

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific****Seventy-second session**

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Item 2 (a) of the provisional agenda*

**Special Body on Least Developed, Landlocked Developing
and Pacific Island Developing Countries: development issues
relevant to least developed countries****Regional implementation of the Programme of Action for
the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

In May 2011, the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries adopted the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action). The overarching goal of the Istanbul Programme of Action is to overcome the structural challenges faced by the least developed countries in order to eradicate poverty, achieve internationally agreed development goals and enable graduation from the least developed country category. The Programme of Action aims to enable half the number of least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2020, with a strong focus on developing their productive capacities.

The second half of the Istanbul Programme of Action will be implemented simultaneously with the first five years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In that respect, resolution 71/2 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) requested the Executive Secretary to continue to assist least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region in building their capacity to undertake appropriate policy responses to accelerate their structural transformation and to achieve other internationally agreed development goals, including those encompassed by the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

The present report first reviews the current situation of the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region with regards to key macroeconomic indicators and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. It then addresses the progress of the least developed countries towards the implementation of Istanbul Programme of Action, in particular with regards to their progress towards graduation from least developed country status. Finally, the report highlights some activities of the secretariat to support the development of capacities in the least developed countries in the region.

The Commission may wish to review the status of implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action in the Asia-Pacific region. It may also wish to provide further guidance on how the secretariat can assist least developed countries in the region, in cooperation with development partners and other international entities, while taking into account their respective mandates, in implementing the Programme of Action, especially in assisting the least developed countries to graduate from the least developed country category.

* E/ESCAP/72/L.1.

I. Introduction

1. In May 2011, the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries adopted the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action). The overarching goal of the Istanbul Programme of Action is to overcome the structural challenges faced by the least developed countries¹ in order to eradicate poverty, achieve internationally agreed development goals and enable graduation from the least developed country category. The Programme of Action aims to enable half the number of least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2020, with a strong focus on developing their productive capacities.

2. The challenges of the least developed countries are those associated with poverty and underdevelopment. One of the characteristics of least developed countries is that many of their people live on an amount insufficient to meet their basic needs in terms of food and nutrition, safe housing, health care and education. The resources available in the least developed countries are few, often unequally distributed and often not adequately mobilized for satisfying levels of sustainable development.

3. The regional midterm review of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action was held in Siem Reap from 4 to 6 March 2015, and was organized jointly by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Government of Cambodia. The meeting adopted the Siem Reap Angkor Outcome Document,² which was endorsed by the seventy-first session of the Commission, which transmitted it to the Comprehensive High-level Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020, to be held in Turkey in 2016, in response to Commission resolution 71/2.

4. The present report further reviews the current situation of the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region with regards to key macroeconomic indicators and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. It then addresses the progress of the least developed countries towards the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action, in particular with regards to their progress towards graduation from least developed country status. Finally, the report highlights some activities of the secretariat to support the development of capacities in the least developed countries in the region.

II. Status of the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region

5. Section II shows selected macroeconomic data and data on the attainment of the indicators of the Millennium Development Goals for the least developed countries of Asia and the Pacific.

¹ The least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

² E/ESCAP/71/3, annex.

A. Economic growth

6. Table 1 shows that over the first five years, 2011-2015, of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action, the region's least developed countries have grown at an average rate of 6.3 per cent. Although this is a little lower than the rate of the previous decade, 2001-2010, which was 7.2 per cent, it should be noted that from 2011 to 2015 the region's least developed countries grew faster than the average for all the region's developing countries. Furthermore, the decline in growth compared to the five-year period of 2006-2010 was lower in the least developed countries, at 0.9 per cent, compared to all the developing countries of Asia and the Pacific, at 2.2 per cent. Overall, the data show an improved growth performance for the least developed countries, especially compared to the decade of the 1990s.

Table 1
Five-year average annual rates of economic growth of least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 1991-2015

	1991-1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015
Pacific					
Kiribati	1.5	4.3	0.5	-0.1	2.7
Solomon Islands	6.7	-2.7	3.0	6.9	2.9
Tuvalu	3.0	6.0	-0.4	1.7	2.8
Vanuatu	4.5	2.6	0.9	5.0	1.7
South Asia					
Afghanistan	-4.6	-5.1	13.6	9.4	5.8
Bangladesh	4.2	5.2	5.5	6.3	6.3
Bhutan	3.8	7.0	7.9	9.5	5.3
Nepal	5.2	4.8	3.5	4.5	4.0
South-East Asia					
Cambodia	6.5	7.1	9.3	6.7	7.2
Lao People's Democratic Republic	6.2	6.2	6.3	8.0	7.5
Myanmar	5.8	8.5	12.9	11.2	7.5
Timor-Leste	10.2	-3.7	29.0	10.3	2.9
Developing economies	6.9	5.8	7.3	7.6	5.4
Least developed countries	4.2	4.8	7.6	7.2	6.3

Note: Gross domestic product figures at market prices in United States dollars in 2010 (at 2005 prices) were used as weights to calculate the aggregates. In cases where a country had no data, the weights of the remaining countries were adjusted upwards so that the total added up to 100 per cent.

