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CATALYST ASIA

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OCT 2015 – MAR 2016

A Publication On Societal Leadership In The Region

COVER STORY

Empowering the Disenfranchised

The dusty, smog-filled outskirts of Phnom Penh may seem like an unlikely location for the Community Legal Education Center (CLEC), but it was chosen for a reason

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A Publication On Societal Leadership In The Region

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ABOUT US

Catalyst Asia is a publication by the Institute for Societal Leadership at the Singapore Management University. It is a collection of feature stories, interview articles and opinion pieces about how leadership is being exercised around societal challenges in Asia. We hope that Catalyst Asia will inform, inspire and catalyse new ideas for change.

EDITOR'S NOTE

At Catalyst Asia, we believe that real life can only be captured at a particular moment in time. Everything you read here is accurate at the point in which it was recorded. We do not expect details to stay the same and we hope that they don't. The ISL globe motif illuminates a featured picture but intentionally obscures certain parts to imply that the perspectives presented in Catalyst Asia are by no means a complete picture. We frame the story and offer a point of view. It is then up to the reader to form his own understanding and imagine how the remaining pieces of the story could look like. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Institute for Societal Leadership. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the Institute for Societal Leadership at the Singapore Management University Administration Building located at 81 Victoria Street Singapore 188065.

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STORIES FROM THE GROUND

IN THE HOT SEAT

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE TOP

TEXT BY CAROLYN HONG | PHOTOS BY DIALOG GROUP

FOOD AID, POWERED BY TECHNOLOGY

Carrying a basket of groceries, the woman walks to the counter and pulls out her Malaysian identity card. The card is swiped, she enters a pin number and walks out of the shop with her food.

It's all cashless, just like any debit or credit card transaction.

Except that this was a welfare transaction, and the woman a recipient of aid distributed by MyKasih Foundation under a unique technology-driven welfare system.

MyKasih is the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative of the Dialog Group, a listed oil and gas company co-founded by Tan Sri Ngau Boon Keat, and is also his family foundation.

The cashless payment welfare system was the brainchild of Ngau, 66.

The idea struck one Sunday seven years ago when he heard an announcement in church for volunteers to deliver food bags to the poor. He wondered if this was the best way to distribute aid.

"How many bags can be sent out this way? How many will benefit?" he said.

He realised that his Dialog Group had the answer: a cashless payment system that it developed 15 years ago for a petrol company using the Malaysian identity card which has a readable chip.

The system was, however, left on the shelf as the corporate venture did not take off. E-commerce was still in its infancy then.

Ngau immediately saw how this system could help in distributing food aid.

That was in December 2008. They applied to the Central Bank for a licence to run a cashless payment system, and set up a pilot programme for 25 families.

It got off to a roaring success because the system was so easy to use, and every Malaysian has an identity card with a chip. Each family nominates a recipient whose identity card is loaded with RM80 a month. They can then go to a selected supermarket to buy food, and the amount is deducted from the card.

Best of all, they can choose what they want. The card can only be used to buy essential food items like rice, milk and eggs, and not cigarettes and alcohol. But the recipients can choose from among the different brands available.

"This gives them dignity as they can make their own choices instead of being given handouts which they may not need," said Ngau.

They can shop as everyone else does.

With that successful trial run, MyKasih Foundation was born in April 2009. MyKasih

means My Love, in Malay.

The system was gradually rolled out, and now covers most of Malaysia including Borneo. Seven years later, over 290,000 families have benefited. MyKasih works with non-governmental organisations to identify needy families in a target district.

"Race and religion are not the criteria. The only criteria that matters is poverty and that they need help," said Ngau.

The programme is funded by donors whose donation goes entirely to food aid. Administrative costs and rent are borne by the Dialog Group.

It's an extremely transparent system as donors can easily track every cent of their donation through an online system which logs all purchases by their adopted family. A monthly report is also sent to them.

"Every ringgit meant for a recipient will go to the recipient, and donors can see exactly how it's spent. In many other charities, they don't know how much goes to the cause and how much to administration," Ngau said.

"It's very targeted and transparent because how do you get the trust of the public if you are not transparent?"

This transparency eliminates the sort of leakages that tend to mar many charity programmes. As a result, MyKasih has been entrusted with over RM200 million in CSR funds from some of Malaysia's biggest companies like its oil company Petronas, banks and multinational firms.

It also manages some of the welfare funds of state governments and religious agencies, and recently ran a pilot programme in Jakarta for 100 families.

But MyKasih realises that food aid alone cannot break the cycle of poverty. A welfare scheme, in fact, can easily turn into a permanent crutch.

Hence, it limits each family to two years on the aid list. In that time, the family also receives other assistance such as financial literacy and skills training, job placements, and micro loans to start a small business.

Its system is not just transparent but also flexible, and can work anywhere with a phone line, even a satellite phone, for the card reader.

Hence, in the interior of Borneo Malaysia where the native groups are skilled at living off the land, the list of available items covers toiletries instead of food. After the massive floods in Malaysia in 2014, recipients received extra money to buy household items like detergents.

Under a school programme, students can use their cards to buy stationery, books and food in school, and in some cases, to pay the bus fare.

MyKasih is today one of the more successful welfare programmes in Malaysia, and certainly among the most innovative CSR initiatives.

"I have tasted hunger when I was young, and people helped us with food. That's how we survived, and I remembered that. I want to give back, and I find joy in it," Ngau said.

MYANMAR'S MICROFINANCE LEADER SAYS RULES ARE TOO TIGHT

In the remote village of Aye Ywar Thit, southern Myanmar, people live in thatched huts that sit in the flickering shade beneath coconut palms. Men scale the trees barefoot to harvest the fruits, which are then piled high along the bank of a river ready to be stripped of their husks and loaded onto small boats.

For the largely agricultural community of 715 people, much is the same as it has been in Myanmar for centuries. One recent development, however, is decidedly modern: the arrival of microfinance.

Than Than Win, who owns one of the boats that carry coconuts, is one of the few people in Myanmar with access to formal finance. Her shipments of coconuts are sent to Yangon, the commercial capital, via a network of waterways that run through the lush southern delta region. Business is good, so with the help of a small loan, she plans to expand. "I would like to buy a bigger boat," she says. Most in Myanmar are not so lucky, and have to depend on loans by informal moneylenders or pawnshops, where rates can be extortionate.

Aye Ywar Thit is the site of one of thousands of projects considered a success by Myanmar's largest microfinance NGO, the Pact Global Microfinance Fund (PGMF). The group, which has 670,000 customers nationwide, has been lending here since 2013.

Htay Lwin recently borrowed 150,000 kyats (around US$150) from PGMF to invest in her business growing and selling betel leaf, a mild stimulant popular in Myanmar. "I use the profits to pay for my children's education. I have two daughters who are students right now," she says during a fortnightly repayment meeting in the village centre, where several other lenders sit on straw mats fanning themselves.

It is hoped scenes like this will become more common as the microfinance industry develops, in turn helping Myanmar's economy to recover from decades of stagnation and isolation that have deprived around 80 per cent of citizens of access to formal financial services.

But before that can happen there are serious hurdles to overcome. Myanmar has the most primitive financial sector in Southeast Asia, with most relying on friends, family and informal lenders for loans. Many keep gold or hide cash as an alternative to savings accounts.

In 2011 the new semi-civilian government, which replaced the former junta, enacted the Microfinance Business Law. A handful of microfinance institutions (including PGMF's predecessors) have been operating in Myanmar since the 1990s, but the law created a legal framework and encouraged others to enter the sector. By October last year there were 215 microfinance groups, known as MFIs, licensed to operate.

But the microfinance sector is ambivalent about the new law, which many say is too restrictive. There are signs that the government may be open to change. After objections from the industry, lawmakers raised the limit on loan sizes from the equivalent of US$500 to $5,000.

But lenders say that isn't enough. "Basically, everything comes back to the regulatory regime," says Jason Meikle, PGMF's deputy director. The two major issues with the law, he says, are a requirement to pay at least 15 per cent interest on clients' saving deposits, and restrictions that prevent MFIs from borrowing to fund their operations.

PGMF funds more than a quarter of its loans with money from its clients' savings accounts (all borrowers are obliged to deposit a small amount to their savings each fortnight). The 15 per cent minimum interest rate keeps costs up, while at the same time a ban on charging borrowers more than 30 per cent a year means MFIs can't raise their margins to compensate.

Meikle adds: "We are not allowed to attract savings from non-borrowers, so the amount we can fund through savings is limited to the amount our borrowers wish to save."

Other ways to fund loans are also restricted by the authorities. The new law allows for MFIs to borrow from banks, "but in reality" says Meikle, "there cannot really be any borrowing."

For domestic MFIs, the issue is they are restricted to borrowing from the Myanmar Economic Bank, which isn't lending to them.

And international groups like PGMF are unable to find loans from abroad that the Central Bank deems cheap enough. The result is that it will be difficult to build a self-sustaining microfinance industry under the current rules. At the moment, MFIs often need donor money to be able to cover the costs of reaching out to Myanmar's rural communities.

Htay Lwin, the betel leaf grower from Aye Ywar Thit, is also responsible for organising other lenders in the village. As skinny chickens scratch in the earth nearby, she insists everyone is happy with the project: "We don't get any complaints."

In the more remote communities of Myanmar, success stories like this are less common because the costs involved in setting up offices are higher. If villages throughout the country are going to benefit from official loans, micro-lenders would argue, the government will have to relax the rules.

Women are a major customer segment for microfinance institutions in Myanmar.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DENE-HERN CHEN

EMPOWERING THE DISENFRANCHISED

The dusty, smog-filled outskirts of Phnom Penh may seem like an unlikely location for the Community Legal Education Center (CLEC), but it was chosen for a reason. Just 5 km away from the city's notorious Prey Sar Prison, it is easier for CLEC's lawyers to promptly assist human rights activists in need of pro bono legal aid.

"Whenever we hear of summons from the police, our lawyers have the ability to be accessible at the scene from the very first minute of their arrest," Yeng Virak, CLEC's executive director, said. "So that helps to lessen their vulnerability of forced confession or abuse."

Legal intervention is especially necessary in a country like Cambodia where allegations of abuse by the government are rampant. Since 2000, more than half a million people – in a country of 15 million — have been affected by state-sanctioned land grabs.

Police have in the past wielded brute force to counter peaceful demonstrations over the issue, often escalating tensions. Activists intervening in land conflicts, as well as other politically charged disputes, can find themselves caught in unfavourable situations.

