Chapter 4

Obstacles to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Emerging Global Challenges and the Performance of the Least Developed Countries

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4.1 Introduction

The least developed countries (LDCs) are defined as low-income developing countries suffering from severe structural obstacles to sustainable development (UNDESA, 2015a). Indicators of such obstacles include a low level of human assets and high vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks. Nearly half the population of the 48 LDCs—some 400 million people—remain in extreme poverty, compared with less than a quarter in any other developing country (UNCTAD, 2015). The headline commitment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to eradicate global poverty by 2030. Improving the prospects of the LDCs will play a crucial role in this.

This chapter argues that, despite relatively fast economic growth, the track record of LDCs graduating from their category has been poor, with only four graduating since 1971. Moreover, the LDCs are facing a new set of interrelated global challenges that will hamper further progress. If the SDGs are to be met, the international community must ratchet up development efforts to help equip the LDCs for prosperity in an increasingly constrained development context.

This chapter pursues its argument in two sections. First, it outlines global challenges across six domains—economic, demographic, technological, environmental, security and governance—that have significant implications for LDCs in achieving the SDGs. Second, it explores the implications for the international community and for LDCs, as well as for development strategies more generally, of an increasingly constrained development context.

4.2 Challenges to meeting the SDGs

The period 2000–2015 was generally one of robust economic growth for the LDCs. From 2002 to 2008, for the group, gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average rate of more than 7 per cent. This represented the strongest and longest period of sustained growth achieved by these countries since 1970 (UNCTAD, 2010). Although, this growth slowed somewhat after 2010, it remained strong, averaging around 5 per cent in the period 2010–2015 (UNCTAD, 2015). This rapid economic growth has translated into better outcomes in terms of improving human assets and reducing susceptibility to economic and environmental shocks.

Despite this progress, the LDCs as a group cannot be expected to meet most of the SDGs unless critical action is taken. This argument is based on three key factors: first, the LDCs' historical record of graduating from their category and meeting the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has not been stellar. In the 40 years since the LDC category was established, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) recommended only seven countries for graduation, and found another two countries eligible for graduation (Kawamura, 2014). While the pace of LDCs graduating/being found eligible to graduate has accelerated since 2000, it has not been nearly fast enough to meet the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) target or the MDGs. Moreover, the SDGs and their related indicators are more comprehensive, more universal in scope and more ambitious in magnitude than the MDGs. For example, SDG 1 is to 'by 2030, eradicate poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than USD 1.25 a day' (UNDP, 2016). As such, they will be more difficult to attain.

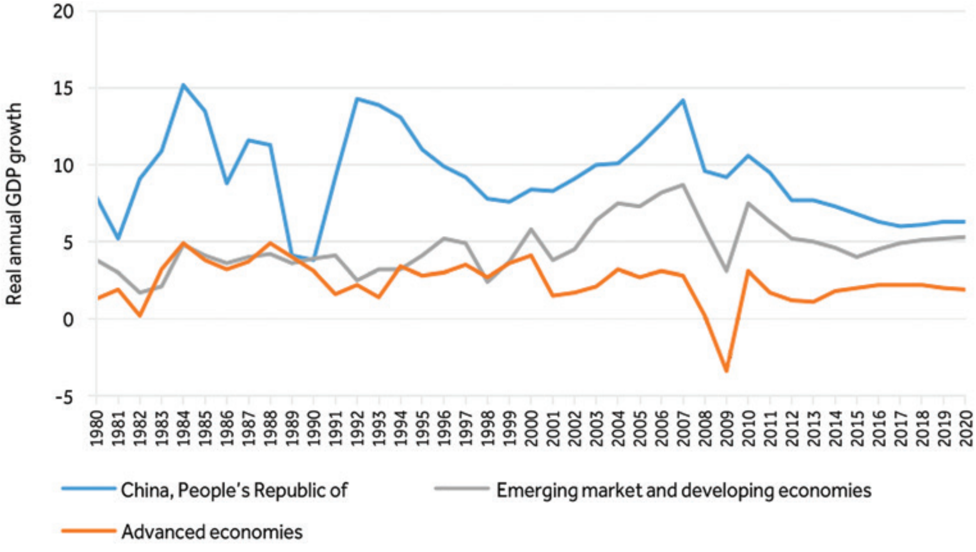
Second, the LDCs failed to meet the MDGs and the targets for graduation during a period of unprecedented economic growth (2000–2015), when they on average out-performed other developing countries. They now face a significantly more constrained development context in which they must progress towards the SDGs. The global economic outlook is one of secular stagnation: growth in China is slowing, global output is reduced, the favourable commodity super cycle has come to an end, interest rates are rising and it is becoming increasingly difficult to access international finance.