B. Inflation

7. Table 2 shows that over the first five years of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action all the least developed countries in the region had inflation rates in single digits with an average of 7.2 per cent. During that period, inflation was lower for the least developed countries in the Pacific, followed by South-East Asia and South Asia. Inflation trended downward in Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste, the only three least developed countries with double digit inflation in the period between 2001 and 2010. On average, inflation has trended downward compared to the five-year period of 2006-2010, although it remained 1.8 percentage points above the average for all developing countries of the region for 2011-2015.

Table 2
Five-year average annual inflation rates of least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 1991-2015

	1991-1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015
Pacific					
Kiribati	6.0	2.0	2.1	4.5	-0.9
Solomon Islands	11.9	10.0	8.2	10.1	5.0
Tuvalu	3.2	2.9	3.3	2.7	1.0
Vanuatu	3.7	2.2	2.5	3.3	1.4
South Asia					
Afghanistan	..	..	..	9.5	6.1
Bangladesh	4.9	6.5	4.1	7.4	8.0
Bhutan	11.3	8.4	-1.7	5.6	8.4
Nepal	11.3	7.9	3.3	8.1	9.2
South-East Asia					
Cambodia	..	6.5	1.4	8.6	3.8
Lao People's Democratic Republic	13.9	49.7	13.7	5.2	5.7
Myanmar	25.4	27.6	22.1	17.9	5.1
Timor-Leste	..	..	..	4.9	8.7
Developing economies	37.3	18.8	6.1	5.5	5.4
Least developed countries	9.1	11.3	6.8	9.0	7.2

Note: Gross domestic product figures at market prices in United States dollars in 2010 (at 2005 prices) were used as weights to calculate the aggregates. In cases where a country had no data, the weights of the remaining countries were adjusted upwards so that the total added up to 100 per cent.

C. Millennium Development Goals

8. Although 2015 has already passed and the Millennium Development Goals have been succeeded by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the final evaluation of the attainment of the Goals must wait until data for the indicators for 2015 become available. Data from 2012 to 2014 is available, and tracking the expected attainment of such indicators by the region's least developed countries is still relevant. This exercise is also important because the 2030 Agenda incorporates the achievement of the Goals that have not been met yet, as stated in paragraph 16:

We recommit ourselves to the full realization of all the Millennium Development Goals, including the off-track Millennium Development Goals, in particular by providing focused and scaled-up assistance to least developed countries and other countries in special situations, in line with relevant support programmes. The new Agenda builds on the Millennium Development Goals and seeks to complete what these did not achieve, particularly in reaching the most vulnerable.

9. Tables 3 and 4 show the attainment of selected Millennium Development Goals indicators by the 12 least developed countries in the region. The indicators selected were those for which the least developed countries have the most data. *Making It Happen: Technology, Finance and Statistics for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific*, the 2015 issue of the *Asia-Pacific Regional Millennium Development Goals Report series*, includes details on the methodology utilized for the preparation of the projections shown in the tables.

Table 3
**Expected attainment of selected Millennium Development Goals indicators by
the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region – indicator details**

Goal	Indicator	Percentage of countries			Countries with data available
		By 2015	Between 2016 and 2030	After 2030	
1	Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption	60	20	20	10
2	Primary completion rate, both sexes	88	0	13	8
3	Ratios of girls to boys in secondary education	80	10	10	10
	Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament	0	56	44	9
4	Infant mortality rate	33	25	42	12
	Under-five mortality	42	33	25	12
5	Maternal mortality ratio	45	36	18	11
	Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel	11	22	67	9
	Antenatal care coverage (at least one visit)	22	22	56	9
6	Prevalence of tuberculosis	100	0	0	8
7	Proportion of population using an improved drinking water source	75	17	8	12
	Proportion of population using an improved sanitation facility	25	33	42	12

Source: ESCAP calculations based on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals database and the World Bank Poverty and Inequality database for poverty-related indicators under Goal 1. Available from <http://mdgs.un.org/> and <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/> (both accessed 15 April 2015).

10. Table 3 shows the percentage of least developed countries that are expected to meet the target for each of a number of selected Millennium Development Goals indicators (a) by 2015, (b) between 2016 and 2030 and (c) after 2030. A large percentage of least developed countries are expected to achieve the targets by 2015 for prevalence of tuberculosis (100 per cent), primary completion rate (88 per cent), ratio of girls to boys in secondary education (80 per cent) and proportion of the population using improved drinking water (75 per cent).

11. The Millennium Development Goals that require most attention are 4, reduce child mortality, and 5, improve maternal health. For these Goals, the percentage of countries expected to meet the targets for the indicators included in the table by 2015 averaged only 31 per cent. Furthermore, the percentage of countries that are expected to meet these targets during the period covered by the 2030 Agenda is only 28 per cent, with the remaining 41 per cent of the countries expected to meet them after 2030. These areas, as well as sanitation, require urgent attention during the implementation of the 2030 Agenda from both the countries and their development partners.

