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Research Report

Securing the Outcome of the UN LDC IV: The Need for an Independent Monitoring Mechanism

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Securing the Outcome of the UN LDC IV: The Need for an Independent Monitoring Mechanism

Debapriya Bhattacharya
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1. Introduction

The much awaited Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (UN LDC IV) concluded on 13 May 2011 after an eventful five-day summit in Istanbul, Turkey. The mass conclave of government, international agencies and civil society representatives has once again epitomised the significance of and concern for international cooperation in addressing the vulnerability of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Once again promises have been made and modalities have been proposed to address the development challenges of the LDCs. A persistent question, however, continued to loom large over the participants long after the “successful” completion of the conference: how effective will the decisions of the UN LDC IV be as catalysts for accelerated, inclusive and sustained development in the most disadvantaged countries in the coming decade?

While articulation of a fresh and innovative partnership agreement between the LDCs and their development partners at the Istanbul Conference was a daunting challenge, the mechanisms for its delivery were no less important. This was especially the case as one of the critical fault lines of the Brussels Programme of Action (BPoA) had been its weak implementation and monitoring mechanism. The implementation process following the BPoA was carried out using the routine UN procedures and practices. Even these simple formalities often became dysfunctional due to serious lack of relevant real time information on delivery of the goals and targets. For this reason, in order to ensure the meaningful realization of the outcome at UN LDC IV, the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) needs to be followed up with strong strategic focus, identification of delivery tools for specific targets, provision of necessary financial and other resources, and the establishment of a strengthened monitoring mechanism. Moreover, without demonstrated political will on the part of all concerned parties towards implementation of the UN LDC IV outcome, it will be almost impossible to deliver any of the targets agreed in Istanbul¹.

2. Implementation Mechanism of the IPoA: The Key Departures

Admittedly, in comparison with the BPoA, the IPoA has a relatively wider scope, both in terms of identification of priority areas of actions and in terms of articulation of goals and targets. Many of the concerns of the LDCs, ranging from crisis mitigation to domestic reforms, have been reflected

1 For details on these concerns, see Debapriya Bhattacharya. *Ten Strategic Considerations for UNLDC IV*, available at http://www.sawtee.org/publications/trade-insight_vol-6_no.-3-4_2010_e-circulation.pdf



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in the outcome document in a relatively comprehensive manner. These concerns were encompassed broadly by the identified goals and targets. However, actualisation of the goals and targets articulated in the IPoA depends on the effectiveness of the accompanying implementation strategies². In this context, the IPoA, like its predecessors, includes elements of an institutional mechanism, which is supposed to follow-up and review the delivery of the goals and targets contained in the IPoA. The institutional mechanism is essentially anchored in the inter-governmental process of the UN, and allows for collaboration both within and beyond the UN development system.

While most of the features of the implementation and review mechanism of the IPoA mirror those of the BPoA, particularly at the national level, the following Table shows the inclusion of some additional elements in the Action Plan arising from Istanbul. The IPoA, for instance, more explicitly mentions the role of the parliamentarians, private sector and civil society in relation to implementation, follow-up and monitoring. As a tool for implementation, improved integration of the IPoA into the aid, trade and development strategies of the development partners has also been urged. The Action Plan insists that the follow-up exercise should focus on actions rather than being limited simply to goals and targets.

Table 1: Implementation, Follow-up and Monitoring Mechanism of the IPoA: Key Departures from BPoA

Issue	BPoA	IPoA	Comments
National Level	LDC governments should engage in broad-based dialogue with civil society and the private sector in undertaking the task of implementation and follow-up of the PoA	Role of civil society recognised as complementary to the efforts of the government and the private sector in the implementation of the PoA	Renewed emphasis on the engagement of civil society and the private sector in the overall implementation process of the IPoA
	Nothing mentioned about the role of parliaments and parliamentarians in the review and monitoring process	Role of parliamentarians in ensuring effective implementation of the PoA at the national level strongly emphasised	This is likely to open up opportunities for constructive debate on the implementation of goals and targets of the IPoA in parliaments
	Development partners were not required to integrate BPoA into their development strategies	Development partners have been urged to integrate IPoA into their aid, trade and development strategies	A welcome initiative to ensure increased predictability of aid flows and greater market opportunities
Regional Level	<i>Periodic</i> monitoring and review of progress of PoA implementation	<i>Biennial</i> and <i>mid-term</i> review of PoA implementation	The IPoA provides predictability by specifying review intervals
	UN should take note of capacity strengthening needs of regional commissions in undertaking sub-regional and regional follow-ups	This provision is missing in the IPoA	The role of regional commissions could have been incorporated in the IPoA