Third, LDCs face a set of interconnected global challenges—economic, technological, demographic, environmental, security and governance-wise—that will hamper seriously their prospects of achieving the SDGs. Compounding the more pessimistic economic outlook are income inequality, automation, jobless growth, demographic imbalances, climate change-related shocks, political instability and security threats and weakened domestic governance. Underpinning all of these challenges is that, despite the progress LDCs have made on reducing their vulnerability, they remain the most susceptible to economic and environmental shocks. Moreover, these shocks have the potential to proliferate between now and 2030, and their associated costs will fall disproportionately on the LDCs. Taken together—the poor historical performance of the LDCs, the worsening economic climate and the emergence of new global challenges—these factors will limit LDC progress towards achieving the SDGs unless serious action is taken, both domestically as well as by the international community. The remainder of this section explores the emergence of a series of global challenges pertinent to this discussion.

4.2.1 Economic

Economic convergence between the advanced and emerging countries is slowing down: the gap in the economic growth rate between Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and non-OECD countries has narrowed in the past decade. This is compounded by the slowing growth of China (Figure 4.1), whose previously rapid growth benefited neighbours and suppliers, in particular exporters of natural resources, such as the LDCs (OECD, 2014b).

Figure 4.1 Actual and projected slowing growth



Source: Datamapper (2016).

The slowdown in LDC growth since 2010 can be attributed partly to their dependence on commodity exports and falling commodity prices. All commodity price indices, including food, agricultural raw material, mineral ores and metals and crude petroleum, declined between 2012 and 2015 (UNCTAD, 2015). Falling prices were a result of weakening demand, oversupply (following overinvestment during the preceding decade of higher prices), an appreciating dollar and unusually large harvests (World Bank, 2015a). Decreasing demand from the US following the gains made by fracking and other deposits, as well as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' decision not to reduce production, has pushed down oil prices. LDC reliance on commodities has also resulted in a pro-cyclical investment strategy, leaving them vulnerable to price fluctuations. Almost one quarter of LDCs (11) are highly dependent on natural resource rents as an engine of growth and are thus especially susceptible to commodity price shocks (Table 4.1).[1]

Slowing growth and falling commodity prices are compounded by the prospect of jobless growth. GDP and employment growth trends have been diverging over the past two decades in almost all countries, including the major OECD economies, the BRIICS (Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China and South Africa) and certain low-income countries, such as Ghana and Bangladesh (Figure 4.2) (OECD, 2015a). Jobless growth is thought to be a significant global risk for the coming decade (WEF, 2015).

Income inequality, both across and within countries, was also on the rise. In 2015, the poorest 66 per cent of the world's population were estimated to receive just 13 per cent of global income, while the richest 1 per cent received nearly 15 per cent. Approximately 50 per cent of the world's wealth is owned by 1 per cent of the global population (OECD, 2015a). Of the 27 LDCs with data pertaining to their Gini

Table 4.1 LDCs are highly dependent on non-renewable natural resources

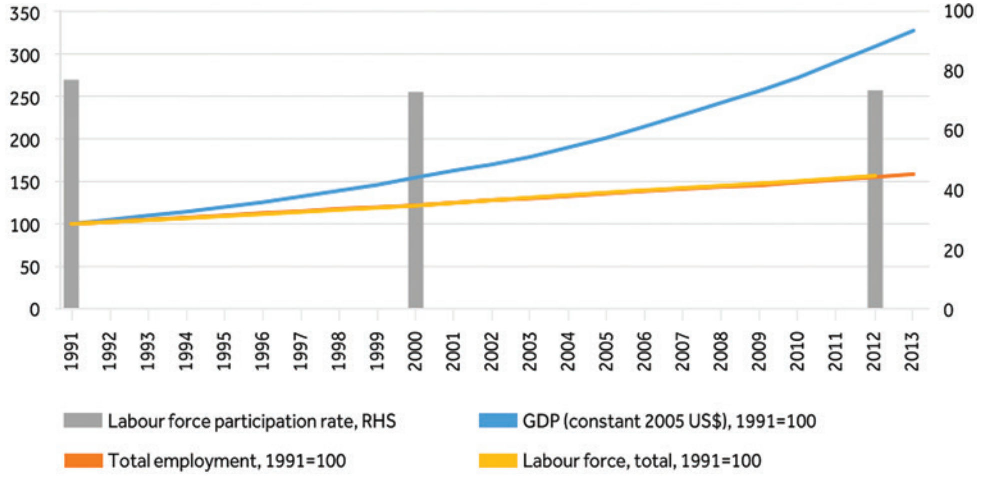
Country	Non-renewable natural resource rents (% of GDP)
Equatorial Guinea	53.3
Mauritania	41.9
Angola	34.6
South Sudan	25.8
Chad	23.3
Congo, Dem. Rep.	21.1
Eritrea	18.8
Zambia	16.6
Yemen, Rep.	15.7
Burkina Faso	13.7
Lao PDR	10.3

