

Ahluwalia's campaign lets youths take charge of future

She's leading a worldwide effort to create jobs in developing countries

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NEWTON, Mass. — The world is home to a billion people ages 15 to 24, and 850 million of those live in developing countries where jobs and resources are scarce.

Poonam Ahluwalia, 46, of Lexington, Mass., is leading an international charge to create productive work opportunities for as many of these young people as possible.

Ahluwalia is executive director of the Youth Employment Summit, a 10-year campaign aimed at creating new jobs that do not put fresh strains on the environment. The crux of the campaign is that it treats young people as partners — not beneficiaries.

Just two years into the campaign, Ahluwalia already has some large feathers in her cap.

She persuaded former U.S. President Bill Clinton and Egyptian First Lady Suzanne Mubarak to co-chair the youth campaign's 2002 launch in Egypt. She has convinced governments to spend millions of dollars to host summit forums. And she has seen the likes of the United Nations and the president of Tanzania announce initiatives very similar to — or exactly the same as — the summit's.

"The biggest thing that this campaign has done is put youth at the center of their development and their own future," Ahluwalia said.

Frederick Clark, communications manager for the summit, said Ahluwalia is an "amazing woman."

"She's a bundle of energy," he said. "She's a pocket Hercules. She's an Energizer bunny. You've got to see it to believe it. It's sort of exhausting just watching her."

Ahluwalia was a stay-at-home mom until 1997, when she received a job offer from Newton's nonprofit Education Development Center, which has projects in 40 countries dedicated to education and health. She set to work organizing global workshops on work-force development and traveled to Peru, Namibia and India.

With no experience in the field, Ahluwalia's travels gave her quite the education. She realized that young people were just not inspired by

the plans being made for them — and they wanted to be more involved in the process.

Ahluwalia convinced her employer to set up what is now the Youth Employment Summit. The Education Development Center commits \$200,000 per year to the effort. The summit employs about 25 people in the United States and abroad.

The summit's strength is in convincing existing nonprofit organizations throughout the world to commit their resources and staff to its initiatives. So far, about 50 groups are on board. In addition, Ahluwalia and her team coordinate a network of hundreds of volunteers in 60 countries.

"Rural youth are moving to the cities, where there are few and poorly paid informal-sector jobs for urban migrants," she said. "We need to



Poonam Ahluwalia got former U.S. President Bill Clinton to chair the launch of the Youth Employment Summit.

try and reverse this by investing in rural communities. Likewise, the graduates of schools and universities are languishing without decent work for years after graduation. We can ease the transition to work with targeted mentoring and entrepreneurship programs."

Ahluwalia has "been responsible for all of the major steps in this project," Clark said. The most recent step was the December launch of an academy to organize and train youths in Hyderabad, India. Donors have already poured about \$200,000 into the academy, which was introduced at a five-day forum in Hyderabad.

The forum itself featured about 600 people from 44 countries. Sessions focused on topics like renewable energy, water and sanitation, and HIV/AIDS.

More than 1,000 government officials, business leaders, youth leaders and nonprofit organizations have been invited to the youth campaign's next big event, which is this October in Mexico.

For Ahluwalia, a naturalized U.S. citizen who grew up in an affluent family in Jaipur City, the Youth Employment Summit came out of a commitment to end world hunger. Though she has received much recognition — in 2002 the California Legislature and the Indian-American Trade and Commerce Council honored her as "an outstanding youth community leader" — she passes it off to others.

"It's a team effort," she said. "Usually one person gets the credit because they are the one directing or leading it, but there are hundreds of people behind it, and it's the team that makes it work. I have a phenomenal team. We work endless hours just to get everything organized."

Ahluwalia herself travels frequently and her job often keeps her away from husband, Mohinder and children, Saatvik, 14, and Tara, 11.

"I've never witnessed commitment anything close to this," Clark said. "Profit drives people to do remarkable things, but that motivation doesn't exist here."



Poonam Ahluwalia speaks at the Youth Employment Summit forum in Hyderabad, India, in December.