Table 4
Expected attainment of selected Millennium Development Goals indicators by the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region – country details

<i>Least developed country</i>	<i>Percentage of selected indicators</i>			<i>Indicators with data available</i>
	<i>By 2015</i>	<i>Between 2016 and 2030</i>	<i>After 2030</i>	
Neither landlocked developing country nor small island developing State				
Bangladesh	50	17	33	12
Cambodia	67	33	0	12
Myanmar	50	25	25	12
Landlocked developing country				
Afghanistan	18	36	45	11
Bhutan	80	0	20	10
Lao People's Democratic Republic	58	25	17	12
Nepal	58	25	17	12
Small island developing State				
Kiribati	30	20	50	10
Solomon Islands	22	22	56	9
Timor-Leste	40	20	40	10
Tuvalu	40	40	20	5
Vanuatu	43	29	29	7

Source: ESCAP calculations based on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals database and the World Bank Poverty and Inequality database for poverty-related indicators under Goal 1. Available from <http://mdgs.un.org/> and <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/> (both accessed 15 April 2015).

Note: Selected indicators of Millennium Development Goals 1-7.

12. Table 4 shows the expected attainment of the targets for the indicators, shown in Table 3, by country. The least developed countries that are expected to achieve the most targets by 2015 are Bhutan (80 per cent), Cambodia (67 per cent), the Lao People's Democratic Republic (58 per cent) and Nepal (58 per cent). On average, least developed countries that are small island developing States are expected to meet a lower percentage of indicators by 2015. However, for some of these countries, particularly Tuvalu and Vanuatu, the number of indicators with data available is rather low. Thus, fulfilling the commitment of the 2030 Agenda to intensify efforts to strengthen statistical capacities in least developed countries will be critical to improving the accuracy of future evaluations of their progress towards sustainable development.

III. Progress of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action

13. In response to paragraph 1 (a) of Commission resolution 71/2, the secretariat submitted the Siem Reap Angkor Outcome Document to the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States as input for the Comprehensive High-level Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020.

14. Also in response to resolution 71/2, the secretariat continues to assist least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region, in cooperation with other international entities and taking into account their respective mandates, in building their capacity to undertake appropriate policy responses to accelerate their structural transformation and to achieve other internationally agreed development goals, including those of the 2030 Agenda.

15. The Istanbul Programme of Action includes 251 specific actions covering eight priority areas.³ Its objectives include enabling half of the world's least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2020. Section III addresses the prospects for graduation of the least developed countries in the region.

16. At its latest triennial review in March 2015, the Committee for Development Policy of the Economic and Social Council found that Bhutan, Nepal, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste met the criteria for graduation for the first time. Two other countries, Vanuatu and Tuvalu, have met the criteria for graduation at more than two consecutive triennial reviews, and the Committee has already recommended them for graduation. A seventh least developed country, Kiribati, has met the criteria for graduation for the second consecutive triennial review. However, Kiribati was not recommended for graduation at the 2015 review because of concerns about the sustainability of the country's income level in view of its acute vulnerability. According to the report, Kiribati is the world's most structurally vulnerable country. In sum, with 7 out of the 12 least developed countries in Asia and the Pacific meeting the criteria for graduation from least developed country status, the region has already reached the ambitious goal in the Istanbul Programme of Action that 50 per cent of the least developed countries meet the graduation criteria by 2020.

17. To further assess the progress of the region's least developed countries towards meeting the criteria for graduation, ESCAP has updated the three indicators for graduation – the gross national income (GNI) per capita, the human assets index (HAI) and the economic vulnerability index (EVI) – to the latest available information, as of February 2014.⁴ To facilitate the analysis, the 12 least developed countries in the region are divided into three groups: (a) least developed countries that are neither landlocked developing countries nor small island developing States (Bangladesh, Cambodia and Myanmar); (b) least developed countries that are also landlocked developing countries (Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal); and

³ Productive capacity; agriculture, food security and rural development; trade; commodities; human and social development; multiple crises and other emerging challenges; mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity-building; and good governance at all levels.

⁴ See *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016*, forthcoming, for further analyses, methodology and data sources.

(c) least developed countries that are also small island developing States (Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu and Vanuatu).

18. Tables 5 to 7 show the latest available data on the three indicators for least developed country graduation for each of the three groups of countries mentioned above. The tables show the “gaps” that each country needs to close in order to achieve the graduation threshold for each indicator. For the cases of the per capita GNI and the HAI, which need to exceed the value of their respective thresholds for graduation, the distance is measured as the value of the threshold minus the value of the indicator over the value of the threshold. For the case of EVI, which needs to attain a value lower than its threshold for graduation, the distance is defined as the value of the indicator minus the value of the threshold over the value of the threshold.

