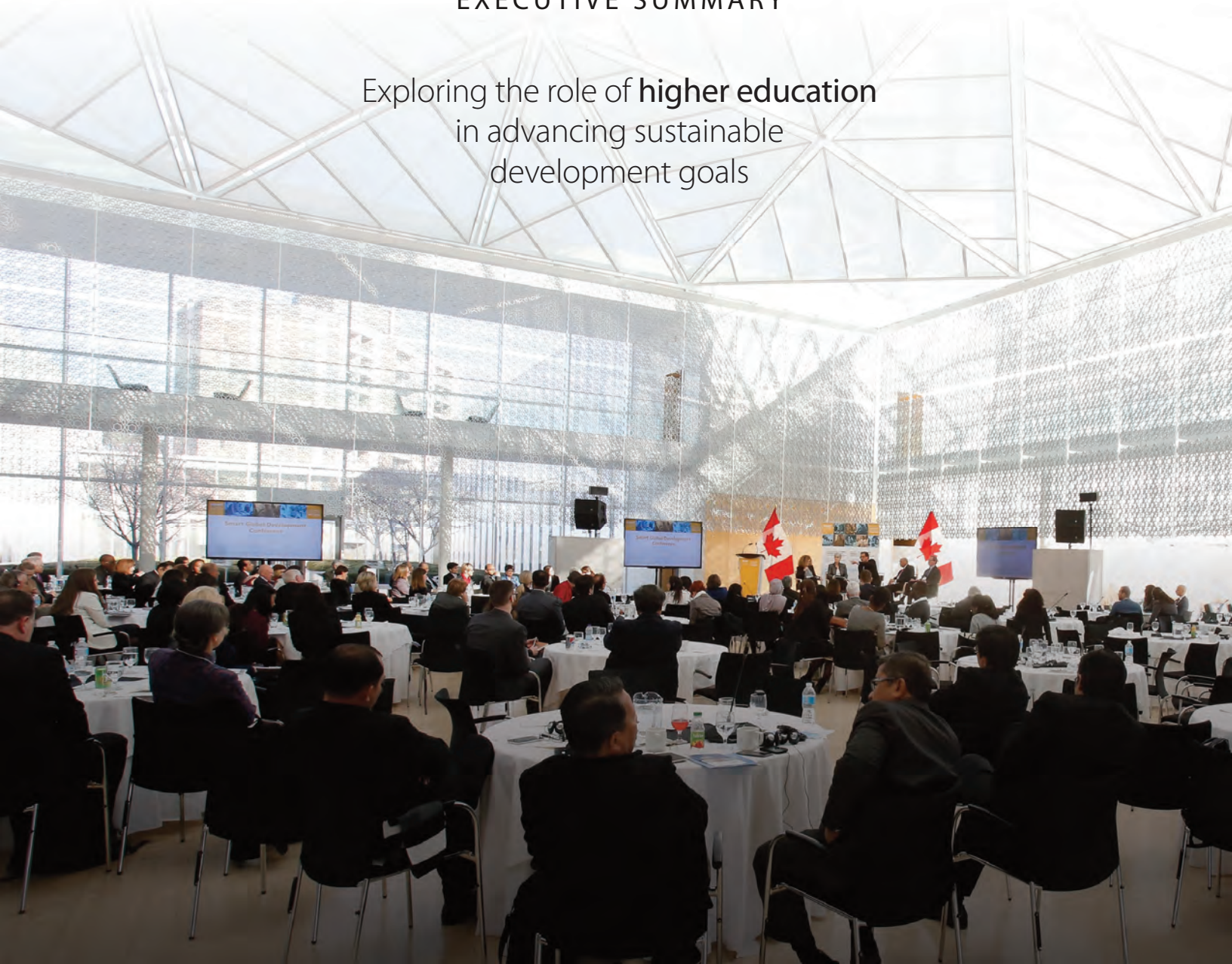


SMART GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Conference Outcomes Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exploring the role of **higher education**
in advancing sustainable
development goals



Executive Summary

In April 2016, Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC), Academics Without Borders (AWB), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) — with financial support from the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada — convened the **Smart Global Development** conference at the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat in Ottawa.