Last November, 11 anti-eviction activists – who have been protesting for years over the removal of hundreds of residents from central Phnom Penh – were arrested and charged after a demonstration.

According to Virak, the arrest and criminalisation of people exercising their rights is becoming the rule, not the exception.

"We've observed the trend that the advocates increasingly face criminal charges in land-related and labour-related cases," he said. "Many human rights defenders face criminal charges and they need lawyers, and not traditional lawyers."

Conceived in 1996 as a field office for the University of San Francisco School of Law, CLEC began by providing legal education to local communities, but by 2003 had started expanding their activities to advocating on issues of land rights, labour violations, and on election reform.

Today, its staff provides legal representation to high-profile cases concerning human rights abuses, and it also avails itself to disenfranchised groups – like embattled garment workers and migrant labourers – who want to press charges against their abusers.

When three garment workers were shot and seriously injured by a provincial governor during a demonstration in 2012, lawyers from

CLEC and Licadho – another local rights group – took up the case despite push-back from the government on the investigation.

Virak said that in addition to representing individuals, his organisation also wants to instill a sense of "legal empowerment" in their clients.

"This means that we focus on building the capacity of our clients," he said. "Their ability to articulate and to argue the law should be strong, and the leadership and advocacy skills of our clients should also be helpful [to their communities]."

Citing a "double standard," Virak said that the rich and powerful in Cambodia often benefit from the law.

"Meanwhile, the poor and vulnerable lose, and not only that, they become a victim of abuse," he said. "The court system silences these people."

Problems from the law don't just stem from local authorities. Thousands of Cambodians leave the country each year in search of jobs and higher wages, and many find themselves in unfavourable situations. Since 2012, CLEC has repatriated more than 10,000 migrant workers who faced abusive conditions abroad, but the Cambodian government – as well as foreign governments receiving the workers – has done little to investigate, and bring perpetrators to justice.

At the most shocking end of the spectrum is the sale of Cambodian women as brides to men in China after they were promised high-paying jobs. Rights groups repatriated nearly 50 women last year. Women working as maids in Malaysia and Singapore have also faced horrific conditions, with no protection from recruitment agencies or legal recourse from foreign governments. Men who registered to work on fishing trawlers around the region found themselves in countries like Senegal and South Africa, labouring under abusive situations and given little to eat.

Moeun Tola, the head of CLEC's labour programme – which covers the labour and migrant issues – said his organisation is constantly advocating for better working conditions, both inside and outside Cambodia's borders. Despite the odds stacked against them, he is hopeful that change will come because the people will demand it – at least through their votes in the next national election in 2018.

The previous national poll resulted in a massive loss of parliamentary seats for the ruling Cambodian People's Party. Though the CPP still took home the overall election, the overwhelming loss gave the government a glimpse at the people's disenchantment.

"As long as the government keeps violating human rights and having poor public services delivery, they will lose the people's support," Tola said.

"Now, multiple groups are standing up for their rights," he said. "The monks are standing up for their rights. The land community, the workers, the farmers are all standing up now."

TEXT BY SERENE ASHLEY CHEN | PHOTO BY PROJECT DIGNITY

KITCHEN ON A MISSION

Kindness has no politics. Kindness has no religion. Kindness is blind to the colour of your skin and to the nature of your disabilities. Kindness cannot be preached. Kindness comes from the heart.

This is the mantra that drives Mr Koh Seng Choon, founder and executive director of Project Dignity, a Singapore-based social enterprise with a mission to skill and promote inclusiveness, integration and employment of people with disabilities.

In affluent and efficient Singapore, the sight of homeless people or individuals with special needs is rarely an everyday occurrence. Yet, according to the Singapore Disability Sports Council, approximately 4 per cent of Singapore's population or slightly over 200,000 people suffer from physical impairment, vision impairment, hearing impairment and intellectual impairment. In addition, 2010 data from the Health and Education ministries indicate that 7,000 pre-school-aged children are disabled. Another 13,000 young people between seven and 18 years old have disabilities. Of these, about 7,600 go to mainstream schools and 5,400 to special education ones.

In Singapore, education typically transits smoothly into employment. But for people with disabilities, the journey is a lot less straightforward.

"After they pass out of school, many of the disabled or disadvantaged stay at home because very few employers would want to hire someone with disability as they do not know how to deal with them," said Mr Russell Kwan, trainer at Project Dignity.

The lack of employment opportunities mean that they would have to rely on someone else to provide for them. Immediate family members, primarily parents, often serve as their main caretaker. The problem comes when their parents pass on or are incapacitated due to old age, illness or accidents. Without acquiring some form of work skill or life skill, the chances for independence and self-reliance remain slim. For the even less fortunate, homelessness becomes a real possibility.

"When I returned to Singapore from the UK in 1994, I was confronted by a strange observation. Why are there no disabled in shopping centres? Where are the beggars and the homeless in Singapore? It was as if they were hidden," recalled Mr Koh.

The former engineering-trained management consultant then decided to scratch the surface. He started a personal one-day-a-month kindness movement where he would encourage others to spend one day a month doing something good for others. From teaching ex-offenders economics in prisons to taking the elderly on city tours, Mr Koh led by example. In 2010, he decided that he would start a social enterprise that would help preserve Singapore's hawker food heritage and empower the disabled and disadvantaged with skills.

Kindness does not come cheap. Since the establishment of Project Dignity in 2010, Mr Koh has invested over S$1 million from his personal savings, re-mortgages, loans and inheritance into the initiative. Majority of the investment went towards rent for the physical set up of the training spaces, equipment, materials and salaries.

While the concept of return on investment for business is clear, the measure of impact for social enterprises is less so because it is much harder to define social returns and place a dollar value on the sense of satisfaction one gets in service of others. Seeing society from a frame of trends and growth phases, Mr Koh believes that he is on a trajectory of growth that will define Singapore for the next decade. He believes that the line between traditional business and social responsibility will continue to blur, and businesses that thrive will be those with the ability to successfully balance commercial interests with social needs.

The rewards of running a social enterprise like Project Dignity then come from the excitement of being able to practise innovation on a daily basis and pioneer something with very little to reference.

"When you deal with people with disabilities, you have to be very creative. Training people is difficult. Training people with special needs

is even more difficult. How do you teach a blind person to collect money and provide the correct amount of change to a customer? How do you train a hearing impaired to sell coffee and tea in a hawker stall? You need new and untested methods" said Mr Koh.

In the last four years, Project Dignity has experimented with different models of training. Mr Koh recalled that he had to learn quickly from mistakes and approaches that did not work. One of the first mistakes Mr Koh made was to have the trainees wear badges with messages such as "I'm deaf" or "I'm blind". The intent was to make customers and potential customers aware of the condition of the trainee and hopefully this would translate to patience in dealing with them. Business became extremely sluggish. He then realised that the labels deterred people from wanting to transact with the trainees. The labels seemed to trigger some form of psychological resistance in people.

Perception is unsurprisingly the biggest challenge for Mr Koh. To address this, Project Dignity runs social outreach programmes that encourage individuals and corporations to come in and mingle with the disabled and disadvantaged through various activities. Project Dignity has reached out to 3,000 corporates and individuals through its social outreach programmes. These programmes coupled with corporate sponsorship form the bloodline that funds the social aspects of the enterprise.

Over time, Mr Koh has come up with ingenious training methods and customised kitchen equipment that work around the strengths and limitations of persons with disabilities. These become the intellectual capital of Project Dignity. To drive home the message of dignity, the social enterprise pays trainees a salary while they are undergoing training. This teaches them the concept of working for something in return and the value of money.

To date, Project Dignity has trained over 350 Singaporeans with disabilities in hawker skills. Trainees come in via word-of-mouth and stay for a 6-week programme before graduating with a WSQ (Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications) basic food hygiene certification. Thereafter, they are placed in jobs that commensurate with their skill levels.

With some 40 employers waiting to employ graduates of the Project Dignity training programme, the initiative is clearly an indication of market demand. In order to standardise training across batches, it made sense to come up with a teaching manual for the hawker business. "Even though the hawker business is a full-fledged business that covers supply chain, food preparation, service, and billing, nobody has developed a curriculum. We are the first to create this pedagogy," said Mr Koh.

The success of Project Dignity is also evidenced by the fact that its training facility which also serves as a public food court, Dignity Kitchen, is the first food court in the world to attain the ISO 22000 certification for its food safety management system. Beyond the shores of Singapore, Mr Koh has been invited to share his insights with various counterparts and replicate his business model in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan and the Philippines.

"I am secular. At the end of the day, everybody dies. Before you die, try to do something good for others," said Mr Koh with a smile.

TEXT BY DENE-HERN CHEN | PHOTO BY SHUTTERSTOCK

A YEAR ON, SOMALY MAM SCANDAL STILL RAISES QUESTIONS

More than a year after Newsweek's cover story on Somaly Mam, organisations within the anti-human trafficking sector are still grappling with its effects.

Published last May under the damning title "Somaly Mam: The Holy Saint (and Sinner) of Sex Trafficking," Newsweek raised questions about her biography, fundraising tactics, and the veracity of stories from young girls rescued by her organisation, Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Precaire (AFESIP; in English, it translates to "Helping Women in Dangerous Situations.") These allegations were damaging given the clout Somaly has as an international icon. Her former life as a prostitute — coupled with her charismatic persona as the champion of young girls rescued from a life of sex slavery — was a compelling narrative that garnered her influential supporters and, along with it, millions in donor funding.

While local media – most notably The Cambodia Daily – had previously raised questions about Somaly's ever-changing stories, the Newsweek article made it impossible for the international community to ignore. Executives within her eponymous foundation soon pushed her to resign in light of its own independent investigation into her past – one that has not been made public.

The Somaly Mam effect reverberated across the anti-human trafficking sector. As some NGOs worried about how the allegations against a single personality could tarnish donors' trust, the media raised concerns about the lack of oversight in ensuring that victims are not further exploited for fundraising purposes. Think pieces abounded over the problematic relationship between donor and NGO, wherein the most sensational stories are often the causes that attract attention and funding.

Mom Sokchar, programme manager at anti-human trafficking NGO Legal Support for Women and Children, said the real issues can get buried under the scandal itself, making it challenging for organisations to address the mundane realities of feeding, housing and educating young women when they are caught up in trying to reassure donors of their credibility.

"It is sometimes hard for the whole sector to come back to the work of anti-trafficking because it has created a picture in the sector, especially for those NGOs who have worked to combat human trafficking in Cambodia," said Sokchar, adding that a "total investigation" on the allegations against Somaly needs to be conducted and made public.

