

LDC Graduation: COVID-19 impacts need to be considered

The United Nations' Committee for Development Policy (CDP) is holding its triennial review on 22-26 February 2021.¹ This meeting is scheduled to decide, without data showing the impact of COVID-19 on graduation indicators, whether to recommend that any least developed countries (LDCs) should graduate from LDC status.

In order to graduate, an LDC must meet two of the three criteria², or gross national income (GNI) percapita at least twice the threshold, in two consecutive triennial reviews by the CDP. This CDP recommendation then needs to be endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA) also needs to take note of it for it to take effect. LDCs are usually given a three-year preparatory period from the date of the UNGA resolution before the graduation becomes effective.³

Some implications of LDC graduation

While Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal and Timor Leste have achieved improvements in development (prior to COVID-19), graduation from LDC status can result in losing a number of benefits. These benefits of LDC status include: aid, preferential market access (e.g. duty-free quota-free programs such as 'Everything But Arms' to the European Union) and important flexibilities at the World Trade Organization (WTO) such as transition periods before intellectual property protection (such as patents on medicines, vaccines and climate change technology or copyright on textbooks) needs to be applied, as well as transition periods in current negotiations such as disciplines on fisheries subsidies etc.

Should LDCs graduate without 2020 data on the impact of COVID-19 on graduation indicators?

Despite the CDP's deep concerns about the possible negative impacts of COVID-19 on LDCs, it is scheduled to make its decision at its next meeting as to whether to recommend that Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal and Timor Leste graduate from LDC status, despite not having any 2020 data for the LDC graduation criteria.⁴ This means the CDP will decide whether to recommend these five LDCs lose the benefits of LDC status without taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the LDC graduation criteria.

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/cdp-plenary-2021/>

² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldc-graduation.html>: Gross National Income, Human Assets Index and Economic Vulnerability Index thresholds

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldc-graduation.html> and <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2018CDPhandbook.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/ldcportal/covid-19-and-graduation-from-the-ldc-category-statement-by-the-cdp-12-may-2020/>

Third World Network (TWN) is an independent non-profit international research and advocacy organisation involved in bringing about a greater articulation of the needs, aspirations and rights of the peoples in the South and in promoting just, equitable and ecological development.

Address: 131 Jalan Macalister, 10400 Penang, MALAYSIA
Email: twn@twnetwork.org

Tel: 60-4-2266728/2266159

Fax: 60-4-2264505

Website: www.twn.my

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This fundamental gap in data in the three main LDC graduation criteria scores of the 2021 triennial review will obviously be prejudging the graduation of eligible LDCs, thus resulting in a premature and questionable graduation assessment. For instance, the 2020 UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) LDC Report states that LDC exports of garments are forecast to “shrink by 20 per cent in 2020” which will directly affect Bangladesh and Nepal, amongst others, for which manufactures account for “over 50 per cent” of merchandise exports,⁵ one of the eight indicators of the economic and environmental vulnerability index criteria.

While the CDP will consider additional information on COVID-19 and its impacts when deciding whether to recommend at its next meeting that these LDCs graduate,⁶ since the pandemic has also hampered the collection of statistics, it is not clear the CDP will have sufficient statistics even for these additional considerations. For example, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) notes that “Short-term statistical production, which heavily relies on traditional face-to-face methods, continues to be affected, with low and middle-income countries impacted the most. Three out of four countries in that income group saw their production of monthly and quarterly statistics negatively affected by the pandemic”.⁷

National statistical offices (NSOs) have also been affected by the pandemic: “65 percent of NSO headquarters offices are partially or fully closed, 90 percent have instructed staff to work from home, and 96 percent have partially or fully stopped face-to-face data collection” and 90% of national statistical offices in low- and lower middle-income countries have seen the pandemic blunt their ability to meet international reporting requirements.⁸ Even before the pandemic, LDCs did not seem to be able to collect the kind of excess mortality data⁹ which would indicate the number of increased deaths due to the pandemic.

