Good afternoon, friends and colleagues. Let me first add my own congratulations to the University of Toronto on this anniversary of its original royal charter. The U of T is one of the great universities of the world, with a history of achievement worthy of celebration.

It is a great honour, and a pleasure, to participate with you in this symposium—to consider the relationships between higher education and economic, social and human development. This is, after all, the ground that IDRC has been working since its creation by Parliament in 1970. The Centre’s support of development research has always been rooted in its founding principle that knowledge can free people in their communities to shape their own futures, and fulfill their own lives. And for more than 30 years, IDRC has counted institutions of higher education among our most important partners — in Canada and throughout the developing world.

We are invited, in this session, to address the creation of linkages among institutions of higher education in the industrial, transitional, and developing countries. To that end, I would like to turn our discussion briefly to what we might consider a necessary prior condition: that is, securing the connection between higher education in any society and the exercise of civil and political rights in that society.

There is a close and inescapable relationship between the quality of higher learning and scholarship, on the one hand, and the quality of effective and democratic governance, on the other. Which is only to say that any successful promotion of development obliges us to see the intimate interaction between higher education and open, responsible government. Just as it is very hard to imagine sustainable and democratic development without promoting higher education, it is quite futile (I will argue) to promote higher
education in a society where civil and political rights are systematically suppressed and denied.

Here is what I mean. We often measure the value of higher education in instrumental terms: correlating numbers of graduate engineers with GDP performance, or investments in medical education with numbers of physicians produced. What I am concerned about now are the more intrinsic benefits of higher education, both as a private and a public good—benefits to those who actually engage in higher education, and benefits to their communities.

Allow me to expand on this for just a moment.

There is one thing we know about national success in the present age: The countries that will thrive best in the global economy are those that are truly open. And openness means more than open trade, open investment, or open borders. By open societies, I mean societies that invite new ideas, show a high tolerance for dissent and criticism, and freely engage in the rethinking and reworking of their own governance. In short, successful societies respect and protect the full exercise of civil and political rights. The exercise of these rights and freedoms not only serves human development; it is, intrinsically, an essential element of human development.

Formulating and testing new ideas, contributing criticism, advancing better methods and better values for governance—these are activities that ought to find a natural space in any society’s institutions of higher education.

Now to my cautionary point. All of the disciplines that bear on the procedures and values of good governance are disciplines at risk in many developing countries. These are not just the obviously contentious disciplines of political science or economics, or sociology or public health—disciplines directly engaged in conducting or challenging government and policy. Disciplines at risk include the humanities, history, philosophy, the arts—all harbouring the kind of vigorous and creative thought that alarms the autocratic, and threatens the corrupt. These are all disciplines at risk in unfree societies, and their practitioners often place themselves personally at risk in such countries.

And to be frank, it must be said that in many developing countries you will find most of these disciplines impoverished and unpopulated even in otherwise robust institutions. These are disciplines deprived of resources—and often suppressed—not just because those countries are poor. These are the departments of higher education, the disciplines at risk, that are deliberately kept weak, precisely because they represent a threat to those who exercise the power of the state.

So it is all very well to insist—and I do, without hesitation—that higher education ought to constitute a powerful engine of economic, social, and human development. But we should also acknowledge, with a clear eye, that universities and colleges are generally only open and inventive and free within cultures and political systems that are open, and
inventive, and free. Universities, by and large, resemble and reflect the cultures in which they operate. A determined questioning of convention and authority is not the natural or effortless role of an institution in a society that neither permits nor rewards any questioning of convention or authority.

In an officially Islamic social and political system, for example, we are rarely likely to observe a lively and cosmopolitan university program in political philosophy, or a graduate seminar in contested theories of gender and power. It is important always to recognize the exceptions to this. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim community in the world, we see an enduring (if embattled) tradition of tolerance, moderation and criticism in Muslim intellectual discourse. But even in more secular countries, the disciplines at risk are commonly confined by taboos enforced by the state. In Singapore, where there is an otherwise good university, scholars understand they are not allowed to publish any commentary that openly addresses questions of racism. Scholars in Malaysia face a whole panoply of prohibitions—entire subjects banned from deep public analysis.

