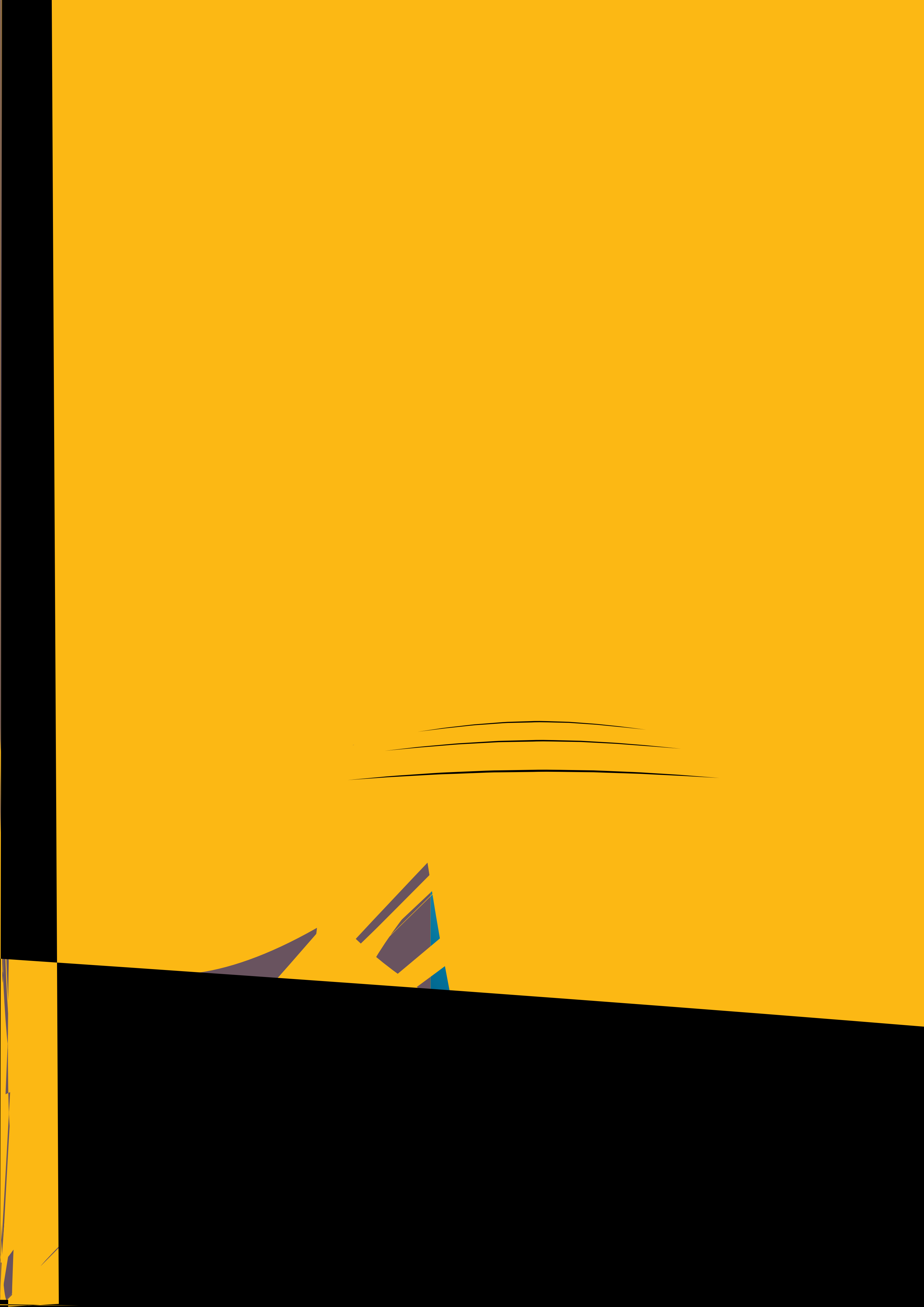

Progress in the implementation of the priority areas of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action)

Africa regional review of the Istanbul Programme of Action

United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

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Publications Section

1. The present report reviews progress made by least developed countries in achieving the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action), which aimed to enable half of the least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation[1] by 2020. As of 2020, 46 countries were classiﬁed by the United Nations as least developed countries, of which 33 (70 per cent) were African countries (table 1).[2] Fen-U2of

[1] United Nations Ofﬁce of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, “Least developed countries Scheduled for Graduation”. Available at http://unohrlls.org/about-ldcs/criteria-for-ldcs/.