Some continuing impacts of COVID-19

Given the unprecedented impact that COVID-19 has had on development, including in LDCs, it is surprising that the CDP plans to go ahead on 22-26 February 2021 and decide whether to recommend that certain LDCs graduate, despite not having 2020 data for the graduation criteria. For example, in May 2020, DESA already warned that COVID-19 “threatens to undo progress achieved towards sustainable development by the LDCs over recent decades”. Even before the pandemic crisis, LDCs were unlikely to achieve the SDGs’ and “once the new coronavirus spreads within an LDC, prospects are dire”.¹⁰ The President of the Economic and Social Council noted that the pandemic is “not only a threat to our health, but a human crisis of multiple dimensions” pointing to the setbacks caused by COVID-19.¹¹ And she added that ““The COVID-19 pandemic, while primarily a health crisis, also quickly became the worst human and economic crisis in decades”. . . “It has exacerbated the already difficult situation for millions of people living in poverty””.¹²

Beyond the health crises, which include disruption caused by COVID-19 to vaccinations etc for other diseases (see Annex 1) and other social crises (see Annex 2) caused by this pandemic, it has also affected LDC economies through multiple channels, including reduced demand for exports, reduced commodity prices,

⁵ <https://unctad.org/webflyer/least-developed-countries-report-2020>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/ldcportal/covid-19-and-graduation-from-the-ldc-category-statement-by-the-cdp-12-may-2020/>

⁷ <https://covid-19-response.unstatshub.org/statistical-programmes/priority-needs-of-national-statistical-offices/>

⁸ <https://covid-19-response.unstatshub.org/statistical-programmes/covid19-nso-survey/>

⁹ E.g. <https://ourworldindata.org/excess-mortality-covid> and <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-tracker>

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-66-covid-19-and-the-least-developed-countries/>

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068331>

¹² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067801>

reduced remittances,¹³ increased unemployment¹⁴ and reduced tourism causing unprecedented pandemic-induced recessions.

For example, in 2019 travel exports were 44%, 80%, 81% and 93% of Myanmar, Timor Leste, Laos and Nepal's total services exports respectively.¹⁵ "Some LDCs, where tourism accounts for around 25 per cent of foreign exchange earnings and approximately 20 per cent of GDP, will be seriously affected ... Although countries with tourism sectors will be impacted irrespective of their level of development, in LDCs this impact is likely to compound with other forms of economic and social fragility."¹⁶

International passenger demand fell 76% in 2020 (the sharpest decline in aviation history) and Asia-Pacific airlines' traffic fell 80% in 2020.¹⁷ The International Air Transport Association's baseline forecast for 2021 is half of 2019 levels, however it notes "there is a severe downside risk if more severe travel restrictions in response to new variants persist. Should such a scenario materialize, demand improvement could be limited to just 13% over 2020 levels, leaving the industry at 38% of 2019 levels."¹⁸ It notes that "Optimism that the arrival and initial distribution of vaccines would lead to a prompt and orderly restoration in global air travel have been dashed in the face of new outbreaks and new mutations of the disease."¹⁹ Reflecting the pessimism about recovery from COVID-19, British Airways, the largest operator of Boeing 747 planes, predicts that travel would not return to pre-pandemic levels by 2024, so it is immediately retiring its whole Boeing 747 fleet.²⁰

UNCTAD's LDC Report released on 3 December 2020²¹, forecasts that "the pandemic will push LDCs to their worst economic performance in 30 years in 2020, with falling income levels, widespread employment losses and widening fiscal deficits". The GDP per capita of LDCs is projected to contract by 2.6% in 2020 from already low levels, with only \$1,088, compared with a world average of \$11,371 in 2019. The report informs that "at least 43 out of the 47 LDCs will likely experience a fall in their average income" and that "the current account deficit of LDCs is forecast to widen from \$41 billion (or 3.8% of their collective GDP) in 2019 to \$61 billion (or 5.6% of their GDP) in 2020, the highest value ever".

The Report further states "the crisis will reverse years of painstaking progress by LDCs in social fields such as poverty reduction, nutrition and education ... The number of people living in extreme poverty (i.e. with an income level lower than \$1.90 per day) in LDCs could rise by 32 million in 2020, pushing the poverty rate from 32.5% to 35.7% and limiting these countries' chances of achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The people living in extreme poverty in LDCs account for more than 50% of the global total".

As regards graduation from LDC status, the Report cautions that "the world economic crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the previously planned graduation of LDCs".

