



United Nations

Committee for Development Policy

**Report on the twenty-first session
(11–15 March 2019)**

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Note

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Summary

The present report contains the main findings and recommendations of the Committee for Development Policy at its twenty-first session. The Committee addressed the following items: the annual theme of the Economic and Social Council for 2019, “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”; the voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; an update on the progress of the multi-year programme on a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria; the monitoring of countries that are graduating or have graduated from the list of least developed countries; a review of the application of the least developed country category by United Nations development system organizations; improved assistance for graduating and graduated least developed countries; and input to the preparations for the next programme of action for least developed countries.

On the Economic and Social Council theme, the Committee emphasized that current levels of inequality were unacceptable and unsustainable. Moving towards inclusiveness and equality requires overturning processes that disempower people and communities. Development under unfettered market conditions and poor institutional frameworks can be disempowering when people are excluded or when participation in productive systems is under conditions that would leave people vulnerable, such as unpaid work. Climate change risks are a major factor in the disempowerment of communities, directly and through the additional burden they place on the resources of the poorest Governments. This combination of factors not only clashes with the ideals of social justice, equity and sustainability, but also fuels conflict and insecurity. With little more than a decade left for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and with the pressing challenges and risks posed by climate change, there is an urgent need to rethink the factors that determine the direction of investment and innovation; the terms under which people are included in production, consumption and financial systems; and the distribution of the benefits, costs and risks of economic activity. There is a window of opportunity for a transformation grounded in equality, inclusion and human rights, where both the empowerment of those at risk of being left or pushed behind and the mechanisms that enable the concentration of wealth and power at the top are addressed.

The Committee continued its analysis of the voluntary national reviews. In the view of the Committee, the reviews could become more effective instruments to share lessons learned and promote mutual learning with the inclusion of more explicit and detailed discussions on national strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda. Substantive coverage of the voluntary national reviews should be more comprehensive; reporting should not be selective and leave out major areas, especially since the 2030 Agenda is intended to be indivisible and integrated. The Committee also highlighted the need for further work and sharing of experiences in effectively translating the central principle of leaving no one behind into development strategies and frameworks.

The Committee took stock of its implementation of the multi-year programme for a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria, which will be concluded at the next plenary of the Committee, in 2020, so that the refined criteria can be applied at the 2021 triennial review of the least developed country category.

In its monitoring of countries that are graduating and have graduated from the least developed country category, the Committee reviewed the development progress of Equatorial Guinea, which has graduated, and of Angola and Vanuatu, which are graduating. While noting that none of the countries appear at risk of falling back to the

least developed country category, the Committee highlighted the vulnerability of Vanuatu to economic and environmental shocks. It also remains concerned at the continuing imbalance between the per capita income and the level of human assets in Equatorial Guinea and Angola, as well as the macroeconomic challenges caused by their overreliance on the oil sector.

The Committee noted that the least developed country category had been useful in attracting political support for the least developed countries, but had, to a much lesser extent, led to explicit assistance, even from the United Nations development system. Although all United Nations development system entities recognize the least developed country category, they do not all provide specific international support for least developed countries. The Committee urges the United Nations development system organizations to use the least developed country category more in programming and budgeting and to develop common guidelines in this regard. The Committee also noted with concern that most United Nations development system entities do not have specific graduation support programmes or mechanisms to phase out support for graduating countries. As a result, those organizations may not always be able to support the smooth transition of graduating and graduated countries.

The Committee emphasized that many least developed countries are concerned about the prospect of graduation and losing international support measures and underscored that it was necessary to provide an incentive to those countries that qualify to graduate from the category. The Committee decided that, in view of the need to encourage a country-led demand for specific types of graduation support, the focus should first be geared towards improvements in the graduation support process and related mechanisms. In this regard, the Committee discussed and decided to pilot a series of new recommendations aimed at strengthening support to graduating and graduated countries. The Committee noted that the recommendations are also highly relevant for various other processes, such as the new programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030.

The Committee proposes that the theme of “Expanding productive capacity for sustainable development” should be used as the organizing framework of the new programme of action and that the programme of action should be meaningfully aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. The proposed framework provides a coherent and integrated approach and it is based on five key elements, namely, building development governance capabilities; creating positive synergies between social outcomes and productive capacities; establishing appropriate macroeconomic and financial frameworks; developing industrial and sectoral policies that promote technological upgrading and structural transformation; and providing adequate international support. The Committee also highlights the importance of providing smooth transition and graduation support for countries graduating from the least developed countries category and the need for additional measures to support the remaining least developed countries, particularly in Africa, to better integrate them into the global economy. It also underscores the importance of continuing discussion on developing an adequate support framework for building resilience to climate change and other environmental shocks.

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Chapter I

Matters brought to the attention of the Economic and Social Council

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

1. In order to address world inequality development models and processes that disempower people and communities, exclude the most vulnerable and concentrate wealth and power must be overturned.
2. Global economic integration and technological change, though important for development, are often sources of exclusion and inequality when they take place under unfettered market conditions and poor institutional frameworks. The dominant business model, which is centred on maximizing shareholder value, has produced unacceptable levels of inequality in multiple dimensions, in turn leading to the capture of institutions and legal systems by powerful interests. The space for the collective bargaining of workers, farmers, indigenous people and communities and their capacity to defend their interests continue to contract. While the benefits of economic activity are increasingly concentrated in a few hands, the economic, social and environmental costs are borne by the most vulnerable.
3. Environmental degradation, further exacerbated by climate-related risks, is an additional factor in the disempowerment of communities because of its impact on livelihoods, public health and access to nutrition, energy and water, often leading to displacement. It is also disempowering in that it places an additional burden on the resources of the poorest Governments, further restricting their capacity to move ahead in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This combination of factors not only conflicts with the ideals of social justice, equity and sustainability, but also fuels conflict and insecurity.
4. In order to overturn these processes of disempowerment, public and private policies, regulations and institutions must be redesigned based on a comprehensive vision of stakeholders, thereby redirecting economic, social, environmental and technological trends, including production and consumption patterns, towards greater inclusiveness. Inclusion in the productive system is fundamental, but it must not be under underpaid, exploitative and vulnerable conditions. Productive systems should be based on the engagement of all stakeholders in the creation, management and sharing of value and accompanied by universal social policies. There must be safeguards, accountability mechanisms and effective access to justice to ensure the empowerment of people and communities to defend their interests.
5. Well into the implementation period of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals is insufficient. In order to achieve the Goals an immediate change in course is called for, in which the pledge to leave no one behind is fulfilled on the basis of internationally agreed principles and standards of human rights; elements of the multilateral system that are holding back implementation are addressed; there is concerted action to improve the mobilization of national and international financing to achieve the Goals; the distribution of resources and capacities reflects the need for local implementation of the Goals; there is broad and meaningful participation in decision-making regarding the implementation of the Goals at all levels, as well as in the mechanisms for follow-up and review of the progress of implementation and for accountability, in line with the innovative processes for consultation and participation that were introduced in elaborating the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals; and additional