Table 5

Gap between the graduation thresholds and the latest indicators, least developed countries that are neither landlocked developing countries nor small island developing States

Country	Percentage			Criteria met?
	GNI per capita	HAI	EVI	
Bangladesh	20	2	Cleared	No
Cambodia	24	Cleared	17	No
Myanmar	4	Cleared	4	No

Notes: Data as of 2014. See *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016*, forthcoming, for details on calculations. “Cleared” means that the country reached or passed the threshold for graduation for an indicator.

Abbreviations: GNI, gross national income; HAI, human assets index; EVI, economic vulnerability index.

19. Although none of the region’s least developed countries that are neither landlocked developing countries nor small island developing States has met the criteria for graduation yet, they have made considerable progress since the 2012 review. The three countries in this group have all met at least one of the three criteria for graduation, and two of them were very close to meeting the second criteria according to the latest data available (table 5). Bangladesh met the EVI criterion but missed the HAI criterion by 2 per cent, and Myanmar met the HAI criterion but missed both the income and EVI criteria by 4 per cent. Although Cambodia has met the HAI criterion, as of 2014 it had a 17 per cent gap to meet the EVI criterion and a 24 per cent gap to meet the GNI per capita criterion. These observations suggest that both Bangladesh and Myanmar have good chances of meeting the criteria for graduation at the 2018 Committee for Development Policy review if they continue progressing at the pace of recent years.

Table 6

Gap between the graduation thresholds and the latest indicators, least developed countries that are also landlocked developing countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>Percentage</i>			<i>Criteria met?</i>
	<i>GNI per capita</i>	<i>HAI</i>	<i>EVI</i>	
Afghanistan	43	35	9	No
Bhutan	Cleared	Cleared	17	Yes
Lao People's Democratic Republic	Cleared	5	13	No
Nepal	45	Cleared	Cleared	Yes

Notes: Data as of 2014. See *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016*, forthcoming, for details on calculations. “Cleared” means that the country reached or passed the threshold for graduation for an indicator.

Abbreviations: GNI, gross national income; HAI, human assets index; EVI, economic vulnerability index.

20. With regards to the least developed countries that are also landlocked developing countries, both Bhutan and Nepal met the criteria for graduation for the first time at the 2015 Committee for Development Policy review. Bhutan has met the graduation threshold for income and HAI while falling short in the EVI criterion (table 6). On the other hand, Nepal met the HAI and EVI criteria but failed to meet the income criterion by a large margin. Of the two remaining countries in this group, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has already met the income criterion and needs to clear a gap of only 5 per cent to meet the HAI criterion, which seems a feasible goal for the 2018 Committee review. Although Afghanistan has larger gaps in GNI per capita and HAI, it has made remarkable progress in both indicators over the last decade.

Table 7

Gap between the graduation thresholds and the latest indicators, least developed countries that are also small island developing States

<i>Country</i>	<i>Percentage</i>				<i>Criteria met?</i>
	<i>GNI per capita</i>	<i>HAI</i>	<i>EVI</i>	<i>Income only</i>	
Kiribati	Cleared	Cleared	122	Cleared	Yes
Solomon Islands	Cleared	Cleared	62	33	Yes
Timor-Leste	Cleared	11	75	Cleared	Yes
Tuvalu	Cleared	Cleared	69	Cleared	Yes
Vanuatu	Cleared	Cleared	49	Cleared	Yes

Notes: Data as of 2014. See *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016*, forthcoming, for details on calculations. “Cleared” means that the country reached or passed the threshold for graduation for an indicator.

Abbreviations: GNI, gross national income; HAI, human assets index; EVI, economic vulnerability index.

21. All the least developed countries in the region that are also small island developing States met the criteria for graduation as of the March 2015 triennial review of the Committee for Development Policy (table 7). As mentioned above, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste met the graduation criteria for the

first time at the 2015 Committee review. Timor-Leste became eligible for graduation on the basis of the “income-only criterion”, meaning that its GNI per capita exceeds a level twice as high as the regular GNI per capita threshold for graduation. Even though the five countries shown in table 7 are eligible for graduation, all are characterized by very high levels of economic vulnerability. The average gap over the EVI threshold for this group is 75 per cent, far above the average of 12 per cent for the other five least developed countries that have not yet met the EVI criterion (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar).

22. The reasons for the high economic vulnerability of the least developed countries that are also small island developing States will be examined in detail in the forthcoming *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016*. The report found that 49 per cent of the EVI index of these countries can be explained by three factors that are largely exogenous: the small sizes of their population, their geographical remoteness and the share of the population living in low-elevation coastal zones. Another 30 per cent of the average value of the EVI index for these countries is explained by the instability and concentration of their exports. Although these factors are also related to geographic characteristics such as the small size and remoteness of these countries, their impact can be reduced by implementing policies supporting export diversification, especially towards services that can be delivered through telecommunications.

IV. Selected capacity development activities of the secretariat

23. Guided by Commission resolutions as well as by global mandates, including General Assembly resolution 68/224 on follow-up to the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the secretariat continues to give high priority to the region’s least developed countries in its work programme, including in the priority areas of the Istanbul Programme of Action. This support has included regional and national reviews of least developed country graduation strategies, technical studies, capacity development activities, including training workshops, and research included in the annual publication *Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report*. What follows is an overview of selected capacity development activities of the secretariat to assist the least developed countries in aspects of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action.