¹³ E.g. 28.6% of Nepal's GDP is personal remittances which leaves it 'exposed to shocks from reductions in remittances' <http://unohrrls.org/custom-content/uploads/2020/05/Statement-of-LDCs-on-COVID-19-Broader-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁴ E.g. 'As a result of the economic crisis created by the pandemic, almost 1.6 billion informal economy workers (representing the most vulnerable in the labour market), out of a worldwide total of two billion and a global workforce of 3.3 billion, have suffered massive damage to their capacity to earn a living. This is due to lockdown measures and/or because they work in the hardest-hit sectors. The first month of the crisis is estimated to have resulted in a drop of 60 per cent in the income of informal workers globally. This translates into a drop of 81 per cent in Africa and the Americas, 21.6 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and 70 per cent in Europe and Central Asia. Without alternative income sources, these workers and their families will have no means to survive.' https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang-en/index.htm

¹⁵ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/ldcs_report_e.pdf

¹⁶ <http://unohrrls.org/custom-content/uploads/2020/05/Statement-of-LDCs-on-COVID-19-Broader-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2021-02-03-02/>

¹⁸ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2021-02-03-02/>

¹⁹ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2021-02-03-02/>

²⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/17/british-airways-retires-its-entire-fleet-of-boeing-747-jets.html>

²¹ <https://unctad.org/press-material/least-developed-countries-report-2020productive-capacities-new-decade> and <https://unctad.org/press-material/improve-productive-capacities-worlds-poorest-countries-stronger-recovery-unctad-says>

Another report states:

“The pandemic threatens to impact the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS disproportionately with potentially devastating impacts on human health, including through social and economic effects of the virus and containment policies through the months and years to come. The lack of domestic financial resources, high debt levels and fragile health systems presents an urgent challenge. What has emerged as a health crisis in the short term may well have far reaching impacts on education, human rights, food security and economic development in the long term. . .

Furthermore, the global demand and supply-side shocks arising from the impact of COVID-19, are also heavily impacting LDCs that are dependent on exporting manufactured goods, particularly clothing and apparel. Six LDCs – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti, the Gambia, Nepal and Lesotho – receive more than 50 per cent of their export revenue from exporting manufactured goods. The contraction in exports will likely lead to current account deficits.’²²

The World Health Organization (WHO) has predicted that the pandemic will take 4-5 years to get under control.²³ Despite the WHO Director-General having said “there will be no return to the old normal for the foreseeable future”,²⁴ the World Bank has stated that the global economic recovery may take 5 years.²⁵ Even once the world economy recovers, UNCTAD notes the talk of a “K”-shaped recovery with a “v-shaped” recovery for the wealthy and a struggle for everyone else.²⁶

The Development Committee (a ministerial-level forum of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund representing 189 countries) noted, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented challenges,²⁷ so governments are also taking unprecedented steps to deal with it.²⁸ While LDCs saw the largest increase in extreme poverty in 2020 due to the pandemic, they were least able to afford support packages so they provided the smallest fiscal response to the pandemic by share of GDP or per capita (LDCs provided \$17.8/person compared to \$1,365/person in developed and transition economies).²⁹ This has been compounded by a lack of international support for LDCs such as debt relief, assistance with relief and stimulus packages and falling official development assistance.

While vaccines have been developed for COVID-19, because developed countries have bought up most of the available doses,³⁰ Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar and Nepal are not predicted to have widespread vaccination coverage until 2023 or later³¹ and it will take until 2027³² (if at all³³) for enough of the world’s population to be vaccinated to reduce the threat of COVID-19. Whereas Denmark aims to have vaccinated its entire population by June 2021.³⁴ The stark difference in vaccines administered between developed countries and LDCs can also be seen.³⁵

²² <http://unohrrls.org/covid-19/>

²³ <https://www.ft.com/content/69c75de6-9c6b-4bca-b110-2a55296b0875>

²⁴ https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/covid-19-virtual-press-conference—13-july.pdf?sfvrsn=5b72e4c7_2

²⁵ <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/global-economic-recovery-may-take-5-years-world-bank-chief-economist-says/2085603/>

²⁶ <https://unctad.org/news/raising-wages-squeezing-corporate-rents-key-recovery-covid-19>

²⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/17/world-bankimf-spring-meetings-2020-development-committee-communicate>

