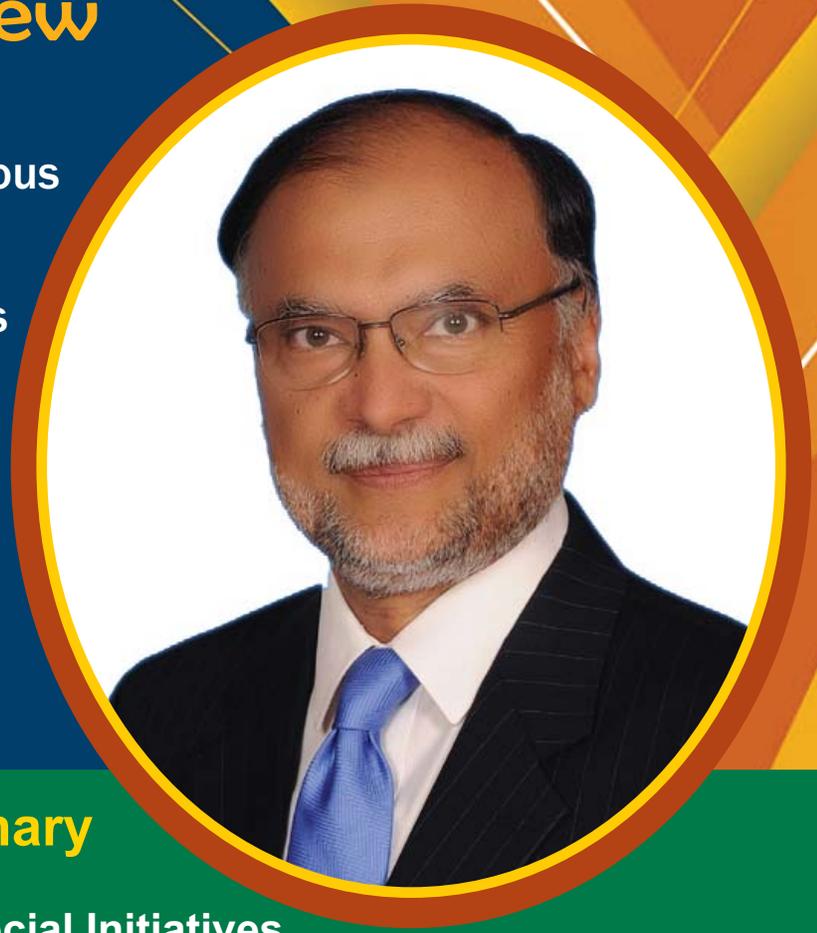


Exclusive Interview

“Brain drain can have serious consequences for Pakistan's economy and society. The loss of skilled professionals hampers innovation and research, which are crucial for economic growth and social progress”



Mr. Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhary Former Federal Minister for Planning, Development & Special Initiatives

ICMA: In your opinion, how significant is the issue of brain drain for Pakistan's development and progress?

Ahsan Iqbal: The brain drain poses a pivotal challenge to Pakistan's development and progress. Skilled professionals such as researchers, academics, professionals, and experts in various fields leaving the country contribute to a serious depletion of critical human capital. This loss of talent has a direct impact on sectors such as education, healthcare, technology, and innovation. The Government of Pakistan has invested huge resources in educating and training its workforce, but when these skilled individuals migrate abroad seeking better opportunities, it creates a major knowledge and skills gap hindering the country's socio-economic development.

ICMA: Why do skilled professionals, researchers, and academics leave Pakistan to find opportunities abroad?

Ahsan Iqbal: Skilled professionals leave Pakistan for several reasons. Economic factors play a significant role, as many find better-paying jobs and greater financial stability abroad. Research opportunities and access to advanced technology and facilities also attract researchers and academics. Factors such as political instability, lack of policy continuity, inadequate funding for research, limited career advancement opportunities, and recognition of individual contributions push professionals to seek opportunities abroad. One of the challenges of our time is the global marketplace that attracts talent from around the world. We need to create an enabling environment to retain our

talent. Unfortunately, our economic and political crises are adversely impacting the future hopes of our youth.

ICMA: Are there efforts to attract Pakistani expatriates back for development?

Ahsan Iqbal: At least I can vouch for the track record of PMLN-led governments in this regard. During 1990-93, when we undertook reforms, many Pakistani expatriates returned home, but the government was not allowed to complete its term. Later, during 2013-18, when the country successfully addressed economic, energy, and security challenges and CPEC became a global brand for Pakistan, many Pakistani expatriates returned, but again, continuity of policies was denied by a rigged election in 2018 to force a regime change.