[2] (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.D.2).

[3] The 2017–2020 multi-year review by the Committee for Development Policy proposed changes to the least developed country graduation criteria. (Committee for Development Policy Report on the twenty-second session, 24ġ27 February 2020), (E/20/33).

(table 1). To date, three African coun-

Table 1: Summary of status of least developed countries in Africa and Haiti

Country	Year added	Gross national income per capita, 2019, Atlas method (United States dollars)a	Human assets indexb	Economic vulnerability indexb	Population 2019, (millions)c
Angola*	1994	2 960	52.5	36.8	30.8
Benin	1971	1 250	49.8	34.3	11.5
Burkina Faso	1971	780	42.9	38.2	19.8
Burundi	1971	280	38.5	44.5	11.2
Central African Republic	1975	520	17.4	33.6	4.7
Chad	1971	700	22.1	52.4	15.5
Comoros	1977	1 400	49.4	52.4	0.8
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1991	530	41.9	27.2	84.1
Djibouti	1982	3 310	58.0	36.3	1.0
Eritrea	1994	600 [d]	42.9	54.7	5.2
Ethiopia	1971	850	45.3	32.1	109.2
Gambia	1975	750	51.8	72.2	2.3
Guinea	1971	930	39.5	30.2	12.4
Guinea-Bissau	1981	820	41.7	52.4	1.9
Lesotho	1971	1 380	61.6	42.0	2.1
Liberia	1990	580	37.2	53.2	4.8
Madagascar	1991	520	54.5	37.8	26.3
Malawi	1971	380	52.5	47.1	18.1
Mali	1971	870	43.1	36.8	19.1
Mauritania	1986	1 660	46.9	39.9	4.4
Mozambique	1988	490	45.8	36.7	29.5
Niger	1971	600	35.4	35.3	22.4
Rwanda	1971	830	55.0	36.4	12.3
Sao Tome and Principe**	1982	1 930	86.0	41.2	0.2
Senegal	2000	1 460	57.1	33.4	15.9
Sierra Leone	1982	540			36.7

Country	Year added	Gross national income per capita, 2019, Atlas method (United States dollars)a	Human assets indexb	Economic vulnerability indexb	Population 2019, (millions)c
South Sudan	2012	1 090[d]	25.8	55.6	11.0
Sudan	1971	590	53.0	49.2	41.8
Togo	1982	690	61.8	28.3	7.9
Uganda	1971	780	50.2	31.7	42.7
United Republic of Tanzania	1971	1 080	56.0	27.9	56.3
Zambia	1991	1 430	58.6	40.5	17.4
Haiti	1971	1 330	48.0	30.6	11.1
Graduation threshold (2018)		1 230	66.0	32.0	Total: 676.2

Sources: a World Bank, World Development Indicators (November 2019); b Committee for Development Policy, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (March 2018); c World Population Prospects: 2019 Revision, United Nations Population Division (November 2019); d United Nations Statistics Division (November 2019).
Notes: *Graduation postponed; **Expected to graduate in 2024.

II

5. Enhancing productive capacities[6] is key to improving productivity and structurally transforming the economies of least developed countries. Yet, as confirmed by the Productive Capacities Index of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)(TD/B/C.I/MEM.4/20), African least developed countries have relatively low productive capacities and levels of value addition.