²⁸ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/global-economy-hit-deepest-recession-80-years-despite-massive-stimulus-measures>

²⁹ https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/0sg2020d1_en.pdf

³⁰ E.g. see <https://launchandscalefaster.org/covid-19> and ‘A small group of rich countries – comprising just 16 percent of the world’s population – have locked up 60 percent of the global vaccine supply’, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-vaccine-nationalism-could-prolong-covid-19-pandemic-n1255417>

³¹ <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>

³² <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/it-will-be-six-years-before-the-world-is-vaccinated-against-covid-19-experts-20210210-p5718i.html>

³³ <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>

³⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/covid-19-vaccination-passports-denmark/index.html>

³⁵ E.g. <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/#global>

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) notes: “COVAX supplies may be slow to arrive, especially if delays in the production for and delivery to richer countries push back delivery dates for poorer nations. Given that unexpected hiccups in procuring supplies have already occurred in most developed countries, it is likely that developing countries with poor infrastructure, few healthcare workers and inadequate refrigeration will find the rollout even harder.”³⁶

The EIU further points out that “The costs associated with vaccine rollouts are more than just the price of the product itself, and many developing countries will struggle to finance the additional expenditures (such as transport and distribution costs, and salaries for healthcare workers who will administer the vaccine), especially given that the coronavirus-induced recession has already depleted fiscal resources and led to ballooning budget deficits” and that even developing countries like the Kyrgyz Republic do not have the infrastructure to receive and store the vaccines.³⁷

This vaccine nationalism has both health and economic consequences. For example, a model of the impact of COVID-19 vaccine nationalism found that: “61 percent of deaths could be averted if the vaccine was distributed to all countries proportional to population, while only 33 percent of deaths would be averted if high-income countries got the vaccines first”.³⁸

As the WHO’s Director-General has noted, “‘This me-first approach’ adopted by the rich countries will ‘leave the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people at risk; it’s also self-defeating.’”³⁹ The economic consequences of vaccine nationalism include that since countries cannot reopen their economies from lockdowns etc until their populations have been vaccinated, vaccine nationalism will mean that LDCs will only be able to reopen their economies and restart their economic growth years after developed countries. A study released by the International Chamber of Commerce found that this vaccine nationalism could cause the global economy to lose as much as \$9.2 trillion.⁴⁰

COVID-19 cannot be eradicated because eradication is so difficult that it has only been achieved with one virus before (smallpox) which had no animal reservoir (unlike the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes COVID-19, which can keep re-infecting humans from various animals) and smallpox had a highly effective vaccine that did not need refrigeration etc.⁴¹ Even to ‘eliminate’ COVID-19 in one country (so it is a low enough level for effective contact tracing) would require closed borders, vaccination and a starting point of few cases like New Zealand.⁴² The chair of the WHO’s Strategic and Technical Advisory Group for Infectious Hazards warned that instead “it appears the destiny of SARS-CoV-2 is to become endemic”, which means it continuously circulates in the community, often causing periodic spikes. Endemic COVID-19 without being able to achieve herd immunity is also a possible outcome.

This coronavirus has been mutating and the vaccines are less effective against some of the variants. For example a laboratory study found the South African variant can reduce antibody protection from the Pfizer vaccine by two-thirds and reduced antibody levels from the Moderna vaccine by sixfold.⁴³ Once vaccines become less effective, herd immunity may not be possible to achieve.⁴⁴ These variants are also combining to form heavily mutated hybrids that are more transmissible and more resistant to antibodies.⁴⁵ Given this rapid mutation, (unlike measles where basically the same vaccine has been used since the 1960s and gives lifelong

³⁶ Report from <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>.

³⁷ Report from <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>.

