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DEVELOPMENT

Supporting the World's Least Developed Countries

By Denis Fitzgerald | December 9, 2013

The United Nations first devised its list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in 1971. More than 40 years later, only three countries have graduated, which means that their Gross National Income per capita has exceeded $1,190 as of 2012, and they have attained other development and economic indicators.

There is no one characteristic that defines the 48 LDCs, which are home to about 880 million people. Some are beset by internal conflict—Afghanistan and the Central African Republic, to name two. Others are small island states affected by climate change and isolation, such as Kiribati and Vanuatu, while there are also nations that are landlocked and detached from international markets, such as Lesotho and Bhutan.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited the Pacific island nation of Kiribati in 2011 to discuss villagers' concerns about the effects of climate change on their low-lying land. (UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe)

The LDCs are the countries that have made the least progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). And with negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda picking up pace, these are the countries that have the most at stake from the future direction of the world's development priorities.

"What these countries are saying is even if you reach the post-2015 phase, they would have to look at the unfinished agenda of the MDGs—they would have to be incorporated in the post-2015 development agenda," said Gyan Chandra Acharya, UN Under-Secretary General for Least Developing Countries.

Acharya said that while a few of the countries may be on target, or reach the target, for one of the goals by the end of 2015, they are starting at such a high baseline that the future challenges are still tremendous.

"When the country's at 70 percent of the population living below the poverty line, say they meet the reduction of that by half which will leave them with about 35 percent, 35 percent of the population living below the poverty—so it's very hard," Acharya told *The InterDependent*. "Rwanda is making good progress, Uganda is making good progress, Bangladesh is making good progress, Nepal is making good progress, but even they will still have something like 25 to 28 to 30 percent of the people below the poverty line by the time we reach 2015."

Lessons Learned

According to Acharya, lessons learned from accelerating MDG progress in these countries point to four key factors. "One, we have found that strong national leadership is critical. If you don't have strong national leadership and ownership, nothing moves. When I say national leadership, it has to be multi-stakeholder," Acharya explained. "Second, we also have found that there has to be the right strategy. Most of the time we don't have the right strategies, or strategies are being changed without really studying the local situations, the geography, the natural endowment and all of that."

Acharya added, "The third is institutions. Now, even if you have national leadership, if you have the strategy but if you don't have the institutions—both the national as well as the local-level institutions—you'll not have progress, and the fourth is resources. If you have the combination of these four, then we have seen that it has worked."

Acharya maintained that the MDG focus on human and social dimensions of development are intrinsic to development. "People have to survive in order to really develop. People have to have basic education, you have to have gender equality, maternal and child mortality [have] to be addressed," he said. "But what we are also saying is that economic growth is very, very important. How do we ensure that there is inclusive sustainable economic growth?"

Sustaining Economic Growth

While some of the LDCs have achieved strong economic growth in the past decade—both Ethiopia and Liberia had GDP growth of more than 7 percent in 2012—much of that growth has failed to generate jobs.

"Employment is a key factor," Acharya claimed. "In the post-2015 agenda, there will be a social dimension, an economic dimension and there will be an environmental dimension. All three will be taken on board in post-2015. What these countries would really like to see is that there is a good emphasis on economic growth based on productive capacity building."

For countries with strong agricultural prospects, that will mean building rural roads and ensuring access to credit and technology to move from sustenance farming to bringing goods to market. For countries with other resources such as minerals, it will mean building up local capacity so the natural wealth benefits the citizens and, in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, addressing conflict associated with minerals. For people dependent on natural resources such as forests in Laos and Nepal, it means addressing degradation.

Future in Peril?

Acharya, whose full title is Undersecretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, said the impact of climate change on poorer countries is universally disproportionate.

Some 10 small island states are also on the list of LDCs. "Because they are dependent so much on marine resources and that is being affected by climate change. Desertification, land pollution and unsustainable patterns of fishing and then of course the sea-level rise, which is a major challenge," he said.

"Some of these islands are just three, four meters over sea. Look at Tuvalu, look at Kiribati, look at Maldives. They are all about three or four meters over sea," Acharya pointed out. He said that besides the existential threat to the people living on these islands—in many cases inhabited for thousands of years—the sea-level rise is causing salinization of the aquifer, leading to a significant problem for extracting fresh groundwater and killing the coral reef. CO2 pollution is impacting marine resources. In addition, it is threatening the livelihood of fish farmers; fish that were once plentiful off their islands now no longer are because of the break in the marine ecosystem chain caused by pollution.

"What they are really looking for is a long-term solution," said Acharya. "The adaptation support is being provided to these countries because everyone knows they are at the frontlines of climate change, but [what] they are also telling us is how long can you go on having an adaptation strategy when you have no idea how big the sea-level rise is going to be and how big the contamination of their water resources will be, and how swiftly the coral and fishing resources are being destroyed."

Other problems facing the LDCs include a growing youth population. One in four youths aged 15-24 is predicted to live in these countries by 2050, and millions of new jobs will have to be created each year to sustain them

Despite the numerous challenges facing the diverse group of states that Acharya's office is mandated to support, he remains optimistic. “Optimism is key to progress,” he concluded. “If you don't have an optimistic view, you don't make progress. The challenge is not that there has been no progress. The challenge is that the progress has been slow. We have to make the progress inclusive.”

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