resources are invested in strengthening the capacity of national statistical offices to develop their national data for monitoring the implementation of the Goals.

Voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

6. The Committee will continue its analysis of voluntary national reviews based on the methodology developed in 2018. The findings thus far are summarized in chapter III of the present report. The Committee recommends that the Economic and Social Council call on Governments to further strengthen the review process and, in doing so, consider the findings contained in the present report.

Selection of the Economic and Social Council theme

7. The Committee recommends that, through its choice of themes, the Economic and Social Council focus its substantive sessions on concrete issues standing in the way of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and solutions to those issues.

Update on the progress of the multi-year work programme on a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria

8. The Committee took stock of its implementation of the multi-year (2017–2020) work programme on a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria. It found that the least developed country category and its criteria remain highly relevant in the current development thinking represented, inter alia, by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It reviewed the basic structure of the criteria and the graduation rule, developed proposals to strengthen the application of the criteria in the graduation process and discussed reorganizing the vulnerability criterion. During the last year of the multi-year work programme, the Committee will finalize its identification of alternative or additional indicators that will further improve the criteria and their application.

Monitoring of countries that are graduating and have graduated from the list of least developed countries

9. The Committee monitored the development progress of Equatorial Guinea, Angola and Vanuatu. It noted that none of the countries appeared at risk of falling back into the least developed country category. It regrets that it did not receive any report from the countries concerned on the development and implementation of their transition strategies, which it sees as crucial elements for making progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Committee remains concerned about the imbalance between the relatively high income and low level of human assets observed in Equatorial Guinea and Angola, as well as about the high level of vulnerability of Vanuatu to natural disasters and climate change.

Review of the application of the least developed country category by United Nations development system entities

10. As requested by the Council in its resolution [2017/29](#) on the report of the Committee for Development Policy on its nineteenth session, the Committee looked into how the United Nations development system is applying the least developed country category. The results of the survey undertaken by the Committee and its findings are contained in chapter VI of the present document.

11. Given the limited changes in the application of the least developed country category by the United Nations development system since the first review in 2017, the Committee underlines that it is important that the entities of the United Nations

development system give priority attention to and follow up on paragraphs 8 to 11 of Economic and Social Council resolution [2017/29](#). It emphasizes that it is urgent that the United Nations development system entities develop common guidelines for applying the category to ensure that priority is given to least developed countries in all programming and budgeting, in recognition of the diversity of challenges that least developed countries face, and that support is provided for smooth transitions.

Improved assistance for graduating and graduated least developed countries

12. The Committee for Development Policy has made a number of recommendations in chapter VII of the present report to improve the framework in support of graduated and graduating countries. The Committee will, in collaboration with relevant graduating countries and development and trading partners, further develop and pilot the recommendations as part of its work programme for 2019 and report on its findings in 2020.

Input to the preparations for the next programme of action for least developed countries

13. The Committee recommends that the new programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030 be fully aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It proposes that the new programme of action use expansion of the productive capacity for sustainable development as the organizing framework for achieving the goals and the underlying participatory processes. Moreover, the programme of action should strengthen the means to increase resilience to economic and environmental vulnerabilities. The programme of action should take into account the implications of significant changes in the composition of the least developed country category over the next decade, in particular the geographical concentration of least developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the prevalence of conflict and post-conflict situations, and incorporate additional measures that enable the remaining least developed countries to benefit more effectively from the specific support provided. It should also emphasize support to graduating countries. Chapter VIII of the present report contains more detailed observations in this regard.

Chapter II

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

14. At the request of the Economic and Social Council and in fulfilment of its mandate, the Committee examined the annual theme of the 2019 session of the Council. The following present chapter should be read in conjunction with chapter I, on matters brought to the attention of the Council.

Disempowerment at the heart of an inherently unequal system

15. In the economic system that has dominated the world economy, finance, production and innovation have been oriented towards the maximization of monetary gains for a limited base of shareholders, with shrinking spaces for the representation of other stakeholders, such as workers, farmers, indigenous peoples and communities, and with disregard for the environment. Under unfettered market conditions and poor institutional frameworks, global integration and technological change, which can be powerful motors to improve peoples' lives, have also created further sources of exclusion and inequality.

16. In a vicious circle, the inequality generated by this system, which has reached unacceptable and unsustainable levels, has enabled institutional and regulatory capture by powerful interests, perpetuating the inability of many to exercise their rights and limiting the capacity of Governments to implement policies and direct investments to deliver on their obligation to secure the well-being of all.

17. The entrenchment of interests has led to paralysis in the face of environmental degradation and the climate crisis, which constitute further elements of disempowerment through their effects on health, access to food, water, energy and sanitation, and livelihoods, caused both by extreme events and disasters and by long-term cumulative effects.