A. Transport infrastructure development

24. Several activities were implemented in 2015 to assist least developed countries to achieve the shared vision of a sustainable international integrated intermodal transport and logistics system for the region in line with the Regional Action Programme for Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific, phase II (2012-2016).

25. The 6th meeting of the Working Group on the Asian Highway (Seoul, November 2015), the 4th meeting of the Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network (Bangkok, November 2015), the 1st meeting of the Working Group on Dry Ports (Bangkok, November 2015) and the fourth session of the Committee on Transport (Bangkok, October 2014) provided an opportunity for representatives of least developed countries to discuss their transport development needs as well as the challenges they face in addressing them, in particular technically and financially. These meetings also provided an opportunity for the secretariat to interact with representatives of least developed countries to streamline activities in order to better address these needs.

26. In accordance with the commitment to strengthen trade and investment through connectivity corridors between South and South-West Asia and other subregions, the secretariat organized the Policy Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in Southern Asia, which took place in Tehran, in December 2015. Its objective was policy advocacy in support of strengthening regional transport connectivity across South and South-West Asia through extended transport corridors.

B. Asian Highway network

27. The activities implemented as part of the collaborative programme between ESCAP and the Korea Expressway Corporation have been useful in advancing the development of Asian Highway priority routes in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The collaborative programme also includes activities aiming to (a) establish road safety facility infrastructure standards, (b) develop model intelligent transport systems deployments and (c) develop strategies on how to promote and facilitate the implementation of the Asian Highway design standards. The programme targets a number of countries along Asian Highway routes AH1 and AH6, including the following least developed countries in which road fatalities erode already scarce financial resources: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Nepal.

C. Trans-Asian Railway network

28. Trans-Asian Railway development continues to benefit least developed countries by enhancing connectivity and facilitating trade with developed neighbours. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations subregion, rail projects to connect China with Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic are progressing. The benefits of connectivity for these countries were discussed with railway managers from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic at a seminar organized by the secretariat and the International Union of Railways on the facilitation of railway transport, held in Bangkok in December 2015.

29. In addition, the Government of Afghanistan officially joined the Trans-Asian Railway project with a request to have its national railway development plan reflected on the map of the Trans-Asian Railway network as a first step towards becoming a party to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network. This initiative makes it easier for the transport work programme to have a coordinated approach with neighbouring countries to develop rail connectivity to ports in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.

D. Dry Ports

30. With a view to facilitating economic growth in least developed countries through enhanced access to transport infrastructure and services, the secretariat recognizes the need to integrate modes as well as facilitate the emergence of efficient logistics in the region. The secretariat is working towards realizing the vision of an international integrated intermodal transport and logistics system. In this regard, the secretariat has collaborated with member countries to develop a network of dry ports that will allow greater integration between infrastructure networks and increase the efficiency of transport in the region. In collaboration with the Office of Legal Affairs at Headquarters in New York, the secretariat assisted member countries in developing and negotiating the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports.

31. Following a successful signing ceremony at which the Governments of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Nepal signed the Agreement, the secretariat is now working closely with member countries to ensure an early entry into force of the Agreement. As per the terms of the Agreement, the secretariat organized the 1st meeting of the Working Group on Dry Ports (Bangkok, November 2015). The meeting provided an opportunity for the delegations from Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Nepal to inform the secretariat regarding projects that were being implemented or considered in their countries to further develop or operationalize dry ports and to highlight the challenges that they face in the process. With these challenges in mind, in 2015, the secretariat organized a series of field missions to selected member countries which have successfully developed dry ports. The secretariat collected their experiences in a report to assist least developed countries in applying best practices in planning techniques and policy formulation to the development of dry ports.

E. Transport facilitation and logistics

32. One of the major challenges to regional transport connectivity is the lack of implementation of various transport facilitation agreements. To support government officials in operationalizing the agreements, the secretariat developed various transport facilitation models. The four models developed are (a) Secure Cross-Border Transport Model, which provides a concept for a vehicle tracking system using new technologies; (b) the Efficient Cross-Border Transport Model, which uses advancements in the trucking industry to deal with non-physical barriers; (c) the Model on Integrated Border Crossing, to provide ways to streamline the flow of information and equipment at the borders; and (d) the Time/Cost-Distance Methodology to identify bottlenecks along the corridors. A series of workshops are planned in least developed countries, involving key stakeholders, on the models' practical implementation to promote seamless international road transport to support regional cooperation and integration. A national workshop was held in Myanmar on 3 March 2016.

