



REVOLUTIONIZING THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR OF PAKISTAN – SIFC'S TOP PRIORITY

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NECESSITY AND VISION BEHIND THE CREATION OF SIFC

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan is a country that is replete with untapped resources and treasures. But due to lack of capacity and incompetence, not only we have been unable to tap them appropriately, but we also have given them away to the international hawk-eyed investors and agencies at practically no cost. It is nevertheless our good luck that we finally woke up to the realities of the present day and have started creeping towards improving the situation by focusing on two core issues - capacity and competence.

In the year 2023, a need was felt by the government to embark upon a journey to take Pakistan out of the economic turmoil and steer it out of disaster towards prosperity and development. A whole of the government approach was adopted and the civil and military officials joined hands in support of political leadership

to create a council that comprises of civil and military leadership - the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). The purpose of creating SIFC was to help tap the economic potentials of Pakistan in the sectors we call the low-hanging fruits, bring Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the country, create a business-friendly environment in the country, and carry out changes in the policy by removing bureaucratic hurdles from the system and making the system more efficient and effective.

Considering the agriculture sector as the top priority of Government of Pakistan and ultimately of SIFC, the GPI was undertaken with LIMS-COE spearheading the initiative through incorporating modern technology and consolidation of existing data into the agriculture sector. As a result of a survey, more than four million acres of land were identified throughout the country, which could be brought under cultivation over four to five years thus adding to the existing 75.4 million acres of land already under cultivation. Coupled with a reduction in cost through economizing the use of fertilizers, water resources, and pesticides, and increasing the yield, it means a lot for Pakistan.

CONFIGURATION AND FUNCTIONING OF GPI AND LIMS

Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI) being the flagship project of SIFC has taken giant strides towards improvement in the agriculture sector in the past year. Based on the need analysis, GPI Headquarters was established in Rawalpindi under which the Laboratory Information Management Systems (LIMS) initiative was undertaken and a newly formed company under the aegis of Fauji Foundation - FonGrow - volunteered to serve as a model to be followed by the agriculture sector. GPI, capitalizing on the expertise of agriculturists, consolidating the survey data available with public and private sectors, and using the team of IT experts, launched the LIMS, which started revolutionizing agriculture from the very moment of its inception.

A question arises: In the wake of already existing projects in the field of agriculture, how do GPI and LIMS stand out? There are numerous reasons to be cited in the context, but to quote just a few:

- They have started working systematically, by first hiring experts in the field, collaborating with renowned national and international companies, and adopting the best practices worldwide.
- With the teams of dedicated workers in hand, and potential investors in the pipeline, GPI embarked upon the acquisition of arable land in the agricultural areas as well as the areas in deserts where no cultivation was done ever before.
- In different regions, GPI went on to establish model farms which, through the use of the latest technology, would serve as samples to be followed by the common farmers. They have shown improved yields with reduced costs and have inspired farmers all over the country to follow in their footsteps.
- Consolidating the agricultural data of the whole country in one place, integrating it with the latest satellite data available, and interfacing it all in their website, have made GPI and LIMS a state-of-the-art organization that has no rival in the country. This model is being studied by other countries as well, who want to acquire it for their use.

MAIN CONCEPT - REVOLUTIONIZING AGRICULTURE IN PAKISTAN UNDER SIFC

The measures taken by GPI and LIMS under the umbrella of SIFC include:

- Digitization of land data of the whole country
- Provision of real-time satellite imagery of land and linking it with the soil testing reports compiled by the government departments
- Introduction of corporate farming techniques by consolidating the land and procurement of the latest machinery to help in the cultivation of large chunks of land with minimum wastage
- Identifying new stretches of land to be added to the agriculture sector
- Ensuring the conservation of resources - water, fertilizer, pesticides, etc. to reduce the cost
- Ensuring the production of high-quality seeds that are more resistant and have a high survival rate
- Taking policy measures to ensure the effectiveness of the system
- Zoning of the whole country for crops most suitable for the type of soil, atmospheric conditions, sub-soil ingredients, and climatic conditions
- Reviving aquaculture of the country which possesses some unique species and breeds of marine and freshwater animals
- Reclaiming the original breeds of cattle of the country - once known in the whole world for their quality of output, meat, and milk - which had lost their pedigree over time owing to cross-breeding and lack of measures to protect the species.
- Reviving the cotton zones of the country which have relatively less requirement of water and other resources and give yields that are known in the whole world for their quality, but unfortunately were sacrificed to water-heavy sugarcane crops owing to vested interests of a few sugar producers
- Repair and de-silting of more than 55,000 canal miles of canals in Punjab to ensure the provision of water to the extreme canal terminals for better irrigation
- Reclaiming reserve forests and enhancing tree plantation by incorporating the society in government projects
- An extensive movement to reduce pollution, clean river waters, and hence improve the local environment
- Taking measures to improve tourism in the country by establishing a Green Tourism Company and developing tourist sites and resorts to attract local and international tourists
- Bringing more than fifty thousand acres of land under cultivation and allotting more than two hundred and fifty thousand acres of land to local and foreign investors for agriculture and related developments

