

## **Balochistan's development**

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The writer is the author of Pakistan: The Economy of an Elitist State.

**ALL socioeconomic indicators show a marked difference between Balochistan and national averages. Whether it is the list of Pakistan's most backward districts, poverty rates and GDP per capita, or unemployment, illiteracy and lack of connectivity, Balochistan ranks at the bottom of the pyramid. There are, of course, inbuilt structural impediments such as a large area, sparse population, low density, tracts of uncultivable and rugged land, dwindling water availability, long distances between few urban areas. Cost of building infrastructure is relatively higher than in**

**other parts of the country and that is why greater allocation to Balochistan under the NFC award is fully justified. However, there are issues of strategic choices, resource utilisation, public investment and development priorities that are amenable to prudent management. What would it entail?**

First, Quetta is the only urban centre of note in the province. It has attracted educated professionals who can earn decent livelihoods, send their children to quality schools and universities and seek healthcare at tertiary hospitals. Therefore, Quetta has done relatively well in reducing poverty levels and catching up with other metropolitan areas in the country. Per capita incomes in Quetta are the highest among all Balochistan districts due to greater productivity. In recent years, Turbat is emerging as the second urban centre in the province. Road connectivity, higher literacy levels and an educated population have helped its rise. It is therefore suggested that medium-term plans be chalked out to develop Gwadar, Lasbela, Kharan, Kalat and Zhob as the next group of urban hubs. The agglomeration of economies here would attract talented rural young men and women from the adjoining areas.

Second, it is feared that the western corridor under CPEC and other highways being constructed under the Southern Balochistan Development Package may give rise to haphazard, unplanned low productivity development in districts along the sides of the corridor. It would be desirable to prevent this by proactively planning to exploit the comparative advantage of these areas by connecting them to much larger sub-regional and national markets. Fisheries, mining and minerals, livestock and horticulture, already the main sources of livelihoods, would become economically viable through quick and easy access to these markets. Balochistan is fortunate to be adjoining the other three provinces with proximate entry points in Karachi (Lasbela), Jacobabad and Kashmore (Jafarabad, Jhal Magsi, Naseerabad), Rajanpur (Dera Bugti), D.G. Khan (Barkhan, Musakhel), D.I. Khan (Sherani, Zhob). Road linkages with these districts and further on to the national motorways and highways in these provinces would be a boon for promoting trade from Balochistan. It is not only physical connectivity but digital connectivity that is equally important. The work that the Universal Service Fund is doing needs to be accelerated and the coverage extended.

*Given its potential, the province doesn't have to rank at the bottom of the pyramid.*

Third, the rich natural resources of Balochistan have not yet been fully utilised for the population's welfare. Kohlu and the adjoining areas are rich in

hydrocarbon resources which need to be explored and developed. Reko Diq alone has the potential to become one of Pakistan's largest foreign exchange earners. A reasonably equitable arrangement in the sharing of royalties and taxes would transfer substantial financial resources to the Balochistan government to be utilised for the socioeconomic development of Kohlu and Nushki districts and other adjoining areas. Schools, colleges, technical and vocational training institutes, clinics and dispensaries should be built in these areas. Pre-service and on-the-job training should be imparted to the youth to find jobs or for self-employment opportunities in the mines as well as logistics and services. Gwadar is ready for take-off provided water, electricity and vocational training projects are expedited.

Fourth, Balochistan has the country's highest proportion of out-of-school children. To implement the goal of universal primary education, a more feasible but challenging initiative is to see Balochistan as the target province. This would require an assessment of gaps to be filled in each district, the number of new structures and facilities to be built and additional teachers to be trained and recruited over time as well as to ascertain the financial resources required annually. This function to assess, manage and operate schools can be done effectively by the local governments. District school management boards should be made autonomous, empowered, fully resourced, but also held accountable for the results. The provincial government should monitor, evaluate and carry out financial audits at regular intervals. Faculty members of colleges and universities located in the districts should provide technical support to the boards.

Fifth, it is gratifying to see a young university such as BUISTEMS in Quetta producing employable graduates in IT, management sciences and engineering. It has maintained standards comparable to other reputable universities in Pakistan. Similarly, there are other fine institutions of higher learning such as UET, Khuzdar; Bolan University of Medical & Health Sciences; Lasbela University of Agriculture etc. These universities should train young men and women in the fields relevant to Balochistan's development — fisheries, mining and minerals, livestock, horticulture — and as teachers of STEM subjects for schools and colleges. The provincial government should have a scholarship programme to fully finance students opting for these fields. Female students should be given preferential treatment. The graduates in these fields must be provided apprenticeship training and guaranteed employment in the public or private sector. Universities should be given generous financial resources to attract faculty and to set up labs and computer facilities.

Balochistan offers an excellent experiment in inclusive development, attacking poverty and regional income disparities by exploiting its comparative advantage, investing and developing its human resources and connecting it with the national market of goods and services. The structural impediments that have kept the province at a disadvantage can be offset by proactive, strategic interventions. This would require an all-hands-on-deck approach in which the federal, provincial and local governments, the private sector, NGOs, academics and professionals and the security agencies all work together for a common agenda. To spell out the agenda is easier than its actual execution because the coordination costs of such an arrangement are huge while selfless, altruistic leadership to drive this agenda is mostly missing. We should ponder as to what the alternative of business as usual is likely to be.

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