18. Inequality and economic and environmental vulnerability not only conflict with the ideas of social justice, equity and sustainability, but are generators of conflict and insecurity.

19. There is an urgent need for a transformation grounded on equality, inclusion, human rights and sustainability that addresses the disempowerment of those being left or pushed behind and the mechanisms that enable the concentration of wealth and power at the top.

The case for innovative action by States

20. The role of States in ensuring sustainable and equitable development has progressively weakened. The scale of global challenges, the ambition of the 2030 Agenda and the fast and continuous pace of economic, technological, social and environmental change require a new and empowered vision of the role of States in shaping the way public and private spheres interact.

21. New governance structures can shape markets and ensure that business and the public sector come together on mutually beneficial terms to produce outcomes in line with the Goals and system of values embedded in the 2030 Agenda. States can and should take innovative approaches to rule-setting and policy-making, including in the design of tax systems, models for the delivery of public services, industrial policies and intellectual property rights regimes.

22. Development strategies, policies, legal frameworks and public institutions need to acknowledge and be responsive to the severe degrees and multiple dimensions of inequality. Policies and institutions designed on the assumption of equality among

players are likely to exacerbate inequalities when applied in the context of multiple and severe inequalities.

23. There is no one-size-fits-all model. Each country needs to find the right configuration of policies, regulations, incentives and institutions to meet its own needs. However, models of growth that push people behind and thrive on their vulnerability must be delegitimized.

The importance of productive inclusion

24. A central element of inclusiveness concerns the terms under which people are incorporated into productive systems. Participation in productive systems as workers in underpaid, vulnerable and unsafe conditions, with no safety nets or legal protection, or through consumption financed by unsustainable levels of indebtedness, exacerbates vulnerability and disempowerment. Unpaid work keeps people, especially women, out of formal labour markets. Access to decent employment is both a dimension and one of the key conditions of empowerment.

25. Equality and inclusion should be central to strategies for the development of productive capacity, and productive capacity should be central to strategies to overcome inequality and exclusion. They must all acknowledge, measure and address the wide disparities in skills, capacities and access to formal job markets; the ways in which incomes are generated; and how factors of production are remunerated and how this affects the distribution of income. Pre-, in- and post-market mechanisms need to be combined in order to effectively curb inequalities. Strategies for expanding productive capacity should also take into consideration the wide disparities among firms in terms of capacities and access to finance and technology. Failure to do so may mean that innovation and technological development could create further gaps.

Universal social protection and mechanisms for participation and the exercise of rights as central to empowerment

26. Empowerment requires universal social protection and effective mechanisms for the exercise of rights and for meaningful participation. Universal social protection policies are essential to shield individuals and households from the disempowering effects of the loss of jobs and livelihoods. People and communities must be able to effectively use, under equitable terms, formal instruments to ensure the exercise of their rights at national and local levels. Effective access to justice and meaningful participation in economic, social and political decisions requires a combination of formal rules and mechanisms with enabling factors (skills, technical support and access to the relevant services) that ensure that, in particular, those groups typically left behind are aware and able to use the instruments that they have a formal right to. Social protection systems can help ensure that the capacity to exercise rights and to participate in decision-making is not undermined by the imperative of meeting basic needs in crisis situations.

A strong multilateral system is fundamental to ensuring equitable and inclusive development

27. The international system is under strain, as the commitment to global aid, trade and financial and environmental multilateralism wavers. While the current system needs reform in order to respond to a changing global landscape, it is important to defend the principle of multilateralism, and in particular the commitment to the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. Multilateralism is vital in defending the rights and interests of the poorest and most vulnerable people and nations.

28. To ensure that sustainable development proceeds in a mutually beneficial way, multilateral rules and institutions must safeguard policy space and provide a commitment to building sound tax systems. They must also ensure that borrowing and lending are sustainable and equitable and that the poorest people and countries benefit from trade and finance. A functional system requires adequate representation of countries at all levels of development. Official development assistance and South-South cooperation must address not only immediate challenges, but also long-term social, environmental and financial sustainability and human rights.

A change in course is urgent for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

29. It is urgent that there be a change in course, in line with the principles outlined above, to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda and ensure that the pledge to leave no one behind is fulfilled on the basis of internationally agreed principles and standards of human rights. Leading up to the assessment of progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the 2019 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development under the auspices of the General Assembly, the Committee stressed the need for concerted action to mobilize additional national and international financing and to ensure that funding reaches the actors, including local governments, that are responsible for action on the Sustainable Development Goals. Mechanisms for broad and meaningful participation must be instituted, both for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at all levels and for the review of progress, building on the innovative processes for consultation and participation that were introduced in elaborating the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The governance of global data must be improved, taking into account new sources of data, and the capacity of national statistical systems must be strengthened.

30. The Committee notes that the indicators for the Sustainable Development Goal targets are important instruments for policy-making, but must be interpreted in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda and the Goals. There is a risk that a narrow focus on indicators could lead to a reinterpretation of the Goals that does not reflect the fundamental concepts and spirit behind the Agenda. In particular, measurements of inequality that do not reflect the concentration of wealth at the very top are not sufficient to effectively inform policy-making to overcome inequality.

Chapter III

Voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

31. The Committee conducted an analysis of the 43 voluntary national reviews presented to the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2017. The reviews are a central element of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They are conceptualized as mechanisms of accountability to a country's citizens, not among States. The purpose of the Committee's study was to contribute to improving the effectiveness of the voluntary national reviews and to sharing experiences among countries.

32. The Committee analysed how countries addressed the three central cross-cutting objectives of the 2030 Agenda: leaving no one behind; integration across Goals and addressing trade-offs; and addressing Sustainable Development Goal 17 (strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development). The Committee found that, while almost all voluntary national reviews acknowledge the overriding objective of leaving no one behind, only 19 of the 43 countries analysed included explicit strategies towards implementation. Little attention appears to have been dedicated to integration among Goals, fostering synergies and addressing trade-offs. Similarly, Goal 17 received scant attention in the voluntary national reviews, and what there was focused mostly on domestic resource mobilization and policy coherence within national frameworks. Less attention was given to issues of policy space and leadership, investment promotion regimes and environmentally sound technologies.

