“What is heartening is that the Earth Institute and Columbia University transcend academics and engage with issues that concern mankind. The Aditya Birla Group is proud to support the great efforts of the Columbia Global Center | South Asia, which will help make sustainable development in India a reality.”

— Mrs. Rajashree Birla, Aditya Birla Group

A new Columbia Global Center in Mumbai, India, will build on the Earth Institute’s work to address issues ranging from public health to water scarcity.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) spoke at our State of the Planet 2010 conference, which brought together experts and leaders from around the world to address critical international challenges, from climate change to poverty.

Thinking and working globally are fundamental to the Earth Institute’s approach. The activities of March 2010 were no exception. For example, the biennial State of the Planet conference, held in partnership with The Economist and Ericsson and supported by Charles and Elizabeth Bowlus, was more global than ever before, with speakers joining live from sites on four continents. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke from New York, President Felipe Calderón spoke from Mexico, and the panel debates on globally relevant issues—climate change, poverty, economic recovery and international systems—transcended boundaries, like the international event itself.

Only a few days before, Earth Institute Director Jeffrey Sachs (who is also special advisor to the UN secretary-general), Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger and others were in Mumbai, India, to announce the opening of a new Columbia Global Center, which will build on the Earth Institute’s past work in the country. As President Bollinger said in a press release about the event, “…we are committed to providing new opportunities to deepen our engagement with scholars, ideas and challenges across the globe.”

Why base a center in India? “You really can’t do development without looking at India,” says the Earth Institute’s Nirupam Bajpai, founding director of the center. “It’s one-sixth of humanity. It’s the largest democracy in the world. There have been huge gains since the reforms, but there is much still to be done … And that’s where the Earth Institute has a good fit to work with policymakers there, [the private sector] and other academic institutions.”

The new Columbia Global Center in Mumbai, to be the hub of the University’s presence in South Asia, is the fourth in a group of centers the University has established to increase its research and academic network abroad. Bajpai’s current focus is the Model Health District project, which involves the Indian government, state governments, UNICEF and a number of other organizations. The goal is to put together interventions to improve human health at several pilot sites around the country such as a new structure for health management at the ground level, the training of community health workers, a focus on higher public spending by federal and state governments, and the integration of health with sectors like nutrition, water and sanitation.

Other Earth Institute projects currently underway in India address monsoon forecasting to benefit agriculture and rural livelihoods, the growing scarcity of fresh water (work supported with generous funding from the PepsiCo Foundation), environmental concerns in the redevelopment of Mumbai’s eastern waterfront, and the effects of deforestation on India’s ecosystems. Such issues are not unique to India, and the insights and strategies developed will be relevant in other places the Earth Institute works around the world.

From motivating global debate among experts and world leaders at State of the Planet to forging global connections and fostering on-the-ground sustainable development work through the new Columbia Global Center in South Asia, the Earth Institute is advancing progress toward a healthy, sustainable planet and global population.