³⁸ <https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/09/14/if-rich-countries-monopolize-covid-19-vaccines-it-could-cause-twice-as-many-deaths-as-distributing-them-equally/>

³⁹ <https://www.twi.my/title2/wto.info/2021/ti210107.htm>

⁴⁰ <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/study-shows-vaccine-nationalism-could-cost-rich-countries-us4-5-trillion/>

⁴¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/why-even-with-vaccines-covid-will-always-be-with-us/2021/02/14/811f605c-6f28-11eb-8651-6d3091eac63f_story.html and <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55985916>

⁴² <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55985916>

⁴³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/17/pfizer-says-south-african-variant-could-significantly-reduce-vaccine-protection.html>

⁴⁴ E.g. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/02/what-if-the-covid-pandemic-never-really-ends.html>

⁴⁵ E.g. see https://www.newscientist.com/article/2268014-exclusive-two-variants-have-merged-into-heavily-mutated-coronavirus/?utm_campaign=RSS%7CNSNS&utm_source=NSNS&utm_medium=RSS&utm_content=news

immunity), repeated vaccinations like the seasonal flu are likely to be needed.⁴⁶ However, even if vaccines are modified to deal with the variants currently emerging, those updated vaccines will not be available for another year⁴⁷ and developed countries will presumably again buy most of the initial doses of those vaccines too, leaving LDCs to wait again until there is enough supply.

Recommendations

The LDC Subgroup of the CDP held its Expert Group Meeting on the Preparation of the Triennial Review of the List of LDCs from 8-15 January 2021.⁴⁸ Bangladesh's graduation is expected to be effective after five years of preparatory period, that is in 2026⁴⁹ which would imply the CDP's LDC Subgroup recommended an extra two years in addition to the usual three-year preparatory period before the graduation becomes effective.

Since that LDC Subgroup meeting, UNGA⁵⁰ unanimously⁵¹ agreed on 11 February 2021 to provide Angola an additional three years before it graduates from being an LDC due to its six year economic recession and "its socioeconomic vulnerabilities exacerbated by the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic".⁵² This indicates that all UN Member States, including the developed countries, recognise the adverse impact that COVID-19 is having on graduating LDCs and are willing to provide at least three years of additional preparatory period before the country loses its LDC status and therefore loses the benefits of LDC status. The CDP should accordingly consider additional years for LDC graduation due to COVID-19 impacts.

When introducing this resolution at UNGA to allow Angola an additional three years before it graduates, Guinea (on behalf of the G77 and China⁵³) "spotlighted the many shocks to the global system brought about by COVID-19 over the last year. Emphasizing that the pandemic has significantly exacerbated development challenges facing the world's least developed countries and reversed years of hard-won gains, he said the Group of Least Developed Countries now seeks to draw the attention of the global community to those most vulnerable to COVID-19's shocks."⁵⁴

Guinea noted that "The perception of graduation 'could benefit from a shift' in which graduation is not seen as a goal in itself, but as a step closer to national self-reliance" stressing that "graduating countries must be able to move off the list 'on a strong footing' and with the confidence needed to make graduation smooth and irreversible."⁵⁵

In the past, the CDP has recommended an additional three-year preparatory period for São Tomé and Príncipe before it graduates from being an LDC (extending its graduation date from 2021 to 2024).⁵⁶ This was agreed to by ECOSOC and UNGA.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55985916> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/why-even-with-vaccines-covid-will-always-be-with-us/2021/02/14/811f605c-6f28-11eb-8651-6d3091eac63f_story.html

⁴⁷ E.g. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/02/what-if-the-covid-pandemic-never-really-ends.html>

⁴⁸ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/2021/egm-on-the-preparation-of-the-triennial-review-of-the-list-of-ldcs/>

⁴⁹ <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/259098>

⁵⁰ The resolution included "Noting with grave concern the reduced revenue resulting from the decline in commodity prices and the negative impact on the vulnerable economy of Angola from the global crisis triggered by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which have further disrupted the sustainable development progress of the country".

⁵¹ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12313.doc.htm>

⁵² Resolution from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/2021/angola-receives-three-year-extension-before-its-graduation-from-the-list-of-ldcs/>

⁵³ <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/L.57>

⁵⁴ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12313.doc.htm>

⁵⁵ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12313.doc.htm>

⁵⁶ <http://undocs.org/en/E/2018/33>

⁵⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-sao-tome-and-principe.html>

Therefore, even if NSOs in LDCs were working smoothly through the pandemic to provide additional information on COVID-19 and its impacts (such as supplementary graduation indicators), since it is a new disease and much about it is still unknown (such as the above), its health and flow-on social and economic impacts are uncertain.

