

Taking a lead on the post-2015 agenda: priorities for least developed countries

Least developed countries (LDCs) have most at stake as the world builds a post-2015 framework for international development cooperation. They suffer unacceptable deprivation, and many are 'behind the curve' on progress to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. On the other hand, LDCs have much to contribute to global understanding of emerging development trends and priorities, and to managing globally important resources, such as oceans, forests, grasslands and other fragile ecosystems. They are ready, and have the potential, to take a lead in debates and negotiations. But they need support, solidarity and action from other countries. This briefing presents the views of the newly convened LDC Independent Expert Group on the Post-2015 Development Agenda on how to achieve that potential.

Policy pointers

- **The international** development processes around post-2015 give LDCs the opportunity to redefine themselves by their strengths and to promote solidarity with one another, as well as partnership between LDCs and more developed countries.
- **LDCs should collectively** promote a new paradigm for international cooperation grounded in fair distribution of the costs and benefits of development, democratic systems of global governance, more equitable allocation and sustainable use of global commons and services, and accountability.
- **LDCs have much to** contribute to post-2015 goal and target setting, particularly regarding the importance of effective governance, development cooperation and environmental stewardship.

Working in solidarity

LDCs have traditionally had very weak bargaining power in international processes and have often been coerced or co-opted by more powerful countries and groupings. It is a challenge for LDCs to work together because of their tremendous political and geographic diversity. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, however, have shown how LDCs can negotiate together and support one another in solidarity — putting group interests before national interests.

The LDC Independent Expert Group (IEG, see box overleaf) sees solidarity between people in LDCs and people in other countries with shared interests as central to changing existing inequitable relations. Only through solidarity can the global community agree on a shared agenda that reflects the priorities, interests and capacities of all countries along with a fair and equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of development. This is a critical factor for strengthening the post-2015 process and for moving towards a fairer and more sustainable world.

Recognising LDC strengths and priorities

LDCs are a diverse group, but one united through socio-economic characteristics. They are bound by their commitment to raise their level of economic development. They have much to learn from one another, particularly in

facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Unlike more industrialised countries, LDCs are not locked into unsustainable, inefficient systems and technologies but have the potential to bypass outmoded systems. LDCs could leapfrog directly to transformational development processes that are forward looking regarding climate and demographic change, resource scarcities and competition, emerging markets and economic trends, and the role of the government and international cooperation in development.

LDCs and their citizens have substantial assets on which to build these transformative processes, including:

- **Resilience.** People, communities and institutions have had to develop capacities for enduring constant uncertainty and recovering from impacts and rapid changes beyond their control, such as natural disasters, trade shocks and political crises. Low income groups in particular must be resilient to survive on a day-to-day basis. This capacity for resilience has contributed to impressive policies and programmes on disaster and climate change preparedness.
- **Innovation.** Where resources and access to information are limited, innovation is essential to survival. People are proficient at applying local knowledge to solving problems where preconceived solutions are not available or are inappropriate. These skills could be scaled up to become an engine of development.

Only through solidarity can the global community agree on a shared agenda

- **Values.** Culture and traditional values govern the way people live and relate to one another, their communities and the natural environment. These values provide a better grounding for sustainable development than those focused on growth and consumerism.

- **Local governance and bottom-up approaches.**

When top-down governance is weak, local or participatory institutions, including social networks, become well developed, particularly where community cohesion is already established. It is not

surprising that LDCs have been leading the way on community-based adaptation.

- **Environmental stewardship.** Scarcity, increasing competition, and lack of effective top-down environmental governance increase incentives for sustainable resource use practices, and there is substantial experience with sustainable, often locally based, management regimes in LDCs.

LDCs have strengths and potentials as a group too. Each has a vote in numerous international institutions, and they can use their collective power to push for a shift towards more democratic, equitable and responsible global governance systems. Working together, and in solidarity with other marginalised groups of countries such as the small island developing states, gives them bargaining power in international groupings — the

G77, for example — where larger and more powerful countries dominate.

LDC priorities for global action in a changing world

The post-2015 landscape is crowded with the priorities of a huge number of actors. LDCs need to break through this noise using a succinct set of their own priority issues.

The shifting power relations between countries. The prevailing global political alignment is shifting. This gives LDCs the opportunity to improve their position but also poses dangers, given the uncertainty of these changes. This shifting landscape offers three main opportunities:

- **Respect for sovereignty.** LDCs should be able to define their own destiny.

