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Healing the world with Canadian know-how

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Last night, I was honoured, and humbled, to receive the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Michael Smith Prize for Canada's Health Researcher of the Year. In my remarks, I outlined two great challenges that confront us as a nation. First, how do we open the innovative sectors of our economy to global markets, especially in the fast-growing economies of India, China and Brazil?

Second, how can Canada assist developing countries, especially in Africa, to accelerate the commercialization of their own products to tackle their own problems, and also to enter the innovative sectors of the global economy?

Although Canada has great domestic strength in innovative sectors such as life sciences, environmental, natural resource and information technologies, we are not leveraging this comparative advantage. I strongly believe Canada should be doing more to project its expertise into our foreign policy.

According to the World Economic Forum, Canada ranks 27th in global competitiveness in the innovative sectors of the economy. The reasons for which were colourfully described by journalist Andrea Mandel-Campbell in her book, *Why Mexicans Don't Drink Molson*. What's even worse than not exporting enough beer is that the Chinese, Indians and Brazilians also don't use our life sciences, environmental, natural resources and information technologies either.

China and India have over one-third of the world's population, and are growing their economies at about 10% per year. According to a Goldman Sachs study, the world's largest economies in 2050 will be China, the United States and India, in that order. Canada should be doing more to help Canadian businesses develop technologies in those markets.

How do we do this? By establishing a national platform that will scope out market opportunities and potential local company partners, match these opportunities back to the best Canadian technologies, develop businesses around these matches, and finance these businesses.

In addition, we should also help Africa to move into the innovative sectors of the global economy. As Paul Kagame, the Rwandan President, said: "We in Africa must either begin to build up our scientific and technological training capabilities or remain an impoverished appendage to the global economy."

There is not a single dollar of life-sciences venture capital in Sub-Saharan Africa outside of South Africa. That means if you have an idea, and you start a company, it will be impossible to finance the company to take the idea to market. Innovation is not limited to industrialized economies, as India and China have demonstrated. There is a huge waste of talent and ideas in Africa.

Our research group has shown that many pieces of the puzzle for life sciences innovation in Africa are there, but they have not yet been pulled together. For example, in Ghana, a professor has developed a diagnostic test for a parasite infection of the bladder. But it's stuck in his laboratory and unable to reach the children, just miles away, who are suffering from the disease.

A model that shows one way to tackle the problem lies in Toronto, where the MaRS Centre is bringing together science, business and capital. It is located in the place where a great Canadian innovation, insulin, was first used in a patient with diabetes. It is early days, but the building is brimming with creative people, buzzing with ideas and expanding.

By helping African countries such as Ghana and Tanzania establish platforms like MaRS to bring together science, business and capital in innovative sectors — but adapted to local conditions and with local leadership — Canada could be making a huge contribution to Africa's economic and social development. But good luck trying to convince the Canadian aid agency that it should be investing some of its money in a "MaRS Africa."

In addressing both these challenges, we have an enormous untapped asset: millions of new immigrants from China, India and elsewhere. My own parents came to Canada in 1956 from Eastern Europe with nothing, and worked hard to make a life for us here.

As I was on the platform in Ottawa last night receiving my prize, what I felt was: "I love Canada." Those of us who have benefited from the opportunities provided by this great country owe it to Canada to help project its domestic strength in innovation on to the world. What is at stake is our prosperity and the welfare of four billion people.

Peter A. Singer is interim director and professor of medicine at the McLaughlin-Rotman Centre for Global Health, University Health Network and University of Toronto, where he co-leads a research program and dedicated team with his close colleague, professor Abdallah Daar.