

Doha Programme of Action for Least Developed Countries: Key Features and its Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals

By Darin Sooksripaisarnkit and Yusuke Tateno

May 2024



Section on Sustainable Development
and Countries in Special Situations

Office of the Executive Secretary

Acknowledgements: This policy brief was prepared by Darin Sooksripaisarnkit and Yusuke Tateno, Section on Sustainable Development and Countries in Special Situations, Office of the Executive Secretary, ESCAP. It benefited from the comments and feedback from Oliver Paddison and participants of the Southeast Asia 2024 Voluntary National Reviews Clinic, held in Thailand on 8 November 2023. Part of this brief was initially prepared as input for the secretariat’s note titled “Strengthening policy coherence through voluntary national reviews to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (ESCAP/RFS/2024/4) for the Eleventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, February 2024.

Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this policy brief do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Where the designation “country or area” appears, it covers countries, territories, cities or areas. Bibliographical and other references have, wherever possible, been verified. The United Nations bears no responsibility for the availability or functioning of URLs. The opinions, figures and estimates set forth in this publication should not necessarily be considered as reflecting the views or carrying the endorsement of the United Nations. The mention of firm names and commercial products does not imply the endorsement of the United Nations.

Please cite this paper as: Sooksripaisarnkit, Darin and Yusuke Tateno (2024). Doha Programme of Action for Least Developed Countries: Key Features and its Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. CSS Policy Brief No. 24-5. Bangkok: ESCAP.

For further information on this policy brief, please address your enquiries to:

Oliver Paddison

Chief, Section on Sustainable Development and Countries in Special Situations

Office of the Executive Secretary

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

Email: escap-css@un.org

Photo credit: iStock 672310452.

Tracking number: ESCAP/PB/57.

Abstract

This policy brief examines the Doha Programme of Action for Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031 (DPoA), particularly its alignment and synergies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted in 2022, the DPoA addresses persistent challenges faced by least developed countries (LDCs) and provides tailored actions to meet their unique needs, with key focus areas including investing in people, supporting structural transformation, and mobilizing partnerships for sustainable graduation. As the DPoA aims to support the sustainable development of LDCs, its implementation should also be seen as instrumental in achieving the SDGs. To understand how the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda are complementary, this policy brief maps the 116 DPoA targets onto the SDG targets and reveals that the DPoA aligns with 14 SDGs, with approximately two-thirds of its targets closely matching or resembling SDG targets. This highlights significant potential for joint implementation. The brief also discusses how leveraging the SDG review process, particularly the voluntary national review (VNR) process, in DPoA's review mechanisms can streamline efforts, reduce costs, enhance horizontal policy coherence, and ultimately support the sustainable development of LDCs.

1. Introduction

Despite significant international efforts, least developed countries (LDCs) continue to grapple with challenges such as poverty, inequality and inadequate infrastructure. Limited access to essential services and high vulnerability to external shocks, including those triggered by climate change, further hinder their progress towards achieving sustainable development. This is particularly pressing in the Asia-Pacific region, where eight out of ten LDCs are on the path to graduation, making a smooth transition from the LDC category a key government priority.

In response to these challenges, the international community adopted the Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031 (DPoA) in March 2022. This renewed accord prioritizes building productive capacities, enhancing human capital and ensuring a smooth transition for countries graduating from the LDC category. As these priorities are ultimately expected to support the sustainable development of LDCs, the implementation of the DPoA should be seen as instrumental to achieving their respective national development aspirations as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. Overview of the Doha Programme of Action

The DPoA is a set of visions, strategies and commitments to support the sustainable development of LDCs. Following the completion of the preceding Istanbul Programme of Action for the LDCs for the Decade 2011-2020 (IPoA), the DPoA was adopted by the international community,

In this regard, understanding the key features of DPoA and its interconnections with the SDGs will be critical. With 116 targets in the DPoA and with 17 Goals and 169 SDG targets, exploiting the complementarities among them is essential for effective implementation. This understanding should assist LDCs in developing comprehensive national strategies and integrating the DPoA principles into their national policies. This will be particularly useful for LDCs that face limited resources and implementation capacities and the expected loss of LDC-specific privileges upon graduation.

This policy brief therefore explores the nexus between the DPoA and the SDGs and discusses the complementarities in their joint implementation. It underscores how the review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, namely the voluntary national review (VNR) process, can offer insights for the implementation of DPoA. At the same time, the DPoA can guide LDCs in identifying actions to accelerate the attainment of SDGs, given its detailed LDC-tailored policy actions aimed at advancing sustainable development.

including LDCs themselves, development partners and various international and regional organizations.