The fact is, respect for candour, critique and diversity as virtues in public life is an especially Western idea (although not uniquely Western). I happen to endorse these values, and think the world would be a better place if everyone adopted them. I believe free thought and free expression benefit individuals and societies; they make for good and prosperous democracies. But in too many developing states, free thought and free expression – the essentials of practising disciplines at risk – are not encouraged as useful or virtuous. Theocrats and autocrats condemn these values as disruptive and wrong. Plutocrats and kleptocrats suppress them as threats.

These observations lead me to three prescriptive conclusions.

First, higher education as a category must be disaggregated if we are to understand and manage the linkages between higher education and development. Engineering and similarly “apolitical” schools might well thrive in a closed society; they might be tolerated, or even encouraged. But universities as centres of moral, social, and political inquiry and argument require around them a social and political environment where inquiry and argument enjoy at least some measure of esteem and protection.

To repeat: These open societies are the ones most likely to prosper in the global economy, and to fulfill the aspirations of their people. So it is the openness we should be promoting as part of any strategy of education or development.

My second conclusion is that the connections between higher education and development need to be seen in the light of a simple but difficult question: Who owns knowledge?

Knowledge ownership goes to such fiercely contested issues as protection of intellectual property rights, and the exploitation of indigenous knowledge. But questions of knowledge ownership reach far beyond these familiar and important stakeholder rivalries. In the end, true development occurs when knowledge is owned—and
operated—by communities, and by the women and men who form those communities. When we speak of promoting networks for research and learning in the South, we don’t only refer to research and learning for Southern researchers and scholars. We mean advancing the knowledge of people, in their own communities.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel economist, defines development as freedom. At the core of any meaningful freedom must be the acquisition and application of knowledge—an expanded understanding of choices, of problems and their possible solutions. This democratization of knowledge is a critical enabling link between higher education and sustainable development.

My third conclusion therefore follows: Productive and equitable development requires an integration of higher education strategies with development strategies. Higher education cannot be an afterthought to the work of development. It needs to be included as forethought, a necessity in any development policy intended to be both sustainable and democratic.

I think we can prove this point rather easily with a little thought experiment.

Imagine that every institution of higher education in Canada is suddenly and completely closed; no more faculties, no more students, anywhere in the country. What harms does this bring, instantly and in the long run, to the Canadian economy? What damage does it cause families throughout our society? What violence does it inject into social cleavages of class, ethnicity, generation, and region? Amid the frustration and despair of this calamity, what’s left of our country?

The bleak catastrophe in that image quite accurately describes today’s reality in dozens of poor countries lacking even the rudiments of accessible higher education. Again, the conclusion is that higher education—open, critical, innovative—is not a luxury reserved for the rich. It’s a necessity, especially for the poor.

To sum up briefly, I think those of us labouring at the intersection of higher education and development will have to respond to these two imperatives, both at once: strengthening linkages among institutions, across and between North and South; and strengthening the institutions and practices of democratic governance – the attributes of an open society that make genuine higher education possible.

I do not have to plead the case for institutional networks in this room; many of you are leading the way. (The volume published last year by the U of T Press, Networks of Knowledge, based on the work led by Janice Gross Stein and Richard Stren, comes easily to mind.) I am attracted, as well, by a proposal from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – the “Africa-Canada Chairs of Excellence”, designed to improve Africa’s own capacity and self-reliance in higher education. The AUCC has recommended a pilot project to the Canadian government.
In a different realm, it seems to me that Canadian universities—compelled to re-invent the ways they raise their own funds to supplement fees and government grants—are well placed to transfer these fund-raising innovations to campuses in developing countries.

As to the second imperative—strengthening institutions and practices of democracy—nobody has a stronger interest in the success of that enterprise than people in higher education. No society will prosper in freedom without vigorous institutions of higher education. At the same time, no institutions of higher education will thrive where ordinary civil and political rights are suppressed.

This is the interaction of education and development that shapes and informs your work and mine. And it has been a privilege to share that work with all of you here today.

Thank you.

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Abstract

Higher education can generate and disseminate knowledge for development. But educational institutions generally reflect their cultural and political surroundings. Where civil and political rights are denied, where “disciplines at risk” are suppressed, higher education cannot thrive. To promote higher education, and to democratize ownership of knowledge throughout communities, therefore demands the promotion of good governance for democratic and sustainable development.