Source: Authors' calculations based on World Development Indicators (2016c).

coefficient available, 12 have worsened in terms of income inequality since the early 2000s (World Bank, 2016c).

This more constrained economic environment is making international finance more difficult to come by for the LDCs. Real bilateral official development assistance (ODA) from OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members has stagnated since 2010 (UNCTAD, 2015). While foreign direct investment (FDI) to LDCs grew rapidly during the 2000s, it has stagnated since 2010. Moreover, FDI inflows are concentrated in a few key resource-rich countries. Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Haiti accounted for 58 per cent of total FDI to the LDCs in 2014 (ibid.). Although extractive industries in

Figure 4.2 Jobless growth occurring in LDCs: Bangladesh



Source: World Development Indicators (2016c) and ILO Employment Trends (2015).
Notes: Indexed GDP (constant 2005 US$), total employment and total labour force, 1991=100 (LHS); labour force participation rate, total in % of total population ages 15–64 (RHS).

LDCs will continue to attract foreign investment, accessing the levels of international finance required to help meet the SDGs will be problematic.

4.2.2 Technology

Technology has been responsible for significant productivity increases throughout human history and technological adoption and penetration have contributed to economic convergence between advanced and emerging countries. Technology also poses risks, however. Automation may accelerate the trend of jobless growth. The rise of processing power and digital information has enabled computers to increasingly perform both routine manual and routine cognitive tasks more cheaply and effectively than people. Moreover, skill-biased technological change is exacerbating income inequality trends. The income and wealth gains the digital revolution has generated are increasingly accruing to capital owners and the highest-skilled workers. Over the past three decades, labour's share in output has shrunk globally from 64 to 59 per cent (The Economist, 2014).

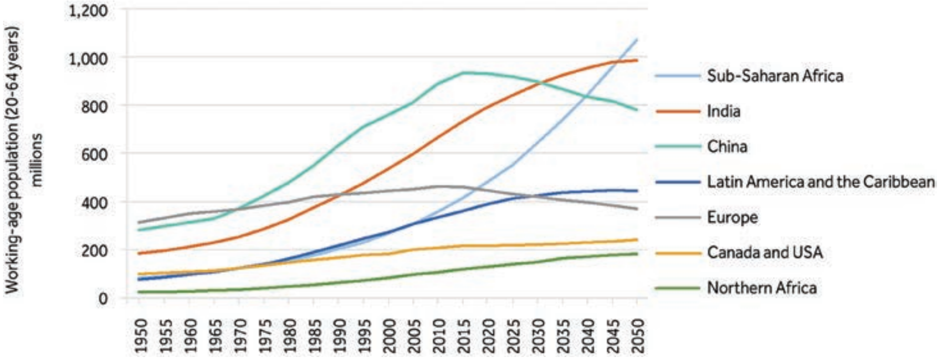
The prospect of digital technologies and automation worsening income disparities and disrupting society is relevant to developing countries too. Nike used 106,000 fewer contract workers in 2013 than in 2012 because it is 'shifting toward automation,' even in lower-margin countries such as China, Indonesia and Vietnam (McAfee, 2014). The rise of 3D printing and additive manufacturing has the potential to re-localise parts of the production process and shorten global supply chains, with significant implications for jobs in low-value added manufacturing activities in developing countries. These trends are contributing to 'premature deindustrialisation' and mean developing countries need to think carefully about where they want to position themselves in global value chains (Rodrik, 2013). This implies a particular challenge for developing regions with fast-growing working-age populations, such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which may be less able to employ the millions of job entrants in emerging basic manufacturing industries.