The conference partners began with the premise that higher education institutions in the Global South have tremendous potential to contribute directly and substantively to sustainable improvements in quality of life, inclusive economic growth, and good governance, but they require renewed attention and the right kinds of global financial and intellectual support to do so. The response to the conference, and the range of global experience illuminated through its 14 sessions, validated that premise.

Some 238 global thought leaders, policymakers, and practitioners from 20 countries participated in the conference, including representatives from governments, civil society organizations, academia, business, and the media. Another 115 individuals joined the live webcast of the keynote and plenary sessions. In their keynote addresses on day one and day two of the conference respectively, His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, and the Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, Canada's Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, set the stage for thoughtful dialogue on the intersections between higher education and global development. Keynote and plenary sessions are available through a [video archive](#).

Four objectives informed the conference program:

- Examine the critical role of higher education institutions in advancing sustainable, inclusive social and economic development in the Global South
- Explore the larger role that universities play in fostering leaders, change agents, and informed citizens so as to strengthen governance, social justice, culture, and inclusive economic growth
- Review the range of approaches to building higher education capacity in the Global South
- Assess current efforts to gather evidence of the development impact of investments in higher education

Over the course of the conference, several recurrent themes and recommendations emerged for the global community to consider as priorities for advancing higher education in support of development aims:

1. Higher Education and Development Innovation

Higher education institutions can play an integral role in fostering development innovation by finding creative ways to improve quality of life and build more inclusive, compassionate societies. We require new approaches, partnerships and resources, however, to encourage, measure and evaluate innovation in that context.

We must look at a wider higher education ecosystem — including think tanks and post-secondary vocational and technical institutions — that promotes knowledge creation and capacity building in collaboration with international organizations, donors, non-governmental organizations, universities, political parties, private associations, business, state, and media.

14

conference
sessions

238

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STEM education and research are critical to advancing the SDGs globally. Innovation, scientific discoveries, and technological advances come through robust connections to global knowledge networks — but access to global fora and networking opportunities remains a barrier for young scientists, scholars, and professionals from the Global South.

2. Inclusivity, Community Engagement, and Social Accountability

As the Governor General observed, Canada's own experience in building strong, inclusive institutions — including learning institutions — is an ongoing, “learning in action” process, notably with regard to aboriginal education. While there is no single way to foster inclusivity, two keys to success are leadership and community engagement.

Higher education institutions have an essential role to play in creating inclusive and safe spaces for dialogue, critique, and debate that incorporate diverse voices and perspectives — and break down barriers for women, youth, and marginalized communities.

*His Excellency the Right Honourable
David Johnston, Governor General of Canada.*

For higher education institutions to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, they must reach outside the classroom and actively engage with communities. The concept of social accountability can help define the role of higher education institutions within the communities in which they are situated. With social accountability, the university or college explicitly commits to social accountability in its mandate — focusing its educational and research efforts to address priority needs of the community.

3. Quality Matters

Minister Bibeau lauded the shift within the Sustainable Development Goals to a focus on quality education, not just access. Strategies for bridging the divide between quality and access (or scale) featured throughout the conference, including leveraging the complementary roles of public and private institutions; harnessing the potential of open education resources; and adopting new approaches to Quality Assurance to encourage innovation and ensure local relevance.



4. Higher Education Opportunities in Conflict Zones and Fragile States

Humanitarian aid does not prioritize education, and the assistance given to that sector largely excludes higher education initiatives. Universities and colleges must respond to this challenge with innovative approaches that enable refugees and vulnerable communities to continue on their educational paths. As important as the focus on higher education opportunities for women and girls is, we cannot increase their access at the expense of young men and boys, particularly in fragile states and conflict-affected communities.

