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Email: jehr@um.uob.edu.pk

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“The Impact of the Pakistan National Incubation Centers (NIC) Balochistan Program on Skill Development for Women and Young Startups: Addressing Socio- Economic Challenges”

Muhammad Asif Khan: *BUIITEMS, Quetta*

Saud Al Taj: *Centre for Teaching and Learning, Algoma University, Canada*

Mateeullah Khan Achakzai: *BUIITEMS, Quetta*

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ABSTRACT

The National Incubation Center (NIC) Balochistan has initiated a program that addresses the socio-economic challenges faced in this region. This program helps build and promote a dynamic, inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. This research article will discuss the impact of this program on young and female entrepreneurs and will also emphasize their skill development, mentorship, and access to funding for their businesses. With the help of the program's comprehensive approach, the participants have been able to develop sustainable businesses that play a vital role in the province's economic growth and the financial and economic stability of an individual. The program has been the reason behind numerous successful startups through training, coaching, and prize opportunities linked with investor support. This article also sheds light on the effectiveness of the NIC program in addressing major problems in the region, like unemployment and gender equality, and developing a pathway that leads to economic self-sufficiency. The findings focus on the need for consistent support and expanded implementation of such initiatives at regional and national levels to ensure long-term sustainability and maximum economic development. With the policy recommendations to scale the model to other regions of Pakistan, this program aims to build a more inclusive and innovative national entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Introduction

Balochistan is a province of Pakistan that faces a high level of socio-economic challenges that include unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, poverty, and limited access to education. These challenges have an overall impact on economic growth and have created obstacles to the employment and development of the young people in this region. Women in Balochistan face additional challenges that include pressurizing and restrictive cultural norms, customs, and traditions, limited access to education and training, and a lack of financial resources that makes the situation even worse for them to pursue careers and gain financial independence by starting their own businesses.

To overcome and fight against the challenges, startups are the vital solution. By doing this, more job opportunities, innovation, and self-reliance can be spread, which is necessary for addressing the socio-economic problems in this region. For females, entrepreneurship has also become a beneficial solution to fight against societal barriers and gain financial independence, which also helps them improve the local economy and their social status. To create a more inclusive and resilient economy, it is crucial to encourage startups that are mainly carried out by young people and females.

To do so, incubation centers like the National Incubation Center (NIC) play a vital role. They offer entrepreneurs the required support, such as business development training, skill development, networking, and the proper funding to transform their ideas from their minds into successful

businesses. NIC Balochistan offers unique support for women entrepreneurs to access resources and provide them essential support that can aid them in navigating through the challenges they face when starting and growing their ventures. NIC helps women overcome gender-related obstacles by focusing on capacity-building and skill development and encourages them to continue their entrepreneurship confidently.

The NIC Balochistan is an effort to promote entrepreneurship as a part of a considerable national effort with the key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Information Technology (MoIT), Balochistan University of Information Technology (BUIITS), the Lahore University of Management Science (LUMS), and Ignite Pakistan. The MoIT has been playing its part in shaping the policies and offering strategic support to foster entrepreneurship in Pakistan, including in Balochistan. LUMS offers its expertise in business education and mentorship and contributes to developing capable and high-quality entrepreneurs. On the other hand, Ignite Pakistan aids in fueling the growth of the startup ecosystems, with a prime focus on empowering and strengthening women and young entrepreneurs.

National Incubation Center Quetta is a unique platform for incubating and accelerating startups. It is launched for the public with the private partnership of the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecom, IGNITE, Lahore University of Management and Science (LUMS), and Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences (BUIEMS).

In addition, the NIC Balochistan program has received appreciation from many international donors, including the United Nations (UN) and the United States Consulate in Karachi. These donors offer financial and technical support to strengthen the program's capacity and reach. Their involvement is critical to ensuring that the NIC Balochistan program continues to grow, support, and inspire entrepreneurs, specifically females and young people, by providing them with the resources and support needed to overcome socio-economic challenges and build sustainable businesses.

