



**MIDTERM REVIEW OF  
THE ISTANBUL PROGRAMME  
OF ACTION:**

*LESSONS FROM UNCTAD'S 2011-15 IMPLEMENTATION  
ACTIVITIES AND THE WAY FORWARD*



**UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT**

# **Midterm review of the Istanbul Programme of Action**

**Lessons from the UNCTAD 2011–2015 implementation activities,  
and the way forward**

*Report of the UNCTAD secretariat*



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## **Executive summary**

The Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) for the Decade 2011–2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action) was adopted by the Fourth United Nations Conference on LDCs in May 2011.<sup>1</sup> In the five years since, UNCTAD has conducted a wide range of activities in support of LDCs, as have other United Nations system entities, development partners and, not least, LDCs themselves.

Despite the work and actions that have contributed to the fulfilment of the Programme's objectives, it is clear that these objectives are at risk of not being met. Only nine LDCs have had gross domestic product growth rates greater than 7 per cent per year, and only 14 currently meet the graduation criteria. LDCs, as a group, also lagged behind other developing countries in achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals.

This report aims to assist the high-level midterm review of progress in implementing the Istanbul Programme of Action, to be conducted in Antalya, Turkey, from 27 to 29 May 2016, and will also serve as a background document for the review of progress by the Trade and Development Board at its next annual session. It provides a summary of UNCTAD implementation activities in support of LDCs since the adoption of the Istanbul Programme of Action and, midway through the term of the Programme, contains a succinct assessment of where LDCs stand in achieving some of the quantitative and qualitative targets therein. Building on UNCTAD experience in the implementation of the Programme, this report also provides policy conclusions and a way forward for improving implementation of the agreed priorities in the years ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> A/CONF.219/7.

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## I. Introduction

Periodic assessments and analyses by UNCTAD of the socioeconomic progress of LDCs indicate that, while the growth performance demonstrated by many LDCs is impressive, improvements in their human and social development aspects to the level envisaged in the Istanbul Programme of Action have not yet been achieved. Progress made to date towards the goals and targets of the Programme have been weak and have varied between countries and regions and across sectors. The sluggish socioeconomic performance of LDCs is a reflection of structural weaknesses inherent in their economies and the resulting vulnerability to shocks of various forms and magnitudes, whether economic, social, political or environmental. UNCTAD has stressed that, to reach the targets set in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Programme, LDCs and their international development partners must continue to build the productive capacities of LDCs and work towards genuine structural economic transformation as a way to build resilience. Without the economic transformation of LDCs from low-productivity to high-productivity economies, sustainable development and decent employment outcomes for their populations will be difficult to realize.

The Istanbul Programme of Action is an internationally developed framework to enhance the development partnership between LDCs and the international community. The Programme contains eight priority areas for action, as follows:

- (a) Productive capacities
- (b) Agriculture, food security and rural development
- (c) Trade
- (d) Commodities
- (e) Human and social development
- (f) Multiple crises and other development challenges
- (g) Mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity-building
- (h) Good governance at all levels

Each priority area includes commitments, specific goals and targets, in a number of different areas.

UNCTAD, whose seminal work led to the establishment of the LDC category in 1971, has been consistently advancing the trade and development interests of LDCs since the first session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD I), held in 1964. Since the adoption of the Programme, UNCTAD has incorporated the priority areas, goals and targets into its ongoing work, in addition to instituting new projects to fulfil the Programme objectives, as detailed in chapter II of this report. UNCTAD will continue to address the trade and development challenges facing LDCs in all of the Programme's priority areas, within its competence and mandates. Paragraph 156 of the Programme and paragraph 18(g) of the Doha Mandate provide UNCTAD with a mandate to assist LDCs through intergovernmental consensus-building and technical assistance.

From 2011 to 2014 (the most recent year of available data), the average annual real growth rate of gross domestic product for LDCs as a group was 4.9 per cent. This level of growth falls short of the 7 per cent target committed to in the Istanbul Programme of Action. Only nine countries<sup>2</sup> grew at a rate above the target over this period. Despite economic growth not being the sole objective of

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<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Myanmar and Sierra Leone.

sustainable development, strong growth can support opportunities to improve material conditions for growing populations and provide a foundation for improvement in human and social development indicators. Targets in health, education and employment may all be supported by continuing growth, as long as the growth is broad based and sustainable. As such, the international community, in addition to LDCs themselves, must redouble efforts to boost growth in LDCs in order to bring about increased living standards for the world's poorest people.

A key goal of the Istanbul Programme of Action is to enable half of LDCs to meet the graduation criteria by 2020. To date, progress on this target has been inadequate. Only four countries have graduated from LDC status, namely Botswana (1994), Cabo Verde (2007), Maldives (2011) and Samoa (2014). Three additional countries are slated for graduation, namely Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Vanuatu, and seven further countries have been found pre-eligible for graduation, namely Bhutan, Kiribati, Nepal, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Tuvalu. A more complete discussion of the progress of LDCs and development partners against the targets set by the Programme is provided in chapter III of this report.

## II. UNCTAD contributions to the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action

UNCTAD supports LDCs in their efforts to achieve the goals of the Istanbul Programme of Action. Its work is organized under three broad pillars, namely research and policy analysis, consensus-building and intergovernmental support, and technical cooperation and capacity-building. UNCTAD contributions to the implementation, follow-up and monitoring of progress towards the goals and targets of the Programme, in areas within its competence and mandates, include reviews by the annual sessions of the Trade and Development Board. The outcomes of the Board's reviews, in the form of decisions and agreed conclusions, are included in its annual report to the General Assembly. These reviews are in addition to the substantive and technical contributions of UNCTAD to advancing the development objectives of the 48 LDCs.

This report is not intended to cover all UNCTAD actions in support of LDCs and implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action. Instead, it highlights some of the more consequential activities and events undertaken and publications prepared by the secretariat in the last five years.

### A. Research and policy analysis

The research and policy analysis of UNCTAD contained in its publications is the backbone of its substantive work.<sup>3</sup> The publications are development oriented, independent and grounded in solid evidence. UNCTAD research and policy analysis focuses, in particular, on the challenges that LDCs face in the areas of trade and development, and provides practical policy options and solutions, taking into account the fact that different countries have differing development needs. As well as contributing to the pool of existing knowledge on development, UNCTAD reports keep issues related to LDCs at the forefront of the international community's collective consciousness. UNCTAD research and policy analysis has continued to emphasize the importance of building productive capacities in creating structural transformation, and it is partly as a result of this research that productive capacities are a priority area in the Istanbul Programme of Action. The research and policy analysis undertaken by UNCTAD is part of an integrated approach to issues of modern development policy that aims to achieve sustained and broad-based economic growth.

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