The loss of trust in the entire sector is a legitimate fear, and certainly one the US government itself was aware of, according to a recent Phnom Penh Post article. Embassy cables sent to the State Department in 2012 showed that international anti-human trafficking groups had decided to remain silent on financial concerns at AFESIP because they were worried that donors would not be able to separate it from other organisations that were "actually good." The cables also revealed that members of the sector raised doubts to the embassy about the psychological and medical care provided to victims, which they considered inadequate especially given AFESIP's funds. Yet the US embassy still believed that Somaly served as a "positive force" in the anti-trafficking effort.

A State Department official declined to comment on Catalyst Asia's queries about whether these concerns should have been investigated given her financial pull with US donors, saying in an email that it "does not have an opinion regarding allegations of financial impropriety."

The official added that the US Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons had previously awarded grants to AFESIP in 2007, 2008 and 2009 totaling more than US$900,000, which was applied for through a competitive process. "The Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons monitored funding from its prior grant to AFESIP and does not have any concerns about misuse of the State Department funds."

Today, Somaly's new foundation – aptly named The New Somaly Mam Foundation – is focused more on rehabilitation of victims instead of rescue. Executive director Rigmor Schneider said that while their programmes have been downsized due to funding shortfalls, the foundation is still working with young women to ensure they have skills for financial independence.

"Somaly stands by her story that she has told the truth as she remembers it," Schneider said in the email, adding that every person and organisation "deserves the right to be able to defend itself against false accusations."

Questions about self-governance posed to various anti-human trafficking organisations, including The New Somaly Mam Foundation, were met with responses about how detailed financial reports were provided to donors. Some require periodic audits after a project has been instated, while certain organisations — including AFESIP, said Schneider – hire independent firms for an annual audit as an additional measure.

Yet the issues raised by the scandal – such as allegations of Mam coaching abused women before they spoke to the media; the parading of young victims in front of reporters which could hurt their anonymity as well as set back psychological recovery; the "truth" behind memories associated with traumatic events, which are often indeterminable – are tougher to address.

Pok Panha Vichetr, executive director of Cambodian Women Crisis Center, said that most NGOs in Cambodia are governed by an

umbrella group, Cooperation Committee of Cambodia, which awards a certificate signifying that financial standards have been met. Yet this does not fully address the less tangible problems, which might arise from an individual's intentions and are thus tougher to determine, she said.

"We would have something [like the CCC certificate] to prove our professionalism and good governance. But in terms of scandal or what affects the donors, nobody can control that," Panha Vichetr said. "How can you control the person?"

Often, the actions of a few individuals within an organisation can "trump those of their stated mandates," said Ou Virak, an independent analyst who was formerly the president of prominent local rights group Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

NGOs in Cambodia basically have "a free reign," he said, and many groups have been known to fake receipts and spending on non-existent cases, or take in children from families and claim that they are orphans. One way to combat this is to apply transparency in every aspect of the organisation.

"Their policies and procedures need to be scrutinised by the media as well as the general public," Virak said. "All information need to be made public, except for when it is related to individual victims."

At the end of the day, shedding light on such practices would be a good thing for the sector, he added.

"In the long term, I think it is a valuable lesson for all of us and it would strengthen the sector as more of the credible and legitimate ones will prevail and will eventually get the funding they need," Virak said.

DILI 360°

More than 12 years after Timor-Leste gained independence, the young nation still suffers from the consequences of conflict and is in search of identity. Ryan Arantes, an Indonesian living in Dili, contributes to reconciliation by doing what he does best: skateboarding.

Dili's skatepark is located at about halfway between Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport and the city centre. The park is an agglomeration of ramps and obstacles built out of concrete and decorated with tentative graffiti. It's part of the serene, open compound that also houses the office of the NGO Ba Futuro – "For the Future".

When we arrive, the park is empty. Ryan takes out his longboard and leisurely rolls up and down the ramps. The sound of hard wheels scraping on concrete hangs in the air.

The evening before, Ryan told the story of how he arrived in Dili. It wasn't with a fixed plan in mind to get involved with NGO work. He came to Timor Leste as a traveller, trying to clear his mind and find solace after the passing of a close friend in an accident months before.

Opportunities came knocking on Ryan's door while he was in Dili. Serendipitously, he was presented with an offer to turn a former beach-side Indian restaurant into a bar. His entrepreneurial instinct kicked in and he decided to say yes.

At the same time, Ryan came in contact with the people from Ba Futuro. They had built the skatepark on their compound in 2006, as part of a programme to work with thousands of internally displaced people who were living in camps due to violent conflicts in the country at that time. But Timor Leste has been relatively peaceful since that last major outbreak, and the camps have disbanded. The main coordinator of the skate programme left, and the NGO's focus shifted towards education. With Ryan, they had found the perfect person to reinvigorate the skate programme which they called Extreme Leste.

Extreme Leste was set up to engage children and teenagers from the refugee camps. Ryan now works with some of the skaters who had their first experience on a board under the tutelage of Extreme Leste. Rather than teaching newcomers the basics, he is helping the more experienced skaters level up, build community and get connected with the world beyond Dili.

Ryan's position as a mediator between Indonesia, Timor Leste, and the world is remarkable. Few Indonesians visit Timor Leste, let alone start businesses there, says Ryan. Memories of the past still linger, complicating the relationship between the two countries. Timor Leste's breaking away from Indonesia after the 1999 referendum was a shock to many Indonesians, because they felt that it threatened the integrity of the archipelago nation. In the aftermath of the referendum, militia groups associated with Indonesia's military took brutal revenge on Timor Leste's population. After independence, several outbreaks of violence across different East Timorese camps continued to make life hard for ordinary people.

As a result of decades of war, violence and the lack of opportunities, Timor Leste's youth are particularly vulnerable. According to data from Ba Futuro, roughly three-quarters of Timor Leste's population are 25 years of age or younger – many of the older generation perished during the period of conflict. Youth unemployment is extremely high, up to 40 per cent in urban areas, and this has led to high levels of youth involvement in gang activity.

Programmes like Extreme Leste are one way to help keep youth away from gangs, by encouraging them to stay fit and mentally healthy, to participate in society and engage in lasting relationships.

"Skating and other extreme sports need dedication, you don't have time to throw stones or do drugs if you want to become the best or even just good. You can see this already in Dili's best talents. By becoming instructors at Extreme Leste they will also become good role models for other young people. Sports create connections," says Ryan.

At the skatepark, young men are now starting to show up one by one. It's as if the familiar whizzing and clicking of the board signalled them to come.

It's fascinating to watch Ryan interact with the skaters. It seems to be no issue that they have to converse in Indonesian, since Ryan does not speak Tetum or Portuguese, two of the many languages commonly spoken in multilingual Timor Leste.

Rather than trying to teach or organise, he is part of the group, asking them about what they have done that day, how often they practised skateboarding and what new tricks they needed to learn. They discuss possible improvements to the skatepark layout, and Ryan shoots photos and videos, which he later shares on their Facebook page.

Seeing photos and videos of themselves published on social media raises the skaters' confidence and helps build a sense of community, explains Ryan. The documentation also supports Ryan in his fundraising efforts. Right now, Extreme Leste consists of a handful of skaters, but the plan is to expand the programme in the future and to introduce young people to skating, especially girls, too.

In May, Ryan plans to hold the first competition at the Ba Futuro skate park. He argues that setting a goal will push his skaters to practise regularly, and the exposure a competitive event receives will attract new members.

Through Extreme Leste, Ryan is not only helping young people in Timor Leste expand their horizons and prove themselves, he has also found a new outlook for himself. CA

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MATHIRA SUTIWATANANITI

CLOSING THE ACCESSIBILITY GAP

With a population of 8 million and 8.55 million registered vehicles, it is no wonder that Bangkok has a serious traffic problem.

Introduced in 1999 as a way to advance urban mobility, the BTS Skytrain quickly transformed Bangkokians' perception and experience of using the public transport system, becoming the preferred choice for many who are looking for a fast and convenient way to get around the city. To persons with disabilities (PWDs) however, the Skytrain is just another painful reminder of their invisibility in the eyes of the state and public service providers.

NOT PART OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC

PWDs, who make up about 2.4 per cent of the country's population seem to be last on everyone's priority list. Despite a handful of state agencies and organisations that exist to provide welfare services to this minority group, they continue to struggle with accessibility to basic services such as education, healthcare and public transport. Undoubtedly, this significantly diminishes the prospects of achieving independent living.

"It's a structural problem caused by a negative underlying mindset that allows discrimination and segregation of PWDs to persist especially in everyday life situations. People forget that we do share the same basic needs. Being unable to use buses or access public spaces makes day-to-day activities unnecessarily difficult and costly, and it is often a humiliating experience. Because of hostile physical and emotional environment and high commuting costs, many PWDs choose to stay home, which further reinforces the stereotype of them as helpless," said the 49-year-old Abilis Foundation's regional coordinator and 2008 Outstanding Women Award recipient Saowalak Thongkuay, whose application to a PhD programme in human rights and peace studies was recently turned down. The school's admissions board cited a lack of lifts and inconvenient library location as the reason for the unsuccessful application.

TRANSPORTATION FOR ALL

Spearheaded by the late 1991-1997 President of the Council of Disabled People of Thailand (DPIT)* and former regional development officer of Disabled Peoples' International Asia Pacific, Topong Kulkhanchit, Transportation for All is an informally coordinated movement that advocates for improvements in accessibility and the widespread adoption of universal design principles through policy and legislation, media engagements and public awareness campaigns.

"It began with a letter sent in 1992 by the DPIT requesting the then Bangkok Governor to ensure the Skytrain system is disability-friendly after learning that all the facilities for PWDs had been omitted from its original design," recalled Suporntum Mongkolsawadi, 48, secretary-general of Redemptorist Foundation for People with Disabilities (RFPD) and current leader of the movement.

The call for attention along with repeated mass demonstrations that occurred during this period eventually met with a positive response in 1999 when the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the central government each contributed half of the 175 million Thai baht (approximately US$5 million) budget to set up one staff-operated lift at each of five selected Skytrain stations.

Concrete progress however came to a halt shortly after, stalled by political instability as well as disagreements that broke out between the BMA and Bangkok Mass Transit System Public Company (BTSC).

SHIFTING INTO HIGH GEAR

In 2007, Suporntum and his brother, a lawyer, began building a case against the BMA, Bangkok Governor, BMA's Director of the Department of Public Works and BTSC for neglecting official duties required by the law, in hope that the legal system would bring favourable results.