F. Sustainable transport

33. The secretariat continued to work with member States to develop and implement sustainable and inclusive transport policies and in particular sustainable and inclusive urban transport systems in major and secondary cities. The main activities, including regional and subregional seminars and national workshops, focused on sharing policy innovations and successful interventions in the region. The regional and subregional seminars and national workshops were also an opportunity to provide policy support and disseminate knowledge on sustainable and inclusive transport, urban and rural transport, the impacts of climate change on transport, and policy options for developing disaster resilient and climate adaptive transport infrastructure. A national stakeholder consultation and capacity-building workshop on the development of sustainable and inclusive transport policy was held in Thimphu on 9 and 10 April 2015.

34. The Subregional Seminar on Sustainable and Inclusive Transport Development was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on 17 and 18 September 2015. At the seminar, senior transport officials and representatives of cities in all the lesser developed countries in Central Asia as well as Mongolia participated and benefitted. In addition, the Regional Seminar on Safe, Climate-Adaptive and Disaster-Resilient Transport for Sustainable Development was held in Kathmandu, on 17 and 18 November 2015, in conjunction with the 9th Regional Environmentally Sustainable Transport Forum in Asia. At the Forum,

international experts, senior transport officials and representatives of capital and secondary cities shared ideas, issues and experiences in building better, more sustainable and inclusive national, urban and rural transportation systems and services as well as policies to develop disaster resilient and climate adaptive transport systems. Many policy makers from least developed countries benefitted from participation in the regional meeting and subregional seminar.

G. Agriculture and food security

35. In accordance with the the Secretary-General's Zero Hunger Challenge campaign, the Istanbul Programme of Action, Commission resolution 71/2 and the Commission's commitment to strengthen institutions and capacity-building to improve resilience to exogenous shocks and to enhance energy and food security, the secretariat held the Policy Dialogue on Regional Cooperation for Food Security in South Asia in Kathmandu in 2015. The objective was to develop a policy agenda on regional cooperation to combat the alarming levels of food insecurity in South Asia.

H. Trade

36. The majority of the secretariat's activities in trade-related research, capacity-building and regional cooperation are of benefit to least developed countries. The secretariat supports the participation of the least developed countries in regional and subregional events and capacity-building programmes. In addition, the secretariat organizes a number of targeted, national-level activities for least developed countries, which are underpinned by analytical work identifying the problems at hand and providing a range of possible solutions. The secretariat provided demand-driven technical assistance and organized 30 national and regional capacity-building programmes in 2015, to which all the least developed countries in the region were invited. National-level activities were carried out for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Timor-Leste.

37. The trade capacity development workshop for South Asia was held in New Delhi in September 2015. The objective was to increase the capacity of policymakers and trade ministry officials, especially in least developed countries, to take advantage of opportunities arising in global and regional markets, including preferential trading arrangements. Afghanistan was also supported through the preparation of knowledge products, the most recent publication being *Doing Business with Afghanistan: Harnessing Afghanistan's Economic Potential*. The report provides detailed analysis and recommendations for the business community and focuses on the investment environment in Afghanistan with the aim of facilitating business development and the creation of productive capacity. It was presented at the Sixth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan in September 2015. As a result of organizing a side event on the role of regional and international organizations in Afghanistan's development, the secretariat was highly visible during the Conference.

I. Human and social development

38. In accordance with the Commission's commitment to strengthen the capacity of policymakers and practitioners to formulate and implement integrated national socioeconomic policies to enhance social protection and reduce the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups, the secretariat has provided technical and other assistance through the following activities:

(a) Studies on social protection and employment creation for inclusive growth with a focus on least developed countries, such as Bangladesh and Nepal, were conducted in cooperation with the South Asia Research Network on Employment and Social Protection for Inclusive Growth (SARNET). The objective of these studies, concluded in October 2015, was to inform policymakers and practitioners regarding policy tools and recommended mechanisms available within the national context and capacities;

(b) The objective of the seminar on integrating social protection for inclusive growth in South Asia (part of SARNET) was to share analysis and advocate policy recommendations from studies to increase the understanding of employment and social protection issues in the least developed countries concerned;

(c) The 1st meeting of the Gender Policy Advocacy Group of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), was held in Islamabad in July 2015, with the participation of officials and experts from least developed countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The objective was to collaborate with the SAARC secretariat in advocating for the centrality of gender issues in the policy agenda of SAARC countries and mainstreaming the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in South Asia, as a tool for women's empowerment.

J. Youth development

39. Since 2014, the secretariat has been leading the implementation of an interregional project to strengthen the capacity of Governments in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Western Asia to respond to the needs of youth in the formulation of inclusive and sustainable development policies. The project seeks to enhance youth policies, especially in the context of participation of youth and decent work, and its main output will be a toolbox of policy and programme options, which includes the promotion of knowledge-sharing and the provision of technical advice. A prototype of the toolbox has already been developed; it includes good practices and inputs from Cambodia and Bhutan. In due course, good practices will be included from other least developed countries, while dissemination of the toolbox will be promoted in all countries in Asia and the Pacific.