1. Methodology

Mainly, this study emphasizes analyzing the impact of the NIC Balochistan program on the skill development of women and young entrepreneur's startups in this region. The methodology implemented included qualitative data collection through direct observations, interviews, and interaction with several stakeholders involved in the NIC Balochistan initiative. As an article writer, trainer, and panel judge, I personally appreciate NIC programs, which provide valuable first-hand insights into the program's workings. The following are the key steps in this research process:

1. Mentor and Guest Speaker Panel Interaction

A major element of the NIC Balochistan program is the involvement of mentors, guest speakers, and panel judges who offered valuable and helpful guidance to the participants. As a panel judge and guest speaker, I had the opportunity to communicate directly with young entrepreneurs and judge their business

ideas. I also offered them feedback on their skill development. With these interactions, mentors identified their key skills, such as business planning, innovation, and problem-solving skills tailored to combat socio-economic challenges. The panel discussions and judge interactions were beneficial in comprehending how the program is impacting skill development, specifically for women and young people.

2. Interviews with Stakeholders

To gain some more valuable insights into the NIC Balochistan program, interviews were conducted with the main figures such as Ms. Sadia Arif Khan, Manager of Marketing and Communications at NIC Quetta (BUIITEMS), and Muhammad Shah Khan, the Founding Director of NIC Quetta. As a panel judge and trainer, I found these interviews to provide a comprehensive view of the NIC's mission, goals, and the challenges faced by the participants. The interviews basically emphasized how the NIC's program is promoting the development of vital business skills, empowering women, and promoting entrepreneurship in Balochistan.

3. Interaction with Participating Candidates

As both a trainer and a panel judge, I had the leverage to interact directly with the participating candidates in NIC Balochistan programs. These interactions included informal conversations as well as formal training sessions with both male and female entrepreneurs. With the help of interactions, I gained insights about the challenges participants face, specifically women, and how the NIC

Balochistan program is helping them develop the necessary skills to fight against these challenges. Special attention was given to the female entrepreneurs in exploring the gender-specific barriers they are facing while encouraging them to start and scale their business ventures.

4. Panel Judging and Evaluation Process

As a panel judge, I was provided with a direct insight into the evaluation process of startup business ideas presented by the participants. I assessed the businesses based on scalability, feasibility, and innovation and how well they are coping with the socio-economic obstacles. The feedback given to the participating candidates after the evaluation helped them refine their business ideas, improve their strategies, and develop important skills that can help them make their business models sustainable. The judging process also defined the role of the NIC program in encouraging young entrepreneurs' startups and guiding them in using the correct strategy to combat challenging economic situations and make their business a success.

The combination of first-hand knowledge as a trainer and panel judge and insights from the key stakeholders and participating candidates gave this research a comprehensive understanding of the NIC Balochistan program. This research describes the program's positive impact on skill development for women and young entrepreneurs. The study also describes how the NIC program helps entrepreneurs in dealing with socio-economic problems, nurturing an environment of innovation, economic growth, and inclusiveness.

Results

As a result of this study, the impact of the National Incubation Center (NIC) Balochistan program is highlighted in skill development primarily on women and young entrepreneurs. The observations, direct interactions with the candidates, feedback from the mentors, panel judges, and key stakeholders, and several key outcomes describe the contribution of the NIC program in addressing the socio-economic challenges.

1. Skill Development for Young Entrepreneurs

The NIC program has significantly contributed to the development of the key entrepreneurial skills in young participating candidates. Through the combination of targeted training, coaching, and mentorship, young entrepreneurs developed the necessary skills to plan and market their businesses. They have also learned how to bring innovation, manage the finances, and develop leadership qualities. Participants showed an increase in confidence in navigating challenges and running their businesses, with many of them describing how the training sessions aid them in implementing theoretical knowledge into practical solutions for startup business ventures.

2. Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs

One of the main and most significant impacts of the NIC program is the empowerment of women entrepreneurs. Female participants said that the program not only helped them develop the necessary business skills but also gave them a supportive environment that helped them to

overcome socio-cultural norms and obstacles that play a major role in limiting their success and entrepreneurial aspirations. The mentorship and training sessions were specifically tailored to help women gain confidence in themselves. This will help them to establish their business and develop strategies to sustain their business startups. These sessions were helpful for them in gathering funds for their business, making meaningful connections, and growing their visibility in the entrepreneurial community. They also gained credibility and success in their business.

