

Pakistan's 'Green Stimulus'

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The word crisis, in the Chinese language, is composed of two characters — one representing danger and the other opportunity, clearly signifying that they are two sides of the same coin. While the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has engulfed an unprepared world and forced it to a screeching halt, a silver lining has also emerged around this black cloud. As humans retreat under forced lockdowns, nature has made an eager and speedy comeback — rehabilitating, reenergising and reclaiming lost space while compelling us to recognise our extreme vulnerability to the destruction of the very ecosystem we live in. Quite visibly, the two striking lessons emerging out of this catastrophic situation are that nature has an inherent capacity to quickly self-heal, if allowed the time and space to do so; and secondly, that a renewed and sustainable balance with nature is not only needed, but possible and within reach if backed by political commitment and collective action.

Surprisingly though, these lessons are not new, but the world seems to have forgotten them. Looking back into history, president Roosevelt came to power in 1932 with the US economy steeped in the depths of the Great Depression. He quickly grasped that the two big resources being wasted were an unemployed youth bulge pushed into forced idleness and depression; and the environment, stressed by the timber trade and unregulated resource extraction. His solution became one of the great comeback stories of the time, termed the “New Deal” and built on the central pillar of the Civilian Conservation Corps. They were the young foot soldiers of the economic revival plan. FDR’s “Tree Army” was employed to preserve the environment through mostly labour intensive jobs including tree planting, working in national parks, restocking lakes with fish, cleaning streams and working on emergency relief work. The results of this planned convergence of youthful passion with the conservation of nature were quite remarkable. In almost 10 years, more than three million youth were employed in six month stints, planting 3.5 billion trees, creating 700 national parks with marked out eco-tourism spots and laying the foundations for the National Parks Service while augmenting the existing Forest Service. The economic recession ended but this movement left an indelible mark on the country — irreversibly marking an appreciation for nature and the environment in the national psyche. Most importantly, it lifted a people steeped in depression and mired in handouts, by offering them dignified work. “The members felt good about himself and what he was doing. In those difficult days, that was enough” (CCC Legacy, 1932).

Faced with the pressures unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic on top of a degrading environment and an already stressed economy laden with huge unemployment, Pakistan

today faces a similar crisis. Also, like the US in the 1930s, it is fortunate to have a leadership that comprehends the potential and fully understands the dire need to invest in nature. The successful implementation of the Billion Tree Tsunami in K-P, generating five lakh green jobs, has already proven that the revival of nature and economy can go hand in hand. Moreover, recent research shows that almost 50% of global GDP is directly dependent on nature and that for each dollar invested in nature the potential economic dividends are nine times greater (WEF, 2020). On the contrary, post-Covid-19 research is also establishing that damaged ecosystems have a causal link with the rising incidence of infectious diseases. It is, thus, no coincidence that Pakistan's current 5-point green agenda is built upon this premise of trusting and investing in nature — with the 10 Billion Trees Tsunami, Clean Green Initiative, plastic ban, Electric Vehicles policy and Recharge Pakistan Initiative. All this has already laid the foundation to launch a directional shift in our economy and future sustainable growth. In this backdrop, the Covid-19 crisis is now providing an opportunity for a renewed revival and we are grasping it with both hands.

Prime Minister Imran Khan last week approved a “Green Stimulus” focused on two objectives — job creation and restoration of our natural ecosystems. The focal areas for intervention include planting trees, reviving our protected areas and sanitation improvement while the targeted beneficiaries are the unemployed youth and women and daily wagers currently out of jobs and migrating to rural areas. The three chosen intervention areas are prioritised as they are all “shovel ready” with complete federal/provincial level ownership. All can be easily made Covid-19 safe, can deliver climate compatible development and provide avenues for jobs as “nighabaans” — custodians of the environment.

In terms of implementation, we envision financial sustainability of the initiative in three phases. The first ongoing phase is fully funded through budgetary provisions and the focus is to upscale the activity and recalibrate priority towards green job creation. This is already underway, with the Prime Minister approving the activities under 10 Billion Tree Tsunami to be opened up from the lockdown while undertaking precautions of using masks and operating with social distancing in open air surroundings. As a result, its delivery has already been boosted to 65,000 daily wage “nighabaan” jobs across the country in nursery raising, plant care, protection of natural forests, honeybee farming and fire-fighting activities. Through the provinces, we have planned to raise this to 200,000 jobs in the next few months.

The second phase is the post-Covid-19 recovery phase, for which substantial support funds (\$60-100 million) are being secured through multi-lateral donors. This will further expand the activities to include establishment of a National Parks Service and support sanitation activities, including storm water management, rainwater harvesting and solid and liquid waste management and hospital waste disposal. This will be carried out in at least 20 main cities of the country, creating employment in hundreds of thousands — estimated at 600,000 daily-wage jobs. This scope can also be further expanded to add climate compatible activities across sectors such as Housing — with energy efficient

retrofitting of buildings, Transport — with cleaner transport electric options, and Energy — with clean renewable energy promotion. In tandem, the Ministry of Climate Change has initiated work on ensuring foolproof transparency and credibility of the activities undertaken, and the green jobs generated, through a complete digital portal covering the whole country.

With the momentum gained in the first two phases, the third phase will be to structure “Debt for Nature” swaps based on the credible ongoing activity and the renegotiation of Pakistan’s burgeoning debt with countries supporting a green revival of the global economy. There are already strong indications of a growing global appetite for supporting this directional shift towards ecosystem restoration and job creation.

This nature-positive “Green Stimulus” to rebuild the economy and stimulate sustainable growth, while employing the youth, is the need of the day and will allow Pakistan to not only come out of the economic recession but also build back better and, more importantly, build back green. Pakistan is willing and committed to lead along a fresh pathway and, not just bounce back, but bounce forward into a brave new world sustained with nature protection and climate resilience, driven by youth engagement and supported through community participation.

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