The DPoA has the following six key focus areas (OHRLLS, 2023a):

1. Investing in people, eradicating poverty and

building capacity;

2. Leveraging the power of science, technology, and innovation (STI);
3. Supporting structural transformation as a driver of prosperity;
4. Enhancing international trade and regional integration;
5. Tackling climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and building resilience; and
6. Mobilizing international partnerships for

sustainable graduation.

To support these priorities, the DPoA outlines 38 key action areas and 116 targets, with five key deliverables, namely an online university, the Sustainable Graduation Support Facility (iGRAD), a food stockholding mechanism, an investment support centre, and a resilience building mechanism (OHRLLS, 2023b). A notable ambition of the DPoA is to facilitate the graduation of an additional 15 LDCs from the 40 that have yet to meet the criteria by 2031.

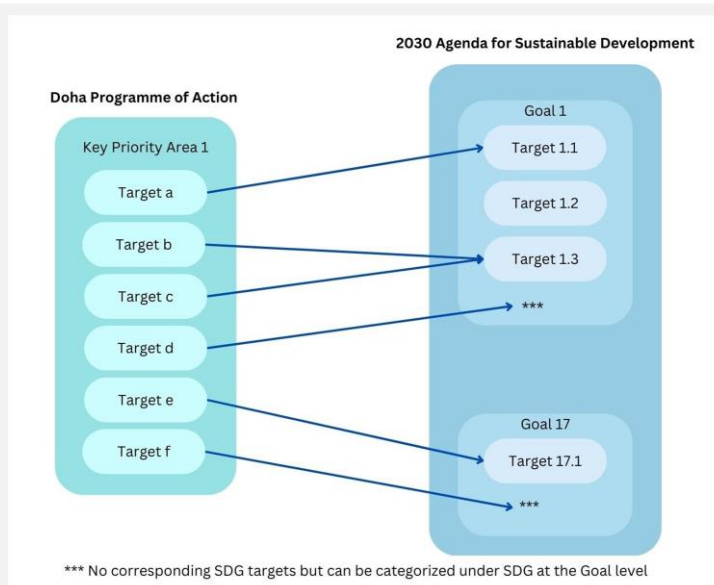
3. Linkage between the Doha Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda

The DPoA and the 2030 Agenda share intertwined objectives of addressing global challenges and promote sustainable development. While the 2030 Agenda provides a broad and universal blueprint encompassing social, economic and environmental dimensions, the DPoA takes a more focused approach. It provides guidance explicitly tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of LDCs, detailing specific actions to meet these shared goals within its defined timeframe. While their scopes might differ, the connection between them is clear, underscored by their shared commitment to inclusive and sustainable development. Realizing the SDGs is integral to uplifting LDCs, aligning with the overarching principle of leaving no one behind.

To better understand the alignment of the DPoA with the 2030 Agenda, each target of the DPoA is mapped to a specific target of the 2030 Agenda based on three primary criteria: i) similarity in wording; ii) similarity in meaning; and iii) similarity of objectives. Should a DPoA target not meet any of these criteria, it is matched to the Goal to which it most closely contributes. While many DPoA targets contribute to multiple Goals due to its integral nature, for the purpose of this exercise, each DPoA target is matched to a single SDG target or Goal, as shown in **figure 1**.¹

Given that the primary objective of the DPoA is to realize the SDGs in LDCs, many of its targets are similar to those of SDGs. Out of 116 targets of DPoA:

Figure 1: Mapping DPoA targets onto SDGs



Source: Adapted from ESCAP (2016).

¹ For more methodological details, see Isgut and others (2016).

- 72 (62.1%) mirror or closely resemble a SDG target;
- 3 (2.6%) are combinations of multiple SDG targets;
- 41 (35.3%), while unique to the DPoA, can still be categorized under an SDG at the Goal level; and
- No targets are out of the scope of the 2030 Agenda.

Across the 17 SDGs, DPoA targets span over 14 Goals. There is a pronounced focus on Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) (see **figure 2**). Emphasis is also placed on Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institution), Goal 4 (Quality education), and Goal 3 (Good health and well-being). However, the DPoA does not address Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production), Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 15 (Life on land).