Our efforts have included creating research grants in critical sectors of higher education, establishing collaborative programs between local and foreign institutions, and establishing centers of excellence. The overarching goal of these efforts has been to create an environment that encourages expatriates to bring their skills and expertise back to Pakistan. Simultaneously, we have encouraged expat Pakistani professionals to continue playing their vital role in the developed world while fostering their collaborative professional links and contributions to the homeland. This is a prerequisite in the age of globalization and an alternative path to increasing the country's international profile, as well as a potential source for foreign remittances needed for its socio-economic development.

ICMA: Can you shed light on the potential consequences of brain drain on Pakistan's economy and society?

Ahsan Iqbal: Brain drain can have serious consequences for Pakistan's economy and society. The loss of skilled professionals hampers innovation and research, which are crucial for economic growth and social progress. The healthcare sector suffers from a shortage of trained medical personnel, negatively affecting the overall well-being of the population. The education sector loses experienced teachers and researchers, which in turn impacts the quality of education. Moreover, brain drain perpetuates a cycle of under-development by depriving the country of the expertise needed to effectively address socio-economic challenges.

ICMA: Apart from economic considerations, what other aspects of national development do brain drain impact?

Ahsan Iqbal: Brain drain can impact education, research, healthcare, governance, and technology sectors, hindering overall national development and competitiveness. Beyond economic considerations, brain drain affects the social fabric of the nation. It weakens the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next, hindering cultural preservation and indigenous development. It can also exacerbate inequalities, as those with access to opportunities abroad often hail from more privileged backgrounds.

ICMA: Does brain drain affect Pakistan's capability to reach its long-term development objectives?

Ahsan Iqbal: Brain drain can hinder Pakistan's progress by depriving it of vital expertise and skills needed to achieve long-term goals. Sustainable development requires expertise in various sectors, and the departure of skilled professionals impedes progress in fields such as technology, healthcare, and education. The shortage of a skilled workforce can slow down the implementation of projects and initiatives aimed at achieving long-term goals.

ICMA: Does brain drain impact Pakistan's global image and competitiveness?

Ahsan Iqbal: Brain drain impacts any country's global image negatively. The loss of skilled individuals points to the lack of opportunities and support for talent within the country. Additionally, the country's competitiveness on the global stage suffers as it struggles to keep pace with advancements in various fields.

ICMA: How does brain drain in Pakistan compare to other developing countries?

Ahsan Iqbal: Brain drain in Pakistan is comparable to that in many other developing countries facing similar challenges. Countries with limited resources and political instability often struggle to retain skilled professionals who seek better prospects elsewhere.

ICMA: What can Pakistan learn from successful approaches in other nations to address brain drain?

Ahsan Iqbal: We must realize that no country can halt brain drain through regulation alone. Today, every country is competing to attract talent and investment. Pakistan can learn from successful approaches in other developing

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nations. First and foremost, we need political stability and the assurance of policy continuity for economic growth and stability. We must create job opportunities and improve the quality of life for our people. Brain drain can't be stopped with speeches or appeals alone. We must shun negativity to combat despondency. Implementing policies that foster an environment of entrepreneurship, research, and innovation, providing competitive salaries and research grants, and building strong private sector and research networks can encourage professionals to stay or return. South Korea, China, and Saudi Arabia offer pertinent examples, as thousands of young professionals who received the best education at top US or British universities, with or without government scholarships, have been offered lucrative incentives to return home and contribute to the socio-economic development of their countries.

ICMA: What steps can the government and various stakeholders take to mitigate the impact of brain drain?

Ahsan Iqbal: To mitigate brain drain, the government and stakeholders can invest in research and innovation, offer competitive salaries, enhance research infrastructure, and establish partnerships with foreign institutions. Creating an environment that values expertise, recognizes contributions, and provides opportunities for career growth is crucial.

ICMA: Besides brain drain, what other challenges do you believe are of similar significance for Pakistan's development?

Ahsan Iqbal: Besides brain drain, other significant challenges for Pakistan's development include political instability, lack of continuity in economic and development policies, poverty, inadequate healthcare and education systems, corruption, lack of infrastructure, environmental degradation, and social inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and sustained efforts not just from the government but also from various sectors of society. We have developed a comprehensive 5Es (Exports, e-Pakistan, Environment, Energy & Equity, and Empowerment) framework that provides a complete roadmap to turn around Pakistan. Our professionals, researchers, and entrepreneurs can play a key role in making it successful.

The Editorial Board thanks Mr. Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhary, Former Federal Minister for Planning, Development & Special Initiatives for sparing from his precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.