5. The Education Continuum

To harness fully the potential of higher education in support of sustainable global development, we must take a wider view of tertiary education as a system that extends beyond universities. Providers of vocational, technical, and professional education — colleges, polytechnics, and similar institutions — are integral players in that system and in every successful economy and society around the world. Higher education institutions cannot work in isolation: cooperation and coordination across the spectrum is essential to provide countries with the skilled human resources, informed leadership, and expertise to find lasting development solutions.

*The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau,
Canada's Minister of International Development
and La Francophonie.*

We must also resist placing tertiary education in competition with primary and secondary education for resources and support. In reality, higher education institutions have an integral role to play in strengthening education systems across the continuum; development strategies, programming, and policies should build upon that integral connection.

6. Higher Education as a Long-term Investment in Local Institutions

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires permanent, local institutional capacities and leadership. Building strong, sustainable institutions is a generational endeavour and requires expanded timelines and a shift in expectations around demonstrating short-term results for investments in higher education. It also requires the right kinds of financial and intellectual support: Investing in administrative capacities, systems, and processes is essential for those institutions to contribute fully to their students and their societies.

7. Demonstrating Impact

To measure the impact of higher education on sustainable development, we must change both terminology and approaches to monitoring and evaluation. “Development impact” usually implies a large scale, sustainable change in the well-being of a population and its environment. Because developmental change depends on a confluence of actors and factors, the focus should shift to evaluating contribution — rather than attribution.

Similarly, the emphasis in current approaches on short-term, immediate outcomes obscures the long-term nature of higher education’s critical role in advancing and sustaining development. Given the long-term nature of investments in higher education, a shift toward intermediary outcomes — coupled with some short-term metrics — may help better predict success over the longterm.

Continuing the Smart Global Development Conversation

Conference delegates emphasized the need for sustained engagement on these sets of issues and identified the following questions as a potential framework for continuing that conversation:

- How can universities and colleges in the Global South engage more directly in the social and economic development of the communities in which they are situated, and what additional capacity might be necessary for them to do so?
- How can higher education institutions more effectively and deliberately advance women’s empowerment and gender equality — and break down the gendered barriers to participation?
- What can higher education institutions do to provide refugees and youth in conflict-affected or fragile areas with post-secondary learning and vocational opportunities?
- How should higher education institutions define and ensure quality, particularly in view of the tensions between quality and access or scale?
- What methodologies, tools, or approaches could strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning around the results of investments in higher education in support of development aims?
- How can institutions in the Global South strengthen access to relevant, high-quality vocational, technical, and professional education? How might they harness the global experience and expertise of colleges and polytechnic institutes to build capacities and implement programs?
- What is the case for investing in private higher education institutions in the Global South? How can private institutions help strengthen educational quality, relevance, and capacities within public institutions?
- What kinds of support and resources do higher education institutions in the Global South require to contribute more directly to improvements in primary and secondary education systems in their operating contexts?
- What types of public policies or reforms would create a more enabling environment for innovation, quality, and relevance within higher education institutions in the Global South?
- What are the appropriate funding mechanisms to support the various types of investments required for strong, vibrant, and relevant higher education institutions in the Global South?

Higher education is an investment in the future, in creating the expertise, resources, and leadership all societies require to achieve and sustain the Global Goals. Such investments in the higher education space require patience: they are generational endeavours. At the same time, the fragilities we encounter across the globe today are so severe that we urgently require vibrant institutions of higher education to anchor progress and serve as bulwarks against instability. While these concluding questions offer a road map for continued engagement, we must continue to make very thoughtful and smart investments in higher education to advance sustainable global development.

About the Conference Sponsors



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION CANADA
FONDATION AGA KHAN CANADA

"Progress in the developing world cannot be sustained without a vibrant constellation of universities, colleges, and research institutes to anchor local knowledge and innovation. Higher education institutions — in Africa, Asia, and Canada — have played a key role in the decades-long collaboration between Canada and the Aga Khan Development Network to improve lives in the developing world. We are coming together for the Smart Global Development conference out of a shared conviction that investments in higher education will underwrite long-term improvements in quality of life."

