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Creativity and Innovation for Sustainable Development of Pakistan

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Creativity and innovation have been recognized, across the globe, as engines of economic growth, employment generation and improvement of human life. National governments of progressive states have attached immense importance to Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) policies for sustainable development and long-term growth of their countries. In April 2017, keeping in view the vital role of creativity and innovation for the world at large, the United Nations adopted a resolution declaring 21st April as the “World Creativity and Innovation Day.” Innovation is a collaborative process and cannot be done in isolation. It, in that sense, is different from invention which can be done by a single person within the confines of a laboratory. The results of innovative are transformative if the process is managed and orchestrated well. However, the complex and intricate interplay of various actors working in an innovation system requires prudent and pragmatic policy framework for bringing the actors together and creating societal value in the shape of innovations. Recognizing the complexity of the innovative processes and a need to create a stronger link among various actors, advanced countries of the world have, for long, been formulating and implementing public policies for developing national, regional, and sectoral innovation systems in order to enhance their competitiveness. Research and development (R&D) for producing new stock of knowledge have always been high on formal policy agenda in these countries.

In the context of Pakistan, innovation has unfortunately remained an extremely weak link in the economy of the country. There have been many instances in the history when the country had the opportunity to leapfrog and catch up on its innovation and technology front. These critical windows of opportunity were, however, missed due to lack of proper policy response and little understanding about the pivotal role of creativity and innovation for economic prosperity of Pakistan. In contrast countries like South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand implemented innovation and technology policies in a timely and well-coordinated manner. Resultantly, these economies which were at similar or lower level of economic developments Pakistan, are now being regarded as much more competitive and advanced. South Korea and Singapore are in fact among the richest countries of the world. Science, technology and innovation have played the key role in their journey from abject poverty to affluence.

The “World Creativity and Innovation Day”, this year again gives Pakistan a unique opportunity to reflect over what has gone wrong in its innovation landscape and what needs to be done to rectify the errors of the past. I regard this year as a unique opportunity on three counts. First, the political leadership of the country is in the hands of a new party. The previous governments had failed to plan and execute something substantial for bringing meaningful changes in the domain of creativity and innovation. The incumbent government must act swiftly to bring systemic changes for improving the National Innovation System of the country. R&D and its importance

need to be emphasized and well thought out STI policy, not a wish list, needs to be formulated. All stakeholders such as related public departments, universities and private firms need to be taken on board for this. Clear timelines and tasks must be defined for various actors in the innovation system of the country.

Second, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and industrial cooperation which are part of the mid and long-term projects of the highly trumpeted China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are being rolled out soon. Pakistan to a certain extent has overcome its critical bottleneck for development i.e., energy crisis. Now is the appropriate time to reflect and rethink about the future. Instead of just using the fashionable phrase ‘Game Changer’ for CPEC, we should focus on actions needed to capitalize on the relationship with China for technology transfer in various industrial sectors. China’s success in SEZs is known to the world. The success of Shenzhen as a SEZ and now what is being done in the Greater Bay Area on the eastern coast of China must be watched very closely. Our relationship with China has hitherto been dominated by political and military concerns. The need of the hour is to redefine this relationship with bringing in more discussions and action plans on economic dimensions. We must leverage on our brotherly relations with China to learn from its advancements in creativity and innovation. Our industry needs to gear up for absorbing technological spillovers from Chinese collaborations under the CPEC.

Third, the results of the latest census indicate median age of the Pakistani population as 25. Almost 104 million people are, therefore, under this age. We need to enhance and improve our knowledge infrastructure to make optimum use of this large population. Labor productivity can only be enhanced by equipping the manpower with relevant skills and related technology. As with all other governments of the world, our policy makers need to make trade-offs too. We cannot ignore education anymore. A modern, professional, dynamic and futuristic knowledge system needs to be developed immediately. Resources are scarce and as a starting point this can be done in the areas where SEZs are being established or where some regional innovation systems are already working.

Pakistan has not performed well in the domain of STI. We cannot ignore this area anymore if we want our country to tread the path of sustainable growth. The future of the coming generations is dependent on our country’s ability to implement a robust policy framework for technology catch up. Only then can we transform into a respectable and competitive nation of the world.