

Local puzzles, foreign pieces

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Here's the latest twist in the saga of Pakistan's economic spectacle: we've decided to bring in a foreign expert to whip up a "homegrown" economic development plan. Yes, you heard that right. We're calling in someone from outside to tell us how to fix our own backyard.

The term "homegrown" should, in theory, mean that we rely on our own local experts, the people who actually get what's going on in Pakistan. But no, we've handed the reins over to someone alien to this land. It's like we're saying, "Hey, local talent, you're good and all, but let's get someone who has absolutely no clue about our daily chaos to lead the way!"

Let's talk about our local experts for a moment. These folks have a built-in radar for Pakistan's socio-economic quirks. They understand our cultural nuances and the specific challenges we face. They're the ones who can offer solutions that make sense in our context. By sidelining them in favour of a foreign expert, we're basically saying, "Thanks, but no thanks." It's a smack in the face to national pride and self-reliance.

The contrast between a local and a foreigner can be vividly illustrated by this scenario. Imagine a business expert from abroad arriving in Peshawar. He sees a bustling city with a large population, rising income levels, a low tendency to save, and a significant youth demographic. His advice? Introduce KFC and McDonald's. Surely, they would thrive here!

Meanwhile, a local can't help but suppress a laugh. This foreigner has no idea that Peshawar is the land of Chapli Kebab and Shinwari Karahi. The taste buds of the locals, especially the youth, are deeply entwined with Pashtoon cuisine. It's more than just food; it's a matter of pride and cultural heritage.

The way dishes are presented, the traditional seating arrangements, and the aromatic kahwa poured from tiny metallic teapots into cups infused with the intense aroma of cardamom—it's a unique experience. KFC and McDonald's would flop in Peshawar, and history proves it. Here, the local cuisine reigns supreme, a testament to the city's rich cultural tapestry.

Don't even get me started on the colonial hangover. Bringing in a foreigner to solve our problems reeks of an inferiority complex we should've ditched ages ago. It's like we're still craving that foreign stamp of approval. This mentality undermines our efforts to be autonomous in policymaking. We've got a rich pool of economists and development pros who can tackle our challenges – if we just let

them.

Sure, our foreign experts probably have resumes that are longer than a winter night. But do they really understand the nitty-gritty of our situation? Solutions that worked elsewhere might not fit here without some serious adjustments. Foreign experts' role should be advisory, not that they take the steering wheel. Let's keep our plan genuinely homegrown while cherry-picking some global insights.

And here's the million-dollar question: why, after seven decades of independence, do we still have this insecurity syndrome? Look at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE). We've been producing solid, actionable plans that could bring real change if anyone bothered to implement them. At PIDE, we're about collaboration, not competition. We're open to dialogue and eager for feedback. We're not shoving our ideas down anyone's throat, but hey, good ideas deserve a fair shot.

PIDE has been knocking on the policy door with strategies like the Reform Agenda for Accelerated and Sustained Growth, the One Year Growth Strategy, the Charter of Economy, and the Reform Manifesto.

Most recently, we proposed the Immediate Reform Agenda: IMF and Beyond. These documents are packed with ideas to modernize regulations, reform taxes, liberalize markets, and improve sectors like energy, agriculture, and banking. Our "Regulatory Guillotine" idea aims to cut through the red tape stifling business growth and innovation.

Tax simplification and stability are also on our hit list. This budget season, we're calling for a streamlined, revenue-neutral tax system with a commitment to no new taxes each budget cycle.

The chaos of tax uncertainty has driven investments underground and hindered corporate growth. We advocate for a uniform tax rate across all income sources, adjustments for agricultural income losses, and the elimination of presumptive taxes and taxes on turnover.

Making exports a national priority is crucial. We need a pro-export trade policy that encourages large firms to enter the global market and grow into multi-billion-dollar entities. This involves promoting trading houses as intermediaries and offering performance-based incentives like tax rebates. Streamlining incorporation processes and removing additional customs duties are key steps. It's about removing barriers, not building them. And let's talk real estate.

Government-owned properties are prime real estate stuck in bureaucratic limbo. In Islamabad alone, these properties could unlock a staggering Rs2,278.6 billion in value. Imagine the economic boost if we utilized this resource properly!

This is just a glimpse of PIDE's comprehensive research and proposed reforms.

Not to forget that PIDE also has revamped its approach in recent years. Previously stationed primarily in Islamabad, we've now extended our reach to every corner of the country. From Lahore and

Peshawar to Karachi, Quetta, Gilgit, Muzaffarabad, Gwadar, Multan, and Kohat, our interactions with remote regions, smaller cities, and socially isolated populations have given us insights we could never have imagined before.

The contrast between research conducted on computer screens and the ground realities is staggering —this is merely the tip of the iceberg. We're planning to engage even more comprehensively with local partners in the coming years.

Now, how could a foreigner achieve this depth of understanding in just a few weeks, or even months? Even conducting comprehensive briefings with all the stakeholders in Islamabad - the capital city - would be a colossal task for foreign experts

Let's not fix foreign pieces again into local puzzles. We don't need another déjà vu of colonial clutches, blindly following foreign proposals. The alien plans and foreign expertise haven't gotten us far; history proves that.

While our governance issues are real, much depends on having a solid plan. If the foundation is weak, positive outcomes will remain a distant dream. Sustainable change must come from within, leveraging local expertise and addressing our unique context. Only through this approach can we ensure solutions that truly resonate and endure.

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