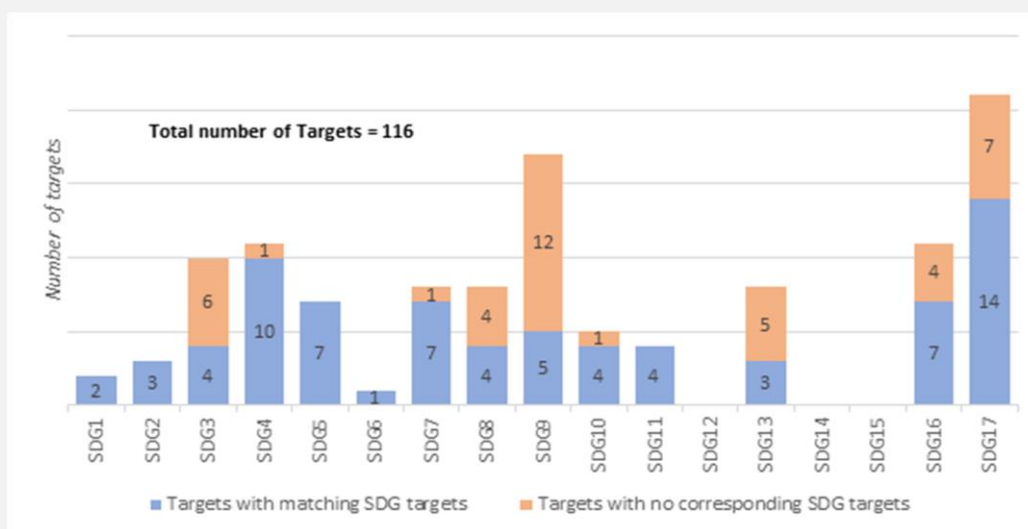
Figure 3 further illustrates the distribution of DPoA targets categorized under Goal 17 over its four sub-categories, namely finance, technology, trade and other systemic issues. Within these, the DPoA places greater emphasis on the finance and trade, followed by technology, while other issues, particularly data, monitoring and accountability, received comparatively less attention.

Although the majority of the targets of the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda are similar, and all targets of the DPoA can be categorized under the SDGs, the DPoA sheds more light on the following aspects:

Migrant rights – The DPoA sets detailed targets regarding migration and mobility. It highlights the need to amplify the positive impact of migrants, invest in their skills development, and ensure inclusive access to basic social services including social protection.

E-learning and E-Commerce – Embracing the digital

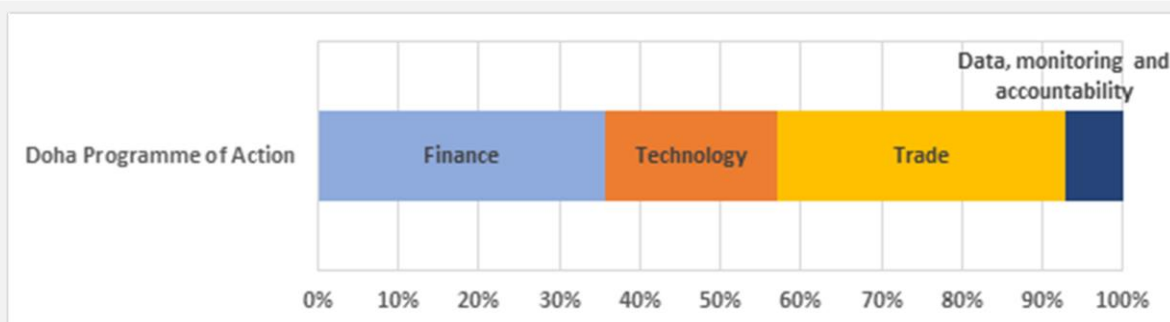
Figure 2: Distribution of DPoA targets across SDGs



Source: Authors' own analysis.

Note: The numbers on the bars denote the numbers of DPoA targets that correspond to each Goal. See Isgut and others (2016) for details.

Figure 3: Distributions of actions categorized under SDG 17



Source: Authors' own analysis.

age, the DPoA prioritizes the development of technology and innovation, particularly in the domains of e-learning and e-commerce for LDCs. Explicit targets such as improving broadband penetration rates complement the broader SDG targets that recognize the importance of technology in the current digital era.

COVID-19 recovery – Developed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DPoA set forth ambitious targets for a resilient recovery. These include ensuring universal access to affordable COVID-19 vaccines and leveraging technology and innovation

to enhance business competitiveness to assist in the post-pandemic recovery of LDCs.

Addressing climate change-related challenges – While Goal 13 emphasizes combatting climate change, the DPoA augments this with targets specific to increase and balance financial resources for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Such focus aligns with and fortifies the SDGs as well as the recent COP28 commitments to climate finance.