K. Gender equality and women's empowerment

40. In support of member States' implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda, the secretariat has been providing technical assistance to least developed countries to develop policies and programmes to address gender gaps in national development. The secretariat organized two capacity-building workshops on advancing accountability and strengthening statistics for gender equality and women's empowerment in September and October 2015. By bringing together representatives from national women's machineries and national statistical offices from 18 countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Nepal, these workshops promoted collaboration and coordination in strategizing and acting for gender equality and women's empowerment at the national level, as well as the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences across member States in the region.

L. Social protection

41. The secretariat has developed knowledge-sharing tools and analytical products on social protection, with a view to facilitating the sharing of experiences and good practices among countries. The Social Protection Toolbox, an online platform, was launched in 2013 to support policymakers and other stakeholders in building broader and more robust social protection systems. The Toolbox contains good practices from around the Asia-Pacific region, including from Bangladesh and Bhutan. Furthermore, it benefited from the review of experts from Governments, including those of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, civil society, academia and the United Nations system. The Toolbox has been launched in several countries.

42. To help countries to address the exploitation and abuse of migrant workers, in partnership with other partners from the United Nations system, ESCAP, through its co-chairing of the Regional Thematic Working Group on International Migration, including Human Trafficking, published the *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2015: Migrants' Contributions to Development*. The report builds the evidence base regarding how migrants' contributions to development processes in their countries of origin and destination can be strengthened, highlighting in particular strategies that ensure migrant workers are able to access decent work and forms of social protection, as well as low-cost migration and remittance channels. The report highlights areas for policy reform which can support increasing the development impact of migrants from least developed countries, in line with the priority area on foreign direct investment and remittances of the Regional Road Map for Implementing the Istanbul Programme of Action in the Asian and Pacific Region for the Decade 2011-2020.

M. Disaster risk reduction

43. The secretariat has taken a series of actions to address the challenges of building resilience in multidimensional ways. The Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development of the Commission placed high priority on capacity-building in least developed countries to effectively use space and geographic information system applications and provided training programmes and workshops to policymakers and practitioners from member States, in particular focusing on least developed countries.

44. To support the least developed countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the secretariat has taken a leading role at the regional level to provide policy guides and to enhance the capacity of member States. The secretariat has worked on (a) institutional capacity-building to promote the use of space technology and geographic information systems for disaster risk reduction; (b) the operationalization of regional drought mechanisms, including the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring and Early Warning; (c) the timely provision of regional support, in particular near real-time satellite imagery, to the countries affected by severe disasters, through the long-standing Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development; and (d) research and policy analysis in identifying emerging needs and challenges, by developing regional inventory.

45. The secretariat conducted a series of training programmes and workshops to enhance the capacity of the least developed countries with regards to geospatial data management, including a programme on technical assistance for geo-referenced information systems for disaster risk

management, held in Bhutan on 3 and 4 June 2015, to build a national geo-portal for disaster risk reduction. Furthermore, the secretariat promoted the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring and Early Warning in the region through capacity-building programmes, such as a national implementation meeting on the Regional Drought Mechanism held in Nepal from 30 March to 2 April 2015. The secretariat has provided more than 150 near real-time satellite imagery and damage maps to countries affected by severe disasters, including least developed countries, through the Commission's Regional Space Application Programme for Sustainable Development. That space information and data contributed to the impact assessment and recovery planning of disaster-affected least developed countries by providing concrete pictures of affected situations.

46. The secretariat has been working towards the implementation of the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring and Early Warning in selected least developed countries, including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal. The secretariat facilitated the provision of space-based data/products and services provided by the regional service nodes in China and India and strengthened the capacity of the landlocked developing countries in addressing agricultural droughts. The status, gaps and institutional arrangements related to drought in Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal were discussed during technical advisory missions in late 2014 and early 2015. The establishment of a country team is underway, as is the development of a country profile for each country, with the assistance of the secretariat. A series of natural disasters and administrative restructuring has caused some delays in those countries, however the secretariat is discussing next steps with national focal points, which are likely to begin with a multi-stakeholder meeting in early 2016. Implementation in Afghanistan will begin upon confirmation of funding.

47. In the field of disaster risk reduction, the secretariat has provided policy guidance and technical assistance to enhance the capacity of member States in addressing disaster risks. In this respect, the secretariat organized:

(a) The Regional Earthquake Recovery Dialogue for Building Back Better, jointly organized with the SAARC Disaster Management Centre and the National Planning Commission of Nepal, which was held in Kathmandu on 1 and 2 October 2015, to support the Nepal-Ghorka earthquake recovery process. The Dialogue served as a platform for sharing best practices and lessons learned in resilient recovery and reconstruction. The secretariat, together with the Disaster Management Centre, organized two national workshops in December 2015 for policymakers from Nepal to learn from the experiences with the earthquake recovery processes following the Sikkim and Bhuj earthquakes in India;

(b) The training workshop on rapid assessment of damage and loss using innovative technology and space applications, organized jointly with the Disaster Management Centre, was held in Nepal from 29 September to 1 October 2015. The training workshop addressed how to utilize advances in space applications, geographical information systems, crowdsourcing and modelling in order to perform a damage and loss assessment of sectors that have been critically affected by a natural disaster. It particularly targeted countries in South and South-West Asia, including least developed countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal;

(c) The secretariat continued the development of guidelines on mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into multisectoral development planning under the United Nations Development Account project entitled "Enhancing knowledge and capacity for the management of disaster risks for a resilient future in Asia and the Pacific". The project targets vulnerable developing

countries, including least developed countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia and Nepal;

(d) The Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar were supported by the ESCAP Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Tsunami, Disaster and Climate Preparedness in convening the biannual Monsoon Forum. The Forum brought together a wide range of stakeholders from various economic, development and disaster management sectors to discuss preparedness and risk reduction.