Without knowing the above and the long-term impact of COVID-19, the extent of the economic and social crises that flow from this new disease are unknown. For example, graduating LDCs cannot be sure that they will be able to remove their lockdowns or other restrictions (and reopen their borders to tourists, send their workers to get remittances and restart their economies and schools in person etc) before 2027 (the date at which sufficient vaccines are estimated to reach them/the rest of the world to prevent COVID-19 resurging).

Given these challenges, this significant uncertainty and the lack of 2020 data reflecting the impact of COVID-19 on the LDC graduation indicators etc, recommending in the 22-26 February meeting that an LDC should graduate in this environment casts considerable doubt on the sustainability of development progress of those LDCs. To avoid their development progress being reversed given the unprecedented pandemic and associated economic and social crises, the uncertainty and the lack of data to make an informed decision, it would be prudent not to recommend any LDCs graduate at next week's CDP meeting.

As the Handbook on the Least Developed Country Category notes:⁵⁸

- one of the principles the CDP has adopted is “Flexibility, referring to the application rather than the criteria themselves. The principle ensures that the criteria are not applied mechanically. The CDP uses additional sources of information before making recommendations for inclusion and graduation”.
- “Based on the analysis conducted by the subgroup and any additional considerations or information, if the country has met the eligibility criteria for a second time, the CDP may decide to recommend graduation. If it has serious concerns – for example, regarding the sustainability of the country's development progress – it may decide not to recommend graduation. In such cases, it typically defers its decision to the next triennial review ... the CDP may defer its decision – for example, if it has serious concerns about the situation of the country or the sustainability of the country's development progress.”
 - o The CDP has decided to defer its decision in the past. For example, even though they met the LDC graduation criteria at a second triennial review, the CDP chose not to recommend that Cape Verde, Kiribati, Nepal and Timor Leste etc graduate.⁵⁹
- “The CDP, ECOSOC and the General Assembly have often deferred their consideration or decisions, or granted additional transition periods, based on the unique situation of each country.”

For example, Vanuatu only graduated 23 years after meeting the graduation criteria for a second time. The Maldives had 11 years after it met the graduation criteria for a second time before it graduated. With the January 2021 UNGA resolution, Angola has nine years from when it met the criteria for a second time until it is scheduled to graduate.

Given these precedents, the scale of the challenges to development progress posed by COVID-19 and its economic and social crises as well as the uncertainty due to it being a new disease, and the CDP not having the 2020 data reflecting the impact of COVID-19 on the LDC graduation criteria etc, the 2021 triennial review regarding which LDCs to recommend for graduation should be deferred, taking into account the valid interests of the eligible LDCs aspiring to graduate as a milestone towards sustainable development and poverty eradication.

⁵⁸ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2018CDPhandbook.pdf>

⁵⁹ Figure I.6 from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2018CDPhandbook.pdf> and CDP reports for the LDCs concerned from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldcs-at-a-glance.html>

The outcome of excluding the impact of COVID-19 on the three main LDC graduation criteria scores which will essentially determine graduation will be a totally flawed review leading to a premature graduation assessment. If the CDP is nevertheless determined to hold the triennial review this year and at it recommend some LDCs for graduation, it should at least provide them with an additional nine-year preparatory period (in addition to the usual three-year preparatory period), as it is clear that these LDCs would require exceptional, longer preparatory periods under ongoing pandemic circumstances.

ANNEX 1: Some examples of other health crises due to the COVID-19 pandemic

70 countries reported moderate-to-severe disruptions or a total suspension of childhood vaccination services during March and April 2020.⁶⁰ Service cancellations will lead to a 100% increase in malaria deaths in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶¹

See also <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/> which includes:

