

She so impressed Bill Clinton at a climate change meeting a little less than two years ago that he called her “the most famous person to take the stage today”. That was saying something, since Shakira was sharing a platform with Larry Page, one of the founders of Google, and the recently retired British Premier Tony Blair – not to speak of the former President himself. But he may have been right. For the award-winning singer, famed for her gyrating routine more than for her IQ of 140, has so far sold 60 million albums worldwide, making her Latin America’s most popular performer ever.

The multi-Grammy winning star – who just months before had opened the Hamburg concert in the worldwide Live Earth bid to combat global warming – was there on serious business. When she got to the podium at the meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative, she announced a \$40 million charitable donation to help poor people recover from natural disasters. Much of it went to cope with the aftermath of Hurricane Felix in Nicaragua. A few months later she was meeting victims of Hurricane Sidr in Bangladesh. “I was devastated to see that entire villages were wiped away,” she said. “I will never forget the faces of the mothers who had lost their children.”

Shakira has been campaigning – and donating money for – sustainable development since first achieving success at the age of 18. She says it is “as important to me as my musical career”, and it certainly goes deep, back to her

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SHAKIRA

own childhood. Her teachers (who rejected her for the school choir on the grounds that she sang “like a goat”) would take her and fellow pupils to help children who were too poor to go to school to learn to read and write. Moved to find them “so hungry that they couldn’t concentrate” she vowed that “if ever I found success, I would do something about it.” Her resolution was reinforced by seeing glue-sniffing orphans, barefoot and in tattered clothes, living in a park near her home in the northern Colombian city of Barranquilla.

“Children are the most vulnerable population in the world and, at the same time, they are our only hope for a safer world,” she believes. Now a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, she has focused particularly on campaigning for universal education worldwide, and has lobbied both the US Congress and Gordon Brown, the UK Prime Minister. “Education can actually save lives”, she says. “In the developing world, people who are born poor will die poor, and that is because of the lack of opportunities, opportunities that come from education.”

She practices what she preaches. In 1995 she set up the Pies Descalzos “Barefoot” Foundation, named after her first big international hit and the children she had seen in the park, which she initially largely funded personally. It has built special schools from poor children all over Colombia, so far educating some 30,000 of them, and she now plans to replicate this worldwide. Two and a half years ago she and Nobel Prize laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a fellow Colombian, launched Latin America in Solidarity Action to fight child poverty in the continent. Last year she was named Humanitarian of the Year by the magazine People in Español and in January she was invited to perform at President Barack Obama’s Inauguration celebrations.

She is determined to go on using her fame to press for what needs to be done. “It’s using the spotlight that shines on me during a concert and moving it away from me to put it on the issues that need attention,” she says. GL.

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