Philanthropists need a respected, forward-thinking and innovative central body, like the APC, to continuously identify, recruit and harness their collective intelligence and efforts for collaborative and catalytic action in Asia.

Laurence Lien, co-founder & CEO of Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC)
Asian philanthropy needs to be more strategic. Currently, it is still quite ad-hoc and focused on low hanging fruits like education and religious giving.

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2. What are the philanthropic networks in Asia that you are involved in? Can you describe each of their purpose briefly?

There are not that many philanthropic networks in Asia, which is why I co-founded the Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC) early last year. The circle brings Asian philanthropists who are keen to collaborate and work on issues together: they exchange knowledge and learn from each other’s work, and replicate successful models across borders.

After working on social issues for years, we recognise that even though the countries are different, the human condition is the same and problems are usually similar in nature. Hence, instead of reinventing the wheel, it is much more effective to pool resources together, tap into our different strengths and address the multitude of problems together.

There are other networks like the Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN), which is a platform for a much wider funder base, including corporates, private banks, government agencies, and they exchange knowledge on a broader spectrum.

On a smaller scale, there has also been an uptake on collective giving – like the SVP networks in China, Collective Impact groups in Malaysia, Hong Kong – which all look at approaching systemic problems collaboratively.

3. In your interview with Caroline Hartnell for Alliance Magazine (May 1, 2015), you say that you want to mobilise philanthropists in Asia to have greater impact, to be more collaborative, to create our own Asian brand of philanthropy. Your initiative, the Asia Philanthropy Circle, aims to join up efforts to tackle more social challenges that are too large or complex for individual philanthropists to take on.

Laurence Lien, co-founder & CEO of Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC)

Collaboration is important because it allows philanthropists to join up efforts to tackle more social challenges that are too large or complex for individual philanthropists to take on. It helps channel resources to risky, long-term projects.

b) What are the barriers to more collaboration/network building in Asian philanthropy?

The lack of a collaborative mindset is the first challenge. Philanthropists generally do not collaborate easily, as they are used to being in full control of their projects, and express their own values and personality through them. If they are merely joining APC or any other network looking for personal benefits and joining only when there are guarantees they will be taken seriously and gain benefits from the project and their needs, they would not make good members.

Collaboration requires people thinking about the public good and impact that they can achieve jointly that is much more than them working individually. This requires not only trust and mutual accountability but also a willingness to jump in even if one’s personal needs are not fully met.

Finally, good collaboration takes time, and requires that philanthropists are open-minded and transparent in their giving, believing that it would be wrong to seek attribution for their contributions.

Many are concerned with legacy building and using philanthropy to pass on family values to their next generations, family being very important to Asians. Faith-motivated giving is also very common in this part of the world.

In many Asian countries, the role of philanthropists in society can still grow very significantly. The size of giving is still modest compared to the capacity to give. This is partly because the non-profit sector is still relatively underdeveloped and philanthropic resources cannot be developed quickly, and partly because many successful business families are only just entering a more mature stage of wealth creation and thinking beyond the business.

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