3. Mentorship, Training, and Coaching

The major component of the NIC Balochistan program was to offer necessary training, coaching, and mentorship to the candidates. These sessions were tailored to enhance the practical skills required to start and scale a business venture. Participants had the leverage to work with experienced mentors and gain tailored guidance on refining their business models, implementing beneficial marketing strategies, and combating operation challenges. As both a trainer and a panel judge of the program, I noticed that the women and young entrepreneurs are more confident after gaining helpful insights from coaching sessions, and helped them to build resilience and gain the skills needed to succeed in the competitive market. Mentors also emphasized preparing entrepreneurs for real-world challenges along with equipping them with the tools to build sustainable businesses.

4. Prize Money and Investor Support

The important feature and opportunity given by the NIC Balochistan program to the participant was the prize money and a chance to secure investment from market sponsors. The panel judges selected the best business plans, and they were awarded the prize money to help them accelerate their business ventures. In addition, successful participants related to investors who expressed their interest in sponsoring their businesses. The funding, along with mentoring and resources offered in the entire NIC program, offered entrepreneurs the very important boost needed to scale their businesses. Due to this, many business startups are currently growing successfully and even now operate in larger markets successfully. This indicates the success of the NIC program in the long term.

5. Networking and Collaboration

NIC Balochistan facilitated significant networking opportunities that fostered a healthy connection between participants and other entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, and relevant industry experts. The participants got to learn more about the larger business community, which helped them grow their businesses and stand out in the circle. Also, participants, mainly women, said that networking helped them make new connections, form relationships, and even get funds for their businesses. Because of this, the participants broadened their business reach and gained confidence to present their ideas effectively to potential investors.

6. Impact on Socio-Economic Development

The NIC Balochistan has a significant impact on the region's socio-economic development. The NIC program helped many startups to expand their business operations and create more job opportunities, which helped in dealing with unemployment, which is a significant contribution to the local economy. Many of these business startups are working to combat regional problems, such as making healthcare and education accessible for everyone, and sustainable agriculture. Moreover, young entrepreneurs are empowered with the proper tools, resources, and connections imperative to establish scalable businesses. The program is fostering long-term economic growth in Balochistan.

7. Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Though the NIC Balochistan program has made a noticeable impact, there are still some challenges to combat. Many women are still facing difficulty in accessing financial resources because of the limited capital and lack of local funding options. While the prize money awarded and connections made during the program benefited the participants, there is a continued need for more diverse and accessible funding options. In addition, some entrepreneurs found it difficult to market their products beyond the local markets and communities. While the NIC Balochistan program provided the necessary training to scale the business, further support in terms of advanced marketing strategies and expanding the market reach would enhance the effectiveness of the program.

To sum up, the research results indicate that the NIC Balochistan program has been immensely successful in developing the necessary business skills in both women and young entrepreneurs and has empowered them to address socio-economic issues and establish sustainable business ventures. The business startups gained a major long-term advantage through coaching, mentorship, prize money, and access to investors. Amongst all, many businesses grow and thrive beyond the NIC program. However, these business ventures need constant support and guidance in order to ensure their long-term scalability, sustainability, and success.

Discussion

The NIC Balochistan program has made some major efforts for young people, specifically women entrepreneurs. The program helped in addressing the socio-economic obstacles through comprehensive training sessions, mentorships, and access to investors. These efforts played a major role in encouraging entrepreneurship and also helped them participate in developing a healthy and sustainable business. The discussions were further made on the NIC program's impact, such as the impact of collaboration of business management experts and corporate sectors and how these elements are enhancing the program's effectiveness, sustainability, and broader implications.

Addressing Socio-Economic Challenges

Balochistan is Pakistan's province that is facing many socio-economic challenges. This includes high poverty,

unemployment, and restricted access to basic resources. Every person, particularly females, faces additional pressure and societal and cultural barriers to start with entrepreneurship. The efforts of the NIC program have been amazing in addressing these issues and empowering young people and women entrepreneurs with the skill development, knowledge, and essential networks that can help them succeed.

Through targeted training and mentorship, participants were able to gather the knowledge and skills associated with business planning, marketing, innovation, and financial management.