Saowalak Thongkuay, a leading advocate of the rights of women with disabilities and Pichet Raktabutr, a member of International Wheelchair Users, were enlisted as plaintiffs.

Traffic congestion is a common occurrence in Bangkok.

While Saowalak underscored the risks and vulnerabilities that women with disabilities face in being subject to taxis as the only accessible mode of public transportation, Pichet highlighted the potential economic boost to Bangkok's retail, hospitality and tourism industries, an observation that was informed by years of living in other barrier-free societies.

"The lawsuit was also intended to help us capture the media and public's attention and create a platform for an open dialogue about equal access, public participation and greater accountability, " said Suporntum.

BEGINNING OF A NEW NORMAL

After 23 years of firing on all cylinders – during which six Bangkok governors and fourteen prime ministers had taken office – the three plaintiffs and their supporters finally emerged triumphant from Courtroom 8 on the afternoon of 21 January 2015.

The atmosphere was completely different from the sombre mood that followed the lower court's dismissals of the disability community's first two legal attempts back in 2009. The first was a lawsuit led by the late Topong in 2006 over Suvarnabhumi Airport's lack of facilities for PWDs and the other was a plaint against BTS Skytrain.

"The Supreme Administrative Court's (SAC) decision signals a seismic shift on people's rights and public interest, setting a new precedent where non-retroactivity and other legal technicalities can no longer be used as an excuse by state agencies to avoid their responsibility," said Suporntum. "Our next step is to use this verdict to negotiate for improved accessibility of buses, the MRT, the Airport Rail Link and other mega projects in the pipeline."

Meanwhile, they will be keeping a close watch on the BMA's progress in installing lifts, handrails and signage at all 23 Skytrain stations, to be completed within one year as ordered by the SAC, and for building owners and service providers who fail to comply with the regulations to expect first warning letters in their mailboxes.

*The DPIT, founded in 1983 by Narong Patibatsorakij, Thailand's first senator with a disability, is now the Disability Thailand Association (DTH).

PATTERN RECOGNITION

Batik fabrics are central to Indonesia's cultural heritage. But according to a trio of former students of the Bandung Institute of Technology, traditional crafts are not meant to be isolated and preserved – they need to keep innovating. They created a software that can produce unlimited variations of batik patterns.

Muhamad Lukman, an architecture student, was working on a floral pattern with a 3D-modelling software, together with his friend Nancy Panjaitan. "It reminds me of batik," Nancy said, and this serendipitous discovery back in 2007 became the starting point of a long journey.

The idea that computer generated visuals could resemble the patterns they knew from traditional Indonesian handicrafts was fascinating. They brought this up to another friend, Yun Hariadi – a mathematician from their university. Together, they decided to investigate the mathematical principles underlying batik patterns.

"We knew a lot of research has been done on batik, from an ethnological perspective. But as far as we were aware, no one had attempted to deconstruct batik patterns into the mathematical formulas that form them," says Nancy.

Batik patterns have fractal characteristics, Yun was certain. A fractal is a complex geometric form made up of repetitive patterns that look similar at different scales. And batik patterns also have elements of repetitiveness and self-similarity, because each ornamentation tends to be filled with another, finer set of ornamentation.

Using fractal formulas, the trio was able to analyse and classify existing batik patterns and define the range of fractal dimension, or the degree of complexity, that is typical for traditional batik. But they also found out that, using the formulas, they were able to create batik-style patterns that were entirely new.

They published their discoveries, and were promptly invited to present their paper at the generative art conference in Milan. This recognition encouraged them to continue working on this idea, which had taken on the project name Batik Fractal.

According to Nancy, she had always dreamed of entrepreneurship, and she saw the

opportunity to turn Batik Fractal into a business. Nancy, Muhamad and Yun co-founded a company, with Nancy as CEO. They knew they had a unique technology, which was the pattern-creation software, and through their research, they uncovered some good contacts in the batik manufacturing world.

The core of their business was to promote the software package called jBatik to batik manufacturers. With the help of the software, pattern designers can sample existing batiks and transform these into patterns with endless variations and degrees of complexity. In contrast to the traditional process that relies on tedious hand-drawing, pattern designers are now able to test designs on screen, and create variations in style and colour with just a few clicks.

Once the design is satisfactory, it is printed out. From then on, the batik manufacturing follows the customary process: copper stamps are created based on the printed out pattern, the stamps are dipped in hot wax and pressed onto fabric before it is dyed and the wax washed out.

Nancy hopes that the new way of pattern-making will have a significant impact on batik manufacturing. "Some traditional patterns have been lost, no one knows how to do them anymore," says Nancy. "As a result, patterns used now have become repetitive and lack innovation."

Using jBatik, pattern makers can be more playful with their designs. They can sample and recreate traditional styles or experiment with more contemporary looks.

Not everyone agrees with Batik Fractal's technology-based approach to pattern-making. When Iwan Tirta, an Indonesian fashion designer famous for incorporating superbly crafted batiks into his haute couture collections first heard about Batik Fractal, he was not pleased.

"He said he was against our way, because the designs are considered sacred. He believes they should not be created on a computer," Nancy recalls.

"But batik has to open up to innovation," she continues. "Otherwise it gets stuck. Yes, we have to preserve the traditional ways, but we also have to see what new technologies can offer. Batik factories today don't work like they did hundreds of years ago, and that's good."

Batik Fractal's business branched out into various directions beyond the software itself. The company also has its own online shop with an inventory of clothing and accessories, which are produced in batik workshops in central Java. It also takes custom designs on order and produces batiks for corporate clients, such as for uniforms, seat covers, or even 3-dimensional decorative elements.

Batik Fractal also runs a community centre in their home town of Bandung, in which products are sold and women from the local community teach how to make simple batiks. Batik Fractal also uses the community centre as a base for the small-scale production of batik products made exclusively with natural dyes.

Scientific research still plays a role at Batik Fractal, and the co-founders challenge each other to continue publishing papers at a regular pace. They see their research on batik and the improvement of the software as a continuous process.

"The ultimate goal is to build up a digital database of patterns, their underlying formulas and regional prevalence," says Nancy.

Since their trip to the generative art congress in Milan many years ago, Nancy, Muhamad and Yun have received many awards and recognitions, including a UNESCO Award of Excellence. Did Iwan Tirta, Indonesia's master of contemporary batik-making, ever change his mind about Batik Fractal?

"I'm afraid we'll never know," says Nancy. "Sadly he passed away in 2010." 04

TEXT BY EVAN TAN | PHOTOS BY SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE HAIYAN'S CHILDREN

It took a storm to destroy – and unite.

Before Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful natural calamities to hit the Philippines, pummelled Tacloban, the city was a shining beacon of progress in the region.

In 2008, the city, under Presidential Proclamation No. 1637, became one of Eastern Visayas's highly urbanised cities, joining the ranks of Biliran, Eastern Samar, and Leyte. A 2010 survey by the Asian Institute of Management also placed the city as one of the Philippines' top ten most competitive cities. Tacloban's poverty rate, at 9 per cent, is only a third of the national poverty incidence.

But that was before November 8, 2013.

Haiyan's death toll is different, depending on who you ask. The official count is at 6,201 people. Some say it is closer to 8,000. The UN reports that 1.9 million people were left homeless. The city had been ravaged in a catastrophe reminiscent of the typhoon which also hit Tacloban and neighbouring provinces in November 25, 1912, which left 15,000 dead and wounded.

With the rest of the world watching, help was not far away. The disaster brought people together – from the capital city, Manila, and from countries including Singapore, Australia, and the United States. International aid organisations swooped in to assist people to rebuild their lives.

But unlike other international NGOs, SOS Children's Villages was not an outsider coming in: the organisation had already been working in Tacloban since 1970. For decades, it had been providing support to families and children from its second Philippine location – in Milagrosa, a community just four kilometres away from the city.

Workers from the organisation understood perfectly the situation the people suffered, and empathised with their needs even before Haiyan hit. And this understanding is what enabled them to address the Tacloban people's plight, when the community they have been serving for years needed them the most.

Aleah Ortiz, SOS Children's Villages Fund Development and Communication Director, confides that she was one of the typhoon's survivors herself. "My house was one of those that were totally damaged. But I thank God that my family was not in Tacloban when the supertyphoon hit the city."

As a way to express her gratitude, Aleah passionately joined her fellow workers from SOS in assisting fellow survivors, especially orphans. Aleah takes pride in the SOS's KINSHIP Care Program, which supports children affected by Haiyan, especially those whose families were taken away by the typhoon.

"We are serving 121 orphaned children in this programme," Aleah notes, saying that one of their missions is teaching them that they must not be hopeless.

So far, SOS has built 11 Child-Care Spaces in Tacloban, which provide children with therapeutic activities such as storytelling, art, and games, as well as a safe place to play with children their own age. They also get psychosocial support from trained professionals to help them recover from the trauma of the storm.

SOS reports that an estimated 2,500 girls and women have benefitted from their efforts.

"One story that motivates me further to bring aid to Tacloban is a family that I brought to the evacuation centre the day before the supertyphoon hit the city. They asked me what to do next once their houses, livelihood, and everything were gone."

Knowing that it takes a village to raise the children left traumatised by the calamity, Aleah understood the need to rebuild the community that the children will grow up in.

"Our short-term aid was to provide livelihoods to the families that were devastated by Haiyan, which was our first and immediate intervention to the survivors."

SOS supplied fibreglass boats and other fishing equipment to fishermen who lost their tools, and simultaneously taught various technical skills to other survivors such as fruit and vegetable vending, fish vending, food vending, carpentry, and vulcanising. They also established welding shops, farms and convenience stores.

Providing permanent housing assistance is also in the pipeline, Aleah shares. "We built a relocation site called the SOS Prime-town Housing Project for the affected families in the families that were in the No-Build Zone in Barangay Pago, Municipality of Tanauan, and in Palanog 12, Tacloban City, while repairing and constructing school buildings and facilities."

Acknowledging that the scaffolding of aid to prop up the community is only temporary, Aleah is keen on seeing that the families and the community can survive after the help is gone.

"We measure success by seeing our beneficiaries' livelihoods succeed – that they could stand on their own and that they no longer need to rely on any organisation," Aleah notes. To ensure this, she and her fellow SOS workers conduct area livelihood visitation and make evaluations.

One year after Haiyan, Aleah admits that much work still has to be done. And this is why she aspires to see more organisations coming in and joining SOS Children's Villages.

"We have to be there to encourage them that life must go on."

A volunteer helping to unload humanitarian relief supplies.