4.2.3 Demography

The world will experience large-scale demographic transitions over the next 50 years. Working-age populations will expand rapidly in low-income countries, particularly in Africa and South Asia (Figure 4.3). Africa in particular has experienced a rapid decrease in child mortality combined with high fertility rates, contributing to a population explosion. The LDCs have experienced a growing share of the total global population but their share of global GDP has not matched this (Figure 4.4). Meanwhile, LDCs will continue to experience sustained population growth figures until 2050 (Figure 4.5).

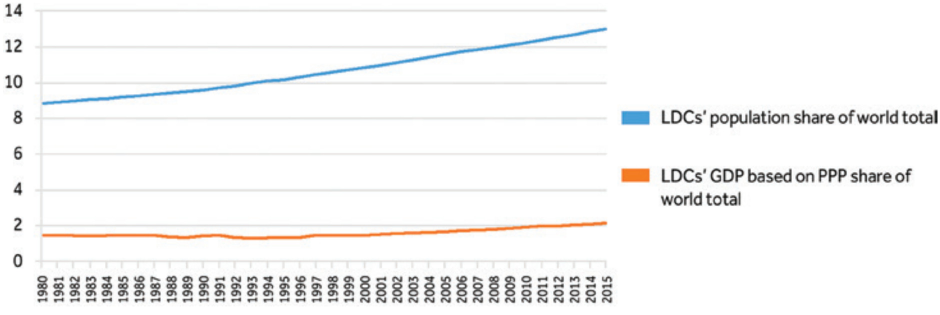
Countries with a high ratio of non-dependants to dependants can enjoy a 'demographic dividend'. A country's capacity to exploit this demographic dividend, however, relies on its capacity to employ the growing youth bulge in the labour force. Sub-Saharan Africa's labour force is expanding by about 8 million people per year; South Asia's by 12 million per year (World Bank, 2012). There should be around 600 million more jobs in 2020 than in 2005 in order to maintain the world's ratio of employment to

Figure 4.3 Working-age populations are expected to grow substantially in low-income countries



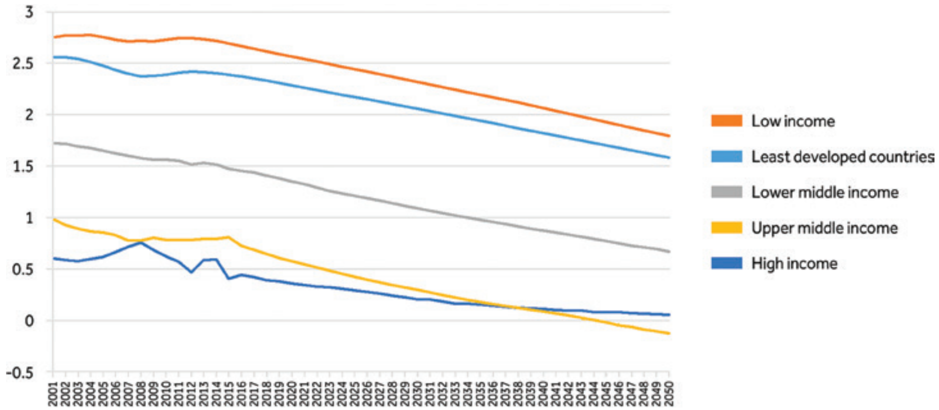
Source: UNDESA World Populations Prospects: The 2012 Revision, www.esa.un.org/wpp

Figure 4.4 LDCs' population and GDP share of world total



Source: Author's calculations based on UNCTAD (2015), IMF Datamapper (2015) and http://esango.un.org/sp/ldc_data/web/StatPlanet.html

Figure 4.5 LDCs will experience sustained population growth figures (annual %)



Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank Health Nutrition and Population Statistics: Population estimates and projections 2016.