These essential skills enabled them to transform their ideas into functional and scalable business models. The program offered more than just business knowledge to women entrepreneurs; it offered a platform for overcoming cultural constraints and breaking gender-related barriers. The NIC program provided support to the participating candidates that gave them the confidence to begin business ventures; otherwise, they might not have been able to transform their business ideas into reality.

Moreover, the NIC program also developed jobs and innovation to aid the region in dealing with unemployment and help in economic development. Due to these efforts, many business ventures continued to grow and fight the local challenges, such as providing access to healthcare facilities and creating sustainable agricultural businesses.

Sustainability

The long-term success of the NIC Balochistan program and the businesses it supports depends heavily on their sustainability. A sustainable

entrepreneurial program would be one that helps entrepreneurs establish their startups and also facilitates them with the required tools and resources to make sure their growth remains consistent. Although the program has achieved great success by nurturing young people and female entrepreneurs, challenges still stand in securing continuous funding and market expansion opportunities. Though the NIC startups thrive and grow after the completion of the incubation period with initial funding and prize money, they still face challenges in scaling their business in the long term, especially entrepreneurs with limited access to infrastructure and capital. In order to address this problem, NIC has actively engaged local business management and the corporate sector and requested them to provide support, real-time guidance, and mentorship to the entrepreneurs. The program has enriched entrepreneurs with a better understanding of real-world business management models and best business practices by connecting them with experienced professionals in Baluchistan's business community. This interaction has played a critical role in helping entrepreneurs learn basic business skills and navigate through challenges like chain management, operations, and cost control; hence, all the skills necessary to scale business and long-term sustainability.

In addition, the corporate sector involved in the program helped reinforce sustainability by encouraging stronger bonds between new startups and established businesses. Furthermore, local corporations are taking part in parenting and investing

in emerging entrepreneur setups, which is offering valuable continuous support to the NIC graduates. The partnership benefits entrepreneurs in their business growth while promoting the exchange of knowledge and expertise between business startups and the corporate sector, thereby helping in sustainable business growth.

Program Effectiveness

The NIC program has shown its effectiveness for young people as well as women entrepreneurs. It facilitated entrepreneurs with the right tools and skills to help them scale their businesses. The effectiveness of the program can be analyzed with these key components: comprehensive training sessions, access to funding, mentorship and exposure and discussions with experienced business leaders.

In addition to the above-mentioned elements, the program also facilitated entrepreneurs with specialized sessions for the participating candidates on digital marketing and online retail management as it recognized the importance of e-commerce in today's competitive world. Due to this, the expert-led session on online business management and modern marketing strategies was conducted. With the help of these sessions, participants get the required knowledge and tools essential to utilize the online platform effectively for sales, marketing, and customer management. Since many business startups in Balochistan face logistical challenges in growth and development and gain access to the broader market, these digital marketing sessions helped them expand their reach.

With the help of these specialized sessions, many participants expanded

their businesses online, majorly their customer base, and improved their business profitability. This digital adaptation opened new markets for the NIC Balochistan graduates and also improved their competitiveness in a rapidly changing global market.

Policy Recommendations

In order to ensure that the NIC Balochistan program remains sustainable in the long run, the following policy recommendations can be made:

- 1. Improving Collaboration with the Corporate Sector:** There is a stronger need to strengthen the relationship between corporate sectors and incubation programs. The NIC Baluchistan's partnership with management experts and local businesses demonstrates that these collaborations provide helpful insights into real-world business scenarios. This enables entrepreneurs to better comprehend and navigate through the market realities. Policymakers must promote private companies to invest in the growth of startups by providing incentives for corporate involvement in mentoring programs and incubation programs.
- 2. Expanding Digital Training Initiatives:** There is an adequate need for entrepreneurship training programs to offer digital business tools, helpful e-commerce knowledge, and digital marketing strategies since the world is increasingly becoming digital. More emphasis must be placed on helping entrepreneurs build digital literacy, from primary advanced online selling to advanced digital marketing strategies. This would prepare the young entrepreneurs to prepare for the

modern marketplace, regardless of whatever their geographical location is.