33. These findings show that the substantive content of the voluntary national reviews could be significantly strengthened through the provision of more detailed information on strategies for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, coverage should be more comprehensive; reporting should not be selective or leave out major areas, especially given the fact that the 2030 Agenda is intended to be indivisible and integrated. The concept of leaving no one behind is central to the 2030 Agenda. The voluntary national reviews need to go beyond the enunciation of the principle, as the principle will not be achieved by "business-as-usual" policy approaches. The current state of reporting indicates that most countries focus on social protection as a means to ensure that no one is left behind, with few examples of the role of macroeconomic, productive sector and technology policies. Given the importance of these policy areas, the sharing of concrete examples in this regard has the potential to significantly accelerate implementation of Agenda 2030. Moreover, the voluntary national reviews presented did not indicate that priority was being given in national policies to those furthest behind or to the principle of pushing no one behind. While participation of the most vulnerable in decision-making is highlighted in the voluntary national reviews as a critical issue, there was little discussion of which participatory mechanisms can be effective and how.

34. To strengthen the global partnership for the 2030 Agenda, countries could reflect on the impacts of domestic policy on the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in other countries. In the view of the Committee, the global review and follow-up architecture should include not only voluntary national reviews, but also voluntary reviews by key actors of the global community concerning how they are supporting Member States' implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

35. The study by the Committee was presented to the meeting of the high-level political forum in 2018. The Committee will continue its analysis of voluntary national reviews. In 2019, the focus will be on leaving no one behind, global partnerships and Sustainable Development Goal targets that relate to the Economic

and Social Council and high-level political forum theme of empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality.

36. In the view of the Committee, the voluntary national reviews could become more effective instruments to share lessons learned and promote mutual learning through the inclusion of more explicit and detailed discussions of national strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The analysis highlighted the need for further work and the sharing of experiences in effectively translating the central principle of leaving no one behind into development strategies and frameworks.

Chapter IV

Update on the progress of the multi-year programme on a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria

37. Every three years, the Committee reviews the list of least developed countries and recommends which countries should be added or graduated from the list. For this purpose, it has developed a set of criteria as the basis for its recommendations, as well as a set of procedures for their application. The Committee has periodically refined its criteria, in line with the evolution of development thinking and changes in data availability.¹ Moreover, in the Political Declaration of the Comprehensive High-level Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020, Member States recognized the importance of the reviews by the Committee of the graduation criteria for the least developed countries and recommended that the reviews be comprehensive, taking into account all aspects of the evolving international development context, including relevant agendas (see General Assembly resolution 70/294, annex, para. 48). In 2017, the Committee established a multi-year programme for a comprehensive review of the least developed country criteria, which will be completed in March 2020, so that any revisions to the criteria can be applied at the next triennial review in 2021. At the 2019 plenary, the Committee took stock of the current status of the work programme.

38. The Committee defines least developed countries as low-income countries facing the most severe structural impediments to sustainable development. It uses three criteria to identify least developed countries: gross national income per capita and two composite indices describing the main structural impediments, namely low health and education status (measured by the human assets index) and high vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks (measured by the economic vulnerability index). To be eligible for inclusion, a country must meet designated thresholds for all criteria in a single review, while for graduation it must pass the graduation thresholds of multiple criteria in two consecutive reviews. Inclusion is effective immediately, but graduation becomes effective after a preparatory period, normally of three years. Recommendations for inclusion and graduation are not automatic – the Committee takes additional country-specific information and the views of the country concerned into account. The recommendations must be endorsed by the Economic and Social Council and taken note of by the General Assembly.

39. The Committee confirmed the relevance of the least developed country criteria in the current development thinking represented, inter alia, by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while acknowledging the need for further refinements. Progress towards graduation signifies progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals because overcoming structural impediments moves countries closer to achieving sustainable development objectives. Graduation must be seen as a milestone, rather than an independent development objective, because graduated countries will continue to face difficult challenges in pursuing the sustainable development objectives outlined in the transformative and universal 2030 Agenda. Progress towards these broader objectives requires not only that structural impediments (such as those captured by the least developed country criteria) be addressed, but also that non-structural barriers be overcome and that improved governance and policy choices be adopted. The Committee found that almost all indicators included in the least developed country criteria are directly related to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. To a large extent, this reflects the fact that the Committee has adopted a multi-dimensional concept of development since the

¹ The Committee refined the criteria most recently in 2017 (see [E/2017.33](#)).

inception of the least developed country category and has frequently refined the criteria in line with changes in development thinking, including the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm.

40. The Committee also confirmed the suitability of the basic structure of the least developed country criteria, including the “two out of three” graduation rule and the “income only” exception, which enables countries with sufficiently and sustainably high income to graduate, even if they fail to pass the other two criteria. The current exception allowing only countries with a population below 75 million to be added to the category (while allowing existing least developed countries to remain on the list even if they have a larger population) could be eliminated for simplification. Graduation of countries with high vulnerability or low human assets (but who are not covered by the income only exception) continues to be justified, if and only if these countries are generating sufficient income and have overcome their other main structural impediment with a sufficient margin. Moreover, requiring countries to meet all three criteria for graduation would violate the principle of intertemporal consistency and equitable treatment of countries, and would prevent most least developed countries from ever being able to leave the category. The Committee will be able to provide a brief assessment of how countries can address their remaining structural handicaps without specific least developed country international support and how the international community can support them, building on the proposed graduation assessment discussed in chapter VII.