- **Introducing equity and democratic governance into international structures.** International finance institutions, trade regimes and global markets have resisted operating on principles of equity and democratic governance on the grounds of efficiency. But the costs of growing inequities, scarcities and unfair competition have been unacceptably high.

- **Redefining 'development cooperation'.** The aid system is not contributing adequately to development, and none of the actors involved are satisfied with current systems and the relationships they engender. The shifting geopolitical landscape offers an opportunity for rethinking and renegotiation.

Increasing income equality. This should be a globally shared priority, as it is affecting most countries, with serious effects on human and natural capital, social systems, and cultural and community values. The international financial and commodity markets — among the major drivers of income inequality — need to be reformed. Commitment is needed by all countries to take action to halt this trend.

Management and equitable distribution of natural resources. Many LDCs are well-endowed with natural resources, which can provide development benefits, but these are often under used, poorly managed or under the control of foreign interests. As a result, local populations are not benefiting and poverty is not being reduced. Global efforts are needed to manage natural resources more effectively to sustain the Earth's production of ecological goods and services, optimise their contribution to human development, and allocate them equitably in order to achieve a more just, secure and sustainable world.

Climate change. Climate induced disasters have disproportionately affected LDCs, disrupting their economic progress and making their development targets more difficult to achieve. LDCs have a substantial stake in getting commitment from all countries on mitigation as well as on support for adaptive responses by LDCs and other vulnerable countries.

The Independent Expert Group: promoting LDC expertise

Like all countries in this post-2015 process, the LDCs need good information and advice with which to frame and promote their positions. Unlike many other actors in this crowded arena, our governments have few knowledgeable sources or high-profile forums to draw upon. IIED has brought together a diverse 12-member group of experts from 10 LDC countries to address this (an initiative that builds on the Istanbul Programme of Action agreed by LDCs and development partners in 2011). This group of thought leaders will generate compelling evidence and ideas, which can contribute to the post-2015 development agenda. The aim is that the post-2015 process becomes better at recognising and supporting the sustainable development agenda of LDCs themselves. To that end, the group will also provide support to New York-based LDC delegations in formulating and negotiating outcomes from the process.

The group will:

- provide guidance on the practical realities of designing and achieving global goals and targets in LDC contexts
- showcase the leadership, experience and expertise that LDCs can contribute to global policy and practice
- influence the post-2015 political process through constructive engagement and communication
- present a vision of transformation for international development cooperation to achieve the potential these countries have to emerge from 'least developed' status and prosper.

Opportunities for LDC leadership in the post-2015 processes

LDCs can be most effective in influencing post-2015 development agendas when they can draw on their collective experience and promote common positions.

Promoting a new era of international cooperation for sustainable development. Sustainable development has emerged as a major theme in post-2015 processes and is strongly promoted by many LDCs and other developing countries. LDCs could lead in promoting a new vision of international cooperation suited to our common challenges and priorities, including:

- a realistic understanding of development as a dynamic, uncertain, messy and highly political process of change, not a fixed technocratically determined pathway
- solidarity among nations in addressing shared challenges, while maintaining respect for the sovereignty of every nation
- equitable and democratic systems of global governance
- knowledge sharing to promote a prosperous, sustainable and just world — systems of knowledge sharing must be two-way
- a greater role for non-governmental actors to encourage more responsible and proactive citizens, private businesses, communities and civil society organisations.

Defining a new development assistance paradigm.

There is growing consensus that the ‘era of aid’ as the primary instrument of international cooperation between wealthy and poorer countries is ending, if not already over. The significant and long-standing presence of development assistance in LDCs provides us with unique insights into how it has worked and needs to change to support a transformation in international cooperation. LDCs can lead in promoting a new development assistance paradigm, characterised by:

- **Redefinition of the development assistance relationship.** LDCs still tend to be framed, and sometimes frame themselves, as passive recipients or victims, while their ‘development partners’ assume the role of active agents of change. These relationships are highly dysfunctional, encouraging unhelpful actions and responses from both sides. More business-like arrangements are required, based on equitable negotiation of responsibilities and obligations. To demonstrate our readiness to take on a more assertive and responsible role and to increase our bargaining power with partners, LDC governments need to make more effort to generate revenue in-country and apply it to development priorities with a focus on the poor.

Figure 1. Framework of the LDC IEG on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.



