**Capitalizing Blue Economy and CPEC**

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The concept of the “blue economy” gained much visibility and importance at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, where the sustainable use of marine resources was streamlined. The World Bank defines blue economy as a “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem”. The scope of the blue economy encompasses different sectors and activities including seafood/ fisheries, aquaculture, maritime/ coastal tourism, renewable energy, and marine biotechnology. Fisheries and aquaculture are the leading sectors that contribute significantly. These sectors have great economic value and provide livelihood to millions of people across the world. Moreover, seafood and fish products are among the leading trading food items.

Pakistan is blessed with pristine landscapes, lakes, coastal areas, and many culturally rich historical sites. The country has a long coastal line of 1120 kilometres (km) surrounded by bare desert with a variety of landforms such as mostly virgin sand beaches, tombolo, rock cliffs, lagoons, headlands, shelf bays, deltas and mud flats with mangrove vegetation. Specifically, the Indus Delta provides an ideal environment for marine resources. Pakistan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends over 200 nautical miles (nm) or 370 km and includes biodiversity, seafood, minerals and hydrocarbon resources. These resources provide the impetus to recognize the blue economy and develop it on modern lines.

The blue economy represents a promising avenue for sustainable economic development.

Among the components of the blue economy, the fishery is worth noting. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey, the fishery sector contributed 1.39 per cent in agricultural produce and 0.32 per cent to the overall GDP in 2022-23. Further, it grew at 1.44 per cent as compared to 0.35 per cent last year. The total fishing area is estimated around 300,270 square km. The major fishing harbours in the country include Karachi Fish Harbor (which manages 90% of fish catch and 95 % of fish exports), Korangi Fish Harbor, Pasni Fish Harbor and Gwadar Fish Harbor.

Gwadar and Makran coasts hold great prospects for the blue economy. Gwadar sea area is abundant with a variety of best fishes including tuna, mackerel, croaker and other marine resources. Shrimp farming is another profitable business in Gwadar. The Jiwani coastal wetland is rich in AvicenniaMarina mangroves, nursery and spawning habitat for shrimps. Notably, Oceanic Whitetip, a fish species found in Gwadar, has a big international market and demand. Tuna especially Yellowfin tuna is a commercial and high-value fish which has significant export potential in the USA, EU, Japan and China. Moreover, Indian mackerel, sardine fish, Ribbon fish and Parfrey fish are major exportable fish species.

The region’s immense potential could not be fully realised due to inappropriate fish handling, poor management, inadequate infrastructure and hygiene problems that severely undermine fish production and quality control. As far as maritime/ coastal tourism is concerned, Kund Malir (Golden Beach)/ Hangol National Park, the remarkable Princesses of Hope, the Hindu Temple, and Astola Island are attractive sites, but the inadequate infrastructure and hospitality facilities are serious challenges.

Despite the endowed potential and latent comparative advantage, the true potential of the blue economy could not be realised, because of poor regulatory framework, fragile institutional setup, limited maritime infrastructure, security issues, technological backwardness, inadequate human competencies, economic uncertainties and political instability. Pakistan desperately needs to develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to realise the untapped potential of the blue economy, especially the fisheries and maritime tourism sector.

The blue economy in the policy domain is administered by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs (MoMA), Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (MoPDSI), and respective provincial departments of Planning & Development (P&D). Although there is no consolidated policy framework, however, there are a few policies related to fragments of the blue economy, such as the Pakistan Merchant Marine Shipping Policy which is mainly about fiscal measures and regulations of the shipping industry. Due to a lack of coordination among the institutions, policies are being formulated fragmentally and result in ineffective implementation. Further, due to the 18th amendment, there is a divide between federal and provincial government organisations which is hindering the coordinated and comprehensive national policy framework. Notably, the development of the blue economy is envisaged in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and authorities may consider the following recommendations to yield benefits from the untapped potential of the blue economy.

o Coastal tourism on five important sites Jiwani, Ormara, Jhaljao, Sonmiani and Keti Bundar) requires deliberate facilitation and marketing through collaboration with Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) and Chinese counterparts. Favourable government policies and improved security will boost coastal tourism. The tourist sites can be developed through diversified investment and financing mechanisms/ modes including built, operate and transfer (BOT), public-private partnership (PPP) and concessional loans to the indigenous population.

o The special investment packages can be offered to local and foreign investors with relevant expertise. Pertinently soft/interest-free loans could be provided to local talented youth for tourism and hospitality services. To develop entrepreneurial ventures in the tourism and hospitality sector, the Youth Entrepreneurship Fund, capacity building and tailor-made training programs need to be executed with the support of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/ CPEC partner countries.

o The government should train local farmers about export standards of aquaculture. Moreover, quality checks and certifications could be introduced to uplift exports of tuna and other aquaculture products in EU markets. Various viable projects including cold storage/ supply chain, processed & value-added seafood products, feed mills & hatcheries development, and hospitality services can be initiated. Moreover, requisite measures should be taken to preserve the national heritage and natural contours by engaging the indigenous population.

In short, the blue economy represents a promising avenue for sustainable economic development. Pakistan can secure its future prosperity while safeguarding its marine ecosystems through a coordinated and comprehensive plan of action along with targeted interventions to reap the benefits, especially for the inhabitants of Balochistan and Sindh. The blue economy should be strategically prioritised and harmonised among all tiers of government.

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