



This Christmas, let's find better ways of doing good

When donating and serving the less fortunate, we should consider whether we are truly helping or possibly even hurting the very ones we are hoping to uplift.

Steve Loh

Filled with a sense of purpose and conviction, I embarked on a career in professional charity work 17 years ago. But as the years went by, serving some of the most impoverished communities in Asia, a sense of unease and discontent had clearly set in.

Part of my job was to facilitate short-term teams of well-meaning Singapore-based volunteers who set out to serve the less fortunate in the region. The well-intentioned individuals would cheerfully hand out aid on our regular trips to villages and slums. They gave sweets to children and food packets to families as well as water filters, medicine, second-hand spectacles, pre-loved clothes and even solar lights.

This took us to neighbourhoods of shanties lined alongside piles of decaying single-use plastics, rotting clothes, non-functioning water filters, children with tooth decay and communities that often were chronically ill and desperately poor.

I realised we were handing out aid in an arbitrary way, based on our assumptions and resources. I wondered what the long-term impact would be – were we doing more harm than good?

The unmaintained water filters, in my view, were testament to a First World charity prescribing a solution that locals had not bought into. As for the ill, they received occasional medication, but no health education or follow-up. And the tooth decay – I hoped it wasn't exacerbated by our candy. Perhaps toothpaste, a toothbrush and a session on dental health might have been more well-informed.

After a decade in the field, I decided to take a long, hard, no-holds-barred evaluation of my work, as well as a deep examination of the unintended consequences I had caused, if any.

Suffice to say, I found little evidence of any transformative or

sustainable impact, and some negative outcomes that I had not expected. In other words, a decade later, the communities we had served were still struggling with the same issues and problems they had when we first arrived.

Over the Christmas period, an occasion for charitable giving during a traditional season of generosity, I would like to suggest a time of reflection from those of us in the privileged position of being the giver.

It may do us well to also think through if our donations and volunteering are indeed helping, or possibly hurting, the very ones we are trying to serve.

FEELING ASHAMED OR EMBARRASSED

One thing I learnt that stands out for me was that beneficiaries said they felt embarrassed or ashamed about the aid they received. This sense of loss of dignity among the poor turns out to be a well-documented phenomenon by practitioners and academics around the globe.

Further research unveiled many issues that confirmed my experiences on the ground. Large charities like Oxfam have reported that 40 per cent of donated clothing ends up in landfills as the villagers find them unsuitable for their needs. This results in the synthetic fibres leaching into the environment and threatening an already stressed ecological system.

Other reports showed that regular aid in cash or kind can threaten existing economic and social systems in a community. A veteran charity colleague told me how short-term teams providing free eye checks and spectacles for years had put the local optometrists and opticians out of business. When the short-term teams stopped coming, the locals had nowhere to go.

Then there is the issue of impoverished communities adopting "learned helplessness" as foreign aid pours in. A community development veteran told me he worked with a South-east Asian village for several years to change mindsets from dependency to independent self-sufficiency, only to have another foreign charity come in handing out aid.

Studies on pop-up medical clinics have regularly cautioned

about providing ad hoc medical care without local expertise, adequate follow-up and health education.

So, should we stop our philanthropy and short-term volunteering? Absolutely not. Quite the opposite.

Charity sectors are fast maturing to move from quick-fix solutions to sustainable initiatives that enable and empower for the long term. We, the donor, volunteer and full-time charity professionals, just need to do more homework and find the right partnership.

Aligning with orphanages, charity hospitals, community developers, educational institutions and social service agencies that have a strong track record will achieve the change we are hoping for.

Philanthropy and charity have critical roles to play in systemic change on a global scale. I have observed a growing maturity in the sector where data, evidence, impact measurement and social innovation are being discussed. I'm heartened by the humility of key leaders to dare to innovate new sustainable solutions.

COMING UP WITH SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

More philanthropists and grant-makers are viewing their beneficiaries as equals and making considerable efforts to

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co-create solutions with them.

In Singapore, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, in a 2023 speech, said: "For the vulnerable, we have been gradually shifting our approach from social assistance to social empowerment. We want to not only help people tide through difficulty, but also boost their sense of drive and purpose and strengthen their sense of agency and ownership over their own circumstances."

Take the Government's ComLink+ programme, which provides financial help to lower-income families, tied to four conditions or "progress packages". It encourages families to invest in themselves by providing financial support of between \$450 and \$550 every three months in a mix of cash and CPF payouts if they find employment in a CPF-paying job with a monthly salary of at least \$1,400.

Other measures include matching up to \$2,500 in debt repayments for utility and housing arrears. This encourages those receiving the support to take an active role in overcoming their financial difficulties.

Similarly, the Empowering Families Initiative, led by full-time social workers, provides grants that match savings by low-income families to encourage them to upskill and increase their income.

Families that do not have access to adequate, nutritious food prefer to receive supermarket vouchers rather than pre-selected food items, found a 2021 study done in collaboration with The Food Bank Singapore and Singapore Management University's Lien Centre for Social Innovation. The families liked the fact they had some control over the type of food they were able to buy with the vouchers.

GIVING, AND EMPOWERING

At the individual level, each of us can examine closely the charities we give to or volunteer with, to better understand the impact they are making.

A long-term view with an equally long commitment to a particular cause that resonates can only help the transformative impact we all hope to see.

I'm particularly encouraged by some of my close friends who have donated and volunteered with a particular orphanage for over 15 years and have seen cohorts of children being empowered and enabled.

It is my hope that as a society, we will not only grow in generosity, but in discernment in our giving and volunteering as we consider initiatives and organisations that look to empower the less fortunate in a sustainable way.

To this end, may we all do good, better, this giving season – any season, for that matter.

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