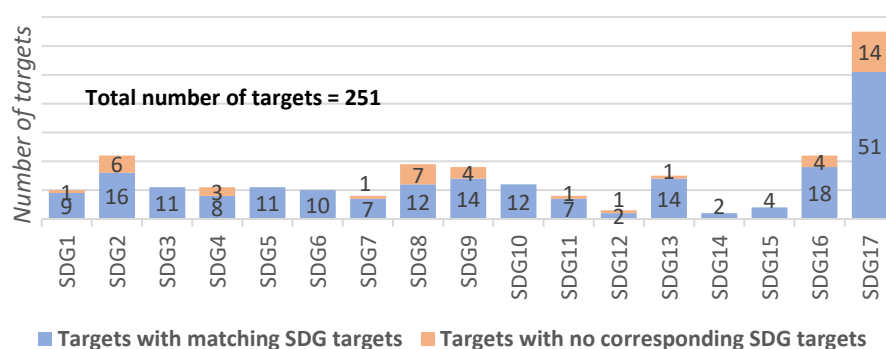
Box 1 further illustrates key features of the DPoA in comparison with the preceding Istanbul Programme of Action for LDCs (IPoA).

Box 1: Comparison between the DPoA and the IPoA

The DPoA succeeds the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) for LDCs for the Decade 2011-2020. While both programmes aim to address the unique challenges faced by LDCs and facilitating their graduation, the DPoA introduces several strategic enhancements reflecting the evolving global landscape.

As shown in **figure A** and **figure 2**, both the DPoA and the IPoA highlight the importance of the means of implementation and partnerships (Goal 17). They emphasize the necessity of mobilizing resources, enhancing capacity building, and fostering global partnerships to support development of LDCs. Moreover, both programmes underscore the significance of enabling LDCs to graduate from this category and ensuring a smooth transition. Support mechanisms before and after graduation are emphasized to make the graduation process sustainable and irreversible.

Figure A: Distribution of IPoA targets across SDGs



Source: Authors' own analysis.

Note: The numbers on the bars denote the numbers of DPoA targets that correspond to each Goal. See Isgut and others (2016) for details.

A significant difference in the DPoA is the heightened emphasis on Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure). While the IPoA broadly focused on economic growth and infrastructure, the DPoA specifically targets digital infrastructure enhancements and innovation ecosystems. This shift recognizes the critical role of science, technology and innovation (STI) in addressing multidimensional vulnerabilities and fostering sustainable development.

Relative to the IPoA, the DPoA also places a stronger focus on health (Goal 3) and education (Goal 4), which have gained prominence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on clean energy (Goal 7), reflecting the growing importance of energy transition and transformation. These advancements align with the current global context and the need for LDCs to integrate more seamlessly into a rapidly changing global economy.

4. Creating synergies

Synergies through implementation

The synergies between the implementation of the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda are evident in several aspects. For example, Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation. This aligns closely with DPoA's second key focus areas of "leveraging the power of STI to fight against multidimensional vulnerabilities in LDCs." The DPoA recognizes the importance of technology transfer to LDCs, not only to enhance their productive capacities but also to develop their digital and artificial intelligence infrastructures. This should contribute directly to Goal 9 and indirectly to several other Goals. Specifically, Target 9.b promotes technology development and innovation, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for industrial diversification and value addition to commodities. The DPoA offers concrete actions towards this Target such as:

- a) Increasing investment in digital infrastructure to support sustainable and inclusive digital development, including for e-learning, e-governance and e-commerce;
- b) Promoting balanced and inclusive and enabling ecosystems for innovation and creativity;
- c) Undertaking feasibility studies for establishing an online university for LDCs, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields,
- d) Establishing and strengthening national science institutes to promote local innovations and research; and
- e) Advocating for technology-driven entrepreneurship to uplift productive capacities.

Another example of synergy in implementation between the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda is in Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which aims to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. Both the 2030 Agenda and the DPoA underscore the pivotal role of collaboration, with the former promoting multi-sector partnerships and the latter emphasizing trade and economic

cooperation to address specific needs in LDCs. Specifically, Target 17.11 seeks to boost exports of developing countries, with an ambition to double the LDCs' share in global exports. The DPoA supports this target through many concrete actions such as:

- a) Increasing economic and export diversification, with a view to reaching the level of other developing countries in export concentration by 2030;
- b) Increasing the value added and manufactured component of the exports of LDCs to foster integration into regional and global value chains;
- c) Boosting LDCs' service exports by implementing the WTO ministerial decision related to preferential treatment for services and suppliers of LDCs; and
- d) Ensuring accession to WTO of all LDCs committed to do so by 2030.

