

Publication: Singapore Tatler Online

Date: 23 June 2021

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Green entrepreneur Robin Pho is committed to helping off-grid communities make the switch to renewable energy

When he completed his studies at the Singapore Management University in 2004, Robin Pho had no plans to join Ponco, his family's Indonesia-based manpower business. His father had successfully steered the company to become a manpower supplier to the country's oil and gas industry, and Pho wanted to pursue his own career in private banking.

The founder and CEO of Right People Renewable Energy (RPRE) explains, "Prior to joining the family business, I was working at ABN Amro and UBS in wealth management. I learnt many things, made many friends, and lived a comfortable life travelling the world for business. However, in 2008, my father suffered a critical heart valve failure and I quit my banking job to return and help the family business."

Pho joined the company full-time in 2008, and spent the years after his father's passing in 2014 contemplating how to steer the business forward. He also enrolled at private university Insead in 2017 to pursue his Global Executive MBA. It was then that he decided to set up RPRE, with the goal of pivoting the business to focus on combating climate change. "Being a second-generation family business, we had the benefit of years of success in our Indonesian manpower business. This meant that the company could provide the seed funding needed to kickstart RPRE."

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We also have a competitive advantage from other startups as we are equipped with the business know-how in Indonesia, compared to those who started from scratch.”



Today, RPRES is based in both Singapore and Indonesia, and is focused on helping off-grid communities make the switch from fossil fuels to solar energy. Pho expounds that it's tougher for these communities to change because there is no reliable central electrical grid in remote locations. Hence, they often have to generate energy using diesel generators that cause pollution and harm to the people and environment around them. Competitors in the solar industry are also reluctant to take on off-grid projects after factoring in the unfavourable circumstances involved, typically caused by logistical challenges and a lack of basic facilities. This includes no access to clean water and rudimentary living conditions when installing solar infrastructures.

“I encourage my team to be the ‘special forces of renewable energy’, to go deep into unknown territories with limited manpower and resources to execute honourable missions that others can't, or refuse to carry out.” With reference to Indonesia, he says, “Indonesia has a population of over 250 million people and a significant proportion still lives in remote areas. When we serve an off-grid community, we are making a big difference to the lives of many who are still living at the bottom of the pyramid.”

The company prides itself in serving three main pillars: people, planet and profits. Pho states, “We want our business to be a force for good and make positive impact both socially and on the environment.”

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Today, RPRE is the only certified B corporation offering renewable energy solutions in Southeast Asia. (Businesses with the accreditation have struck a balance between profit and purpose). The company was also recognised as the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's Champion of Good last year for its inclusive hiring policies and positive contributions to the environment.

Aside from aiding off-grid communities, Pho also wishes to export Singapore's greatest assets—its people, skills and knowledge—to make a positive impact globally. "Switching to 100 per cent clean energy is just half the battle, and it's equally important to focus on energy efficiency and reduce the total energy consumption," Pho shares. Among its many projects in Singapore, RPRE was vital in helping a floating fish farm off Pulau Semakau in installing a solar photovoltaic (PV) system and energy storage solution that enable them to have clean operations—completely powered by the sun.

Pho is also committed to helping the world's only floating hospital barge, run by non-profit organisation DoctorShare, to adopt solar energy and batteries. "For over 10 years, DoctorShare has provided critical medical support to remote communities in Indonesia. They currently rely on old diesel generators on board for power, and we plan to fundraise and install solar equipment and batteries for them to eliminate their need for diesel." Pho estimates to complete this project by end-2021, after delays due to the pandemic.

But what drives this entrepreneur in his quest to save the planet? Pho admits that apart from his twin boys—for whom he wishes to build a better future—the legacy of his late father continues to inspire him every day.

"My father was an intuitive entrepreneur, he often made decisions based on gut feel and not on financial models built on Excel. His can-do spirit lives in me, and I often imagine what he would say when I find myself in doubt. Next year would be the 50th anniversary of our family business. I can only hope I haven't let him down, and have been a responsible steward in steering the family business forward."