



FOURTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Preparations for the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC III)

1. Introduction

1. The Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC III) will take place in Brussels from 14 to 20 May 2001. The objectives of the Conference are: (i) to assess the results of the Programme of Action during the 1990s at the country level; (ii) to review the implementation of international support measures, particularly in the areas of Official Development Assistance (ODA), debt, investment and trade; and (iii) to consider the formulation and adoption of appropriate development of the LDCs and their progressive integration into the world economy.¹ This event is expected to attract several Heads of State and/or Government, especially during the opening session on 14 May.
2. The objective of this short note is to inform the Governing Body of developments that have taken place since the beginning of the preparatory process and of the steps that the Director-General has taken in order to ensure an effective role for the ILO at the Conference as well as in the preparations for it.

2. Background

3. In 1971, the international community recognized a category of countries who deserve special consideration in view of their profound poverty and the weakness of their economic, institutional and human resources. They are officially designated as “least developed countries” (LDCs) by the United Nations General Assembly on the basis of a number of criteria, including low national income, low levels of human development and economic vulnerability. Forty-eight countries are identified as LDCs of which 33 are

¹ UN General Assembly resolution 52/187.

African, nine Asian, one Caribbean, and five in the Pacific region.² Senegal is about to become the 49th LDC.

4. To respond to this challenge, the General Assembly decided to hold in 1981 in Paris the First UN Conference on the LDCs. At that Conference, the international community adopted the Substantial New Programme of Action of the 1980s for the LDCs (SNPA) containing guidelines for domestic action by LDCs, which were to be complemented by international support measures. However, lack of progress in the 1980s led to the convening of the Second Conference (LDC II) in Paris in 1990 which adopted the Paris Declaration and Programme of Action for the LDCs for the 1990s. The Conference agreed in particular on a three-tiered mechanism covering national, regional and global follow-up to monitor the effective implementation of the Programme.³ In 1997, the General Assembly responded to the growing marginalization of LDCs, particularly during the 1990s, by deciding to convene the Third UN Conference on LDCs (LDC III) in the year 2001.⁴
5. At the UN Millennium Summit (September 2000), the Heads of State and/or Government placed poverty eradication high on their agenda, vowing to address the special needs of LDCs. They called on industrialized countries: (i) to adopt a policy of duty- and quota-free access for essentially all exports from the LDCs; (ii) to implement without further delay the enhanced programme of debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries and to agree to cancel all official bilateral debts of those countries in return for their making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction; and (iii) to grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction.⁵

3. Preparations for the Conference

6. In 1998, the General Assembly designated UNCTAD as the focal point for organizing LDC III and welcomed the offer of the European Union (EU) to host the Conference.⁶ It was agreed that the Conference would be held in the Brussels headquarters of the European Parliament. The Assembly also designated the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr. Rubens Ricupero, as Secretary-General of the Conference and decided, among other things, to establish an intergovernmental preparatory committee.
7. The Preparatory Committee gathered for the first time from 24 to 28 July 2000 in New York and was preceded by three expert meetings (Addis Ababa, Kathmandu, and Niamey).

² Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Yemen and Zambia.

³ <http://www.un.org/events/ldc3/conference/conference.htm>

⁴ *idem*, footnote 1.

⁵ Paragraph 15 of the UN Millennium Declaration, A/RES/55/2.

⁶ UN General Assembly resolution 53/182.

The Committee elected Ambassador Jacques Scavée (Belgium) as its Chairman and decided that the Conference would be segmented in three parallel tracks: (i) intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document (Programme of Action) in the Committee of the Whole; (ii) interactive thematic sessions; and (iii) parallel events. An NGO Forum was also planned in parallel with the Conference.

8. The Committee was convened again in New York from 5-9 February 2001, and was preceded by an Inter-agency Meeting on 2 February. The main objectives of these meetings were to have a first formal reading of the draft Programme of Action to be adopted at the Conference, to consider national reports on preparations for this event and to coordinate the role of the United Nations system and the Bretton Woods institutions in the Conference. During the week-long meeting of the Committee, governments conducted only part of their first reading of the draft Programme of Action. It was, therefore, decided that the Committee would meet informally in New York from 26-30 March, followed by a third and final formal session from 2-6 April.
9. The draft Programme of Action, as it stands now,⁷ sets out seven commitments (people-centred development; governance; human capacities; building productive capacities; making globalization work for LDCs; reducing vulnerability and protecting the environment; mobilizing financial resources)⁸ for addressing the problems faced by LDCs. The negotiations in February focused mainly on issues related to trade (market access) and finance (debt cancellation, financing for development, ODA) with little room for other issues, notably employment. Many delegations expressed their disappointment at the lack of emphasis on poverty eradication and stressed that this issue should be the overarching goal of the draft Programme of Action.
10. In parallel with preparatory work on the draft Programme of Action, committees have been working in each LDC to develop national programmes geared to the specific problems of individual countries and regions. At the time of the second session of the Committee, 42 national programmes of action had already been received by the Conference secretariat. To assist with the substantive preparations for the Conference, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD has also appointed a seven-member High-Level Panel for the Review of the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the 1990s. This Panel has been reporting to the Preparatory Committee.

4. The ILO contribution

11. The Director-General has taken a number of steps to ensure that the ILO plays an important role at the Conference and the process leading to it. The Office has been involved in the overall preparatory process of the Conference, including several inter-agency meetings. During the last meeting of the Preparatory Committee in February, the ILO delegation was able to obtain the “restricted” right to make a statement during the plenary, following statements by UNDP, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. In his statement, the ILO representative said his Organization fully supported LDC III. However, he stressed that the draft text did not sufficiently address the role of employment and job creation in poverty reduction and eradication. The ILO delegation had numerous contacts with delegates, the secretariat and other agencies’ representatives and submitted some

⁷ A/CONF.191/IPC/CRP.6

⁸ Please note that the exact wording and content of these commitments are currently subject to negotiation.

amendments to the draft text, which were circulated as an official document of the Committee.

12. The ILO has also been designated as lead agency for the thematic session on “human resources development and employment” and is fully engaged in the preparations for this session which is due to take place in the afternoon of 18 May. The Office is expected to submit a background document on human resources development and employment, focusing on decent work and poverty reduction in LDCs. This document will be presented and discussed during the thematic session. Another common feature of the 11 thematic sessions⁹ will be the presentation of “deliverables”, or concrete actions to improve specific sectors in the LDCs, to be identified and promoted by two partner governments – one from an LDC, and the other from a developed country – as well as by the lead agency and other UN agencies active in each particular field. The lead agency is expected to moderate the session, together with the two partner governments (to be represented at the ministerial level).
13. The ILO is already having regular consultations with France, which is one of the two partner governments of this session (the other partner government should be confirmed in the near future), for both the “deliverables” and the general format of the thematic session. The Office has been engaged in the identification and selection of “deliverables” to be proposed to the two partner governments. Internal consultations have been held in this regard and contributions have been prepared by the units concerned.

Geneva, 13 March 2001.

⁹ Themes of the sessions: (i) governance, peace and social stability; (ii) enhancing productive capacity (the agricultural sector and food security); (iii) education; (iv) enhancing productive capacities (the role of health); (v) energy; (vi) international trade, commodities and services/tourism; (vii) enhancing productive capacities (the role of investment and enterprise development); (viii) human resources development and employment; (ix) infrastructure development; (x) transport; and (xi) financing growth and development.