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Thursday, February 28, 2008 | Today's Toronto Star

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Canada's emerging global citizens

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BOB HEPBURN

Shamin Mohamed was only 15 and living in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto when he founded a charity aimed at raising youth awareness of HIV and AIDS in Canada and abroad.

Jenna Hoyt, who is completing a nursing degree at the University of Toronto, was in her early 20s when she started the Little Voice Foundation, which helps African communities operate schools and housing for homeless children.

Mohamed and Hoyt are just two of the growing number of Canadian youths trying to make a difference in the world and in their own communities at home.

Wanting to help others overseas or in Canada is nothing new. Canadians, both young and old, have been doing it for decades.

Many of us view ourselves as global citizens, interested in tackling such issues as climate change, human rights, poverty, inequality.

But in the past, Canadians tended to work through major aid institutions or the federal government.

Today, more and more young Canadians are taking matters into their own hands and bypassing large, established groups. Like Hoyt and Mohamed, they are either starting their own tiny charities, which are run on a shoestring, or they are volunteering their time and sweat to such agencies.

All like these two young, dynamic Canadians, they believe in the power of volunteers to change the world. All of them want to make a positive change in the world around them, as evidenced by the fact that schools are jammed with programs, conferences and seminars on global citizenship, social responsibility and empowerment.

So why are these young, educated and well-travelled people striking out on their own?

Why won't they work with larger charities? And why are large aid agencies failing to appeal to this generation of global citizens?

Such questions are starting to be raised within academic circles and aid agencies themselves.

Answering those questions, though, will be difficult.

For starters, young Canadians complain the big agencies are too bureaucratic, too rigid, lack a "community feel," and fail to give youths, who want hands-on experience, the power to effect significant change

Such things are needed for youths to measure their own success.

For example, Hoyt, a 27-year-old Ottawa native, founded the Little Voice Foundation out of her passion to make a difference for vulnerable children. The small charity supports two schools in Ethiopia and a residence for street children.

"I never had any intention of creating an organization or even getting involved in the formal arena of international development," she says. But her friendship with some Ethiopians led her down that path.

"The outcome has been a grassroots organization that embraces diversity and encourages community involvement. It is the only way I feel really comfortable working in `development,'" she says.

Mohamed, a health sciences student at the University of Ottawa, still heads the Children's AIDS Health Program (LetsStopAIDS) he founded with other high-school students. Since its creation, he has travelled across Canada, South Africa and India and will be in Mexico this summer promoting

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youth-related AIDS programs.

Does he think of himself as a global citizen?

"Anyone who is taking action, something as simple as recycling, to make our world better," here or elsewhere, might be considered a global citizen, he says.

For Mohamed, the keys to being a global citizen are to be passionate about your cause and to know what you consider to be success.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet, lecturer and essayist who died in 1882, is often credited with a saying that defines success:

"To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children ... to leave the world a better place ... to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."

For Jenna Hoyt and Shamin Mohamed, and countless other young Canadians like them, helping one life to breathe easier – either here or abroad – is indeed their true measure of success.

Bob Hepburn's column appears every Thursday.

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