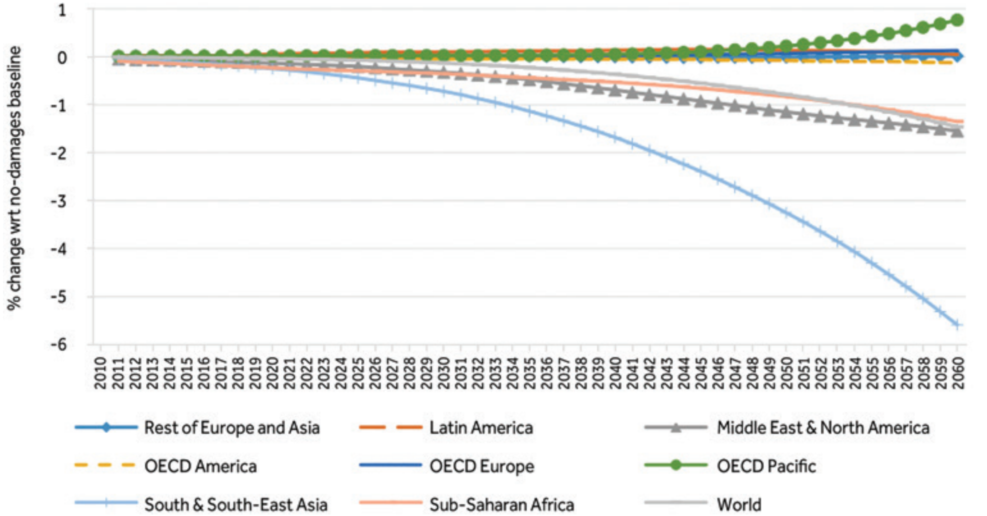
working-age population (ibid.). However, the gap between actual employment and the working-age population is significant, and is growing in several regions; it may reach about 200 million in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2030 (ibid.). Such a youth bulge and employment gap may cause significant social and political problems if left untended.

4.2.4 Environment

Environmental degradation and GDP growth are tightly and negatively correlated (van Zanden et al., 2014) and climate change is expected to reduce economic growth in most regions (Figure 4.6). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that the global mean temperature will increase by 0.5–1.2 degrees Celsius between 2015 and 2035 (IPCC, 2014). Significant portions of plant and animal species face extinction risks as a result. The frequency of natural hazards, such as floods, droughts, typhoons and hurricanes, is already increasing because of climate change. The number of people exposed to droughts is expected to increase by 9–17 per cent in 2030 and 50–90 per cent in 2080. The number exposed to river floods is expected to increase by 4–15 per cent in 2030 and 12–29 per cent in 2080 (World Bank, 2016a). Coastal systems and low-lying areas are at increasing risk from sea level rise, which will continue for centuries even if the global mean temperature is stabilised (IPCC, 2014). People living in LDCs are disproportionately at risk from climate change-related shocks. LDCs suffered 1.3 million climate-related deaths from 1980 to 2013, accounting for 51 per cent of global casualties, although they are home to only 12 per cent of the world's population (IIED, 2013).

Climate change poses a significant threat to food security: fisheries productivity and wheat, rice and maize production in tropical regions will be severely challenged.

Figure 4.6 Climate change will reduce economic growth in most regions (OECD projection of regional economic impact (in % of GDP) owing to climate change)



Source: OECD (2014b).

Water scarcity will become increasingly prevalent in light of the projected reduction in renewable surface water and groundwater resources. Climate change is also expected to affect human health by compounding existing health problems and diseases, such as malaria and diarrhoea.

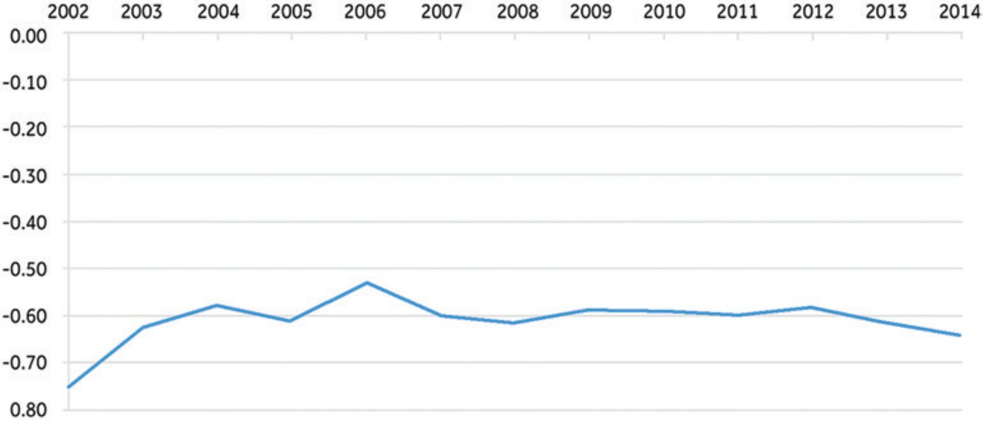
Poorer people suffer disproportionately from climate-related shocks. In the absence of rapid and inclusive development policies, climate change could result in an additional 100 million, mostly based in LDCs, living in poverty by 2030 (World Bank, 2016a). Meeting the SDGs is highly unlikely under such a scenario.