41. The Committee resolved to strengthen the graduation process by amending the procedures governing the application of the least developed country criteria. In this regard, it is looking forward to the preparation of the pilot United Nations graduation assessments for countries considered for graduation, which are detailed in chapter VII. The Committee will include in future recommendations a statement concerning whether a three-year preparatory period is commensurate with the planning capacity and overall situation of the country concerned, or whether the country requires an additional period of up to two years. In the event of significant natural disasters or other external shocks affecting a graduating country, the Committee will pronounce its opinion on the need for delaying graduation in its regular monitoring of graduating countries or, if necessary, upon request by the President of the Economic and Social Council. These amendments and the creation of a country-specific graduation task team will allow for better integration of the graduation decision-making process with country-level preparation. They are expected to result in a more informed and smoother decision-making process, as well as shorter overall graduation time frames.

42. The Committee undertook preliminary assessments of alternative or additional indicators suitable for inclusion in the least developed country criteria framework, paying close attention to the agreed principles of methodological robustness and data availability, as well as relevance to the international agenda, including the 2030 Agenda. It stressed the need for additional work on the human assets index and the economic vulnerability index. The Committee agreed that the criteria could be improved by better separating economic and environmental vulnerabilities. Accordingly, the refined vulnerability index could contain economic and environmental subindices. Owing to data limitations and the heterogeneity of least developed countries, any refined vulnerability index will not be able to capture all key structural vulnerabilities. The graduation assessments will therefore play a critical role in providing a comprehensive picture. Accordingly, the Committee requests that the assessments include data for a wider set of vulnerability indicators, covering the least developed countries and all other developing countries to the greatest extent possible.

43. During the remainder of the implementation of the work programme on the comprehensive review, a dedicated subgroup of the Committee will continue to identify suitable indicators for the revised criteria, including through continuing consultations with other experts. It will also continue to brief Member States and other stakeholders.

Chapter V

Monitoring the development progress of graduating and graduated countries

A. Introduction

44. The Committee is mandated under Economic and Social Council resolution [2018/27](#) to monitor the development progress of countries graduating and graduated from the least developed country category, in accordance with General Assembly resolution [67/221](#). The present report includes the cases of Angola and Vanuatu, which will graduate in 2021 and 2020, respectively, as well as Equatorial Guinea, which graduated in 2017.

45. More detailed monitoring reports are available on the Committee's website.

B. Graduating countries

Angola

46. The Committee noted that Angola was highly dependent on the oil sector and that its economic growth was affected by low international oil prices and reduced oil production. Real gross domestic product growth has been slow or negative over the past few years and is expected to recover slowly in the next one to two years. High inflation, unstable exchange rates and current account and fiscal deficits present challenges in maintaining macroeconomic stability.

47. Gross national income per capita is estimated to be approximately three times higher than the graduation threshold established at the 2018 triennial review (\$1,230). On the other hand, the human assets index score remains low compared with countries with similar incomes. The economic vulnerability index score remains above the graduation threshold (see table).

48. Angola's overall productive capacities index is 43.3, which is lower than the average of 45.1 for least developed countries and far lower than the average of 50.0 for other developing countries (see table). The low productive capacities index score of Angola is mainly explained by limited private sector diversification.

49. The Government has not yet reported progress in the preparation of the smooth transition strategy. The Committee recommends that the Government channel its resources into improving human assets.

Least developed country criteria and productive capacities index in 2019: monitored countries that are graduating or have graduated

	<i>Gross national income per capita (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Economic vulnerability index</i>	<i>Human assets index</i>	<i>Productive capacities index</i>
Graduation threshold (2018 review)	≥ 1 230	≤ 32.0	≥ 66.0	Not applicable
Angola	3 942	39.3	55.9	43.3
Equatorial Guinea	9 665	24.6	58.1	42.9
Vanuatu	2 922	44.1	79.0	47.1

Source: Committee for Development Policy secretariat and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Vanuatu

50. Per capita gross domestic product growth has been stabilized at around 3 to 4 per cent per annum. Gross national income per capita is expected to remain well above the income graduation threshold (see table).

51. The human assets index score is stable and much higher than the graduation threshold. The country remains highly vulnerable to natural disasters and climate shocks, while showing remarkable resilience during recent natural disasters, such as the volcanic eruptions in 2018.

52. The productive capacities index is higher than the least developed country average, owing mainly to the high level of human capital.

53. No progress report on the country's preparations for a smooth transition strategy has been submitted by the Government. The Committee suggests that donors and trading partners extend the maximum possible support to countries with high vulnerability, including Vanuatu, following graduation.

C. Graduated countries**Equatorial Guinea**

54. Equatorial Guinea, which graduated in June 2017, is the third largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, after Nigeria and Angola. Equatorial Guinea continues to face serious challenges owing to declining oil production and limited investment in exploration of new oil fields. While gross national income per capita remains far above the graduation threshold (see table), the economy is projected to continue to contract by 2 per cent annually in the years to come.

55. Human assets have improved only slightly since last year, while vulnerability remains below the graduation threshold.

56. The productive capacities index score is much lower than the least developed country average, owing to low levels of development with respect to institutions, the private sector and human capital.

57. Equatorial Guinea has not submitted a progress report on the preparation or implementation of its smooth transition strategy. The Committee is concerned about the slow progress on human capital, given the resources the country possesses. The Committee urges Equatorial Guinea to implement development strategies to channel its resources into improving human assets and promoting economic diversification.

Chapter VI

Review of the recognition and use of the least developed country category by United Nations development system entities

58. As requested by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution [2017/29](#), the Committee looked into how the United Nations development system is applying the least developed country category. A survey was sent in 2019 to 47 United Nations development system organizations, as a follow up to the 2017 survey.

59. The Committee reviewed the results of the survey, which showed that all United Nations development system organizations recognize the least developed country category and make contributions to the development efforts in many least developed countries to varying degrees through their activities.² The Committee noted, however, that, as was found in the survey of 2017, United Nations development system organizations do not consistently apply the least developed country category. The recognition of the category does not translate into a consistent application of priorities and budget allocation, and there are large variations in the type and level of assistance to least developed countries. Since 2017, there seem to have been no major policy changes in United Nations organizations with regard to the application of the category. Assistance is often based on the organizations' own policies, priorities and criteria, which may not necessarily be related to least developed country status.