All these steps have brought about a revolution in the field of agriculture in the country. The first result of hard efforts of the complete year was seen in the form of bumper crops of wheat, barley, maize, and several vegetables. Ironically, when on the one hand the GPI was boasting of exporting the surplus yields to countries like GCC, China, and Europe, we nevertheless ended up in importing wheat in millions of tonnes, thus resulting in creation of a wheat crisis. The main lagging in our country that I mentioned earlier - capacity and competence - came in play and resulted in a crisis situation for crop growers. We are probably the only people who can create a crisis over abundance as well.

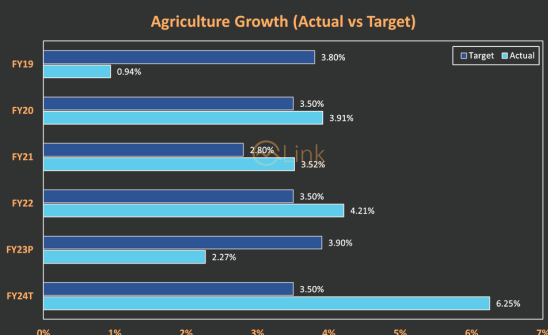
With an infrastructure developed, a team in place with a will to work and do something for the country, and the model enterprise to serve as an example for the farmers to follow, Pakistan is fully equipped to bring revolutionary changes in the agriculture sector and embark upon a spree to put Pakistan on the road to economic prosperity and development and take the country out of crisis.

The steps being undertaken in the GPI will have manifold advantages: giving opportunities to investors (both local and foreign) to invest in agriculture sector, whether it be crops, livestock or for that matter fisheries and blue investment; the local farmers will have direct benefit through reduction in cost, and enhancement in yield, the general population will be beneficiary in terms of reduction in price due to increase in production. In short, we can easily call it a win-win situation for all tiers of national power.

As a result of the efforts of SIFC and - under its aegis - the GPI and LIMS, there was marked improvement in the economy of Pakistan by the close of the financial year 2023-24. A few glimpses of the improvement as seen in the governmental statistics are appended below: -

- The Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24³⁵ ³⁶ report an expansion of 6.25% in agriculture sector, which helped in driving the GDP growth by 2.38% in FY 2024. The overall fiscal deficit was overturned only due to improvement in agricultural produce.
- The Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP)³⁷ highlighted that there was an increase of 37 % in agriculture exports, which reached \$8bn in the financial year 2023-24. The increase was due mainly to an increase in exports of rice, maize, sesame, onion, and meat.

- This year, with further streamlining of the procedures, restoration of confidence of farmers, increased consideration of the investors to consider investing in Pakistan, and inclusion of new arable land in the agriculture sector of Pakistan, there are all the chances that these statistics will further improve.
- The establishment of SIFC is another such factor that gives indications towards this end because the main factor of its establishment was to keep it safe from political situations.



WAY FORWARD

Since the establishment of SIFC, I have always called it a 'National Effort' that can only achieve success when every element of society realizes the need for measures being undertaken and joins hands with the government to bring about positive changes in the country. Side by side, the government will have to enhance its capacity and competence to match the need of the hour.

We don't have any time to lose. It is written on the wall that the current century is the century of Asia - a quarter of which has already passed. If we do not wake up to the realities of life, if we do not welcome the opportunities that are banging (not knocking) on our doors, if we keep playing the blame game and maintaining a stagnant position through self-created conflicts and disagreements, we will be left behind in the race to development. The time is not far when - if we maintained the same state of procrastination - we will be looking at our neighbors growing head and shoulders above us and making us feel ashamed of ourselves.

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³⁵<https://mettisglobal.news/agriculture-sector-in-pakistan-re-cords-6-25-growth-in-fy2024-exceeding-target/>

³⁶Economic Survey of Pakistan 2023-24, Economic Adviser's Wing, Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad.

³⁷Monthly Trade Report June 2024, Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, Ministry of Commerce.