6. For instance, as a percentage of GDP, manufacturing value addition in African least developed countries averaged 8.7 per cent during the period 2011–2019, compared with 14.0 per cent for South Asia, 16 per cent for Haiti, 10 per cent for Africa excluding North Africa, and 11 per cent for all least developed countries (figure IIa). Remarkably, Haiti has maintained a manufacturing value

Figure IIa: Manufacturing value added as a percentage of GDP, 2011–2019

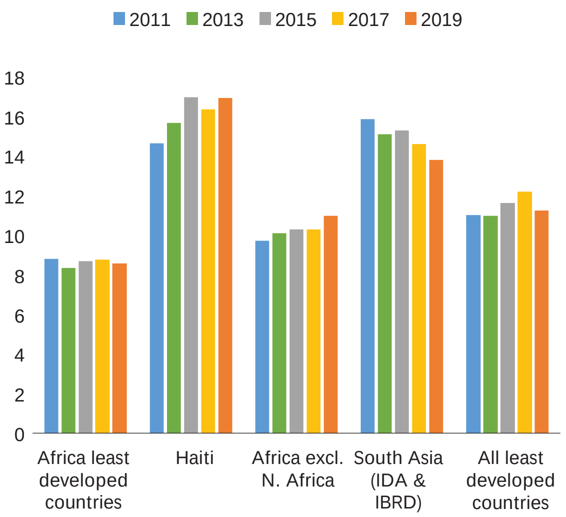
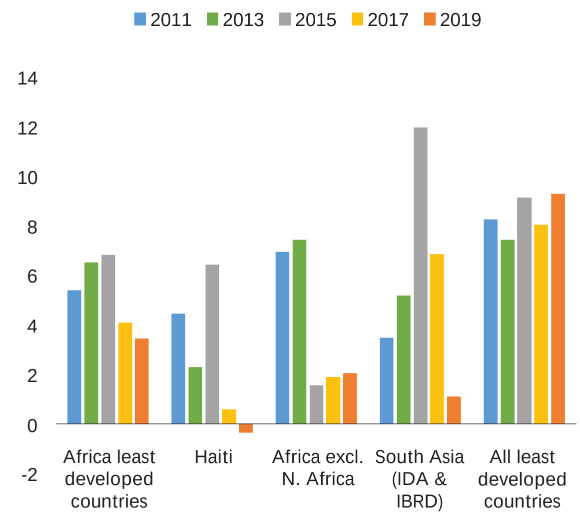


Figure IIb: Manufacturing, value added (annual percentage growth)