FOR THE LOVE OF GEMS

A PHOTO STORY FROM THE STREETS OF JAKARTA

For those who believe, wearing certain gems can boost one's income, enhance confidence and health, attract romantic interest and offer protection from enemies and evil spiritual forces.

Diamonds are a girl's best friend, or so claims the 1949 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes Broadway production. In Indonesia, gems such as amethyst, garnet and agate are fast becoming a man's best friend. This is part of a booming trend that has lined the streets of Jakarta and even rural areas of Indonesia with vendors and eager adult males and teenagers in search of hidden gems.

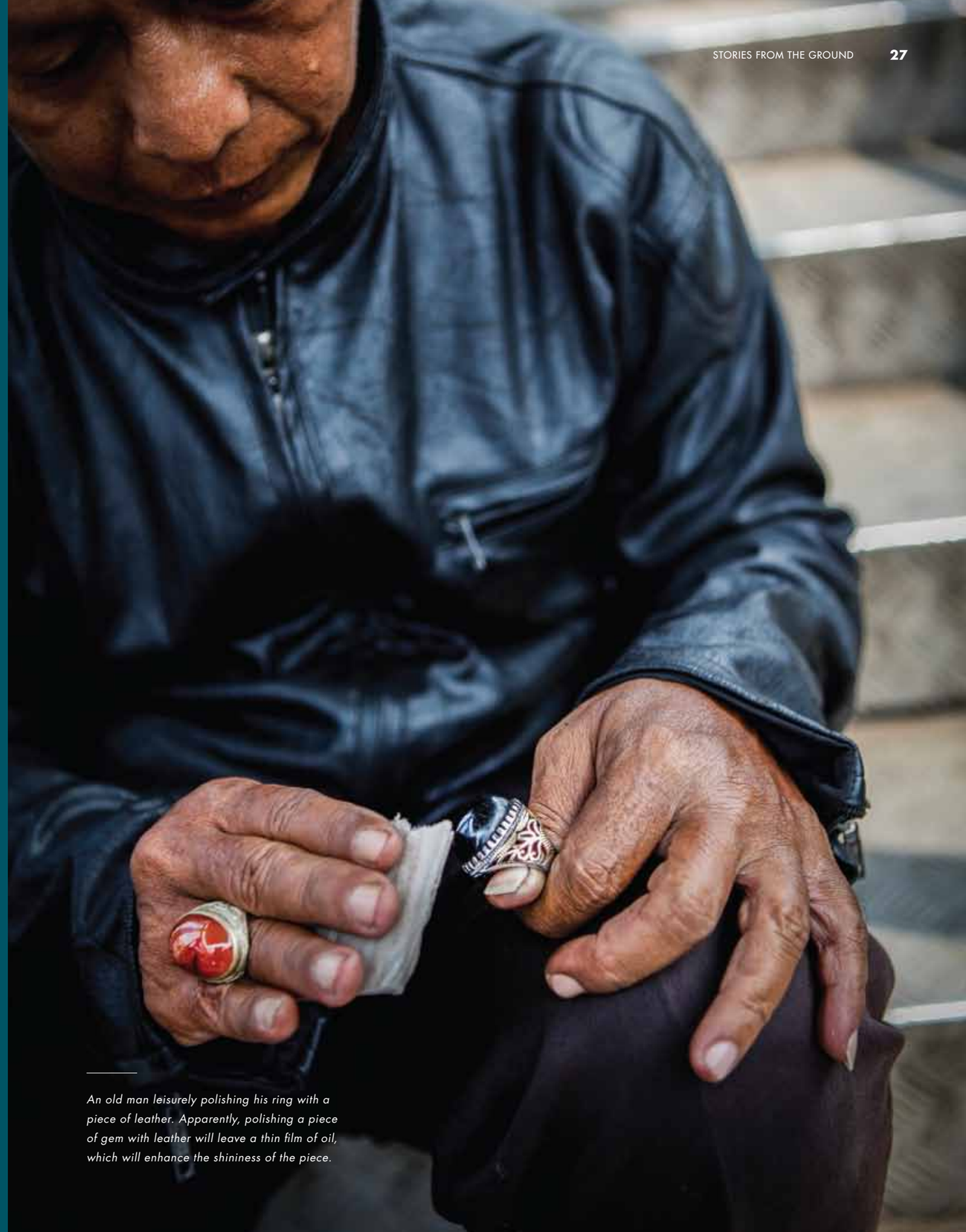
Indonesia is rich in mineral resources and its cultural beauty is reflected in the creation of traditional and modern gemstone jewellery. Over the last few years, gemstones have evolved from being trinkets touting mystical properties to a new industrial business with promising economic benefits. This has led to the development of museums, university departments, industry groups, foundations and associations that promote, support and safeguard the ecosystem of the gemstone industry. Yayasan Mutu Manikam (Gemstone Foundation) for instance was set up to provide training and research for the development of Indonesian jewellery and gemstones in an effort to boost the reputation of Indonesian craftsmanship internationally.

According to merchants, consumer interest in gemstones started taking off in Indonesia following news that a Bacan stone was presented to US President Barrack Obama by former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono a few years ago.

Several news sources in Indonesia have also reported that gemstone accessories including rings, necklaces and bracelets were also recently given as souvenirs to world leaders and their delegates who attended the Asia-Africa's 60th Commemorative Summit, which was held in Jakarta and Bandung in April 2015.

From street side stalls to state gifts, gemstones seem to be enjoying a day in the sun.

Collectors going through rough unpolished rocks in search of rare and expensive varieties that can be transformed into wearable accessories.



An old man leisurely polishing his ring with a piece of leather. Apparently, polishing a piece of gem with leather will leave a thin film of oil, which will enhance the shininess of the piece.

Top: Assortment of stones with unique shape and character bearing the name of the place of origin is a common feature in street side stalls.

Bottom: A seller flushing the stones with water to keep debris away. It is believed that flushing can enhance the metaphysical energies of the stones.

A gems maker honing a stone with a high speed diamond saw blade. A wrong cut can mean the difference between a profit and a loss.

TEXT BY JOHANN LOH | PHOTO BY WIKICOMMONS

PHILANTHROPISTS AND TRUST IN MAINLAND CHINA

When Chinese billionaire Jack Ma set out to establish charitable trusts worth more than US$3 billion, the last thing he probably expected was to be criticised for it.

In a blog post dated February 2015, he wrote about his dismay upon reading an "authoritative report" which had stated that 80 per cent of Chinese charitable giving was being channelled overseas. The report, said Ma, earned him a great deal of criticism, with even government officials paying attention. His blog post, written in Chinese and posted on Sina, was titled "doing a public service by donating money, but ending up broken-hearted". Ma's experience is hardly unique, reflecting a general spirit of distrust for philanthropy and philanthropists within China.

Certainly, philanthropy in China has been growing, burgeoned by past economic growth and an increasing number of high net-worth individuals. 2013 saw 208 philanthropic donations that exceeded US$1 million in value, for a total value of US$2.65 billion. In comparison, the value of such donations in 2012 was less than half of that, at US$1.18 billion. But while the rate of growth appears promising, the total amount remains at a fraction of more-developed donor markets – the total charitable donations in China in 2012 was approximately 4 per cent of that of the US.

Public distrust in charitable institutions was first precipitated in 2011, following a series of scandals. In April 2011, an invoice for the equivalent of over US$1,500 was posted on social media, paid for by the Red Cross of Shanghai Luwan District for meals at a high-end restaurant. Two months later, public outrage was again provoked by Guo Meimei, who identified herself as a general manager of the Red Cross Society of China while posting photos that flaunted her wealth and material possessions. These scandals, amongst others, revealed issues in the perceived lack of transparency and accountability of charitable institutions. And in the case of private philanthropy, individuals have also received adverse publicity, with people questioning their motives and levelling accusations of showmanship and the flaunting of wealth. Examples include recycling tycoon Chen Guangbiao, whose controversial acts of philanthropy have drawn the flak and ire of netizens on Weibo. In 2014, a photo of Chen's business card went viral. The card listed 10 honorary titles for Chen, including "Most Influential Person of China" and "China Top Ten Most Honourable Volunteer". While the online backlash to Chen's business card may have been warranted, it was nevertheless a stern reminder that philanthropy, if seen in the eyes of the public as inappropriate, could lead to negative publicity for the philanthropists.

Public opinion aside, the government's position on non-profit organisations also appears to suggest a number of misgivings. A new national security law, released in draft form in May 2015, seems to be aimed at providing security forces and courts with greater control over both Chinese civil society organisations and foreign NGOs. The draft law cites 'ideological security' and 'cultural security' as imperatives for increased regulation from the Public Security Ministry, highlighting fears from the government that non-profit organisations, far from being simply altruistic, may have ulterior motives in promoting doctrines contrary to those of the state.

This phenomenon of governmental distrust for non-profit organisations is not unique to China. In April this year, the Indian government instituted a series of crackdowns and restrictions against charities and activist groups, cancelling the registrations of almost 9000 non-governmental institutions, suspending the registration of Greenpeace India for affecting the "economic interest of the state". It also placed the Ford Foundation on a watch list of donors, requiring official approval for any grants issued. Despite an apparent shared motivation towards improving the conditions of the public, the conflict of ideology between the government and the NGOs led to a breakdown of trust, and potential repercussions for a large number of developmental programmes across India.

But adding further to the problems philanthropists face in China is the difficult regulatory environment for non-profits looking to set up. Private non-profits and philanthropies have difficulties gaining official recognition without partnerships with Chinese governmental organisations. Without such recognition, non-profits are unable to hold fundraising activities or gain tax-exemption status. At the same time, having a partnership with a governmental organisation would mean losing a degree of control over philanthropic activities and funds. As it stands, there is little reason for philanthropists to actively donate money, an act which would potentially garner unwanted attention and accusations of ulterior motivations.

Yet not all hope is lost. Even as China increases restrictions on civil society activity, a long-discussed Charities Law has been gaining momentum, with a draft law prepared earlier in the year. This Charities Law would provide charities with greater means for raising funds from the public and lower barriers for social organisations. In the annual Government Work Report to the National People's Congress, it was mentioned by Premier Li Keqiang that the government plans to promote charities in 2015. It is clear that the Chinese government recognises the potential of philanthropy in promoting desirable outcomes. Nevertheless, without a history of trust towards philanthropy, the state has chosen instead to institute a regulatory environment which may deter potential philanthropists.

