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**PROGRAMME OF ACTION
FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES:
ONE YEAR AFTER BRUSSELS**

Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries: One year after Brussels

Introduction

The Brussels Programme of Action (POA) for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) for the Decade 2001-2010 is different from the earlier programmes in terms of its objectives, orientation, scope and follow-up arrangements. The basic objective of Brussels POA is to achieve, in respect of LDCs, substantial progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of halving poverty by 2015 and promoting sustainable development. Poverty eradication, gender equality, employment, governance, capacity building, special problems of land-locked and small island developing countries, as well as special problems faced by least developed countries affected by conflict, has been singled out in the Brussels POA as cross-cutting priority issues.

Soon after the adoption of the Brussels POA in May 2001, the United Nations General Assembly by its resolution 55/279 of 12 July 2001 endorsed the Brussels POA, and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) by its resolution 2001/320 decided to establish a follow-up mechanism for the review and coordination of the implementation of the Brussels Declaration and POA at its 2002 substantive session.

Since the Brussels Programme of Action was adopted, the international community took into account the concerns of the LDCs through major global conferences such as the Doha WTO Ministerial Conference (November 2001), Monterrey International Conference on Financing for Development (March 2002), the mid-term review of the tenth United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD X) in Bangkok (April/May 2002), the G-8 Summit in Kananaskis (June 2002), and adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) by the African Union (AU) in Durban (July 2002). The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (August/September 2002) in its Declaration addressed the need to pay special attention to the development of the least developed countries and the small island developing States. The Brussels POA's closer links with the outcome of these meetings would reinforce the opportunity for bringing tangible progress in the least developed countries. Overall the new environment provides cause for positive expectation with regard to the development prospects in the least developed countries.

As a significant and critical departure from the first two Programmes of Action for LDCs, it was recommended that "an efficient and highly visible follow-up mechanism" be created to undertake the responsibilities related to the coordination, monitoring and review of the implementation of the POA. The Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Land-locked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) was established on the recommendation of the Secretary-General of the United Nations by the General Assembly in its resolution 56/227 of 24 December 2001. The Office of the High Representative (OHRLLS) is located at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The Office aims at enhancing the mobilization

and galvanization of international support for – and ensuring the effective coordination, monitoring and review of – the implementation of the Brussels POA.

Progress since the establishment of the Office of the High Representative

The Office of the High Representative of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Land-locked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing Countries (SIDS) formally started functioning in April 2002. Since then, the Office has been setting its course and direction and getting organized for its assigned tasks. In carrying out the mandate of the General Assembly and the Programme of Action, the Office has adopted framework for action with four main elements:

- (i) It will focus on country-level implementation – both by the LDCs and donor countries – to see to it that, they are implementing their commitments made in the POA. The Office will work closely with the UNDG partners, in particular UNDP, to ensure full support of the Resident Coordinator system to the LDCs. The UNDAF and PRSP processes in LDCs, as applicable, need to incorporate implementation of the POA;
- (ii) It will work with all relevant entities of the UN family, in particular the Funds and programmes, Regional Commissions, Specialized Agencies, and the BWIs, to ensure that these entities mainstream the Brussels POA in their activities and in their intergovernmental processes as well as to establish appropriate focal points for review and follow-up as called for in the POA and the General Assembly resolution 56/227;
- (iii) It will be working with other multilateral organizations, particularly the regional organizations like the African Union (AU), as well as the subregional organizations like the SADC, ECOWAS, ECCAS, EAC, IGAD, COMESA, ASEAN, SAARC, and CARICOM. Recent adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) by the African Union provides an immense opportunity for reinforcing and complementing the development efforts in 34 African LDCs;
- (iv) It will work closely with civil society and private sector –both national and global – so that they are brought in as full development partners of the LDCs.

Soon after the establishment of the new Office, the Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations, in his capacity as the global Chairperson of LDCs Coordinating Bureau, organized the first meeting of the High Representative with the LDCs at the Ambassadorial level on 18 April 2002. The issues discussed at the LDCs Ambassadorial meeting included the mandate of OHRLLS given by the General Assembly, immediate tasks to be undertaken as well as the forthcoming activities of the Office.

The Office of the High Representative was involved in two major intergovernmental processes for the first time. First, the Office prepared the first Medium-Term Plan on least

developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states as the new Programme 26 of the United Nations for the period 2002-2005 and presented it to the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly's Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) on 12 June 2002. The Committee examined and extended its full support for the Programme and recommended for adoption by the fifty-seventh session of the General Assembly.

Second, as follow-up to its resolution 2001/320, the High Representative presented an oral report to the general segment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on 18 July 2002 on the work of the new Office and follow-up responsibilities related to the Brussels Programme of Action to be undertaken by the ECOSOC. The Office recommended, among other things, that the ECOSOC set aside one day during the general segment at its annual substantive sessions for a specific review of the Programme. It also recommended that all efforts be made to adopt an implementation-focussed outcome following such a review. It also urged the Council to reiterate the invitation of the General Assembly to organs of the United Nations system and other multilateral organizations to mainstream the implementation of the Programme within their respective frameworks. The Council was requested to devote the high-level segment of its 2004 substantive session for the review and coordination of the implementation of the Brussels Programme. Delegates expressed full support to the implementation of the Programme.