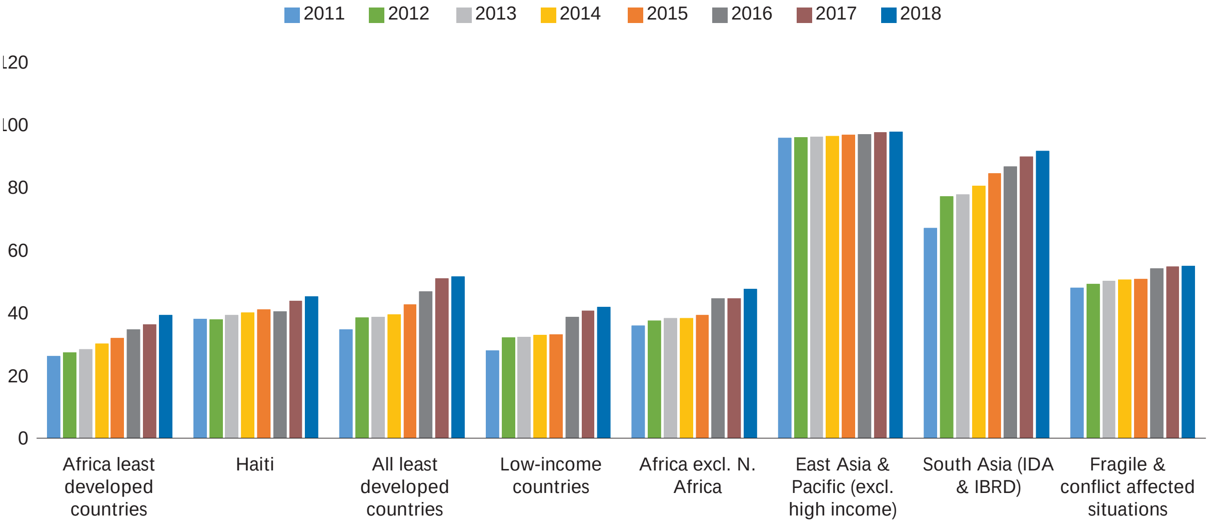


Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (January 2021). Available at https://databank.worldbank.org/source/international-debt-statistics.

[6] Productive capacity refers to the physical capital, labour, technological, institutional and environmental resources that influence a country's efficiency and competitiveness in production.

addition of approximately 17 per cent for almost a decade, while South Asian countries have experienced consistent declines since 2015. The rate of growth of manufacturing value addition in African least developed countries slowed in the second half of the decade. After peaking at 6.8 per cent in 2015, it declined to 3.4 per cent in 2019. The average manufacturing value added growth for all least developed countries remained stable and exceeded 7 per cent during the last decade, suggesting rapid improvement among non-African least developed countries in particular (figure IIb).

Figure IIIa: Access to electricity as a percentage of population, 2011–2018



Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (January 2021).

12. Notwithstanding some progress, African least developed countries will not achieve the Istanbul Programme of Action target of universal Internet access by 2020. While access for this group more than tripled – from 4.67 per cent of the population in 2010 to 17.11 per cent in 2018 (figure VI), the levels are very low: four out of five people in African least developed countries have no access to the Internet. This is particularly concerning in an era of COVID-19, when Internet access is fundamental to all forms of social and economic interaction. The data, however, mask substantial variations in access to the Internet, ranging from a high of 55.7 per cent in Djibouti to a low of 1.3 per cent in Eritrea. The top three African least developed countries (plus Haiti) in terms of Internet access in 2018 were Djibouti (55.7 per cent), Senegal (46 per cent) and the Sudan (30.87 per cent). The bottom three were Eritrea (1.31 per cent), Somalia (2 per cent) and Burundi (2.67 per cent). Increased investments are required by African least developed countries to achieve the Istanbul Programme of Action target of universal access.

13. The share of exports from least developed countries remained stagnant, at 1 per cent, over the period 2011–2019, with a slight decline during 2014–2015 following the slump in commodity prices (figure VII). During the period 2011–2019, African least developed countries' share of exports declined slightly, from 0.72 per cent in 1 1