60. The Committee noted that although the least developed country category often receives priority in the strategic frameworks or programme priorities of United Nations development system organizations, the trend seems to be that priority is allocated to the least developed country category along with other country groupings, such as landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, or thematic groups closely related to the mandates of the organizations, rather than being granted solely in consideration of the special challenges of the least developed countries. Furthermore, few United Nations development system organizations have percentage budget targets for their core budget allocated to least developed countries or earmarked allocations for them. Some organizations have internal guidelines on how to translate the stated priority into their regular budget allocations or to give priority to least developed countries in their capacity development projects. In this regard, the Committee noted with appreciation the existence and use of the few specific funding mechanisms and programmes for least developed countries. It also recognized that, although organizations may not have specific funding mechanisms for least developed countries, that does not necessarily mean that organizations do not assist them. The Committee urged the United Nations development system organizations to use the least developed country category more in all programming and budgeting and reiterated its proposal that common guidelines be developed in this regard.

61. The Committee noted that organizations often have their own policies for providing assistance to graduating and graduated countries and that assistance is often reviewed on a case-by-case basis, rather than on the basis of an established institutional approach for phasing out least developed country benefits and providing support to graduating countries. The Committee considered this a cause for concern because numerous countries were coming up for graduation from the category. The Committee also emphasized that United Nations development system organizations should use the least developed country criteria (gross national income per capita, the human assets index and the economic vulnerability index) and their indicators as part of the criteria for allocating official development assistance.

² The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund do not recognize the least developed country category for their operational activities, but contribute to the development efforts of many least developed countries.

Chapter VII

Improved assistance for graduating and graduated least developed countries

62. The Committee emphasized that many least developed countries were concerned about the prospect of graduation and losing international support measures. The Committee underscored that it was important to provide an incentive to those countries that qualify to graduate from the category. While graduation is a milestone in development progress, graduated countries continue to face the risk of external shocks and challenges, which should be taken into account systematically to ensure a smooth transition. The Committee therefore calls for the strengthening of smooth transition provisions, an improved graduation process, enhanced and more coordinated support by United Nations entities, additional efforts by graduating countries and their trading and development partners and dedicated capacity-building. The Committee also underscored the importance of prioritizing graduation at the political level. The following proposals and pilot recommendations were agreed upon by the Committee for follow-up.

Strengthening smooth transition measures

63. Smooth transition measures that have already been agreed upon by the international community should be urgently implemented. The extension by development and trading partners of specific support for least developed countries for a fixed period of time after graduation would greatly reduce uncertainty about the effects of graduation. Hence, partners that do not yet grant predictable smooth transition provisions should be encouraged to do so, particularly with regard to trade-related support measures. The Committee also looks forward to an agreement on enhanced smooth transition for specific support measures for least developed countries provided under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Piloting a graduation assessment

64. The Committee decided that there should be one consolidated United Nations voice and assessment regarding graduation from the least developed countries category. While preserving their respective strengths and integrity, the impact assessments currently prepared by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the vulnerability profiles currently prepared by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) should be merged into one consolidated document – a graduation assessment – and enriched with inputs from the country identified for graduation, the members of the inter-agency task force on graduation of least developed countries, the United Nations country team and other relevant organizations, as well as bilateral development and trading partners. The secretariat of the Committee, in close consultation with partners, will develop the outline, coordinate the graduation assessment and compile inputs from the entities involved for submission to the Committee. The Committee also recommended that, in view of the fact that the triennial review is to be conducted in 2021, the graduation assessment combine the existing reports on Bangladesh into one report and that the secretariat of the Committee, UNCTAD and other entities pilot the early and consolidated graduation assessment proposal for the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar.

United Nations support

65. The Committee recommended that, under the guidance of the Development Coordination Office and the leadership of the resident coordinator (in line with General Assembly resolution 67/221), the United Nations country team establish a country task team on graduation when a country is first found eligible for graduation. The task team should include all the main multilateral and bilateral development partners (including international financial institutions) operating in the country and receive input from the inter-agency task force, which coordinates efforts at the international level.

66. The Committee noted that, in the context of the current reform of the United Nations development system, the United Nations country teams are being called upon to produce better and more integrated policy advice, tackle programmatic challenges and cross-border issues more successfully, ensure better transparency and achieve better results. The Committee noted that, under the reform, the new United Nations Development Assistance Framework is a central living document to assist all countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and that all United Nations entities will feed into it.

67. The Committee recommended that the resident coordinator, based on the consolidated draft graduation assessment and the work of the country task team on graduation, organize a country-level meeting on graduation support. The meeting should involve development partners and include the inter-agency task force on graduation of least developed countries to provide in-depth knowledge of the process and facilitate learning from the experiences of graduated countries.

68. The Committee also recommended that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in partnership with the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, organize a dedicated session on graduation at the Development Cooperation Forum or other appropriate intergovernmental forums to allow graduating and recently graduated countries to present their experiences and requirements for support, and development and trading partners to highlight their efforts.

Country coordination

69. The Committee recommended that graduating countries establish a country-level graduation focal point, preferably the senior government official who is the existing focal point for the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries, to provide inputs to the preparation of the graduation assessment, identify the support needed and coordinate the seeking of support. The Committee also recommended that the graduating country present its graduation challenges and provide inputs to the work of the United Nations country team and the country task team on graduation, as well as to the meeting on graduation support organized by the country team on actions to be taken by development partners in support of the country's graduation.

70. The Committee reiterated that to facilitate the preparation of the transition strategy and the identification of associated actions, the country should establish a consultative mechanism with development and trading partners, which can be supported, if the country so requests, by the United Nations country team, and that the consultative mechanism should be integrated with other relevant consultative processes and initiatives between the graduating country and its development partners.