Synergies through the follow up and monitoring processes

The voluntary national review (VNR) process stands as a pivotal and established follow-up and review mechanism of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At its core, the VNR process ensures countries are advancing on the SDGs and on the pledge to "leave no one behind". Based on a series of global, regional and national indicators, VNRs serve as foundational input for the annual global review of the SDG progress at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

The benefits of VNRs often go beyond the mere review of the SDG progress. Through the VNR process, countries can also review their national development goals and policies, enhance institutional adequacy, foster multi-stakeholder partnerships for global attainment, and facilitate experience-sharing. By generating new data and analysis, the VNR process assists countries in recognizing implementation challenges and creating new solutions. VNRs also enable countries to generate new momentum and dialogue with the 'whole of society' on how to solve policy problems (ESCAP, 2021).

Leveraging the VNR process as a review mechanism

for the DPoA is beneficial in two key ways:

- 1. Strengthening the monitoring and review mechanisms of the DPoA:** VNRs facilitate an integrated and comprehensive approach to reporting, reducing duplicative efforts and allowing for more efficient use of limited resources - a particular concern for LDCs which often face staffing and budget constraints. Furthermore, VNRs can foster a deeper understanding among policymakers and stakeholders of the interconnected nature of development challenges and the need for coordinated responses.
- 2. Complementing the VNR process with DPoA insights:** By providing action-oriented targets and measures specific to LDCs, the DPoA enhances the quality of reporting. Insights from the DPoA can provide nuanced, context-specific information relevant to the broader Goals and their related targets, which would enrich the

content, leading to better informed and more targeted policy interventions. The Sustainable Graduation Support Facility (iGRAD), one of the key deliverables of DPoA, could be tapped into in this regard, as it provides tailored capacity building support for graduating countries to ensure a smooth transition from the LDC category.

This synergistic approach encourages greater stakeholder engagement by providing a more cohesive and clearer picture of development goals and strategies, facilitating better communication, collaboration and collective action among government entities, international organizations, civil society and the private sector. Integrating the review processes of the DPoA with the VNRs will help LDCs achieve horizontal policy coherence, improve implementation effectiveness, and ultimately achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

5. Conclusion

The DPoA signifies progress in the global community's dedication to overcoming challenges facing LDCs and fostering sustainable development. Aligned with the broader objectives of the 2030 Agenda, the DPoA tailors actions to address the unique challenges of LDCs, emphasizing human capital development, innovation, structural transformation, and resilience-building.

The DPoA and the 2030 Agenda are inherently complementary, with the former providing a focused approach tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of LDCs, while the latter offers a broad, universal blueprint for sustainable development. Synergies between the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda can be created through both

implementation and monitoring processes. The DPoA provides concrete, tailored actions for LDCs to effectively pursue and accomplish the SDGs, while the VNR process can strengthen the DPoA's monitoring and review mechanisms. The synergies between the DPoA and the VNR process offer a pathway towards enhanced policy coherence, implementation effectiveness, and stakeholder engagement.

By capitalizing on the linkage between the DPoA and the 2030 Agenda, and between their respective review processes, LDCs can harness a more unified and effective strategy to address the multifaceted dimensions of development, leaving no one behind and ensuring a sustainable future for all.

References

- ESCAP (2016). [*Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2016: Adapting the 2030 agenda for sustainable development at the national level*](#). Bangkok: ESCAP.
- ESCAP (2021). [*Putting the voluntary national review in action: developing practical next steps and planning the post-VNR period*](#). ESCAP Policy Brief ESCAP/PB/11. Bangkok: ESCAP.
- Isgut, Alberto, Ran Kim, Gabriela Spaizmann, Yusuke Tateno and Naylin Oo (2016). Complementarities between the global programmes of action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. MPFD Working Paper WP/16/09. Bangkok: ESCAP.
- OHRLLS (2023a). [*Doha Programme of Action*](#). New York: OHRLLS.
- OHRLLS (2023b). [*Key Deliverables of the DPoA*](#). New York: OHRLLS.

 www.unescap.org

 facebook.com/unescap

 twitter.com/unescap

 instagram.com/unitednationsescap

 youtube.com/unescap

 linkedin.com/company/united-nations-escap