As a result, philanthropists have been slowly working towards gaining trust by proving to both the Chinese public and government that they have a shared identity and a shared set of motivations. In one interview, Jack Ma noted that while he did want to influence government policies, he aimed to do so in a collaborative way; sitting down to work with the government rather than confronting them. Other philanthropists have also recognised that promoting philanthropy may in itself be an effective use of their funds. In 2005, Yang Lan, known informally as the Oprah of China, started her Sun Culture Foundation, which aimed not only to improve education in China, but also to create a culture of charity and a supportive environment for philanthropy. Other organisations, such as the China Foundation Center, aim to bring greater transparency to philanthropic foundations in China.

Building trust will require a great increase in the visibility of tangible positive impact – and that may be difficult, given that philanthropists and foundations want to remain discreet. In some ways, it's a chicken and egg problem – philanthropists fear repercussions, and so they stay quiet. But only when trust is built will these repercussions subside and philanthropy flourish and this perhaps requires more outspoken and credible Chinese philanthropists such as Ma himself.

TEXT AND PHOTO BY JOSH SCHENKKAN

THE AMERICAN KNOWN IN NORTH KOREA

Casey Lartigue has been working as an advocate for individual freedom all his life. As an advocate for educational choice in Washington, D.C. he was well known — notorious, even.

With some pride, he remembers meeting Justice Clarence Thomas of the U.S. Supreme Court at an event in Washington; Justice Thomas already knew him by name as "that young man at the Cato Institute causing so much trouble."

For his efforts and his notoriety, Lartigue considered himself an activist par excellence — until his first meeting with North Korean refugees made him reconsider everything. "I felt like I was somebody who got deeply involved, and then [I met] somebody who had to rescue themselves," he says. "I suddenly felt like I was the freedom advocate from the cocktail party."

Lartigue began a journey towards becoming one of the most known activists for North Koreans in Seoul. He's been involved in the rise of two of the most publicised defectors of the past decade, Park Yeonmi, who has been featured in The New York Times and The Guardian, and Lee Hyeon-seo, whose 2013 TED talk has been viewed almost four million times. He serves as the volunteer international adviser for the Mulmangcho School, which provides education and therapy for young refugees from the North. Most notably, he co-founded and runs Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR), an organisation that matches teachers across a broad range of disciplines with refugees looking for help.

TNKR is unique among other similar programmes in both its model and its ambition, which bear Lartigue's signature emphasis on choice. Whereas most tutoring programmes assign only one or two English teachers to each refugee without giving the students any say, TNKR allows the students to select their own tutors, and take as many as they want.

According to Lartigue, Park, who was involved in the programmes, had 18 tutors over 8 months, and was at one point studying English over 35 hours a week.

The emphasis on choice is about empowering the refugees, but it's also "about taking away the excuse," Lartigue says. He noticed a high attrition rate in other programmes, in part because of refugees' dissatisfaction with their tutors, who turned out not to be able to provide them with what they were looking for. Some teachers didn't speak enough Korean to properly explain concepts, for example, while others spoke too much. Lartigue guessed that if refugees were able choose they'd be more likely to stay involved.

As he suspected, retention in the programme has been marked. But what he didn't expect was the variety of things that the refugees were looking for other than English instruction; due to demand, the programme now offers language tutoring in Spanish and Latin, and is preparing to offer classes on financial planning, studying abroad and how to deal with the media.

Lartigue named this first track of the programme "Finding my Own Way," because the programme had become more than just a way for refugees to learn English; it'd evolved into a means for them to gain the skills they needed to take charge of their lives.

With the success of activists like Park, though, Lartigue saw an opportunity for TNKR to go beyond its original goal of helping refugees help themselves. Though the vast majority of participants only wanted to learn English or other life skills, some were vocal about their desire to fight back against the regime from which they'd escaped. As Park and others had done, they wanted to publicise their experiences, either in North Korea or in their escape into and from China. Lartigue envisioned a matching programme modelled after the first track, where speech coaches would be paired with refugees looking to hone their narratives. With that, the second track emerged: "Telling My Own Story." So far, roughly 10 of the 156 refugees the programme has helped have volunteered.

Lartigue is modest in acknowledging the work he's been able to accomplish, but as he finishes telling his story, he says there are two things in the last few years he's particularly proud of. The first involves one of the refugees, who Lartigue had taken to India to speak at a conference, writing an article about TNKR, the help that it provides and Lartigue himself — and then broadcasting it via radio into North Korea. "That, to me, is like a great honor," Lartigue explains. " … I'm happy because she's spreading the message."

And the second?

"One of the refugees told her sister [still in North Korea]: 'Come to South Korea. Don't believe what they say about Americans. There's a nice American here who can help you study English. You can get as many teachers as you want,'" Lartigue says, with some disbelief.

"I'm like, now this programme is a selling point about why you should escape from North Korea."

Casey Latrigue (pictured), co-founder of Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR).

TEXT BY SERENE ASHLEY CHEN | PHOTO BY DARYL TAY

BRIDGING TWO WORLDS THROUGH CONVERSATION

For Singaporean and recent Singapore Management University (SMU) graduate Daryl Tay, going into humanitarian work was not something he had in mind until a year before graduation.

He had charted a career plan in wealth management and dreamed of becoming a consultant in this field before an encounter with a marginalised hill tribe community in Northern Thailand made him rethink his plan. Daryl speaks to Catalyst Asia about how he came to the decision of pursuing a rather unconventional career path.

Have you always thought of going into the non-profit sector after graduation?

No, my original plan was a wealth management track with OCBC Bank. I remember drafting a career plan that would see me move into a wealth management role at one of the top five largest wealth management companies.

Two years ago, this plan got turned upside down when I witnessed first-hand the needs of a marginalised hill tribe community, called the Hmong people, living in Northern Thailand.

How did you come to know of them?

I was deciding what to do with one of my summers and decided to jump aboard a humanitarian outreach trip with RADION to clear my CSP (community service programme; fulfillment of a minimum of 80 hours of community service is mandatory for all SMU undergraduates) hours. During this trip, we organised an educational excursion for village children from traumatic backgrounds and food distributions for impoverished villagers.

During this time, I remember meeting a teenager addicted to glue sniffing. On our first meeting, he was dazed and intoxicated so I was wary of him. The next time, he returned fully conscious, so I had the opportunity to talk to him. In our interactions, I learnt that he chose to sniff glue because while a dollar spent on food will stave away hunger for half a day, a dollar spent on glue would allow him to 'escape' from hunger longer. It was then that it hit home for me – that the villagers here were that poor and something needed to be done!

What made you decide to pursue a career so different from what you had originally conceived?

I learnt that the Hmong face a myriad of sociocultural problems arising from deeper underlying needs. For example, girls were getting married too early because most parents did not see the importance of education. This causes them to grow up poor, unable to provide for their own children.

Much had to be done particularly in the area of influencing development among the Hmong people. I learnt this in theory in my studies, but it was the first time I saw the reality and immensity of what development would mean for these people. I saw the beauty of being able to change lives.

The final decision was not easy. It was not just because I would forego the lucrative starting salary entitled to most SMU graduates, I also had to convince my parents who had expectations about my future.

In the end, I am thankful for my parents' openness to visiting the village last year. I shared with them why the Hmong people meant so much to me and they gave me their blessing to pursue this unorthodox career path.

Tell us about your role at RADION and some of the challenges of your role.

My main role at RADION is the leadership and management of volunteers that travel up to the village to carry out developmental projects – from running mobile clinics and coordinating construction during building projects, to working with children during children's outreach events.

Singaporeans have the potential to augment developmental work in the village, but only if they are properly guided to intervene in culturally sensitive and sustainable ways. This is where the leadership and mentorship aspect for volunteers is very important.

Challenges of this role are vast. It is a steep learning curve where I'm expected to pick up as much knowledge as possible in a very short span of time. This is how we get to value-add to the villagers' local expertise instead of creating more liabilities for them. I remember being required to study a manual on rural pig farming in order to understand better the operations behind our Integrated Pig Farm. The manual was over 100 pages long! From there, we can then begin to have meaningful discussions with the villagers about the use of more productive farming technologies.

What is the most surprising insight you have taken away from your current role?

Humanitarian and developmental work should not be seen as an easier path than a conventional 9-to-5 job in the corporate sector. I've interned twice in a bank and I don't think what I do now is easier.

If anything, we're pressed to push harder and longer because the stakes here are much higher. If we lose focus in the corporate sector, we only lose business or reputation. Here, we lose lives.

Those who want to go into humanitarian work should also find ways to credibly value-add to the lives of local communities. This comes through building relationships with the locals – it's about learning from them first, before we can start thinking of ways to help them develop. At the end of the day, a successful partnership between first and third world really boils down to effective knowledge sharing between both worlds.

TEXT BY SERENE ASHLEY CHEN | PHOTOS BY THE VISION MISSION

THE GIFT OF SIGHT

Sapura Bhoi, an elderly lady, lives alone in the village of Salesing. Her husband passed away years ago and her only daughter got married and is now living far away from her. More than five years ago, she also lost her vision to cataract. This has made the simplest of everyday tasks like drawing water, leaving the house and recognising others impossible. The sad part about Sapura's story is that her blindness could have been prevented.

Based on the latest assessment by the World Health Organisation, cataract is responsible for 51 per cent of world blindness, which represents about 20 million people (accurate as of 2010). Although cataracts can be surgically removed, the lack of access and financial resources to surgery in developing countries mean that many face the same fate as Sapura.

According to Avinash Jayaraman, one of three founders of The Vision Mission (TVM), a Singapore-based social impact organisation by a team of doctors and professionals, the organisation was set up precisely for the purpose of providing free eye care to people like Sapura. According to the organisation, 285 million people are visually impaired worldwide and 80 per cent of all visual impairment can be avoided or cured. Cataracts remain the leading cause of blindness in middle and low-income countries.

In 2014 alone, TVM funded and conducted 1,000 free cataract surgeries in Odisha, India. In addition, TVM is also serving as a conduit to enable transnational collaboration of dedicated ophthalmic experts in providing free high quality eye care and surgery to patients in areas of need, with a view to eradicate treatable vision impairment and allow eye care access to all in Asia. Catalyst Asia caught up with the team to understand more about how cataract surgery missions are conducted.

Which geographical areas are you focused on?

Our primary focus area is South Asia and South East Asia. We started in the eastern and northern parts of India such as Odisha and Bihar because these are known to be the poorest states with a large rural and tribal population and very little help in primary healthcare. We are expanding our efforts to Northern Sri Lanka (a former war-zone), Cambodia, Myanmar and rural parts of China. In short, we look for a locality with a high proportion of population living under poor socio-economic circumstances.