² For a comprehensive review of the IPoA see *Bhattacharya, D. and Hossain, S.S. (2011). Overcoming the misery of Least Developed Countries: Demystifying the IPoA (2011-2020)*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Geneva. (Forthcoming). An initial review of the IPoA may be found in *Cortez, A.L. (2011). Beyond Istanbul: Challenges after the UNLDC IV* (available at http://ictsd.org/downloads/2011/06/presentation_cortez.pdf)

Table 1: Continued

Issue	BPoA	IPoA	Comments
Global Level	UN General Assembly (UNGA) should monitor implementation of PoA as a specific item on its agenda	In addition to that, IPoA calls for periodic review at the Annual Ministerial Review UNGA called upon to consider conducting regular high-level <i>mid-term</i> review of the PoA	The IPoA calls for enhanced regularity and further intensification of the review process
	Monitoring process focussed mainly on the goals and targets	Monitoring and follow-up should not focus only on goals and targets, but also on actions	
			A proposal to strengthen the principle of mutual accountability
Role of the UN System	Dedicated sub-section on the role of UN system as a whole	Merged within the texts on national, regional and global level initiatives UNCTAD has been specifically urged to contribute to the implementation of the IPoA	A dedicated section/sub-section would have added greater emphasis on the issue
Role of the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS)	Request for creation of OHRLLS placed	OHRLLS should continue assisting the UN Secretary General in the follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of the IPoA	OHRLLS mandated to effectively engage with the review and monitoring process of implementation of the IPoA
	No responsibilities specified for OHRLLS	It should continue awareness raising and advocacy works in favour of LDCs in partnership with UN, parliaments, civil society organisations (CSOs), media, and academia. It should also provide support to group consultations of the LDCs	

Curiously, a number of implementation and monitoring related issues on mutual accountability which figured in the earlier drafts of the outcome document disappeared conspicuously from the final version due to objections from a number of important developed countries. One such issue related to greater involvement of the LDCs and other key stakeholders in the review mechanism to monitor the delivery of the commitments by the development partners³.

3. Rationale for an Independent Monitoring Mechanism

Given the mixed, if not relatively modest, delivery record of the BPoA, devising innovative but practical approaches to the implementation of the IPoA has acquired particular importance. One potential innovative approach would involve putting together an “independent” mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul outcome.

Such an approach should be seen not as a substitute, but as complement in its improvement of the efficacy of the inter-governmental process. The proposed independent mechanism would operate as a “watchdog” on behalf of the global development community by bringing the performance record of IPoA under wider public scrutiny and visibility.

The emergence and consolidation of a number of high calibre development policy related think tanks across the world in the past decade allows us to think that the proposed monitoring mechanism can be institutionally serviced by dedicated non-government professionals. Indeed, many of these independent think tanks have developed sophisticated country/issue/sector specific review modalities with great success. By accessing real time data at the national level, these institutions provide high quality policy analyses, which feed effectively into the national policy-making process across a wide range of countries. These institutions

³ See UN Doc. A/CONF.219/3/Rev.1 titled *Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020*, dated 23 May 2011

have often cooperated closely at the global level to perform oversight functions on behalf of the civil society. The proposal to establish a system to track and oversee the implementation of the Plan of Action for the LDCs is, then, not so new after all.

One might also recall that the non-state actors were given a certain role in the context of UN LDC IV. A Civil Society Steering Committee was established to contribute to the preparatory process of the conference, although it was essentially an event-oriented initiative and did not generate enough intellectual traction. Equally, creation of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) for the UN LDC IV by the UN Secretary General recognized the role of ideas, knowledge and wisdom in shaping the “deliverables” of the conference, but such an initiative was not incorporated in the implementation process of the IPoA. The proposed independent mechanism could build on these experiences, and contribute to the official follow-up and review mechanism of IPoA.

Finally, the IPoA calls for the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS) to “continue awareness raising and advocacy works in favour of LDCs in partnership with UN, parliaments, civil society organisations (CSOs), media, and academia”. The proposed initiative could help this mandate to become operationally effective.