4.2.5 Security

Security and peace are essential for development. Yet 1.5 billion people live in countries affected by conflict. Inter-state conflict is one of the most important global risks in terms of its high likelihood and probable negative impacts (WEF, 2015). Globally, forced displacement has been accelerating, reaching unprecedented levels. By the end of 2014, conflict, persecution and human rights violations had forcibly displaced 59.5 million people worldwide (UNHCR, 2015). The burden of these displaced peoples falls disproportionately on low-income countries and LDCs. Developing regions hosted 86 per cent of the world's refugees in 2014, whereas the LDCs hosted 25 per cent in 2014—some 3.6 million refugees (ibid.). Meanwhile, political instability and violence continue to blight many LDCs (Figure 4.7).

Persistent conflicts in many low-income countries have negative impacts on development, as the rise in poverty in such countries demonstrates. For example, countries that experienced major violence between 1981 and 2005 had average poverty rates 21 percentage points higher than in countries that experienced no violence (World Bank, 2011). Moreover, the negative externalities of conflicts spill

Figure 4.7 Perceptions of political stability and absence of violence/ terrorism remain high in the LDCs



Source: World Bank (2015b).
Note: Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism measures perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically motivated violence, including terrorism. Estimate of governance ranges from approximately -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) governance performance.

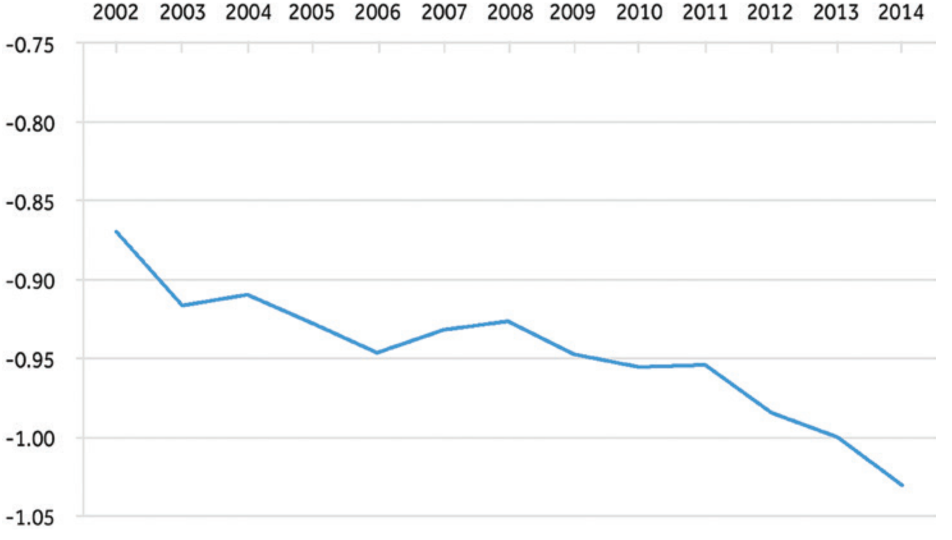
over to other countries: neighbouring countries host 75 per cent of refugees (UNHCR, 2015). Moreover, while inter-state conflicts have declined, new forms of security risks have emerged. Terrorism has become an increasingly salient problem for advanced countries and LDCs since 9/11. The rise of rogue terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia, is making governance in already fragile states increasingly difficult. All these groups are propagating conflict beyond their origin countries.

4.2.6 Governance

The final global challenge is one of governance. Several significant challenges to governance have emerged worldwide, including bureaucracies' reluctance to change, an institutional 'silo' mentality and the weakness of subnational entities. Public trust in governments has stagnated and fallen in many places over recent decades. Moreover, the governments of LDCs face greater financial constraints and find it increasingly difficult to carry out programmes of action with reduced mandates from the citizen body. The World Governance Indicators project estimates that government effectiveness—perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies—has deteriorated rapidly since the early 2000s (Figure 4.8).

