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Philanthropy: Giving Meaningfully

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PHILANTHROPY: GIVING MEANINGFULLY

Helming one of Singapore's more prominent non-profit organisations, the National Kidney Foundation, at a time when public confidence has been severely shaken, is a feat that requires more than just heartwarming feelings of goodwill. As the giving climate in Singapore gives way to donor fatigue and a degree of scepticism, Gerard Ee tells *Social Space* the kind of philanthropic acts that he thinks will bring local charity to the next level.



Social Space: There are many definitions of philanthropy. What's your definition?

Gerard Ee: A philanthropic act involves giving with the goal of helping others. The key words are 'helping others'. Blind giving and not knowing whether the act achieves the goal of helping others may not enable one to become philanthropic.

SS: It is difficult then to be philanthropic?

GE: My view is that it really depends on the donor's ultimate motive. He may be donating in support of friends who are managing the beneficiary organisation and so is not really bothered by the outcome of his generosity. On the other hand, he may simply be relying on the organisation's reputation and have the confidence that the donation will be put to good use. The true philanthropist seeks to make a difference, to ensure that his money is being put to good use.

SS: What do you mean by 'being put to good use'?

GE: Organisations have a corporate mission and vision to guide them in what they do. Based on these polestars, priorities are set. This is how organisations are meant to behave. But alas! Many organisations often lose track of their mission and vision which are framed and displayed, often gathering dust and long forgotten. In some cases, the statements are quoted often but the operations of the organisation get out of synch with their statements as they succumb to temptations to do what is popular or try to do everything good under the sun.

SS: What would be the common pitfalls that charity organisations face?

GE: Some charitable organisations are not mindful that as an organisation, they are no different from any other organisation in terms of the need of managerial skills and knowledge. Typically, charitable organisations are started and managed by good-hearted people and their principal focus is to help their constituents. It is good that there are compassionate people rising to the occasion. However, it does not change the fact that such people must know what they are doing and strive to carry out their programmes efficiently. They should not be reactive; instead, they need to plan carefully what they are trying to achieve and ensure that they have the right resources to realise the outcomes.

The fault is not entirely that of those involved in these organisations. In Singapore, the nature of charitable acts has evolved. Decades ago, early missionaries started charities to provide for the neglected members of our society. They provided shelter, meals and other needs of these people. There were homes for the lepers, displaced individuals, schools, and more. Today, the Singaporean government attends to most of these needs. There are public assistance schemes, comcare funds, shelters to eliminate vagrancy, affordable rental premises, medical assistance, and more. However, it's also true that the government cannot do it all itself. And so, there are charitable organisations whose works supplement that of the government.

SS: What advice do you have for those who are planning to create a charitable organisation?

GE: It is important to look at the outcomes that organisation is meant to achieve – whether it is to help people to address their afflictions, help the poor to cope with their daily needs, or some other philanthropic act. Adequate resources are then allocated to help achieve the desired outcomes. Such programmes should then be offered to all and not just the poor beneficiaries. Charity, as it is understood, comes at the tail end. No one should be deprived of access to the programmes and funds are needed to be raised to subsidise the costs and make the programmes affordable even to the poorest of beneficiaries.

SS: And what happens in the absence of such an understanding?

GE: Without such an understanding, programmes will be poorly designed due to a lack of resources. Worse, they will barely meet their desired outcomes. Programmes must never be designed within a framework of discrimination, even if it is unintentional – this happens when one presupposes that an otherwise worthy programme should cater only to the poorer beneficiaries. In my mind, this is absolute discrimination and the consequence is the creation of a ghetto. Both the rich and poor must stand together and resolve their common afflictions harmoniously.

With this framework in mind, charitable organisations must be professionally operated. They should be measured according to the outcomes that have been achieved. And here's where true philanthropy kicks in. Philanthropists must, in turn, be more discerning in their giving. It is the expectation of effectiveness in achieving outcomes that



Gerard Ee is a well-known figure in the local charity sector. He is the chairman of the new NKF and the Council for the Third Age, and a board member of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

will spur charities to do more with their resources, grow management competencies, and achieve better results for the benefit of their constituents. Careless giving can only perpetuate the existence of ineffective charities resulting in waste of resources. Worst of all, beneficiaries will be ill-served.

SS: What then makes an effective philanthropist?

GE: Philanthropists who demand results can go a long way to spurring charities into improving themselves. In turn, this demand ensures donations are being put to good use. This is especially important since many smaller donors are in no position to conduct due inquiries into the competency of the charities. However, larger donors with the capacity to make due inquiries should do so.

What's more, charities with potential need not be overlooked or abandoned as savvy philanthropists are quick to spot a gap in the sector and can be persuaded to help strengthen the organisation's management or help improve key competencies through capacity building.

Such proactive activism helps protect the interest of the smaller donors. The major paradigm shift is that we must not blindly give, reacting from a bleeding heart syndrome. Instead, we give meaningfully and in such a way that everyone benefits. □