- **Country ownership that is more than rhetoric.** In the context of reformed relationships, external development partners must stop dictating national policies, programmes and investment priorities. Development assistance needs to support national self-determination and self-reliance, not undermine them.
- **The obligation of partner countries to honour past commitments on development support.** International assistance needs to be uncoupled from the transfer of resources from recipient countries or aid budgets to supply countries (for example, payments to international partners and consultants), as this reduces the net value of the assistance to build local assets, options and self-reliance.
- **Accountability to beneficiaries.** Existing channels of accountability — from recipient governments to donors, and from donors to their own citizens — are not effective inducements for interventions that improve the wellbeing of the ultimate beneficiaries. Information flows and accountability channels need to become bottom-up to make development assistance demand-driven and to make donor, lender and recipient governments accountable to the intended beneficiaries.
- **Learning between middle-income countries and LDCs.** New aid programmes from countries such as Brazil focus on sharing practical experience in dealing with issues such as urbanisation, social safety nets and improving food security. There is practical experience and capacity that can be

shared to support LDCs in addressing comparable challenges over the coming decades.

- **Sustainable development as the aim.** The principles of sustainable development, including that people are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature and that development actions should not undermine the needs of present or future generations, should guide all international cooperation strategies and interventions. It will be a major challenge to integrate these principles into development practice but a strong collective commitment from the post-2015 process is an important signal.

Identifying opportunities to fast track progress. Bottom up processes of development are the most sustainable over the long term, but they are also very slow; it may be years before significant change appears. There are opportunities to move faster now.

Fast and affordable new technologies make it possible to communicate and exchange information rapidly in beneficial ways. Small producers can take advantage of market information and share information on prices in real time using mobile phones, for example. Investment by governments and the private sector in the development and dissemination of these technologies can have a significant impact on livelihoods.

The high proportion of young people in LDCs means that investment in education can make a difference to development even in the short term, as children are effective change agents within their households and communities.

Many LDCs have growing pools of skilled labour to draw upon to move existing sectors up the value chain. With skilled labour, LDCs do not have to rely on primary commodities for the bulk of their national income.

Rising income levels are providing national markets for local products and services, which can contribute to reducing dependency on foreign markets and economic leakage, and to building local business capacity.

Offering lessons from experience. LDCs have experience in issues that are high on most development agendas, and can make important contributions to post-2015 processes by distilling and sharing lessons.

- **Redefining development progress.** LDCs have experimented with alternative ways of measuring development, which offer a more comprehensive assessment of progress than measures such as GDP and the Human Development Index. Bhutan's index of gross national happiness, while sharing some of the shortcomings of other metrics, has been very effective as a guiding philosophy for national development and a framework for assessing trade-offs and investment alternatives.

- **Local adaptation to climate change.** Community-based adaptation is probably most advanced in LDCs, and that experience is already contributing substantially to global understanding on the requirements for effective adaptation and resilience-building in the context of climate change.

- **Environmental stewardship.** LDC experience with environmental management is closely linked to the role of natural resources in sustaining livelihoods. There is considerable learning about effective management practices and the factors that encourage them.

Promoting solidarity among countries with common values. LDCs working together have the opportunity to promote the concept of solidarity among countries as the basis for achieving progress on a more prosperous, sustainable and equitable world. Solidarity is a more appropriate framework for post-2015 international collaboration than partnership because it emphasises a union of interests and mutual responsibility. By promoting solidarity, LDCs would also be advocating for greater equity, transparency and accountability in international cooperation on development.

Next steps

The Independent Expert Group aims to produce technical briefs on different thematic areas, which will be in line with the UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals' work programme in the run up to February 2014. We will also produce an issue paper to inform stakeholders including permanent representatives from LDCs, and other international players. And we will work closely with, and offer our expertise to, LDC governments/representatives after the intergovernmental process resumes early next year.

Notes

- Members of the IEG are as follows. **Chair:** President of FOKAL Foundation and Former Haitian Prime Minister Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis. **Panel members:** James Murombedzi, CODESRIA (Zimbabwe, based in Senegal); Youba Sokona (Mali); Hama Arba Diallo, Mayor of Dori (Burkina Faso); Farah Kabir, ActionAid (Bangladesh); Dipak Gyawali, ISET (Nepal); Fatima Denton, African Climate Policy Centre (Gambia, based in Ethiopia); Rosebell Kagumire, Africans Act for Africa (Uganda); Pa Ousman Jarju (The Gambia); Chimere Mariteuw Diaw, African Model Forests Network Secretariat (Senegal, based in Cameroon); Chime P Wangdi, Tarayana Foundation (Bhutan); Saleemul Huq, IIED (Bangladesh); Essam Yassin Mohammed, IIED (Eritrea, based in London)

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