Another way of assessing the governance prospects of the LDCs is through the concept of fragility. A total of 31 of the 48 LDCs are defined as 'fragile states' as classified by an OECD composite index (OECD, 2015b).[2] These are countries whose governmental

Figure 4.8 Perceptions of government effectiveness in LDCs have been declining



Source: World Bank (2015b).
Note: Estimate of governance ranges from approximately -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) governance performance.

effectiveness, regulatory quality and accountability are weak. The OECD's composite list of fragile states is partly based on the Fund for Peace's Fragile States' Index (FSI).[3] Of the 38 most fragile states on the 2015 FSI—marked as on 'very high alert', 'high alert' and 'alert'—26 are LDCs (Table 4.2). Moreover, a critical portion of LDCs have become more fragile over time. Since the Fund for Peace began compiling its index in 2005, 13 LDCs have experienced 'worsening', 'significant worsening' or 'critical worsening' in their fragility indices (Fund for Peace, 2015).

These governance issues should be cause for concern. Meeting the SDGs will require significant domestic resource mobilisation, in terms of generating government revenues, coordinating and implementing programmes and evaluating progress. Several LDCs lack such effective government capacity and are thus at risk of falling further behind in their development.

The challenges outlined above are of course not discrete. Rather, they interact with one another in complex and often mutually reinforcing ways. For example, automation and skill-biased technological change may widen disparities in the income distribution and contribute to a worsening economic environment. Moreover, the democratic youth bulge in many LDCs will place pressure on economies already struggling to create sustainable jobs in large numbers. The negative effects of climate change will interact with and exacerbate the other challenges, causing additional economic, governance and security problems. It is important to emphasise that a significant portion of the burden of these global challenges falls disproportionately on the LDCs, and this has severe implications for whether or not they can meet the SDGs.

4.3 Implications for the international community and development strategy

This chapter has highlighted the difficulty in achieving the SDGs for the LDCs. This is based on their historical record of graduation from the LDC category, the more pessimistic global economic outlook they now face and the emergence of a set of global challenges particularly problematic for their development context. It is important to recognise that the ultimate objective is development, and the SDGs are just one mechanism by means of which to gauge progress towards this. However, because of their universality of scope and unprecedented magnitude of ambition, they do represent a significant departure from previous development frameworks and deserve to be treated seriously. It is thus imperative that the LDCs and the international community realise that a 'business as usual' approach will be insufficient to meet the SDGs. Detailing a comprehensive framework for how the LDCs can achieve the SDGs is beyond the remit of this chapter. That said, the remainder of this section sketches what steps the international community and the LDCs can take to put themselves on a path to success.

4.3.1 Increase the total allocation of ODA to LDCs and improve ODA targeting

ODA to LDCs has stagnated since 2010. Moreover, it has become increasingly unevenly distributed, with significant portions going to countries based on

Table 4.2 LDCs are among the world's most fragile states

Ranking	Country	Fragility Index 2015	Status since 2006
Very High Alert			
1	South Sudan*	114.5	Some worsening
2	Somalia*	114	Worsening
3	Central African Republic*	111.9	Significant worsening
4	Sudan*	110.8	Some improvement
High Alert			
5	Congo (D. R.)*	109.7	Marginal change
6	Chad*	108.4	Some worsening
7	Yemen*	108.1	Worsening
9	Syria	107.9	Significant worsening
8	Afghanistan*	107.9	Worsening
10	Guinea*	104.9	Some worsening
11	Haiti*	104.5	Marginal change
12	Iraq	104.5	Strong improvement
13	Pakistan	102.9	Marginal change
14	Nigeria	102.4	Some worsening
15	Cote d'Ivoire	100	Strong improvement
16	Zimbabwe	100	Strong improvement
Alert			
17	Guinea Bissau*	99.9	Critical worsening
18	Burundi*	98.1	Marginal change
19	Niger*	97.8	Significant worsening
20	Ethiopia*	97.5	Some worsening
21	Kenya	97.4	Significant worsening
21	Liberia*	97.3	Some improvement
23	Uganda*	97	Marginal worsening
24	Eritrea*	96.9	Significant worsening
25	Libya	95.3	Critical worsening
26	Mauritania*	94.9	Some worsening
27	Myanmar*	94.7	Some improvement
28	Cameroon	94.3	Some worsening
29	North Korea	93.8	Some improvement
30	Mali*	93.1	Critical worsening
31	Sierra Leone*	91.9	Strong improvement
32	Bangladesh*	91.8	Some improvement
33	Congo (Republic)	90.8	Some improvement
34	Sri Lanka	90.6	Marginal change
34	Timor-Leste*	90.6	Some improvement
36	Nepal*	90.5	Some improvement
37	Rwanda*	90.2	Some improvement
38	Egypt	90	Marginal worsening

Note: LDCs are marked with an asterisk. Source: Fund for Peace (2015).

geostrategic imperatives. Between 2003 and 2012, 22 per cent of all OECD ODA was allocated to Afghanistan and Iraq (OECD, 2015b). Per capita ODA is also unevenly distributed across LDCs, heightening the risk of 'aid orphans'—countries that are potentially under-aided and thus at risk of being left further behind.