We look for regions where there are already some healthcare operations and ophthalmologists. The most economical way of providing services is to tie up with existing organisations that have a basic setup, so that we do not have to move equipment to those regions. We also keep an eye out for a passionate local team of eye care experts that is willing to work with international teams and keen on augmenting their local setup to extend the reach of high quality general and subspecialist ophthalmic care to the needy.

How many volunteers do you have?

We have about 15 volunteers right now. They are a mix of Ophthalmologists, Sub-Speciality Experts, Optometrists, people who can help with fundraising, publicity, logisitics and planning. We have had volunteers who have wanted to come in and just help in general ways like help with patients, help out in various ways at the camp and so on.

What are the main challenges in running The Vision Mission?

Getting clearances in various countries to support camps is the biggest challenge. Over the last year, we have been able to find willing donors, volunteers and partners. However, in many cases, we will need government clearances, medical licences in the country we wish to work in and so on. Those tend to be hard to come by, take a lot of time and are mired in red-tape.

What are your development goals moving forward?

Geographically, we would like to expand our coverage to include more countries in South and South-East Asia. We see ourselves working with multiple partners in multiple countries, while also harnessing the talent pool from various countries as well. For our next camp, we are getting volunteer doctors not only from Singapore, but also from India.

We would also want to move towards a more scalable setup, where within our organisation, there could be dedicated teams of experts handling very specific areas. Right now, as a nascent organisation, there is quite a bit of overlap in the work that each of us handles. This is obviously not scalable. We would also want to ensure standardisation of procedures within the organisation, and produce detailed process documents so that we can easily replicate operations in various countries.

We would also like to move the organisation towards a sustainable model – one that is not based on repeated donations. We are talking to other non-profit organisations to this end.

About the founders of The Vision Mission

Mr Avinash Jayaraman is an entrepreneur and social entrepreneur with over 12 years experience in building companies. He is a founder and director of Innove Technologies – a company that works in the area of Education Technology. He has been involved with other charitable causes and work over the years. He has worked with several social initiatives and non-profit organisations over the years and brings in a background in fund-raising and organisation management. Avinash has more than 12 years of experience in setting up and managing teams, building sales channels, coordinating implementations of projects across various domains in various countries. Avinash was a recipient of the prestigious Singapore Airlines Scholarship, and the Singapore Airlines – Neptune Orient Lines Scholarship under which he completed his Bachelors in Computer Engineering (Hons) in NUS. He completed his Masters in Computing from NUS.

Dr Jayant V Iyer is an Associate Consultant eye surgeon with the Singapore National Eye Center (SNEC). He has presented clinical and scientific ophthalmic research work in numerous conferences in addition to authoring papers in international peer-reviewed journals. In 2012, he authored Essential Ophthalmology – an ophthalmology guide for general practitioners – that was distributed by SingHealth to polyclinics and GP clinics across the country. He is actively involved in international ophthalmic mission work in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India and the Philippines, while also serving as a regular volunteer in running free clinics for the needy within Singapore with organisations such as Tzu Chi.

Dr Jason Lee is a Registrar at the Department of Ophthalmology, Tan Tock Seng Hospital and has presented research work in numerous international ophthalmology conferences. He has a keen interest in providing eye care for the needy and has been actively involved in free eye care screenings across Singapore. He is also a regular volunteer at the Tzu Chi Free Health Screening and Medical clinic for which he forms part of the team which runs the eye clinics. Dr Lee has also participated in multiple international ophthalmic humanitarian trips to various countries including Myanmar and India.

TEXT BY SERENE ASHLEY CHEN | PHOTO BY SHAWN KHOONG

SEEING WITH NEW EYES

In 2008, Sangeetha Yogendran travelled to Cambodia to help build a well for the villagers there. A close encounter with a new friend, who was head of the village she was volunteering with and a former soldier who fought during the Khmer Rouge, opened Sangeetha's eyes to a whole new paradigm that would shape her views about her role in society and her subsequent career choices.

Sangeetha, a graduate of NUS Law School, speaks to Catalyst Asia about her time at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, her reflections about humanitarian work and what she hopes to achieve in the next five years.

What is your role at Save The Children International?

I started 1.5 years ago as a humanitarian response officer and I had the opportunity to be involved in the Typhoon Haiyan response. Today, I cover full spectrum humanitarian operations and development for Save The Children International's work in South and Central Asia which include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The experience with Typhoon Haiyan was one of the most intense and eye-opening life experiences I've had. We were deployed immediately after the typhoon struck. Along with four other colleagues, we had to figure out a way to get almost 100 tonnes of humanitarian aid from our global warehouse to the victims once our Boeing 777 plane touched down. The sense of urgency meant that nobody was complaining. If you stopped, you would be delaying essential aid.

What motivated you to take on this role?

I was with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore when the opportunity to join Save The Children International presented itself. Having always wanted to pursue humanitarian work and being idealistic, I jumped at it. When I got home, I had to explain myself to the family.

The decision to join Save The Children International was not an easy one because I knew I would be giving up a nice paycheck and the stability of a civil service job for an environment that offered less certainty. However, the role spoke to me as this is something that has been in my heart for some time now – the ability to impact lives.

How did your interest in human rights start?

If I were to narrow it down to a catalysing moment, it would be my maiden trip to Cambodia in 2008. I was volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. Together with a team of working adults aged 20 to 60 years, I was helping to build a well for the community there. The village head I was working with had an amputated leg. I later realised that he had fought as a soldier in the Khmer Rouge and lost the lower part of his leg after stepping on a landmine.

That was my first encounter with the Khmer Rouge and the subject of genocide. My interest was piqued and I spent a lot of time researching about this part of history and the journey led me to an internship with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal's Victims Unit in Cambodia. An internship which was supposed to last for 3 months turned into a 7-month stint. Fortunately, the Dean of the NUS Law School at that time was extremely supportive and I was able to successfully defer my graduation.

Tell us more about the stint. What was most surprising about the stint and how did your experience there shape you?

The department I was in acted as an intermediary between the victims of the Khmer Rouge and the lawyers representing them. My role involved a mixture of legal research, budgeting and coordination. The highlight for me was having to arrange for 93 registered victims to attend the first day of trial at the Tribunal.

My interaction with the victims made me realise that there were so many underlying issues and a lot of work had to be done especially in the areas of social support and psychotherapy. Due to the traumatising experience from 30 years ago, many of them are suffering from mental issues. As far as I know, there is only one organisation – Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation Cambodia – that is dedicated to supporting this area of work.

Many victims are so angry. I remember some

of them telling me that the detention facilities at the United Nations (UN) that housed the defendants of the Khmer Rouge are a lot nicer than their homes and they saw it as an injustice. This anecdote gives a flavour of the bitterness they are living with. Yet, they are conflicted internally as well. One man told me that if he were to see a perpetrator on the streets, he would be tempted to kill him. Yet, he is restrained by his religious beliefs. A lot of Cambodians are Buddhists and they believe that violence is not the way. The experience at the Tribunal fundamentally changed me. That is still my main point of reference for how I got involved in humanitarian work. I started looking into other Tribunals in Rwanda, Yugoslavia. A seed of curiosity grew in me. Very few experiences come close to the experience I had at the Tribunal. Meaningful work had a new definition.

What are some of the challenges of humanitarian work?

In terms of challenges, I would say the nature of humanitarian work is such that you can be called up to go to some place for an undetermined amount of time and you wouldn't know the job scope before hand. You'd have to drop everything all of a sudden. It would be much harder if you had responsibilities and commitment that would require you to be around, especially if you had children or parents to take care of back home. Having an understanding spouse and family members is essential if you want to do this line of work. I think this might explain why there are more men than there are women in humanitarian work.

What are your reflections and what is your view of the future? What do you hope to achieve in the next five years?

This is not meant to be advice or anything, but for anyone who is keen on humanitarian work I would say that it is not easy as this is not a tried and tested career path, you need to have passion and perseverance. Humanitarian work can be very draining.

I intend to do a masters in human rights and/or humanitarian law as I would like to be able to combine humanitarian work with my legal background. I am passionate about both. I want to make a difference in someone's life and help correct a wrong if you will. Humanitarian law is much more tested in a conflict-related situation as opposed to a natural disaster-related one. I want to be involved in that because that's where the challenge is and where I hope the reward will be. I hope that when I look back 10 years from now, it'll all make sense.

*The Khmer Rouge Tribunal, is a court established to try the most senior responsible members of the Khmer Rouge for alleged violations of international law and serious crimes perpetrated during the Cambodian genocide.

Sangeetha Yogendran is currently a Humanitarian Officer with Save the Children International, supporting humanitarian response and emergency preparedness in the Asia region. Sangeetha previously worked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore on international boundary issues. An Advocate & Solicitor of the Singapore Supreme Court, Sangeetha has interests in international law issues such as human rights, humanitarian law and international criminal law. Her interest in Cambodia and international justice began in 2009 when she worked with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal's Victims Unit. She has continued her involvement by assisting Civil Party Lawyer Mahdev Mohan in collecting victim testimony for a minority group in Cambodia affected by the Khmer Rouge, which then informed legal submissions to the Tribunal. She has also worked with the International Criminal Court, Interpol and the UNHCR.

TEXT BY SERENE ASHLEY CHEN | PHOTOS BY WESLEY HEDDEN

SARUS

HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

On 25 December 1978, over 100,000 Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia, marking the first and only extended war between two communist regimes that would last for nearly thirteen years and deepen strong undercurrents of suspicion and resentment between the two neighbours that had already been in conflict for years.

With both countries emerging relatively recently from their turbulent past in a region that is rapidly opening up for social and economic growth, there is no better time than now to heal the wounds of war and promote reconciliation between the two.

Wesley Hedden, Program Director of Sarus Exchange Program speaks to us about the need to create space and dialogue to ease deep-seated tension and build relationships between bordering countries with histories of distrust – starting with university-level students from Vietnam and Cambodia.

The Sarus Exchange Program promotes peace between Cambodia and Vietnam by bringing together an equal number of college students from both countries for a month of physically and mentally demanding service in Cambodia and Vietnam. Students learn to reflect, work in and as a team, share insights, and negotiate conflict productively.

Tell us more about how the idea of Sarus first came to mind. What inspired you to start Sarus and what were you hoping to achieve?

From 2006 to 2010, I lived and worked in a variety of educational and non-profit contexts in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. During this time, I observed that my students and colleagues harboured negative stereotypes about people of different ethnicities, religions,

and nationalities within the region. I also noticed that there were few spaces for young people to explore conflict, both interpersonal and structural. The intention of Sarus was to create a safe space where people from countries with a history of conflict could come together to collaborate, learn, and explore their experiences with conflict. By focusing on young leaders, I hoped Sarus would be able to catalyse a diverse, international community of social innovators, inspired and empowered to create a more peaceful Asia.