3. **Increasing**

Access to Funding: Amongst all the challenges startups face, one of the biggest ones is finance, mainly in underdeveloped areas. Policymakers must focus on facilitating business ventures in Balochistan by expanding funding opportunities like venture capital, grants, and micro-loans. Subsequently, introducing financial products that can aid the financial needs of young and women entrepreneurs will eventually remove obstacles and eventually promote their businesses to flourish in the long term.

4. **Encouraging**

Gender-Sensitive Regulations:

Women entrepreneurs face a distinctive set of challenges while starting and sustaining their business ventures, including limited access to business capital and making beneficial networks and markets. Policymakers must focus on introducing and prioritizing gender-sensitive policies that can remove barriers—like the implementation of tax breaks for women businesses, offering specialized grants, and conducting women-only events and mentoring events that can mainly increase the success rates of women-led businesses.

Broader Implications

The lessons learned from the NIC Balochistan program can be implemented in other regions of Pakistan as well as in areas facing similar socio-economic challenges. The idea behind the NIC Balochistan program was to partner together with tailored business training sessions along with mentorship and access to business investors. These implications,

combined with the digital marketing training sessions and corporate investment knowledge, offer a holistic approach to encouraging the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The NIC Balochistan program insights can help in informing national-level entrepreneurial initiative programs by educating them in regard to the importance of personalized support to entrepreneur needs. For instance, while digital literacy is imperative in today's era, underdeveloped and rural areas need additional support in terms of infrastructure and connectivity. National entrepreneurial programs can begin with targeted initiatives to help the digitally disadvantaged areas while making sure all entrepreneurs have equal access to the resources and tools they require to survive and flourish in their businesses.

Consequently, the success of the women-led business venture in the NIC Balochistan program indicates that similar efforts and programs can bring major socio-economic benefits in other regions as well. Such sort of incubation programs can empower women and contribute to gender equality in the entrepreneurial industry by addressing both practical business skills and societal barriers.

Conclusion

The socio-economic challenges of Balochistan were successfully addressed by the NIC program by majorly focusing on empowering young and female entrepreneurs. It laid a robust foundation for entrepreneurship in Pakistan's most underdeveloped region as it facilitated entrepreneurial training and mentorship from experienced business leaders and provided entrepreneurs access to funding opportunities. The

NIC program not only encouraged the growth and development of new business ventures but also played a pivotal role in building a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment that focused on the growth of individuals, particularly women, from diverse backgrounds.

Summary of Key Results and Their Implications for Addressing Baluchistan's Socio-Economic Challenges

The insights from the NIC Balochistan program indicate its success in taking care of region's some of the major problems and pressing socio-economic challenges. The NIC program contributed mainly to dealing with the unemployment rate in Balochistan through entrepreneurial business startups, which are also responsible for economic development. Mainly females, along with other participants, learned and practiced basic business skills that aided them in strategizing their crucial business operations, channeling their finances, and implementing focused marketing techniques. This, eventually, helped in addressing the high unemployment rate in the province and encouraged self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, entrepreneurs are enabled to enter into the wider markets beyond their local communities by facilitating the knowledge of digital marketing and online retail training. In essence, entrepreneurs maximized their business reach and approached global potential customers.

Furthermore, the NIC program focused on gender inclusivity that mainly empowered women's entrepreneurship and showed major improvements. The women were educated with the necessary skills through mentorship

from experienced business leaders and provided business training and coaching in overcoming societal problems. Due to these reasons, women were able to break societal barriers and traditional obstacles that prevented them from beginning their business ventures in the Balochistan province. They not only successfully contributed to the local economy but also became an inspiration for other women in the region and encouraged them to begin their entrepreneurial startups.

In essence, the NIC Balochistan program is successfully taking care of socio-economic problems in the province by educating young entrepreneurs and making them capable of fighting the local challenges in establishing successful business ventures. Combining skill development training sessions with access to wider markets has made the NIC program able to achieve desirable outcomes in Balochistan.

Final Verdict on the Impact of Training, Funding, and Mentorship in Promoting Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The entrepreneurial ecosystem provides an extensive approach and caters to both the technical and non-technical requirements of entrepreneurs. It also indicates that training must be accompanied by other very important factors, such as adequate training, mentorship, and funding, for an entrepreneurial program to be successful. Also, entrepreneurs must have ample knowledge and skills associated with business management to ensure a successful business startup.