The Government of Benin, in its capacity as the Coordinator of Least Developed Countries, organized the Ministerial Conference of the Least Developed Countries in Cotonou from 5-7 August 2002 and discussed the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. The outcome of the Conference was the adoption of the "Cotonou Declaration" calling on all stakeholders for the effective implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. In his message to the Ministerial Conference, the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan firmly stated, "The United Nations family remains committed to helping the least developed countries (LDCs) overcome the formidable obstacles they face". He further stated, "... their development partners, as well as civil society, the private sector and all other stakeholders, will forge partnerships that will make the difference between success and stagnation".

In June, 2002, two entities of the UN system viz., UNICEF and UNDP took decisions at the annual sessions of their Executive Boards to mainstream the Brussels Programme of Action within their respective work programmes. In the coming months, it is expected that other UN system entities will adopt similar decisions.

The High Representative held meetings in May 2002 with UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNCTAD, WTO, ITC, WHO, ILO, ECA, OAU/AU and AfDB with regard to the involvement of these entities in the implementation of the Brussels POA. There were meetings also with representatives of civil society organizations including NGOs in New York and Geneva and of the private sector organizations to discuss on enhancing their participation in the implementation process.

In addition to meetings and contacts on a regular basis with the chairpersons of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, the High Representative continues to hold regular discussions with the representatives of the donor community, including the European Union, Japan, Norway, USA, and the World Bank.

In all these meetings with the donor countries, UN system organizations, NGOs/civil society and private sector, widespread support was extended by all, for the effective implementation of the POA including support to the Office of the High Representative in carrying out its tasks.

Challenges Ahead

The 2002 LDCs report of UNCTAD released this June estimates that people living on less than \$1 a day in the least developed countries will reach 420 million by 2015 if the present trend continues. The incidence of extreme poverty is highest in most LDCs.

Global campaign for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which, *inter-alia*, target on addressing the needs of the LDCs have put development of these countries high on the agenda of the United Nations. The success of the MDGs would depend in a very significant way on the success of the development efforts of the LDCs. Progress with regard to the development indicators contained in the MDGs will make a headway if the LDCs do better in achieving those. Thus, the MDGs and the Brussels POA are closely inter-linked and mutually supportive.

It is important to draw lessons from the implementation experiences of the POA's of UNLDC I and UNLDC II, when implementing the POA of the UNLDC III. Some of the lessons are: (i) there must be a strong commitment and concerted efforts on the part of the LDCs themselves and the international community should be forthcoming to support those efforts; (ii) there is need for a clearly defined operational plan showing the actions and roles of stakeholders in implementing the various commitments contained in the POA with properly sequenced priorities and coordinated actions at the national, regional/subregional, and global levels and; (iii) success in attaining the objectives of the POA will require effective functioning of the arrangements for the continuous follow-up and coordination as well as monitoring and review of the progress in implementation.

Challenges ahead in the coming months for the LDCs during the implementation of the Brussels POA would require immediate engagement of the LDCs and its development partners in the following areas:

- (i) The Least Developed Countries should integrate the Brussels POA into their national development programme. They should also appoint a high-level LDC focal point to monitor and follow-up their national implementation and to work closely with the UN Resident Coordinator to facilitate reporting the progress to the United Nations;

- (ii) The Least Developed Countries should establish in their respective countries a national set up, which will be the platform for regular and systematic overseeing of the progress in the implementation of the POA through a broad-based and inclusive dialogue. The POA has recommended such arrangements calling it national forum. The forum may include policy makers, private sector, NGOs/civil society, academics, foundations and media;
- (iii) Each LDC, at the country level, with the support of its development partners, should promote implementation of the actions contained in the POA by translating them into specific measures within their national development framework and poverty eradication strategy, including, where they exist, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), common country assessments (CCAs), and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), and should guide the effective implementation on the basis of a broad-based inclusive dialogue;
- (iv) The United Nations system organizations and other multilateral organizations which have not done so, should mainstream the implementation of the Brussels POA within their programme of work;
- (v) The LDCs representatives should effectively, participate in the intergovernmental processes and coordination efforts. In this regard, the Office of the High Representative would continue to give full support in facilitating their participation. The decisions of UNICEF and UNDP Executive Boards should lead to similar actions in the upcoming meetings of the other relevant governing bodies;
- (vi) The United Nations system organizations that have not yet established a focal point for LDCs will need to identify one soon;
- (vii) The Office of the High Representative may consider establishing a Trust Fund for the LDCs at the United Nations to provide support, for the implementation of the Brussels POA and to support the Office of the Chairperson of the LDCs Coordinating Bureau;
- (viii) ODA remains a critical resource for achieving the objectives, goals and targets of the POA. It is essential to consider fully, both quantitative and qualitative aspects of aid and the effective coordination of this aid. Enhancement of ODA to 0.20 per cent as agreed in the UN conferences will certainly have a significant impact on the implementation of the POA;
- (ix) The external debt overhang constitutes a serious obstacle to the development efforts and economic growth of LDCs. The serious debt problems of LDCs necessitate a comprehensive solution, including the full, speedy and effective implementation of the enhanced HIPC initiative and other debt relief measures;

- (x) A synoptic table/chart should be prepared by the Office of the High Representative for use and reference by the ECOSOC for intergovernmental review and for monitoring and follow-up of implementation of the POA by LDCs and its development partners;

- (xi) NGOs and civil society need to play an important role as development partners in the least developed countries. Private sector also needs to engage in providing effective support to LDCs development objectives. Efforts should be made to enhance their involvement in the implementation of the POA.

Way Forward

The LDCs with over 600 million people, face formidable developmental obstacles. The globalization process has further deepened their vulnerability. These challenges could be met resolutely through effective national and international policies that should be anchored more firmly in long-term development strategies aimed at the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action during the first decade of the new millennium.