Involving development and trading partners

71. The Committee emphasized that bilateral and multilateral development partners (including international financial institutions) should actively participate in the consultative mechanism. In the mechanism, partners should not only agree on financial commitments, including concessional financing, but also on the most appropriate cooperation modalities and instruments for each stage of the graduation process. The mechanism should be closely aligned to United Nations processes.

72. The Committee recommended that the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) design a toolkit for supporting graduating and graduated least developed countries. Given the fact that least developed countries also receive cooperation from non-OECD countries, an appropriate consultation and participation process could also be established to involve those countries in the design of the toolkit.

73. The Committee recommended that discussions about trade measures between a graduating least developed country and its trading partners should start immediately after a country is first found eligible for graduation and that trading partners also consider alternative market access solutions for the post-graduation period, such as free trade agreements and preferential market access arrangements that are not specific to least developed countries.

74. In line with General Assembly resolutions [59/209](#) and [67/221](#), the Committee underlines the importance of extending to graduated countries the existing special and differential treatment measures and exemptions available to least developed countries under various World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements for a period appropriate to the development situation of the country. In this regard, the Committee hopes that the next Ministerial Conference of WTO, to be held in 2020, will agree on measures to address the loss of special and differential treatment for graduated least developed countries.

75. The Committee reiterated the importance of development partners including, in line with General Assembly resolution [67/221](#), all three least developed country indicators (gross national income per capita, the human assets index and economic vulnerability index) as part of their criteria for allocating official development assistance.

Dedicated capacity-building

76. The Committee recommended that capacity development work be undertaken in support of graduating and graduated countries. In this connection, the Committee requested its secretariat, as part of its capacity development activities and in close collaboration with other relevant United Nations entities, to explore the creation of a graduation support facility. The objective of such a facility would be to assist in obtaining the support requested by graduating countries to address the loss of specific support measures provided to least developed countries and to provide countries with specific policy advice. Capacity-building support should also help inform development partners about the best way to assist countries following graduation.

The way forward

77. The Committee noted that the pilot recommendations are also highly relevant to the preparations for the new programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030, which are addressed in chapter VIII of the present report.

78. The Committee decided to establish a subgroup on support for graduated and graduating countries to further discuss and review the outcome of the pilot recommendations and include them as part of the Committee's work programme for 2019–2020.

Chapter VIII

Input to the preparations for the next programme of action for the least developed countries

79. The Committee stresses the importance of the programme of action for the least developed countries for the decade 2021–2030 in ensuring that least developed countries are not left behind. The programme of action must reflect recent key trends related to the least developed country category, including the evolution of the composition of the category owing to upcoming graduations and the emergence of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the overarching global development framework. These trends are compounded by uncertain global economic prospects, the tendency towards protectionism and the growing opposition to multilateralism as a framework within which to address global challenges, which further threaten to undermine the development progress of least developed countries.

Integrating the Sustainable Development Goals

80. In the view of the Committee, the new programme of action should be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, which are universal goals. The current Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 and the 2030 Agenda share many principles, objectives and targets. Hence, progress towards graduation from the least developed country category and progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals are mutually reinforcing. The principle of leaving no one behind, which is central to the 2030 Agenda, should be integrated in the new programme of action. This, in effect, means that the priority areas, targets and action plans associated with the new programme of action must take into account gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, geographical location and other relevant contextual factors potentially contributing to marginalization within a country.

81. The new programme of action requires a strong monitoring and review mechanism, but should avoid duplication and excessive reporting burdens for countries. There is therefore a need to leverage existing Sustainable Development Goal review mechanisms, including the voluntary national reviews. The availability of data remains a critical issue in this regard. Accordingly, the new programme of action should include a focus on capacity-building for the collection, processing and analysis of disaggregated data. It should strengthen mutual and domestic accountability, including through provisions for effectively integrating civil society and other non-State actors.

Organizing the programme of action around expansion of productive capacity for sustainable development

82. The lack of sufficient development progress in many least developed countries is rooted in their limited productive capacity, inhibiting them from undergoing a dynamic structural transformation of their economies. The expansion of productive capacity enables countries to produce an increasing range of higher value-added goods and services, thereby creating decent and productive jobs and allowing countries to upgrade their skills base and improve their technological capabilities. Whereas the current Programme of Action lists productive capacity as the first of eight priority areas, the list approach of the Programme of Action fails to harness the intrinsic linkages between policies and the different priority areas. The Committee's work on expanding productive capacity for sustainable development provides an integrated framework with a sound conceptual basis (see [E/2016/33](#) and [E/2017/33](#)).

83. This framework uses a broad definition of productive capacity comprising productive resources, entrepreneurial and institutional capabilities and production

linkages.³ It focuses on the process of expanding productive capacity and highlights its key role in the broader progress towards sustainable development. It identifies four main elements at the domestic level: (a) building development governance capabilities; (b) creating positive synergies between social outcomes and productive capacities; (c) establishing conducive and macroeconomic and financial frameworks; and (d) developing industrial and sectoral policies that promote technological upgrading and structural transformation (with digitization and decarbonization providing new opportunities and the agricultural sector requiring special attention in many least developed countries). The framework highlights the need for international support as a fifth key element. This includes not only measures to support the integration of least developed countries in the global economy by providing preferential market access and easing supply-side constraints through aid for trade, but also measures to facilitate the transfer and access to technology and knowledge, both embodied and disembodied, to build resilience, and to support social sectors.

84. Such a framework would ensure coherence between macro and sectoral policies, as well as between policies and the goals and targets to be achieved, while also fostering integration of the programme of action with the 2030 Agenda. It would facilitate the identification of gaps and the tailoring of domestic policies and international support accordingly. The Committee will continue its work on this issue by further exploring how a new programme of action could be organized around the expansion of productive capacity for sustainable development.