4.3.2 Improve the quality of aid distribution and test innovative aid modalities to LDCs

The ultimate objective of aid to LDCs is to develop local capacity until it is no longer required as a financing mechanism. As such, ODA should reward national reforms that enhance domestic resource mobilisation, enable multi-sectoral approaches, build trust and quality (not just quantity) of public services, extend the use of technology among the poorest and most vulnerable people and scale up South–South, regional and triangular cooperation (OECD, 2015b).

4.3.3 Adapt traditional aid modalities, such as sector and budget support, to more specific LDC contexts

This could include supporting national ownership and capacity-building by distributing aid through national systems (OECD, 2015b).

4.3.4 Ease access to international finance and agree on quantifiable targets for mobilising additional sources of finance beyond aid

This includes increasing LDCs' own domestic revenues, making international commitments to raise support for public financial management, reducing the transaction cost of remittances and a new global partnership to stem illicit financial flows.

4.3.5 Help LDCs tap existing global knowledge as well as develop new knowledge relevant to their needs

Ultimately, aid and international finance will go only so far. The key to long-term cross-national income convergence is the widespread adoption of policy knowledge and existing technology (Comin and Ferrer, 2013). While the pace of technology adoption across developing countries and LDCs has been increasing in recent years, its widespread penetration within countries has been slowing down. In addition, there is rapid development of new digital technologies that disrupt existing ways of operating as well as providing new possibilities to leapfrog to produce and deliver goods and services more efficiently (OECD, 2015, 2016b). Moreover, equally large disruptions and potential are possible with rapid advancement in biotechnology as well as new materials (OECD, 2016a). It is therefore important to help developing countries tap into existing knowledge as well as to help prepare them to take advantage of new technological development rather than being left behind. This requires deep technical expertise and policy knowledge, and institutional capacity with which to select and use relevant knowledge and technologies. This in turn requires significant investment in education. To accelerate this process, the international community should invest heavily in knowledge exchange programmes with LDCs, open up public data platforms and share intellectual property and expertise on key technologies around climate change mitigation, disease prevention, agricultural productivity and new manufacturing technologies.

4.3.6 Address specific LDC challenges

The SDGs are to be lauded for their universality. However, the international community should not forget that the LDC category exists because these countries face a specific set of obstacles to development, as well as challenges unique to each member of the group. Two of the challenges outlined in this chapter stand out in particular: demographic changes and vulnerability to climate-related shocks. Several LDCs face an explosion in their working-age populations in coming decades. This youth bulge can provide a demographic dividend if harnessed carefully. However, widespread political unrest and economic instability could result if sound development policies on universal education, female empowerment and job creation are not put in place. LDCs are also more exposed to flooding, droughts and famines and more vulnerable to their effects, and possess less capacity to prevent and manage those effects. Mitigating the effects of climate change in LDCs will be a key task in the short run, while the long-term prevention of climate change will be instrumental to their sustainable development. LDC private sector capacity can be built through access to established global funds for climate change mitigation.

This chapter has highlighted the difficulties facing the LDCs in meeting the SDGs based on their historical record of graduating and meeting the MDGs, the more challenging economic environment in which the SDGs must be attained, and the emergence of a set of global challenges that will hamper their progress if not addressed rigorously. It should be a call to renewed and heightened action by the international community and the LDCs to mobilise the resources and develop the institutional capacity necessary to meet these emerging development challenges.

Notes

1 High dependency on non-renewable natural resources is defined as a country's total non-renewable natural resource rents as a percentage of GDP exceeding 10 per cent.
2 The OECD began reporting on official development assistance (ODA) flows specifically to a group of conflict-affected and "fragile states" in 2005 based on an annually revised composite list drawn from the World Bank and the African and Asian Development Bank Harmonised List and the Fund For Peace's Fragile States Index (FSI) (formerly the Failed States Index).
3 The FSI is a composite index that covers 178 countries and is based on 12 main social, economic and political indicators: social (demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced persons, group grievance, human flight and brain drain), economic (uneven economic development, poverty and economic decline), political (state legitimacy, public services, human rights and rule of law, security apparatus, factionalised elites, external intervention).

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