48. The Asia-Pacific Gateway for Disaster Risk Management and Development portal provides resources, such as studies, databases and disaster data from member States, including the least developed countries, which facilitate the preparation for and response to disaster events in the region.

N. Mobilizing financial resources for development and capacity-building

49. Recognizing the budgetary constraints faced by Governments in the region, the secretariat has been implementing a number of activities to assist least developed countries in attracting private sector financing in infrastructure development. In particular, a regional forum on public-private partnerships was held in Bangkok on 21 and 22 January 2015, in which five least developed countries participated (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal). The meeting provided a unique opportunity for exchanging information and sharing knowledge on how to involve efficiently the private sector in the financing and development of transport infrastructure.

50. In 2015, two subregional events were held: the Policy Dialogue on Public-Private Partnerships for Infrastructure Development in South Asia, in Kathmandu on 22 and 23 September 2015, and the Expert Group Meeting on Financing Sources for Public-Private Partnerships in South-East Asia, in Kuala Lumpur on 24 and 25 November 2015. These two meetings resulted in the formulation of key policy recommendations that should guide the future development of public-private partnerships in countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal as well as Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. National activities were also implemented in four least developed countries in 2015 to support them with the establishment of their public-private partnerships policy frameworks (Phnom Penh, 10 and 11 March 2015 and Thimphu, from 24 to 26 March 2015) and to build the capacity of government officials to identify, develop and manage public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects (Vientiane, 26 and 27 August 2015 and Nay Pyi Daw, 1 October 2015).

O. Developing statistical capacity

51. Despite the unambiguous importance of quality data for monitoring progress of the implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action, many of the region's least developed countries struggle to produce even basic indicators. The secretariat has worked to close gaps in statistical capacity in areas relevant to the Programme of Action, including statistics in the areas of economics, agriculture, the environment, gender, and population and social statistics, as well as cross-cutting institutional capacity gaps affecting good governance. Significant data gaps exist in important areas relevant to measuring gender equality, and the secretariat provides analytical, normative, technical and advocacy assistance to support countries in closing these gaps. For example, important vital statistics relevant to monitoring human development are missing, a data gap targeted by the Commission's Civil Registration and Vital Statistics technical and advocacy work.

52. The Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific leads training programmes on the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Regional Action Plan to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics, which aims to improve the production of data used to monitor the role of the agricultural and rural sector in food security, environmental sustainability and poverty reduction, with a focus on participation from least developed countries. ESCAP is also engaged in critical technical and advocacy work promoting economic statistics through its Regional Programme on Economic Statistics, which covers important statistical issues foundational to monitoring the Istanbul Programme of Action.

53. In 2015, the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific conducted 18 statistical training courses/seminars, which included participants from the least developed countries. A total of 183 government statisticians, planning and agricultural officials, and managers of statistical offices from 12 least developed countries developed and improved skills and increased their knowledge regarding internationally agreed standards, methods and frameworks for statistical activities in the following main areas: fundamentals of official statistics; population and social statistics; economic statistics and the 2008 system of national accounts; environmental statistics, and specifically the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting; agricultural statistics; and managing for quality statistics and modernizing national statistical systems. The training courses/seminars included one customized country-specific training course for Afghanistan and one for Nepal. The training courses increased national capabilities in areas that member States identified as priorities for filling capacity gaps.

V. Summary and conclusions

54. The greatest impediment facing the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region is overcoming the structural challenges to poverty eradication, the adaptation of the 2030 Agenda and graduation from the least developed country category. Addressing such challenges requires strengthened capacity development to undertake appropriate policy responses to accelerate their structural transformation and build productive capacity.

55. In this regard, it is important that ESCAP continue to provide technical assistance to least developed countries in building capacity to formulate appropriate policies and strategies in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Istanbul Programme of Action, including mobilizing and effective use of financial resources, promoting regional integration and connectivity, strengthening productive capacity and innovation, promoting economic diversification, promoting human and social development, facilitating means for transfer of appropriate and new technologies, building statistical capacity, and promoting regional cooperation for disaster risk management.

56. The Commission may wish to encourage the active participation and involvement of the least developed countries in the secretariat's activities and to guide the secretariat in assisting the least developed countries in building their capacity to strengthen regional integration and connectivity and to formulate and implement policies in line with the 2030 Agenda, the Istanbul Programme of Action and other internationally agreed development goals.