Reflecting and supporting graduation

85. The Committee observed that the overarching objective of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 of enabling half of the least developed countries to meet the eligibility criteria for graduation by 2020 would not be met; as of the latest triennial review, in 2018, only 12 least developed countries had met the graduation criteria at least once and 2 had graduated since 2011. Nevertheless, the objective helped to bring the question of graduation to the forefront of the international policy debate. A realistic but ambitious graduation objective for the next decade could be ensuring that an additional third of the remaining least developed countries become eligible for the first time. As progress over the current decade was concentrated in Asia and the Pacific, meeting the new graduation objective requires targeted additional efforts, including a focus on African countries.

86. The Committee noted that while some least developed countries are actively embracing graduation, others are concerned about it, often out of uncertainty about its impacts and a fear of losing international support. In the view of the Committee, graduations should be seen as achieving a milestone in development progress, rather than as a threat. Changing the graduation narrative requires not only actions at both the national and the international levels, but also a strengthened graduation process and a smooth transition through cautious phasing out of existing schemes and dedicated graduation support measures. In this regard, the Committee highlights its detailed proposals in chapter VII of the present report.

87. Whereas smooth transition and graduation support are important in all areas, preferential market access requires special attention, as the provision of duty-free, quota-free access for least developed countries has been a key factor in supporting the development progress of a number of countries already meeting the graduation criteria. Based on available data, \$30 billion of the \$36 billion of goods imported by development partners under duty-free, quota-free schemes specific to least developed countries originate in countries expected to graduate in the upcoming decade. The

³ See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *The least developed countries report 2006* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.06.II.D.9).

low utilization of preferential market access by the remaining least developed countries underscores the need for these countries to build productive capacity and to better integrate into the global economy.

Addressing vulnerabilities

88. The Committee reiterated its concern that most least developed countries, including those approaching graduation, remained highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks, including those associated with climate change. The Committee therefore urges the international community to develop an adequate support framework for building resilience to address vulnerabilities. Discussions of this issue should reflect not only the increasing threats posed by climate change and other shocks, but also the fact that many non-least developed countries, including former least developed countries and many small island developing States, are also highly vulnerable.

89. The Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring effective access of least developed countries to environmental and climate financing to address country-specific vulnerabilities. The limited institutional capacity of many least developed countries makes it difficult for many of them to access finance, which implies a need for simplified procedures. The Committee also reiterated its proposal to use the economic vulnerability index and/or other appropriate criteria to allocate development cooperation flows addressing vulnerabilities. This proposal, which is in line with General Assembly resolution [67/221](#), would ensure that graduation from the least developed country category would not lead to abrupt changes in international support.

Chapter IX

Future work of the Committee for Development Policy

90. The Committee will continue to align its work programme to the needs and priorities established by the Council, with a view to contributing effectively to its deliberations and assisting it in the performance of its functions.

91. The Committee will address the main theme for the 2020 session of the Economic and Social Council and the high-level political forum within the framework of the Committee's multi-year work programme on the crisis of multilateralism and the future of development policy. In parallel, the Committee will continue its research and analysis concerning the voluntary national reviews as a key feature of discussions related to the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as on productive capacity as an input to the new programme of action for least developed countries.

92. The Committee will continue its work on the comprehensive review of the least developed countries criteria, as outlined in its 2017 report to the Economic and Social Council ([E/2017/33](#)), and pilot the recommendations made on improved assistance for graduating and graduated least developed countries.

93. In accordance with the provisions of Economic and Social Council resolution [2013/20](#) and General Assembly resolution [67/221](#), the Committee will also monitor the development progress of the following countries graduating and graduated from the least developed country category: Angola, Bhutan, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Chapter X

Organization of the session

94. The Committee held its twenty-first session at United Nations Headquarters from 11 to 15 March 2019. Twenty-three members of the Committee (including one via video link), as well as observers from several organizations within the United Nations system, attended the session. The list of participants is contained in annex I to the present report.

95. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs provided substantive services for the session. Following an information session held in the morning of 11 March, the Chair of the Committee opened the session and welcomed the participants. Subsequently, the President of the Economic and Social Council and the Assistant-Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs addressed the Committee. Statements are available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/cdp-plenary-2019/>.

96. The agenda for the twenty-first session is contained in annex II to the present report.

Annex I

List of participants

1. The following members of the Committee attended the session:

Adriana Abdenur
Debapriya Bhattacharya
Winifred Byanyima
Ha-Joon Chang
Diane Elson
Marc Fleurbaey
Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (Vice-Chair)
Kevin Gallagher
Arunabha Ghosh
Sen Gong
Rashid Hassan
Gertruida Maria Hartzenberg
Stephan Klasen (by video)
Mariana Mazzucato
Jacqueline Musiitwa
Keith Nurse (Rapporteur)
José Antonio Ocampo Gaviria (Chair)
Leticia Merino Pérez
Meg Taylor
Taffere Tesfachew
Kori Udovicki
Rolph van der Hoeven
Natalya Volchkova

2. The following entities of the United Nations system and other international organizations were represented at the session:

Commonwealth Secretariat
Development Coordination Office
Enhanced Integrated Framework
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries,
Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
United Nations Industrial Development Organization
World Intellectual Property Organization

Annex II

Agenda

1. Information session.
 2. Opening session.
 3. Empowering people to build equal and inclusive societies.
 4. “A decade to go” for the 2030 Agenda: Committee for Development Policy inputs ahead of 2020.
 5. The future of development policy in a changing multilateral context.
 6. The Committee for Development Policy research agenda.
 7. Update on least develop country issues.
 8. The next programme of action for least developed countries.
 9. Support for graduating and graduated countries.
 10. Early impact assessment for Bangladesh.
 11. Comprehensive review of the criteria for the least developed country category.
 12. Committee on Development Policy effectiveness and impact.
 13. Defining the work programme for the Committee for Development Policy for the period 2019–2020.
 14. Adoption of the report of the Committee for Development Policy on its twenty-first session.
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