**Reimagining the geography of development**

**By**

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The establishment of the Special Technology Zones Authority (STZA) is a welcome initiative by the government that demonstrates its well-intentioned desire to reap the innovation dividend and transform the national growth model from low to high growth. The vehicle of this transformation is slated to be specialized zones serving essentially as dedicated built spaces that will provide new technology and digital infrastructure coupled with an integrated service platform for the collaborative clustering of technology, industry, and finance.

Initially, the first of these zones is to be established in Islamabad. This is a wise choice considering the relatively favorable knowledge economy endowments of the capital city. Assurance of all-out support to the new initiative by the Prime Minister is indeed a factor of strength. The appointment, as the first chairperson of the authority, of a dynamic and versatile professional who is experienced in tech entrepreneurship and innovation management and governance, and is reputed to have an enterprising spirit and an excellent work ethic, is likewise a step in the right direction. It is generally envisaged that these zones will help in changing the mix of factors available in the regions where they are located, so that high-quality factors like knowledge and technology come to represent the highest proportion in the factor structure of selected urban centers or districts.

In this regard, perhaps the most serious obstacle standing in the face of this promising initiative is the poor general and institutional understanding of how to promote science-based and innovation-led regional economic and urban development. In the last two decades, the discourse of science, technology, and innovation has gained some traction in policy circles but its practice remains less than satisfactory. This is indicated by the fact that while there is profuse recitation in academic and policy circles of the benefits of knowledge economy and the fourth industrial revolution powered by robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and the convergence of technologies, our urban land-use development strategies are still proto-industrial in nature, neither properly industrial nor primed for innovation.

Starting in the 1950s, major cities in North America, Western Europe, and Asia Pacific have been developed and governed as the dynamic sites of knowledge economy, but cognitive, institutional, and spatial dimensions of Pakistani cities have remained stubbornly non-conducive to the promotion of open innovation systems that are based on the creative proximity and density of people and enterprises. One sign of this reality is that our cities continue to embody the vagaries and throes of physical distance.

The supreme virtues of open innovation economy are collaboration, sharing, and an unceasing welter of ideas to discover how best to create new social and economic value, but the dominant mindset in our cities, even in advanced highly qualified enclaves like institutions of higher learning, is characterized by silo-based turf protection and jaded ad hocism unwedded to any patient, exploratory, and collective pursuit of strategic objectives. There are very few exceptions to this condition.

This shows that our aspirations for growth and development are inspired by post-industrial connectivity, but our mindset is held hostage by the isolationist self-sufficiency of feudalism. The element of haste further confounds our individual actions and policy choices. What is dangerous is that we mistake haste for speed. Haste, inimical to good planning and innovation, is just laziness and incompetence in disguise. Speed on the other hand, is time saved during the implementation stage by time taken at the planning stage. We need speed not haste.

To fulfil its promise, STZA will have to steer clear of all these cognitive, decisional, and planning traps found in our institutional and urban cultures. Only then, in time, will it be able to reimagine traditional modes of urban development in favor of redrawing the urban landscape for innovation by means of planning mixed-use development strategies that put people, firms, talent, and sustainability first, and improve the quality of life, business, work, and production.

Moreover, different green-field and brown-field initiatives will have to be considered to create new innovation capabilities as well as adopt and improve existing S&T assets. It will inevitably mean that the behavior of traditional interests ensconced in the urban design will have to be modified, and new coalitions of pro-innovation actors will have to be promoted through push-and-pull strategies and incentives for the development of S&T industry. The demographics of the cities in which the zones will be set up will have to be studied to identify innovation-friendly segments of their urban populations for leveraging these constituencies of support. In this context, locational choices will need to reflect the potential of positive spillover effects and maximize the utilization or internalization of existing knowledge economy assets.

Most important than all, in order to ensure operational success and sustainability, the zones will have to provide a model of development that indicates the programmatic architecture of how the young adults of Pakistan can be gainfully employed, meaningfully engaged, constructively empowered, and organized for common prosperity in opposition to anachronistic modes of education, employment, and representation.