

**DR TERHEGGEN**

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partnership with government. In the US, what the government does can be irrelevant to you and that’s fine.

“In the US, there are many NGOs, good ones. You don’t need to create your own programmes. Here, grass-root NGOs are very weak. There is a huge distrust between philanthropists and foundations, and NGOs. There is little transparency, accountability and governance. If I give you (NGO) a grant, what will you do with it? There is no obligation to make a report. Even if you have a report, unless I send an audit team, what sense does it make? Costs may be high and with a grant of a particular size, I might as well run my own programme.”

One of the projects on the table is to support the Indonesian government in encouraging slum dwellers to relocate into public housing. Some of the Circle’s members had been called upon by the government for assistance. Dr Terheggen says: “We were discussing – what would happen if the members joined forces around a project. There would be more resources and knowledge on the development of community in a housing project. It’s not easy to relocate people and the effort will be more successful if people feel at home in a new place.”

It turns out that one member may be able to give educational support; another in the field of healthcare, and another in infrastructure and public services.

“All of a sudden as a group they have a much more comprehensive portfolio and tools... Suddenly the individual project is not just for a single community, but an emerging best practice for other similar places across Asia. It’s a wonderful example of how a group is more potent than the sum of its individuals,” he says.

A potential project with region-wide impact is in the area of education. The group is doing research on a “school leadership” programme focused on developing school principals. Mr Lien says: “From our research it seems there are not too many programmes in the area of training and developing the school principal. We thought it was perplexing, that it was a very high impact and fairly low-cost intervention.”

For Singapore the group is researching the feasibility of an assisted-living pilot facility for the elderly and those with disabilities. “We don’t believe the model we have in mind exists in Singapore,” he says. The traditional way to deal with a disability among those who can afford it is to hire a helper who is typically not trained. A second option is a nursing home where you are then “over-served”, he says.

“We need to understand what older people want in terms of care options, what services they want. We have to have a sense of what they will or won’t pay for, their attitudes towards such a facility and their family members who are the key stakeholders and decision makers...”

“One important factor that is under-appreciated is the need to be part of a thriving and dynamic community. Isolation is one of the biggest issues.”

Yet another project in the research stage is talent development for the philanthropy sector. Dr Terheggen says: “Philanthropists struggle to find the right people for their operations, and the right talent among (grant) recipients. Everyone would benefit from more talent in the sector. We’re at a very early stage of research.”

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Lawrence Lien (left), Co-founder and Chief Executive, Asia Philanthropy Circle

Strength in numbers

Year-old Asia Philanthropy Circle finds that when members collaborate, outcomes exceed the sum of the group’s individuals

BY GENEVIEVE CUA

WHAT happens when you get a group of philanthropists together to collaborate on projects? The result should be far more than the sum of the group’s parts.

This is what the year-old Asia Philanthropy Circle has found – a happy outcome after just over one year of travelling the world and speaking with over 200 philanthropists.

Today, the Circle has 20 members from five countries, and six projects in varying stages of planning and research. Two of those projects will be in Singapore. The projects span a range of causes, from education and healthcare to public-housing support services.

Says the Circle’s co-founder and chief executive Lawrence Lien: “After one year, we’re more optimistic than pessimistic about the response we get. It has been more positive than what I expected starting up. We had expected it to be difficult because it is very unusual for an entity like ours to promise action. Most other platforms don’t promise that because they know it’s challenging, so they promise capacity building, spiritual inspiration and so on.”

The Asia Philanthropy Circle sets out to provide a platform for philanthropists in the region to exchange ideas and to collaborate. “We think when philanthropists work together they can create much more social impact. We also

wanted an Asian brand of philanthropy, rather than borrow models from the West. We have learnt a lot, but we believe the context in Asia is different.

“We need to grow the thought leadership and ways of doing things more suitable to our culture and context. People point to the huge diversity in Asia, which to me is a strength. Through diversity you get innovation.”

Members must be prepared to be active, and this means going beyond writing a cheque. The Circle’s chief operating officer Mathias Terheggen says: “One of the things we do ask our members is to be really there. We want our members to take ownership of the Circle. Some (philanthropists) tell us that at this point they cannot, that they would rather not be a member than be a disappointing member. Some make it clear that they will revisit this in three months or a year.”

There are a few ways, says Mr Lien, in which Asian philanthropy differs from the West. One is the predominance of family businesses in the corporate landscape. This means the objective of legacy-making is likely to permeate. “In the US, it’s more likely that you make money, and put a large chunk into philanthropy, and the kids can make their own living and wealth. Here, they think about passing it on. That leads to a different way of doing things.”

A second difference is that the role of governments is stronger in the Asian context. The state of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Asia is also relatively less mature. “In many cases in Asia you need to work closely and in