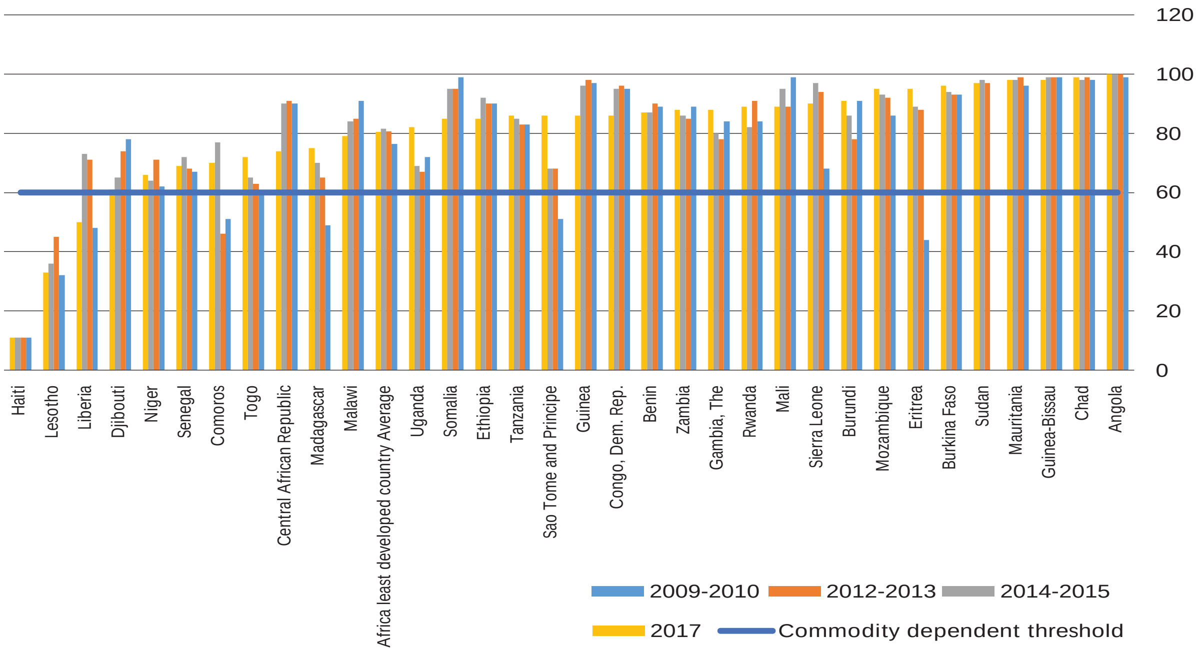
in 2011 to 0.43 per cent in 2019. The demand for least developed countries’ exports is projected to drop by 10–20 per cent, which may further widen current account deficits, which are forecast to increase sharply, from 4.6 per cent of their combined GDP in 2019 to 6.8 per cent in 2020.

14. Commodity dependence increases vulnerability to external shocks due to the high volatility of primary commodities. Export diversification and value addition are key to reducing commodity dependence. However, in 2011, only three countries (Haiti, Lesotho, and Sao Tome and Principe) were not commodity-dependent,[8] and this number increased to six in 2019 (the Central Africa Republic, the Comoros, Djibouti, Haiti, Lesotho and Liberia). During the period 2011–2019, only 6 of the 33 African least developed countries (Angola, the Central Africa Republic, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and the United Republic of Tanzania) registered a decline in commodity dependence (figure VIII).

15. Despite continued dependence on commodities, African least developed countries are diversifying their commodity exports. During the period 2011–2019, export concentration declined sharply for all least developed countries except for those in Asia. Despite relatively high levels, product concentration in African least devel-

[8] According to UNCTAD, a country is commodity-dependent when more than 60 per cent of its total merchandise exports are composed of commodities. ((United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.D.8)).

Figure VIII: Commodity exports as a share of total merchandise exports, percentage, 2011–2019



Source: UNCTADstat (December 2020).

16. The human development index classifies countries in three categories of human development: low, medium or high. With the exception of Angola and Zambia, which fall in the "medium human development" category, all other African least developed countries (and Haiti) fall in the "low human development" category. South Sudan, on the other hand, is the only country that has experienced a reversal on the human development index over the course of the Istanbul Programme of Action.

17. Between 2011 and 2018, government per capita expenditure on primary students increased 1.6 percentage points for African least developed countries, and declined by the same margin for non-African least developed countries (figure X). On average, African least developed countries spend approximately 11.8 per cent of their per capita GDP on primary pupils (2011–2018). This compares favourably with the low- and middle-income countries of East Asia (12.8 per cent), but falls short of the global average of 15 per cent. Excluding the outlier figure of Djibouti, at 37 per cent, reduces the African least developed country expenditure to 10 per cent of GDP per capita. However, this is still relatively higher than their non-African least developed country counterparts (9.3 per cent). In addition to Djibouti, the Niger (21 per cent), Lesotho (21 per cent), Burkina Faso (19 per cent) and Sao Tome and Principe (16 per cent) are among the top spenders on primary education in the African least developed country category. At the low end of the spectrum are South Sudan (4.0 per cent), Uganda (5.9 per cent), Rwanda (5.9 per cent) and Chad (6.1 per cent).

