

ECONOMIC PROSPECTS OF GILGIT BALTISTAN

PART II

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The community organizations have built bridges, irrigation channels and other small infrastructure projects at much lower costs as they participated in the supply of labour and land parcels for these projects. The incentive structure made them realize that this would lead to the doubling of their farm incomes. The improved marketing of produce through better roads and bridges contributed to accretion in farm incomes and increased food security. These community organizations have also been able to improve social indicators such as school enrollment, student retention, nutrition, water supply and sanitation which look relatively better than other provinces in Pakistan. Other development partners such as the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation fund (PPAF), also stepped in and provided finances and training to the farmers, and micro loans to small farmers and small businesses.

In the recent years a major intervention for assisting the rural population was a project by the International fund for agriculture development (IFAD) approved in 2015 that would last for 10 years at a total cost of \$120m. The project-- Economic Transformation Initiative Gilgit Baltistan (ETIGB) is assisting about 100,000 rural

households and increasing agricultural production, introducing high value cash crops and linking farmers to local markets. Farmers are being encouraged to diversify their cropping pattern from overproduction of apricots that goes waste to a large extent and suppresses the returns. Potato is the second major crop grown in the area. Under this project 49000 acres of barren land were provided channel water from glacial melt, 20000 acres irrigated by construction of 50 channels. 480 kilometers of road are under construction. Agriculture Cooperatives covering about 50000 households have been formed. As irrigation channels and rural roads are developed and improved, in one of the villages the writer witnessed the discussion by the members of the farmers cooperatives, mostly women, exploring the possibility of selling frozen vegetables. They asserted that even after expenses on required cold chain, refrigerated vans and processing facilities are taken into account the end user cost of these vegetables in Islamabad would be relatively lower than those procured from the existing sources. It is business propositions like these that the private sector can move in and study the technical feasibility and economic viability of this particular proposal identified by the community members themselves on the basis of their own knowledge. This model of tripartite collaboration i.e. NGOs mobilizing the communities and providing technical assistance, the Government providing the

funds (such as IFAD is giving now) and the private sector involved in marketable activities has been successfully implemented in several poor countries where marginalized communities live in harsh conditions.

How can the future economic prospects of this province be maximized? There are at least four sectors ----Agriculture, Eco and cultural Tourism , Electricity generation and Distribution, and Human Resource development-- which can be drivers of growth along with the cross cutting theme of Governance.

Agriculture GB is primarily a rural society with population scattered over approximately 700 Villages and small holder agriculture is the primary occupation and the population is over vast mountainous Terrain. Most of the farming takes place at altitude of 3000 metres. Rangelands and their interfaces are dominant land use in this mountain ecosystem . Terrace cultivation and fields carved out of Alluvial deposits along the rivers and streams draw water through irrigation channels. A distinct feature of the area is equitable distribution of land and almost 90% of the households own Agricultural land. As the holdings are small, owner cultivation is predominant resulting in higher earnings for the household. They also own Cattle, sheep, goats which supplement their cash incomes . As pointed

out earlier the KKH and RSPs together have induced a transition from traditional crops for meeting subsistence needs towards modern high value crops that can be grown under the agro ecological conditions of the region in summer and sold to meet the off season needs of the rest of the country. The expansion of this cropping pattern would require irrigation channels, better seeds , credit and connectivity both physical and digital to markets . GB agriculture is more suited for organic farming and poultry and livestock products. Universities and research centers ought to carry out experiments aimed at increasing yields per acre of organic farming by developing improved seeds, breeds, efficient water use and better marketing. Health conscious urban middle class in the adjoining cities upto Islamabad provide a potential buying Class for organic farm produce. A 2018 comprehensive study on Agriculture sector prepared by the Department of Agriculture, AKDN and Sadpara Development Project has laid down a policy framework which needs to be implemented.

Eco and cultural Tourism . The potential for Eco and cultural tourism given the pristine natural beauty of this area has not been fully exploited. There is an influx of tourists both domestic and foreign but the integrated planning to accommodate, feed, transport and guide them is missing. One of the grave dangers is that the environment is being polluted by trash and human waste left

by the tourists and is at the risk of losing its pristine environment deterring mountaineers from coming to these peaks if remedial measures are not taken. While the Government should set up collection points, incineration plants and disposal of solid waste, previous attempts to involve the communities in the adjoining areas in the collection of trash, maintenance and cleanliness have been successful at pilot level and should be replicated at large scale. New hotels and private guest houses along with Air BnB accommodation are emerging with restaurants and cafes but they are following an adhoc haphazard path. Local Community organizations and District Administration should jointly ensure safety, cleanliness and standards. Training for jobs in hospitality industry and other allied vocations for which there is growing demand in Pakistan and the Gulf countries can further ease pressure on youth employment. . During the winters a large number of young men find jobs in the rest of Pakistan as they are considered honest and hard-working and clean . The residents of GB are preferred for jobs in hospitality industry in Pakistan due to their attitudes , behaviors and courtesy. These intrinsic qualities can be of advantage to the people of this region. *Visit GB* app which has been developed by the Tourism Department for providing information to tourists should be widely publicized and updated in light of the feed back from the tourists.

Human Resource Development: Adult Literacy rate in GB is 62 percent --higher than the national average . Enrolment rate of children aged 5 to 16 exceeds 80 percent and in Hunza- Nagar and Ghizer districts it is almost 100 percent. If Diamer district is excluded the average enrolment rate would be about 90 percent much higher than the rest of Pakistan except Islamabad. Another redeeming feature that places the educated youth of GB above those from the other four provinces is that their curriculum, assessment and examinations are conducted by the Federal Board of intermediate and secondary education and the AKU Board . Both these Boards enjoy good reputation and discourage malpractices and cheating that are so widespread in other boards. The standards of education imparted in schools and colleges in GB are therefore at a relatively higher level. This enables the outputs of this system to get admissions to quality institutions of higher learning in Pakistan or outside Pakistan .

TO BE CONTINUED