Key features of the proposed mechanism

Track II Approach: The proposed mechanism is based on a network of policy-oriented think tanks, drawn from both developed and developing countries (including LDCs), which have demonstrated interest in development policies related to the LDCs. In other words, it is for the most part a Track II (non-government) initiative, although it does not exclude collaborative engagements with inter-governmental knowledge platforms. A secretariat could be set up at any of the participating institutions (in rotation) to facilitate the functions of the consortium. Similarly to the inter-governmental process, the network would maintain close liaison with all relevant agencies in order to ensure the availability of data and information necessary for analytical review of progress achieved by the IPoA. The process could be similar to the country review mechanisms carried out for assessment of achievements under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The objective of the approach should be to come up with additional insights rather than to duplicate the tasks of the official bodies.

Strategic and Selective Focus: The proposed initiative would not, however, produce regular, comprehensive reviews of the state of implementation of the IPoA. Rather it would strategically and selectively focus on certain key elements of the action programme. To this end, the initiative would be guided by the comparative advantage of the participating institutions of the network in terms of their capacity in the areas of research, dialogue and outreach. Such an approach ought to encourage expertise-specific issue selection and ensure high quality analytical output from the network.

Working relations with the inter-governmental process: In addition to maintaining a network among its members, it must be ensured that the independent monitoring mechanism enjoys good relations with the OHRLLS as well as the inter-governmental process and the concerned international/regional development agencies. This may happen by absorbing knowledge generated by the concerned agencies as well as by providing inputs generated through the network’s own research and analysis. Such an initiative might also facilitate comparison of analytical results as well as may create development synergies.

International Peer Group: A group of eminent personalities with recognised credentials in the field of development might act as a Peer Group for the proposed initiative. The main function of the Peer Group would be to provide strategic guidance to the network and ensure the quality of its outputs. The experience of the EPG of the UN LDC IV might be studied to take lessons with a view to making the functioning of the Peer Group more effective.

Support from the development partners: The development partners, through their statements and association with the outcome of UN LDC IV, have reiterated their commitment to ensuring effective implementation of the IPoA. Indeed, the IPoA calls upon the private sector, parliamentarians and civil society to make suitable contributions so that the objectives of the IPoA are achieved. Thus, it may be justifiably expected that the development partners of the LDCs - both developed and developing countries - will extend substantive support to the proposed initiative. The role of the host country of the UN LDC IV, namely Turkey will be critical in this regard.

Major tasks of the proposed mechanism

Benchmarking of the initial condition: One of the initial tasks of the proposed mechanism would be to benchmark the relevant development indicators

of the LDCs so that there would be no confusion in measurement of subsequent progress. In the same vein, the performance record of the major development partners would have to be registered so that their contribution could be measured.

Clarification of the targets of the IPoA: A large number of the goals and targets set out in the outcome document of the UN LDC IV are presented in a descriptive manner or in relation to the benchmark condition of a specific country (as with MDGs). With a view to making these targets measurable, the proposed mechanism would have to quantify them in a manner that is compatible with the data collection practices of concerned development agencies. This is expected to lead to transparency and accountability in the overall implementation process of the IPoA.

Establishing coherence: Once translated into quantifiable indicators, the process would facilitate establishing the level of coherence (and conflicts) between different targets mentioned in the IPoA. The process would further distinguish between input and output indicators. One would also expect that in establishing the level of coherence the process would clarify the interrelationship of the IPoA and other international development commitments (e.g. MDGs). Research would be undertaken to expose the causal relationships between various development variables in the context of LDCs.

Identification of data and information need: The proposed mechanism is expected to carry out an inventory of data and information and conduct situation-gap analysis. This may lead to generation of

relevant data for assessing the delivery of the IPoA. While the task may be a difficult one, the impact of such an exercise on the overall monitoring of the IPoA implementation process is expected to be highly significant.

Preparation of periodic progress and analytical reports: The envisaged process should ultimately seek to produce biennial and mid-term reviews of the progress of the IPoA. These “shadow reports” would be widely disseminated among the LDC governments and international organisations prior to the consideration of the official reports from the inter-governmental process. As part of the process, the network should organise annual meetings to discuss the findings of the analytical review and research in the context of implementation of the IPoA. Outcome of these meetings is expected to feed in into the mid-term review process. Hopefully, these will also be used by the official process.

4. Concluding Observations

The ability of the LDCs to achieve the goals and targets identified in the IPoA will ultimately depend on two factors: on the one hand the level of domestic reform initiatives; and on the other, fulfillment of the commitments made by the international development partners. In both cases, developing a framework for transparency and accountability based on interaction with external stakeholders will be of crucial importance. To this end, the proposed knowledge-based monitoring mechanism for the Istanbul outcome of the UN LDC IV could turn out to be one of the defining instruments.

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