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for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Organisation internationale pour les pays les moins avancés (OIPMA), a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[27 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on LDCs

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to immeasurable losses of human lives worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, the trade sector and labour market. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic has been devastating, particularly to countries more vulnerable to external economic shocks, natural and man-made disasters and communicable diseases, such as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

The Economic and Social Council in its Resolution 2020/10 (E/RES/2020/10) has recognized that COVID-19 severely affected the LDCs, including those graduating from that category, and was likely to have an impact on their sustainable development trajectories. Given their greater exposure to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Organization for the Least Developed Countries (IOLDCs) therefore draws the attention of the international community to the needs of the LCDs during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to The Least Developed Countries Report 2020 (UNCTAD/LDC/2020), the health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in LDCs have not been as serious as initially feared. Overall, the virus has spread less rapidly and less severely in these countries than in the rest of the world. The health outcomes of the pandemic in LDCs in 2020 contrasted with that of other developing and developed countries, with the latter showing a higher COVID-19 mortality rate than the LDCs average. As illustrated by the Report, in August 2020, the COVID-19 mortality rate of LDCs corresponded to 13% of the rate of other developing countries and 3% of that of developed countries.

Nevertheless, the fact that the direct health impacts of the pandemic on LDCs were less severe than initially expected does not mean that it has not seriously affected and weakened indirectly the LDCs' health systems. Disruptions in health services due to COVID-19 have already been observed in several LDCs, particularly in the provision and use of reproductive, maternal, and child health services. Consequently, the pandemic is expected to reverse decades of improvement in health outcomes, throws progress in reaching SDG3 and in achieving progressive realization of the right to the highest attainable standards of health in LDCs.

Economic impacts

Conversely, the pandemic economic consequences have been a lot more devastating for LDCs than the health impacts. According to UNCTAD, "in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to LDCs experiencing their strongest economic shock in several decades, resulting in a sharp economic downturn, due to the combined effects of a deep world economic recession, and the consequences of the domestic containment measures adopted by LDCs governments."

The impact of the recession on the global trade translated into a strong decline in the external demand for LDCs' goods and services, such as fuels, minerals and metals, as well as garments. The world economic recession also depreciated the prices of their main exports and caused a fall in inflows of external resources. LDCs also faced a decrease in tourism activity - a key sector of the economy in 42 of the 46 countries -, severely impacting the employment rate. Moreover, LCDs' financial situation has become more challenging, with a higher risk of debt distress and a drop in foreign direct investment and remittances, which is a major source of foreign funding and support for household incomes in many LDCs.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected economic growth in LDCs. According to the latest projections of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (World Economic Situation and Prospects, as of mid-2021), LDCs had experienced economic contractions in 2020, with GDP growth forecasted as -0.3 per cent for the same year. This is the worst economic outcome in 30 years, and, as stated by UNCTAD, represents a significant reversal of the economic and social progress achieved by them in recent years. With the risks of a prolonged pandemic and insufficient financial

opportunities to stimulate demand, the projections suggest that LCDs are facing the prospect of a lost decade, with economic outcomes only expected to return in 2022 or 2023.

Development impacts

The IOLDCs is also deeply concerned about the severe negative impacts of the pandemic on LDCs in terms of poverty and development outcomes. According to the Comprehensive Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on the LDC Category from the Committee for Development Policy (Comprehensive Study Report, April 2021), “in LDCs, the aggregate poverty incidence is expected to have increased by 2.4 percentage points, to almost 39 per cent, in 2020.” This is equivalent to a rise of over 32 million people living in extreme poverty in the LDCs.

The pandemic’s economic impact has also worsened inequalities by disrupting the employment of low-skilled labour more severely, and limiting employment prospects for less-educated workers for several years to come. This crisis has affected women and girls have even worse, as they suffered significant job and income losses and rely more on the informal sector.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to retard progress towards the realization of the SDGs and hamper the progressively achievement of the economic, social and cultural rights for LDCs. It not only threatens to retrogress many years of LDCs’ achievement in SDGs on poverty, hunger, health and education, but it has also exacerbated inequalities, compromising the achievement of SDG on gender equality and SDG10 on reducing inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic may also affect graduation from the LDC category. However, according to the Committee for Development Policy, the negative impacts are likely to be more severe for those countries that are below the graduation thresholds.

Recommendations

The disparity in vaccination coverage between LDCs enhances the already fragile recovery of their economic recession. The COVAX initiative remains severely underfunded in most LCDs, contributing to the high risk that LDCs will come last in global vaccination efforts. In Africa, for instance, the vaccination rate is only 1 in 100 per people. Moreover, a survey conducted by The Global Fund between April and September 2020 in 32 countries from Africa and Asia showed that, in 24 African countries, 11% of health facilities could conduct COVID-19 antigen rapid diagnosis tests, and only 8% could conduct PCR tests. As such, IOLDCs urges the international community to support LDCs’ national efforts to strengthen their capacity in achieving access to COVID-19 vaccination and diagnostic tests, which are crucial for the recovery of the world economy.

Lastly, IOLDCs seeks to draw the attention of the Human Rights Council and, through it, all the concerned international bodies, to show its support to the LDCs during this COVID-19 crisis. IOLDCs also calls on the international community to build solidarity, cooperation and partnership with the LDCs to help them build national capacities, recover their fragile health systems and continue achieving the realization of the SDGs.
