

# Interview

**Poonam Ahluwalia,  
Executive Director, YES Campaign**

More than one billion jobs need to be created by 2010 to accommodate young workers entering the labour force and reduce unemployment—a vision of the Youth Employment Summit campaign initiated in 1998—so that social cohesion is not undermined.

By Sobhanund Seeparsad

## “Unemployed youth can spell disaster”

**M**rs Poonam Ahluwalia, Executive Director, YES Campaign, says if jobs can be found for young people, the “workforce bulge” can be the basis for more investment, greater labour productivity and rapid economic development. This will generate revenues for social investments like health, education and social security, to meet the needs of both the old and the young and secure the basis for future development.

One billion young people (15-24 years old), eighty-five percent in developing countries, are in the labour market with few skills, and even fewer opportunities for productive work. Nearly three billion people, i.e. half the world’s population, are under the age of 25. They are entering the different sectors of society in large numbers, putting immense pressures on governments around the world to wake up and face new challenges. These include the increased need for jobs and livelihoods, the growing need for health care and education, increasing the stress on the environment. The social and economic disparities continue to grow, increasing the number of people living below the poverty line each day. Today, 1.8 billion people survive on less than a dollar a day



and 3 billion people live on less than \$2 a day. High levels of unemployment and rapidly deteriorating standards of living are resulting in destructive social unrest and dangerous levels of tension. This is most evident among the youth who make up 50 percent of the world’s population. “Tronically, all of these challenges are exploding at a time when humanity is more prosperous than ever. The knowledge base and connectivity to create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods for the world’s youth are

available.

“The challenge is to raise awareness and build an adequate understanding of the issues we face and collaborate in promoting youth employment. It is essential that knowledge is disseminated, capacity is built, and the will generated to resolve this crisis, and build opportunities for youth employment.”

This year’s YES summit meets in Nairobi, Kenya from September 13-16.

“Leaders and members of the 70 YES Country Networks and

other diverse stakeholders from all over the world will attend the summit. It will be a forum to address the issue of creating markets for goods and services for rural areas and unleashing widespread entrepreneurship efforts to eradicate poverty.

“Innovative policies, practices and ideas, will be shared and used for initiating committed and collaborative action. YES Kenya is expected to attract around 2000 people, of whom 1000 will be youths. This will not be just an event. It will be organized as a

workshop based learning event to build capacity to conceptualize programs and policies, build partnerships for program implementation to combat youth unemployment. YES Kenya will include Ministerial meetings, plenary sessions, open forums, workshops and skills development workshops,” Mrs Ahluwalia says.

She explains unemployment of youth has far-reaching implications on the labour market and the society at large. It contributes to economic exclusion and poverty and increases the probability of future joblessness and results in the loss of a valuable contribution to economic activity and growth from one of the most productive elements in society. It obstructs the movement of young people from adolescence to adulthood and in turn is a major cause of crime and drug abuse. High levels of youth unemployment can also lead to alienation from society and distrust of democratic political processes. As a result, social cohesion is undermined.

YES Campaign, Mrs Ahluwalia underscores, has identified five major development challenges from the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and has been building the knowledge base, commitment, and programs around them for youth engagement and employment. These challenges are renewable energy, water and sanitation, information and communication technologies, rural development, and HIV/AIDS.

“We have demonstrated exceptional organizational skills, global credibility, and local support to bring attention to the pernicious issue of global youth poverty, and the need to focus on employment generation.

“Let us be clear: Half-educated, unemployed youth, with no prospect of being integrated into a better future is a prescription for disaster. If young people do not have a stake in the existing social order and political order, if they do not feel there is a way for them, why should they sacrifice today for a better tomorrow? Why should they have an interest in protecting the stability and social safety of that system?”

## Heart and soul of YES

Mrs Ahluwalia, a small, diminutive woman, is the heart and soul of the YES movement, an initiative that has galvanized world attention on promoting youth employment. She did it by placing youth at the centre of development efforts in their countries. Over the last eight years she has patiently forged the partnerships needed to seed this movement, which is now embedded in over 70 countries, and is led by young visionary social entrepreneurs.

Working at the world renowned Education Development Center (EDC), based in Boston, Mrs Ahluwalia had the proverbial powerful mentor in the President of EDC Janet Whittle, who bought all her “unreasonable ideas” and offered unstinting support to Mrs Ahluwalia in her efforts to catalyze this global movement. Believing in the undeniable power of “why not” Mrs Ahluwalia plunged heart and

soul into an unknown terrain, powered by nothing else but a burning desire to eradicate poverty by focusing on youth employment.

When Ahluwalia began this journey in 1998, she invited Sam Daley Harris, Director of the Microcredit Summit to be her mentor. Before agreeing he gave her several tasks to accomplish in 2 weeks – to get institutional support, to get her family to agree to loan her to the world for the next 10 years or more, and get three high level world leaders to agree to her vision and join her in this quest... he did not realize at that time that this would be done in a week.

Mrs Ahluwalia first had a family meeting where she shared with them that if they agreed to let her do this... she would seldom see them – they agreed! She then called her EDC President on the phone, too intimidated to go see her in person, and shared her

vision... the President agreed! She then called Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General, Beijing Conference for Women inviting her to join the Youth Employment Summit Organizing Committee – she agreed! Excited she called Dr M. S. Swaminathan, world-acclaimed father of the Indian Green Revolution to invite him – he agreed! Buoyed by these successes she met Baroness Shirley Williams, got her agreement and then that of Robert Reich – now she had a really global Organizing Committee with leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe and the US. Armed with this she called Sam and he agreed to mentor her... she credits him with clarifying her thoughts and ideas, and working with her to set up the structure and processes that have brought the YES Campaign where it is today.

The key to her success must be her infectious enthusiasm as Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated so eloquently, “Enthusiasm is the mother of effort and without it nothing great was ever accomplished.”