Figure X: Government expenditure per student, primary (percentage of GDP per capita)

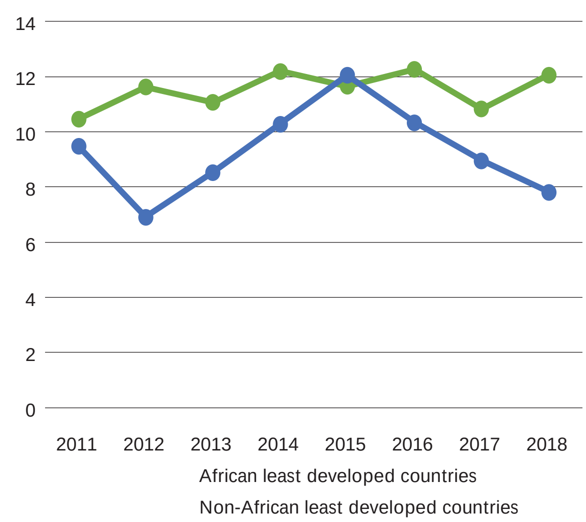
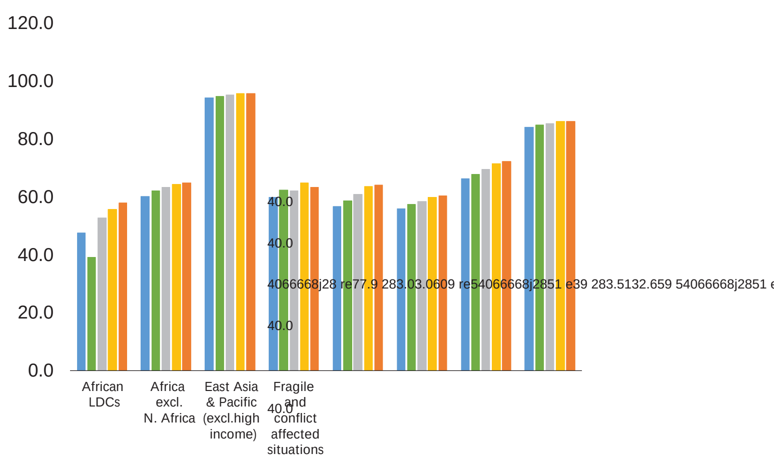


Figure XI: Literacy rate, adult total (percentage of people ages 15 years and above)



18. The average literacy rate in African least developed countries increased by an annual average of 1 percentage point during the eight-year period (2011–2018), and lags all country groupings, including low-income coun-

20. Primary completion rates in African least developed countries also increased steadily, from 61 per cent in 2011 to 71 per cent in 2019. However, with the exception of low-income countries (65 per cent), the 2019 performance is well below corresponding rates in non-African least developed countries (102 per cent), low-income East Asia and Pacińc countries (99 per cent) and South Asia (90 per cent) (ńgure XIIb). Sao Tome and Principe (89 per cent), Zambia (84 per cent), Togo (84 per cent) and Lesotho (83 per cent) are the African least developed countries with the highest completion rates.

21. On average, gender parity in primary and secondary schools in African least developed countries increased from 0.90 per cent in 2010 to 0.97 per cent 2018. The 2018 performance is on par with non-African least developed countries, but exceeds the corresponding ńgures for Africa, excluding North Africa (0.93 per cent), and low-income countries (0.89 per cent). Based on average ńgures for the 20.

from the list reduces the 2011–2018 average per capita health spending of African least developed countries to $120, which is 9 per cent of the global average of $1,024, and lower than the corresponding ńgures for all least developed countries ($166), Haiti ($146) and countries in fragile and conŅict-affected situations ($284). Besides Liberia, the Sudan ($282), Lesotho ($264), Sierra Leone ($242) and Sao Tome and Principe ($196) have the highest average per capita spending on health care among African least developed countries. In contrast, healthcare spending is relatively low, on average, in the Democy

2019) than their African counterparts. The declines were greater in the latter half of the decade (2015–2019), compared with the first half. Within the African least developed countries category, Sao Tome and Principe (36), Rwanda (45), Eritrea (47) and Malawi (59) had the lowest under-5 mortality rates based on the 2015–2019 average. East Asia and the Pacific (excluding high-income) averaged 16 deaths per 1,000 live births during the 2015–2019 period.

