and 9th of March, 2023. There, world leaders gathered with civil society, the private sector, young people and more to build the plans and partnerships to deliver on the promise and ambition of the DPoA over the following decade. Download the DPoA at the conference website: un.org/ldc5



Progress on the implementation of key focus areas of the Doha Programme of Action

The COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the global economy in 2020. 15 million more people in LDCs were living in extreme poverty in 2023 than in 2019. More than half of all people living in extreme poverty (about 380 million) in 2023 lived in LDCs, and average real GDP growth in LDCs fell sharply from 4.7% in 2019 to 3.4% in 2022 but recovered to 4.4% in 2023, remaining well below the 7% growth target.

Annual Real GDP growth in LDCs (percentage)



Source: World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023



Focus area I: Investing in LDCs to leave no one behind

Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: LDCs have consistently demonstrated a reduction in adolescent birth rates in recent years, with double-digit declines seen in 25 out of the 45 countries. Likewise, they narrowed gender gaps in secondary school enrolments – including a double-digit decrease in twelve of the 45. However, despite an aggregate fall of 13% in adolescent birth rates, teen motherhood remains common in many LDCs.

Investing in youth and education: In 2022, 21.9% of children in primary-school-age were out of school in the LDCs, more than double the world average. Although the literacy rate rose from 57% to 66% between 2013 and 2023, more than 360 million people in LDCs still lack basic reading and writing skills.

Promoting maternal and child health and wellbeing: The overall fertility rate dropped to 3.96 births per woman in 2022. Also, 73% of births in the LDCs were attended by a skilled health professional, up from 61% in 2015.

Universal Social Protection: People in the LDCs enjoy lower levels of social protection compared to other developing nations. Only 14% are covered by at least one area of social protection, excluding healthcare and sickness benefits. Only 6.2% of the labour force (and just 4.2% of women in the labour force) actively contributes to a pension scheme, compared to 53.1% (and 55.6% respectively) in other developing countries. The high degree of informality in the economies of the LDCs limits the expansion of social safety nets.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: In 2022, 63% of the population in LDCs lacked safely managed water services, compared to 27% globally, highlighting significant disparities between LDCs and the global average. Only 41% of people in LDCs have access to basic sanitation, with 36% in rural areas and 51% in urban areas.¹



Focus area II: Leveraging the power of Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development of LDCs

While three quarters of people in the LDCs are covered by a mobile broadband network, only about 36% use it, compared to 93% in high-income countries. Citizens of LDCs (residents and non-residents) filed only 1,357 patents in 2020, compared with 875 in 2011. As a share of global figures, that number is almost zero.

1. <https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2023-wash-households>

While no LDC has reached 1% of GDP expenditure for R&D, LDCs achieved a significant increase of scientific publications between 2000-2020, faster than the growth of OECD countries over the same period. The UN Technology Bank for LDCs plays a significant role in advancing Science, Technology, and Innovation and bridging the digital gap between those online and offline.



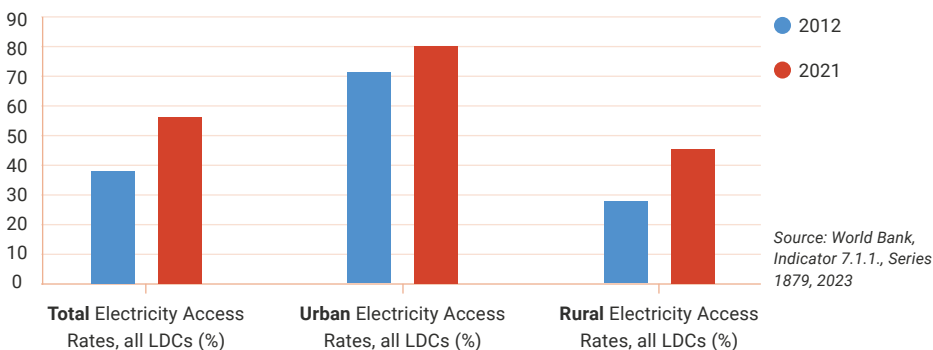
Focus area III: Structural transformation as a driver of prosperity in the LDCs

Agriculture: Employment in agriculture in the LDCs has steadily declined over the years, though it continues to employ nearly half of the population and constitutes the primary source of income in rural areas. There is consequently significant potential to advance structural transformation by creating links with the industrial and service side of agricultural activities. Nevertheless, the scale of the agriculture sector also reflects the need for LDCs to diversify their economies to build resilience.

