

LAURENCE LIEN, THE QUIET PHILANTHROPIST

The world today is in a lot of trouble. "Globalisation was supposed to help people and bring prosperity to everyone. Instead it seems to have benefited a few people, and the wealth is not redistributed. We need to refine the capitalism issue. Call it whatever you want – compassionate or moral capitalism – but business as a whole needs to change," expounds Lien.

The founder of the Asia Philanthropy Circle goes on to list all the problems plaguing the planet, and as he goes on for a few minutes ("poverty, inequality, marginalised groups being ignored in society, people with mental illnesses, migrant workers..."), it dawns on me that perhaps the problem is the human condition itself.

"But from a philanthropist's point of view, I suppose there are a lot of opportunities," Lien says with a chuckle.

HELPING THE PEOPLE

The grandson of one of Singapore's most prominent banking tycoons, Lien was not seduced by wealth and its trappings. He even took up a government scholarship, worked in the civil service and became a Nominated Member of Parliament. But his passion for helping the people never waned. "It's quite unusual for someone from the administrative service to come out to the non-profit sector but I want to dedicate myself to this path," says Lien.

The result is the Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC), a community comprising Asian individuals and families who would like to do good in the region and the world. Membership is only by invitation. Since it launched early in 2015, Lien has recruited 25 people.

"The APC has never been about a numbers game. We want to go as deep as possible with each member. I'm happy that we have started eight projects. Many of them are still at the early stages because it's not just about pulling funds and doing something that's already been done. Most of it is about tackling something new, which means that it takes time to scope out the issue before designing an intervention that can be implemented," Lien shares.

TACKLING OLD AGE

In Singapore, the APC is delving into the issue of assisted living, which is especially pertinent here with our ageing population. Unlike nursing homes, which are for the elderly who needs more care and concern, assisted living communities are for those who are still relatively independent but might need some help in certain areas.

"The biggest issue in Singapore is always land," Lien laughs. We're not ready to officially announce the project but I can tell you that we are working with a non-profit partner to conceptualise it and it will hopefully be done in three years. It's not just assisted living actually; it is an integrated

complex, so there are other things within the facility. We are putting a lot of thought into the planning because if it's not successful the first time, then no one is going to copy it."

Another social problem that Lien is personally vocal about is poverty and inequality. "A lot of issues that you see on the world stage now, whether it's Brexit or these dangerous far-right parties becoming popular, has its roots in inequality and the class divide. Previously, it was mainly the lower classes that were left out but right now, even the middle class is feeling the pinch. When the middle class gets anxious and worried, that's when the country is in trouble," says Lien.

TAKING OWNERSHIP

Lien readily admits he doesn't have all the answers. But he is trying and taking these social issues into his own hands, and this is a behaviour that he hopes more Singaporeans can adopt. "I think we can certainly do more. When I was the CEO of National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, I always said, 'Volunteer first before you give money.' Once you give the time, you'll start empathising with the struggles of the less fortunate and you see that they are just like you – human."

LIEN'S VIEW ON GOVERNMENT

"The government does a pretty good job in philanthropy, perhaps too good sometimes because it crowds out private initiatives since it is so big and in every space. I think one of the thoughts that should cross our minds when we read about a social issue is not what the government is going to do about it, but what we can do about it.

"Giving everything to the government is not a healthy state of affairs. People become disengaged, which is a shame because we have a lot of strength and the capacity to innovate, to achieve things that are better than what the government can do.

"So it might be hard but the government needs to learn to let go. It cannot want to be in every single area and the vision of philanthropy should not be about giving to government-backed projects. Then we might as well just pay more taxes.

"Then the government needs to be more receptive to good ideas and good models, and realise that these can come from private initiatives too. Encourage these entities. That's when you get real innovation."

