

The Strategic Roadmap for the Economic Development of Afghanistan

As a foreign consultant with having an extensive global experience of working with innovation and entrepreneurship related projects for the economic growth and development of the firms and organizations as well as the national and regional economies, I may suggest the following key areas which should be explored to identify the current gaps and to take the required actions for the desired outcomes for Afghanistan in terms of its social and economic development in the mid-term and long-term.

Brain Gain Initiative

Over the past few years, there has been noticed a massive outflow of the professional talent pool ('brain drain') from Afghanistan to different countries worldwide. This intellectual and professional talent pool of Afghan origin is needed to be brought back to the country ('brain gain') for the national reconstruction and development. For that purpose, the database of the Afghan diaspora (migrants) is required to be systematically organized as per their personal data, qualifications, competences, experiences, interests, and requirements to facilitate their potential resettlement in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the government would need to provide them with the suitable environment and work conditions to encourage and help them join the right assignments and projects in order to contribute to the development of national economy and local communities. The Afghan international diaspora is a big asset for the country, as they would come back with their priceless global experiences and exposure, which will provide the local leadership with new insights and thus will open up new venues for the growth and development.

Innovation-Led Economy

It is an established fact that the innovative firms, economies, and nations grow much faster than the other economies which merely depend on the use of the available natural resources and traditional style of trading. For example, the market capitalization of the top 5 US-based global technology firms is \$7.6 trillion, which is more than 2.5 times of the total GDP (\$3 trillion) of the whole African continent. However, excelling in innovation requires of an institution and a nation to develop the supporting systems, processes, and a conducive structure and culture that could facilitate the generation and exploitation of new and creative ideas for the commercial gains and social benefits. To achieve this goal, it is important to have an effective 'idea management system' and implement a customized 'innovation management system' aligned with ISO 56002 guidelines. It also requires building the 'innovation capacity' through developing the innovative capabilities of the individuals, firms, and institutions, and providing them with the required resources. To become an innovation-led economy, it is essential to go through the digital transformation process.

It is recommended that initially a selected number of local firms from the targeted industries and a few selected government institutions shall be enrolled into the designed ‘innovation program’, which shall be followed by a large scale deployment of the innovation program at a grass-root level to engage all the remaining private firms, social-sector, and public-sector institutions.

Entrepreneurial Universities

In order to play an important role in the innovation-led economy, there is a new realization that the universities are required to enhance their roles, contributions, and impacts for the betterment of the national economy and society – beyond the traditionally assigned (assumed) roles within the teaching and research domains. The modern universities are now required to produce the ‘innovative entrepreneurs’ and the future ‘employers’ and not just the ‘graduates’ and potential ‘employees’. This enhanced role of the universities is termed as the ‘third mission’ of the universities and such innovative universities are named as the ‘Entrepreneurial Universities’. As a first step to become an entrepreneurial university, it’s important to train the teaching staff and introduce both theoretical and practical courses on innovation and entrepreneurship initially at the undergraduate and graduate level study programs in all universities across the country. Secondly, it requires that all universities shall be helped with establishing state-of-the-art innovation and entrepreneurship centers (‘incubators’ and ‘accelerators’) within the university premises in collaboration with the local industries and public-sector institutions. Third, it demands to nourish a strong innovation and entrepreneurship ‘Ecosystem’ with the help of cloud-based software applications so that the innovative and entrepreneurial ideas are provided with the required timely support so that those new creative ideas could readily be transformed into deliverable products and market-ready solutions, and new innovative firms and enterprises are created from the universities. To begin with, initially a selected number of universities in Afghanistan shall be enrolled into this transformation to an ‘Entrepreneurial University’ program, which shall be followed by a full-fledged deployment of this ambitious program for all the remaining higher education institutions.

Global Linkage Program

An innovative economy cannot exist and sustain in a ‘bubble’ or in an ‘isolated island’, and hence it must be fully connected and engaged with the rest of the world through actively becoming part of the innovation networks and global value-chains. Therefore, this important program shall facilitate in effectively connecting the local & national level firms and institutions of Afghanistan with rest of the world to increase the bilateral trade, technology investments, technology transfer agreements, equity partnerships, innovation collaborations, joint ventures, strategic alliances, and other forms of potential engagements.

Industrial Clusters (Concentrated Zones)

An industrial cluster is a geographic concentration of interconnected businesses, suppliers, and associated institutions in a particular field. The interaction between the final market producers, suppliers, and related enterprises is what creates an industry cluster, which then strengthens the economic area it operates in through increased productivity, partnership, and entrepreneurial activity. The increased productivity through being part of an industrial cluster makes the participated companies capable of competing both nationally and globally. Afghanistan can benefit from identifying and developing a certain number of targeted industrial clusters by providing them the required support for achieving the medium-term to long-term gains and competitive advantage. Afghanistan can particularly learn from the invaluable experiences of the neighboring China to know how it developed its wide range of thriving industrial clusters both at the city & village level.

Skills-based Online Training & Entrepreneurial Education

At a time when the global trend is towards promoting the online learning and virtual education, Afghanistan can particularly benefit from adopting this trend, considering the fact that it seriously lacks the required infrastructure and facilities to train and educate its whole population, including the previously disadvantaged segments of the society like the woman and the people living in the rural areas. It is recommended to initially design and deliver a few targeted online training and education programs with a particular focus on skills-based courses with entrepreneurial outcomes. By effectively implementing such an ambitious program would help to fill the current widening gap between the ‘haves and have-nots’. This online program will also address the cultural challenge of providing segregated education to the females in Afghanistan, which is currently not possible due to the lack of the physical infrastructure and available educational resources. Hence, the housebound females would also be able to safely avail the opportunity of acquiring education to become a productive segment of the Afghan society beyond fulfilling their family obligations.

It is believed that with an effective design and implementation of the above recommended programs and initiatives, they have the potential to fully transform the Afghan economy and society, and to achieve the envisioned national development plans. There are a few other secondary or affiliated projects, which shall be discussed with the concerned authorities at a later stage.

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