For entrepreneurs to achieve the necessary business knowledge and

abilities and build a sustainable business venture, training is very crucial. It helps entrepreneurs comprehend complicated business models and learn financial management, which has been effective in preparing participants for entrepreneurship demands. Entrepreneurs also need real-time guidance along with training sessions from experienced business mentors who can facilitate practical knowledge, help navigate challenges and provide real-time feedback on business techniques. The NIC program facilitated participating candidates to achieve confidence in themselves to make important business decisions and protect their businesses from common mistakes.

The last factor to consider when establishing a successful business startup is consistent access to funding. Many entrepreneurs, specifically those in underdeveloped regions like Balochistan, struggle to secure the capital they need to take in the right direction. NIC Balochistan played a pivotal role in facilitating entrepreneurs with prize money, investor access and collaborations with corporate sectors and in connecting them with the financial resources that are essential to scale a business. However, consistent support and investment are important to ensure that a business thrives beyond the initial incubation stages.

Training, funding, and mentorship, altogether, form a powerful entrepreneur ecosystem that helps entrepreneurs to succeed and ensure that they sustain their business in the competitive market in the long term. The NIC Balochistan model offers a valuable blueprint for how these

elements can work together to foster growth, innovation, and self-sufficiency in regions with many socio-economic challenges.

Call to Action for Continued Support of Such Initiatives at the National and Regional Levels

The success of NIC Balochistan showed that there is a constant need for entrepreneurship development, particularly in underdeveloped regions. It is imperative that stakeholders, including corporate sectors, international donors, and government bodies, continue to foster, support, and expand such initiatives in order to continue the momentum created by the NIC Balochistan program.

There is a need for policies that promote further investment in entrepreneurship support programs at national levels, specifically those that emphasize marginalized communities, youth, and women. These programs emphasize not only providing consistent funding but also establishing a positive entrepreneurial ecosystem for business startups to grow and sustain. For example, policies must be made to make the business registration process less time-consuming and easy, making access to markets feasible and ensuring that rising entrepreneurs have regular access to necessities, internet connection, and reliable infrastructure. Subsequently, more focus must be made on the long-term sustainability of such programs like the NIC Balochistan in other regions of the country where similar socio-economic challenges exist. To that end, the insights from the NIC Balochistan program can be replicated and adapted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Federally Administrated Tribal Areas

(FATA). In other provinces as well, entrepreneurship is capable of delivering desirable outcomes and driving the local economy.

The measures can also be taken at the regional level as business leaders and local government bodies must partner to promote an entrepreneurial atmosphere that encourages the sustainability of local talent and businesses. As the NIC Balochistan program has already involved the corporate sector, the same efforts can be made in other entrepreneurial programs to reduce the gap between new business ventures and established businesses. This will enable young entrepreneurs to gain beneficial practical insights and resources that are required to succeed in the entrepreneurial world.

Furthermore, women entrepreneurs still must be given a prime priority in facilitating and providing them with constant support. This empowerment can be provided to them by giving them special access to gender-specific resources, funding opportunities, and a networking framework. In essence, they will be an active part in contributing to the local as well as national economy, which will result in driving social and economic equality.

Conclusion

To sum up, the NIC program has taken

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care of the socio-economic challenges in the province by establishing an inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable entrepreneurial environment. The comprehensive training, access to funding, and mentorship have given young entrepreneurs, mainly women, the confidence to build their own businesses and contribute to the economic growth of the region. Entrepreneurs were not only provided with the necessary tools and resources to gain entrepreneurial success but also encouraged to gain financial stability that enabled them to achieve self-reliance and financial independence in the long term, which is also very beneficial for establishing sustainable business ventures

However, a complete, detailed analysis of the success of the NIC program in the most underdeveloped province of Pakistan can be done by providing it with consistent support at both national as well as regional levels. Pakistan can build a more inclusive, constructive, and sustainable entrepreneurial environment that will be capable of empowering generations to come by consistent investment in entrepreneurship development. Eventually, individuals would be more capable of achieving economic independence, thereby contributing positively to the stability and growth of Baluchistan's economy.

UNDP (United Nations Development Program)
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