— **Khalil Z. Shariff**, Chief Executive Officer,
Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Established in 1980, AKFC is a registered Canadian charity and an agency of the worldwide Aga Khan Development Network, a family of development agencies with individual mandates that address social, economic, and cultural dimensions of development. Active in 30 countries, these agencies share a mission to improve living conditions and opportunities for the poor, without regard to their faith, origin or gender. The AKDN includes two universities: Aga Khan University and the University of Central Asia. For more information visit www.akfc.ca and www.akdn.org.



AWB | USF
Academics Without Borders
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"Many low- and middle-income developing countries do not have the experts and professionals needed to provide basic services for their citizens, grow their economies, and do the research necessary for sustainable development. To avoid the brain drain, which often happens when students leave their home country to study in the developed world, these countries urgently need to provide high-quality tertiary education within

their own borders. Their universities must be able to create the experts they need by giving their students both knowledge that is relevant to local conditions and the skills necessary to solve problems unique to their socio-economic circumstances. For several years, Academics Without Borders has been working on projects initiated by universities in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia to help them improve their universities' teaching, research, and back-office operations. The Smart Global Development Conference provides an opportunity to demonstrate how good universities can play a vitally important role in improving the lives of developing countries' citizens."

— **Steven Davis**, Executive Director,
Academics Without Borders

Academics Without Borders' mission is to support developing countries in building capacity in higher education so that they can educate their own experts and conduct research to assist in their development. We fulfill our mission by sending professional and academic volunteers on projects that originate from and are owned by our partners in the developing world. Our volunteers work on projects that foster the teaching skills and research expertise needed for health care, education, agriculture, infrastructure, business, and more. We work in all disciplines and areas of instruction as well as helping to upgrade a university's administration and services. We are a bilingual Canadian NGO based in Montreal, with our volunteers working around the world. For more information, visit www.awb-usf.org.



IDRC | CRDI

International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

"The International Development Research Centre has long recognized the immense potential of higher education institutions as drivers of social and economic development, repositories of cultural heritage, research centres for expanding human knowledge and hubs that spark innovation. We are committed to supporting

access to higher education and to finding more effective ways for its integration into development policy, development assistance, program design, and evaluation. This Smart Global Development Conference is a powerful acknowledgement of the promise of higher education in the developing world to forge innovation and resolve challenges.”

— **Jean Lebel**, President,
International Development Research Centre

The International Development Research Centre invests in knowledge, innovation, and solutions to improve lives and livelihoods in the developing world. Bringing together the right partners around opportunities for impact, IDRC builds leaders for today and tomorrow and helps drive large-scale positive change. IDRC was established by an act of Canada’s parliament in 1970 to help developing countries find solutions to their challenges. The International Development Research Centre Act describes the Centre’s mandate: “to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical, and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions.” For more information, visit www.idrc.ca.

Acknowledgements

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Conference Executive Committee

The Smart Global Development conference executive committee combined expertise from the three institutional organizers and sponsors: Maria Brunelli, Steven Davis, Carrie LaPorte, Shabana Manji, Tavinder Nijhawan, Jennifer Pepall, and Corrie Young. This committee was chaired by Greg Moran, Director of Special Projects, Higher Education Quality of Ontario.

Conference Rapporteurs

Eight young scholars responded to a call for rapporteurs to help document the insights and lessons to emerge from the conference sessions, as well as to serve as active participants in the conference. Their work contributed to the development of this report. The conference executive committee acknowledges their contributions: Gissou Ataee; Jean-Marie Cishahayo; Alyshea Cummins; Jennifer Fieldhouse; Jose Miguel Lopez; Stephanie Melliet; Amar Nijhawan; and Mariya Podeyko.