- ‘As the COVID-19 epidemic continues to erode health systems, disrupt routine health services and constrain access to nutritious diets and essential nutrition services, hundreds of thousands of additional under-5 deaths are expected in 2020, along with tens of thousands of additional maternal deaths. According to a recent study, if routine health care is disrupted and access to food is decreased, the increase in child and maternal deaths could be devastating: 118 low- and middle-income countries could see an increase of 9.8 to 44.8 per cent in under-5 deaths per month and an 8.3 to 38.6 per cent rise in maternal deaths per month, over a period of six months.’
- ‘Modelling suggests that if the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a 25 per cent global reduction in expected tuberculosis detection for three months – a realistic possibility given the levels of disruption being observed in multiple countries – then a 13 per cent rise in tuberculosis deaths could be expected.’
- ‘Since March 2020, routine childhood immunization services have been disrupted on a scale not seen since the inception of the Expanded Programme on Immunization in the 1970s. More than half (53 per cent) of the 129 countries where data are available reported moderate-to-severe disruptions or a total suspension of vaccination services during March and April 2020. Measles and polio vaccination campaigns, in particular, have been badly hit, with suspended measles campaigns in 27 countries and suspended polio campaigns in 38 countries. At least 24 million people in 21 lower-income countries are at risk of missing out on vaccines against polio, measles, typhoid, yellow fever, cholera, rotavirus, human papillomavirus (HPV), meningitis A and rubella. Moreover, border closures resulting from COVID-19 outbreaks are resulting in potential vaccine shortages in at least 26 low- and middle-income countries.’
- ‘Recent modelling shows that cancellation of prevention campaigns and severe disruptions in treatment in sub-Saharan Africa could lead to a 23 per cent increase in cases and a 100 per cent increase in deaths by the end of 2020 (compared with a 2018 baseline).’

‘Hundreds of thousands of additional under-5 deaths may be expected in 2020’.⁶²

HIV, tuberculosis and malaria rates in low and middle income countries will also be affected: ‘In high-burden settings, deaths due to HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria over 5 years could increase by up to 10%, 20%, and 36%, respectively, compared with if there was no COVID-19 pandemic. The greatest impact on HIV was estimated to be from interruption to antiretroviral therapy, which could occur during a period of high health system demand. For tuberculosis, the greatest impact would be from reductions in timely diagnosis and treatment of new cases, which could result from any prolonged period of COVID-19 suppression interventions. The greatest impact on malaria burden could be as a result of interruption of planned net campaigns. These disruptions could lead to a loss of life-years over five years that is of the same order of magnitude as the direct impact from COVID-19 in places with a high burden of malaria and large HIV and tuberculosis epidemics.’⁶³

⁶⁰ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desapolicy-brief-81-impact-of-covid-19-on-sdg-progress-a-statistical-perspective/>

⁶¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>

⁶² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>

⁶³ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30288-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30288-6/fulltext)

ANNEX 2: Some examples of social crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

The 2020 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report notes that:⁶⁴

- ‘In 2020, as COVID-19 spreads across the globe, more than 190 countries have implemented nationwide school closures. About 90 per cent of all students (1.57 billion) were out of school. Although distance learning solutions are provided in four out of five countries with school closures, at least 500 million children and youth are currently excluded from these options. The sheer magnitude of school closures is likely to set back progress on access to education. . . Months of absence from school owing to COVID-19 are likely to impact education outcomes. In the longer term, prolonged absence from school is associated with lower retention and graduation rates and worse learning outcomes, in particular among segments of the population that are already disadvantaged, including members of poor households and students with disabilities.’
- ‘During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools are offering remote learning to students through virtual classrooms to mitigate the impact of school closures. While this is an option for some, it is out of reach for many. Lack of access to computers and the Internet at home, as well as a low level of computer-related skills, put many already marginalized students at a further disadvantage.
- In 2019, around 87 per cent of households in Europe had Internet access at home, compared with 18 per cent of those in Africa. The digital divide is also reflected in computer ownership: 78 per cent of European households owned a computer in 2019 compared with 11 per cent in Africa.
- Successful remote learning also depends on the computer skills of teachers and parents. In about half of the 86 countries for which data are available, less than half of the population possessed basic computer skills, such as copying an electronic file.’
- ‘Those in sub-Saharan Africa are the most disadvantaged: only 57 per cent of upper secondary schools have access to electricity, 55 per cent to drinking water, 41 per cent to computers and 24 per cent to the Internet.’
- ‘Children from poor families often work to compensate for lost family income.’
- ‘The cost of fighting COVID-19 and the reduction in tax revenue caused by the economic downturn are likely to have a negative effect on education spending by governments and on global aid to education.’

In addition, ‘An estimated 379 million children missed out on school meals because of school closures during the pandemic. Without them, many children go hungry, which also threatens their immune systems and their capacity to cope with disease.’⁶⁵

⁶⁴ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

⁶⁵ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>