Productive Capacity: The core task of increasing national economic output requires an approach combining enterprise development, skills formation, formalization and the application of new technologies – all of which figure extensively in the Doha Programme of Action. Existing large enterprises can have a role to play internationally in building their profile in global supply chains, as well as supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to increase their productive capacity domestically.

Energy: Access to electricity in the LDCs increased substantially from 37.8% in 2012 to 56.3% in 2021. However, there remains a large disparity between rural and urban areas: 80.3% in towns and cities and only 45.5% in rural areas. To bridge this gap, more investment is required in both electrical grid and off-grid solutions.

Access to electricity (%)





Focus area IV: Enhancing the participation of LDCs in international trade and regional integration

Trade and Commodities: Between 2018 and 2022, LDCs' exports of goods and services increased at an average annual rate of 7.1%. In 2022, LDCs' goods exports particularly benefited from high energy prices, leading to an annual growth of 17.4%. The LDCs' share in world exports of goods and commercial services increased from 0.95% in 2021 to 1% in 2022. Export growth of LDCs was mainly driven by commercial services (27%) while merchandise exports grew by 14.7% in 2022.

Volatile commodity prices continue to impact LDC growth prospects, with 38 of the 45 least developed countries classified as commodity dependent in 2023. Aid for Trade for LDCs amounted USD 15.1 billion in disbursements in 2022, still below the levels required to remain on track to doubling Aid for Trade levels from 2018 by 2031.



Focus area V: Addressing climate change, environmental degradation, recovery from the pandemic and building the resilience of LDCs against future shocks

LDCs are highly vulnerable to multiple shocks, including climate-induced disasters. In 2022, disasters impacted the economies of LDCs around 10 times more severely than the economies of the richest countries, as a share of their GDP.

LDCs' disaster-related mortality rates between 2013 and 2022 was 3.10 per 100,000 people, significantly higher than the global average of 1.15.

Only 61% of LDCs have national disaster risk reduction strategies, and 46% have multi-hazard early warning systems.

23 LDCs have submitted National Adaptation Plans to UNFCCC, with 15 more in preparation stages.

As at February 2024, total funding from Green Climate Fund (GCF) for the least developed countries had reached USD4.1 billion, representing 30% of its global portfolio, while the Least Developed Countries Fund provided access to nearly USD 2 billion in grants. However, much more is needed to address the pressing needs in LDCs.



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

Domestic Resource Mobilization: During 2020-2022, only 14 LDCs (out of 39 for which data is available) reached the DPoA target of a tax to GDP ratio of at least 15% at least once. The median tax to GDP ratio fell from 12.1% in 2020 to 11.7% in 2022.

Development Cooperation: The average share of GNI provided as ODA to the LDCs from DAC donors declined from 0.1% in the last decade to 0.08% in 2022. Only three DAC donor countries met the target of disbursing 0.15% or above of their GNI as ODA to the LDCs in 2022, down from 6 in 2021. OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors allocated 21% of their total ODA to LDCs in 2022 down from 27% in 2021.

External Debt: Government debt as a percentage of GDP in the LDCs remains elevated, standing at close to 60% for 2023 up from 41% in 2011. As of November 2023 6 LDCs were classified as in debt distress while 15 LDCs are at high risk of debt distress.² A further deterioration of this situation is expected.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to LDCs decreased slightly over the past decade. After a peak in 2015, FDI fell to between \$20 billion and \$25 billion annually - less than 2% of global FDI. However, recent figures from UNCTAD show a dramatic 16% drop in FDI to LDCs in 2022.³ The adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are expected to have long-term effects on specific sectors such as transportation and tourism.

Remittances: Remittances to LDCs continued to grow and reached 5% of GDP in 2023.

2. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/dsa/dsalist.pdf>

3. <https://unctad.org/news/foreign-investment-least-developed-countries-fell-16-2022>

un.org/ohrlls

