

ECONOMIC PROSPECTS OF GILGIT BALTISTAN PART III

The recent initiative taken by the GB government to introduce STEM subjects right from the school level is highly commendable. This initiative is quite unique and far sighted. Instead of the traditional recruitment of teachers the government is engaging a private sector provider (PSP) through an open competitive process for imparting digital learning at 34 selected schools to begin with. The PSP would post a resource person in each school to establish complete e-learning environment in schools including servers, routers, power back ups, etc. They would use the Learning Management system (LMS) to deliver the content, set up centralized data centres, connect with Cloud, set up Dash boards for monitoring. The PSP would train the teachers, and EMIS staff of Education Department, operate and maintain the hardware, software, LMS, content and data connectivity. 144 computer labs and libraries are proposed to be set up in Government schools However, this requires SCO to be more proactive and ensure internet stability and optic fibre connectivity to schools.

A Career Fest was organized by the Chief Secretary last month at Gilgit in which 20,000 schools students from all over the province were exposed to the opportunities that are available or likely to be available when they enter labour

force . Experts from different fields were invited to sensitize and raise the awareness of the students. The Career Fest was followed up by Tech Boot Camps in 30 government schools to build and equip children with tech skills. In these camps, more than 1200 children were directly trained and 500 children were impacted indirectly. The trainees would then present their projects at a public competition and exhibition .

In addition to the government schools, hundreds of schools are run by private sector, civil society and non-governmental organizations. AKU has established a Professional development center (PDC) at Gilgit which imparts training to teachers and has a highly successful record.

Power generation

One of the major constraints in the way of GB's take off is the availability of reliable electricity supply . Hydro or micro-Hydro project total production in winters is 48MW and in summer 78 MW while the demand is estimated at 300 MW.

Six main tributaries of Indus- Olding, Shyoke, Shigar, Gilgit, Hunza, Astore Rivers have feasible sites that can provide 21,000 MW. The largest among them, Bunji

Hydro has difficult access, and would require ancillary infrastructure to evacuate power to load centers . Capital investment in hydro projects is large and transmission and distribution costs are unaffordable for the majority of the population and enterprises. There is little impetus to establish a regional grid and therefore a better alternative is to set up 1 MW to 4 MW off grid solar power generation units in the districts and sub divisions where hydro power is not available or is not economically viable. We may learn from the experience of Bangladesh , the largest off grid solar program in the world , where Solar Home systems provide clean energy to 20 million people mostly in the rural areas. Fifty eight non governmental organizations supplied and installed the system made affordable with micro loans. AKRSP and GBRSP through their local support organizations and Village organizations are well suited to take this initiative.

To execute this agenda to exploit the economic potential of GB and uplift the living standards of these remotely dispersed communities the governance structure has to be rethought through. The newly given powers to the elected representatives and the Executive branch should be allowed to be exercised without prior concurrence of the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit Baltistan or undue interference by the bureaucrats or the Federal Government politicians. It is a matter of great satisfaction that the civil servants of GB are directly recruited

like the Federal and All Pakistan services through a competitive process by the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC). Their quality is as good as those in the Pakistan Administrative service (PAS) but they have limited exposure. They should be sent for training at mid career and senior levels to the institutions in Pakistan. The best among them should be selected for foreign scholarships. Like other provincial executive services who are given the opportunity to be absorbed in the PAS cadre the officers of the GB should also be given equal opportunity to compete and if found capable rise to the top positions.. A scheme should also be designed to rotate the officers of GB and AJK for a limited tour of duty to other provinces and also the Federal Secretariat . This exchange of officers would create a better understanding of the national and provincial affairs which in turn would enhance their decision making capability when they occupy higher positions of decision making and policy formulation. Governance and institutional reforms are easy to be piloted in GB as the political and bureaucratic will exists to implement them. This experiment, if successful, can then be replicated with due modifications and adaptations to other provinces. Given the solid record of local village organizations devolution to district and tehsil levels makes a lot of sense in the environment of GB where local elected representatives are given the powers

and resources to identify, design and execute the projects that are responsive to their needs.

For executing the above outlined agenda the financial resources transferred to GB have to be augmented from the current annual budgetary allocation of around Rs 70 billion or Rs 35,000 per capita to match the allocations to other provinces. Last year these allocations amounted to Rs 63,000 per capita on average. The cost of laying down basic infrastructure in a remote area with harsh terrain and low population density is certainly to be higher than even the settled and well connected districts of KP. The Federal Government should enter into an agreement with the GB Government at the beginning of the budget year to achieve specific performance targets and release the funds for implementation , monitor the results without micro managing from Islamabad. If such an consensus is reached the budgetary allocations should be gradually raised every year. The GB Government has to make efforts to mobilize tax and non tax revenues from its own sources and has to allocate at least 30 percent of the annual budget to the local governments. The recent move to set up a Revenue Authority is a welcome step but it should be manned by professionals of integrity rather than the transfer or deputation of the existing civil servants who are not qualified or trained for carrying out this task.

To sum up, the economic potential of GB to be realised would require the devolution of powers and authority from the Federal Ministry along with augmentation of Federal financial allocations; strengthening of the local governments , Village organizations, Cooperatives Rural Support networks; attracting donors to replicate projects on the line of ETIGB, and Involving the private sector in tourism , electricity generation, agro processing and marketing. The Government has taken some path breaking initiatives in spreading STEAM Education and human resource development that have to be sustained on a long term basis while the Governance structures should help in access to justice , , cheap , quick and easy resolution of disputes .

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