25. Poor access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation contributes to poor health outcomes and, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, can seriously undermine efforts to slow the rate of transmission of the virus. On average, access to basic drinking water services for the population of African least developed countries (and Haiti) increased marginally, from 56.4 per cent in 2011 to 60.8 per cent in 2017. Access to basic sanitation services has also seen modest improvements, rising from 25.5 per cent in 2011 to 29.5 per cent in 2017. In comparison, in 2017, 82.2 per cent of the population of non-least developed African countries had access to basic drinking water rates, while 62.2 per cent had access to sanitation. Access to basic handwashing facilities, including soap and water, is key to stemming the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As of 2017, only 17 per cent of the population of African least developed countries had access to handwashing facilities, compared with 48 per cent for non-African least developed countries, 25 per cent for Africa excluding North Africa, and 38 per cent for countries in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

26. At 21.4 per cent in 2015–2018, women's representation in parliaments in African least developed countries (and Haiti) was marginally higher than in non-least developed African countries, higher than the Asia–Pacific least developed countries, and slightly above the average rate of representation in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members (24.1 per cent). There are substantial cross-country differences, and this indicator is highly variable across the African least developed countries (and Haiti), with countries such as Rwanda (62.6 per cent) and Senegal (42.3 per cent) having the highest representation rates for women in national parliaments during the period 2015–2018 (World Bank, World Development Indicators, November 2019).

27. Least developed countries face multiple crises and emerging challenges, including high poverty rates, inequality, climate change, poor governance and institutions, and elevated debt levels, which could result in insolvency.

28. African least developed countries face a disproportionately higher risk of debt distress. Prior to the pandemic, 5 of the 8 countries in debt distress[9] and 10 of the 13 countries at high risk of debt distress

34. Ofńcial development assistance (ODA)

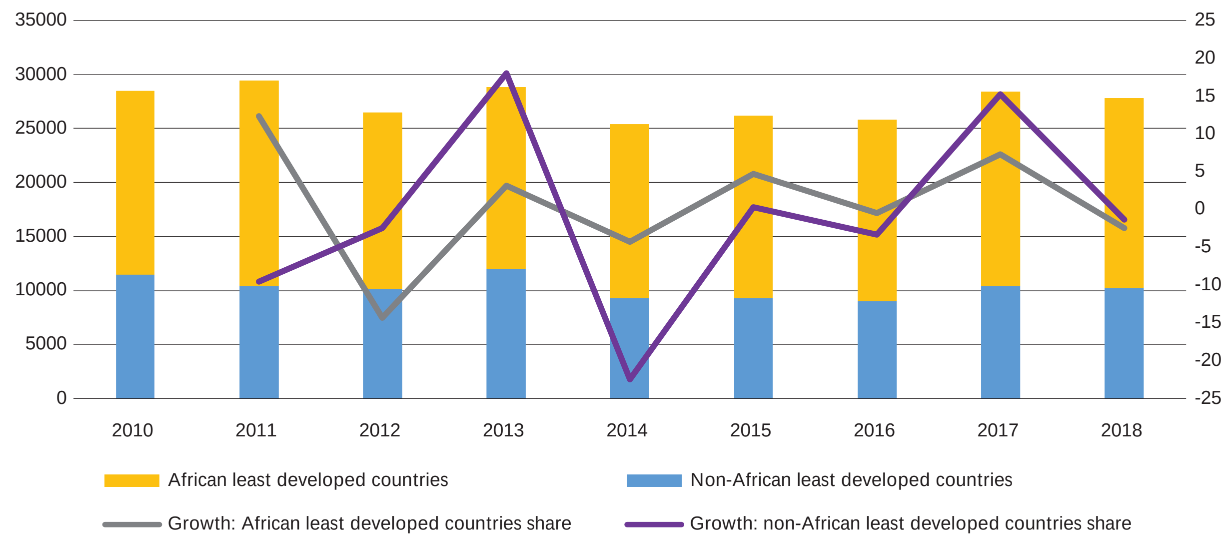
to 9.6 per cent from 2010 to 2018. The decline is associated with a sharp fall in ODA growth, particularly to African least developed countries, since 2014. ODA to African least developed countries grew by 0.4 per cent in 2011–2014, but contracted by 0.9 per cent over the 2015–2018 period. In contrast, despite an average decline from 2 per cent (2011–2014) to 0.5 per cent (2015–2018), average ODA growth in non-African least developed countries remained positive in both periods (figure XIX).

36. Improving the governance track record of African least developed countries is critical to increasing domestically mobilized resources, optimizing efficiency in the use of public resources, attracting foreign investment, and strengthening security and political stability.

37. A weak political governance architecture undermines democracy and can fuel instability. Similarly, fragile economic governance institutions contribute to fiscal leakages, including illicit financial flows. Africa is estimated to lose $50 billion annually due to illicit financial flows, which is equivalent to: one and a quarter times the $39 billion annual financing required to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Africa; three quarters of its estimated annual health financing gap of $66 billion; and one third of the additional $130 billion–$170 billion needed annually to fund infrastructure projects of Africa.[13]

38. The 2020 Mo Ibrahim Foundation report on African governance reveals a decline in overall progress for the first

Figure XIX: ODA shares and growth by least developed country grouping



Source: OECD.Stat. Available at https://stats.oecd.org/.

13 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.K.2).

time in a decade, driven by a deterioration in security and the rule of law in some African countries. Angola and Somalia, both least developed countries, remained at the bottom of the list, despite steady improvements. Somalia has improved on its governance score since 2010, due to improved infrastructure and gender equality, among others, but remained at the bottom because of security challenges posed by al-Shabaab militants. The pandemic is testing the already fragile governance systems of African least developed countries. For instance, political transitions have been delayed in countries such as Ethiopia, where elections were postponed due to COVID-19. Furthermore, in some countries, the pandemic has exposed governance deficits related to financial mismanagement, violation of human rights and impunity of security forces deployed ostensibly to keep the peace and maintain law and order.[14]

39. Beyond political governance, economic governance is also vital in enhancing efficiencies in the mobilization and use of public resources. This is particularly relevant in the fiscally constrained context of the pandemic, which has heightened pressure on governments to provide fiscal stimulus support to large segments of society whose livelihoods have been disrupted by lockdowns and other containment measures. The World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) rating reveals that, during the period 2011–2019, the quality of budgetary and financial management in African least developed countries declined from 3.1 to 2.9, identical to the performance of all least developed countries. East Asia and the Pacific countries (excluding high-income

Figure XXa: CPIA quality of budgetary and

[14] African Union Commission and United Nations Development Programme, "The Impact of the COVID19 Outbreak on Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa", Regional Brief (Addis Ababa, 2020).

countries) scored relatively higher (3.0) on this indicator, but this represents a decline from 3.3 in 2011. The score of Haiti of 2.0 was the lowest in 2019, and represents a decline from a score of 3.0 in 2018 (ńgure XXa). Performance on transparency and accountability has also deteriorated relative to 2011 for all groupings (ńgure XXb).

40. African least developed countries have

up investments in green recovery and technology to enhance growth, create decent jobs and accelerate intra-regional trade, through the effective implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area. These measures should be underpinned by policy reforms and strengthened governance systems, particularly in the sphere of public resources management and public debt transparency.

44. Structural transformation policy mea-