How are programmes designed at Sarus?

Programmes are typically designed through a mixture of intention and experimentation. The design process is human-centered with the programme participant as the key user. Our theory of change remains front and central throughout our design process. We also allow for a relatively high degree of flexibility and experimentation to ensure that participants, partners, and community members have strong voices and become invested stakeholders in our programmes. We solicit feedback from stakeholders, reflect rigorously, and adapt as needed. We are, first and foremost, a learning organisation, and, as such, we are not afraid to make mistakes and change course as needed. In this way, we've organically adapted the design thinking mentality of rapid prototyping and iteration.

How are the programmes doing?

Our programmes are going very well. This past fall we launched a new fieldwork course in partnership with the United Nations mandated University for Peace entitled Designing for Social Innovation and Leadership (DSIL). Over 30 professionals from more than 15 countries attended the programme in Bangkok and Phnom Penh in October and November.

To date, we've run a total of 11 programmes in the last five years that have served a collective total of more than 200 students and professionals, the majority of whom have been from Cambodia and Vietnam.

Feedback from participants in our assessment surveys and interviews has been overwhelmingly positive historically. We have had notably high levels of engagement from programme alumni, especially those of the Sarus Exchange Programme. A strong indication of said engagement is that over 70 per cent of our alumni donate annually to the organisation. Alumni of our programmes regularly indicate in longitudinal tracking surveys that Sarus programmes have helped shape their academic interests and professional trajectories. The community of alumni, which members refer to as the Sarus Family, remains strong and connected, even for those who participated in programmes several years ago.

What is keeping you busy at the moment?

At the moment, my two biggest projects are the establishment of new DSIL programmes in partnership with the University for Peace and the build-out for our new Bangladesh-Myanmar exchange programme.

Tell us about the challenges you have faced in running Sarus and how you've overcome them?

One of the biggest challenges we've had is ensuring our financial sustainability. The participants in our programmes come from low-income countries, and as such, they are unable to cover the costs of the programme. Because of this, we depend on external sources of funding to run our programmes. In addition to inherent fundraising challenges such as donor dependency and shifting global aid trends, we face the additional challenge of trying to create a sense of urgency and importance to a problem whose consequences tend to be more long-term and indirect in nature. The situation in Cambodia and Vietnam, for example, is one of what peace practitioners call negative peace, namely a situation in which physical violence is limited but structural and cultural violence such as discrimination, stereotypes, and unequal access to resources are prevalent. In developing countries in which there are more urgent issues such as water sanitation, infectious disease control, and maternal health, it is difficult for us to build the awareness and call to action necessary to raise sufficient funds to cover our operations.

In order to overcome this challenge, we've shifted towards a social enterprise model. Part of this effort has included the creation of what we call Lift Programs. These programmes are designed for students and professionals from higher-income backgrounds and provide opportunities for this demographic to visit and learn about the countries in which we work. We leverage our existing partnerships, alumni, and resources to keep the quality of these programmes high and the costs low. The revenue generated from Lift Programs is then used to subsidise the costs of our core programmes for students from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

Another effective and sustainable fundraising mechanism that we've utilised is crowdfunding. Over the course of three successful Indiegogo campaigns, we've raised nearly US$50,000 from over 500 donors in 30 plus countries. We view crowdfunding as a way not just to raise money, but more importantly as a means of energising and expanding our network, clarifying our message, and raising awareness about our cause.

Where do you see Sarus going? What is going to help or prevent you from achieving this vision?

Organisationally, I see Sarus becoming more focused and mature in the coming three to five years. I expect all of our programmes will coalesce clearly behind our theory of change, and we will finalise our hallmark curriculum, which will be used across all programmes. I anticipate that our core programmes linking Cambodia & Vietnam and Bangladesh & Myanmar will be one hundred per cent financially sustainable on the basis of our Lift Programs and our other social enterprise endeavours.

With respect to our participants, I expect we'll have a better understanding of what works and how we can most effectively inspire and empower them to create more open, inclusive, and resilient communities regionally. I also anticipate that with increased funding sources we'll be able to reach three times the current number of participants annually by 2020.

I believe the two biggest challenges for us in the next five years will be securing our financial sustainability and navigating the complex and ever-shifting political landscapes of the countries in which we operate.

If you were to achieve the goal of building connections between future leaders in Cambodia and Vietnam, or Bangladesh and Myanmar, what outcomes do you think that might bring?

First and foremost, it would reduce the risk of physical violence between people of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities in the region. Second, it would reduce levels of discrimination in society, thus eliminating barriers for minorities to access educational and professional opportunities. Finally, it would lead to increased opportunities for collaboration across traditional ethnic, religious, and national divides, thus leading to greater economic growth and prosperity, as well as opportunities to address the most vexing international challenges of the 21st century.

Vietnamese and Cambodian participants building understanding and friendship through fun and laughter at the Sarus Exchange Program.

LEADING AUTHENTICALLY

OVERCOMING THE 'MIND-BOGGLING' CONSEQUENCES OF MINDLESS LEADERSHIP

The extent of fake leadership and management behaviour in business and society is mind-boggling as indicated by the large number of corporate non-compliance cases and trust violations. Examples include the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the damaged reputation of UK-based pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline as a consequence of a bribery case in China or the recent class action lawsuit related to price-fixing of tickets for trans-Pacific flights.

In this article, we posit that mindfulness defined as present moment-awareness in combination with authentic leadership behaviour might be a cure to prevent more of such leadership crises from happening in the future. In its final stage, mindfulness refers to a sort of enlightened state of being in which greed, hatred and delusion have been overcome, and are absent from the mind. In the context of everyday leadership behaviour, this might imply the necessity of staying aware of one's responsibilities, for example, by paying close attention to situational requirements as well as concerns and needs of one's followers. Mindfulness without high standards for moral conduct is like a failed rocket launch. To make a case for mindfulness, let us revisit what leaders do and what they should not do.

According to leadership wisdom accumulated in the ever growing leadership literature, 'good' leaders change the status quo for the common good (which requires initiative and courage); they influence people and provide an environment to achieve team or organisational objectives; and they (ideally) exercise ethical, values-based leadership in the pursuit of economic and societal progress as well as sustainable development. The flip side in terms of real 'bad' leadership is perhaps best embodied in the fictional character Gordon Gecko portrayed by Michael Douglas in the 1987 movie Wall Street. The 2007-2008 financial crisis illustrates the negative socio-economic consequences of an unrestrained greed market. Who then are 'good' leaders and what defines them?

One outstanding leadership expert in search of 'positive' leadership is Professor Bruce Avolio. He and his team has developed several diagnostic leadership development tools such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (45 descriptive statements) which assesses a full range of leadership behaviours related to the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership as well as passive/avoidant leadership and outcomes. Transformational leadership in particular is the holy grail of effective leadership because of the potentially beneficial impact of required competencies (which are not always in sufficient supply in organisations) on stakeholders such as 'idealised attributes and behaviours' (influence), 'inspirational motivation', 'intellectual stimulation' and 'individualised consideration' and outcomes. Related questions every leader should ask are: Am I a role model for my followers and am I able to inspire others to follow? Can I motivate others to commit to the vision? Do I encourage innovation and creativity? Do I coach my followers (and bosses) in line with my/our/their needs?

In one of his papers entitled 'Pursuing Authentic Leadership Development' in which he reflects about the evolution of the authentic leadership paradigm (the apex of transformational leadership so to speak), Avolio introduces the reader to Sam, a supervisor in a US prison workshop where he did some research: "As I reflect back on Sam, he was unfailingly humble, genuine, compassionate, ethical, inspiring to a large cadre of inmates, and willing to challenge the core assumption that most inmates end up failing to do—there is a better life than crime. Sam was a transformational leader in every sense, and more importantly he was authentic". It is this humble transformational authenticity in combination with mindfulness which I find most inspiring when it comes to exemplifying really positive leadership behaviour in reflective leadership sessions with young high potentials because these traits are so critical and yet so rare in the corporate world.

Conceptually speaking, authentic (genuine) leaders are true to their own personality, spirit and character. They do not wear several masks and ensure that their true personality shines through both at work and outside of work. With their clear moral center, self-awareness and high sense of ethics, they are (perceived as) fair, balanced in their decision-making approach and mission-driven. They lead with their heart and focus on the long-term. Mindful leaders know when to pause and listen; they show respect and are supportive.

As Bill George, Professor of Management Practice at the Harvard Business School and former chairman and CEO of Medtronic has put it, 'people know who is authentic and who is not'. Medtronic is a successful global medical technology company whose market capitalisation grew to US$60 billion from US$1.1 billion under George's watch. Authentic leaders have stable and coherent self-concepts. They are motivated by a larger purpose (than their ego) and willing to make decisions which are 'right'. They are not coercive to associates but are able to rationally persuade them. Through their authentic values, beliefs, and behaviour, they represent role models for the development of associates (and help to transform / develop them into leaders themselves). They solicit feedback for improving dealings with others, are clearly aware of the impact they have on others and admit mistakes when they. Inauthentic leaders in contrast ask 'what's in for me'? They don't see the need to reflect on their own personal limitations, are not always candid about their failures and often not in touch with their own emotions.

The way towards truly authentic leadership behaviour is long and stony. Besides high standards for moral conduct, authentic leadership apprentices must be willing to invest substantial time and effort into self awareness work in order to accumulate sufficient self knowledge and to be aware of one's strengths cum weaknesses (e.g. with the help of diagnostic tools such as the StrengthsFinder, reflected best self exercises or through the eyes of their own followers during a frank coaching session). They need to be open towards and engage in guided self development aimed at transitioning from one's actual self to one's possible self. The ultimate goal is to become 'the best person you can possibly be'. Regular feedback, formal workshop training, journaling, reflections about one's own leadership ('crucibles') moments and defining past experiences, learning from adversity, observational learning or role modelling represent other useful tools. Where do we start?

Identifying and working with a trusted coach is a workable approach. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) defines coaching as "developing a person's skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives. It targets high performance and improvement at work, although it may also have an impact on an individual's private life". In the context of leadership, coaching provides both aspiring and experienced leaders with feedback on their strengths and their limitations. Since it is a skilled activity, leadership coaching should be delivered by people competent in both coaching and leadership matters. Effective coaching can help leaders to (i) think big and innovatively so that they are able to lead innovation efforts, (ii) improve the way they relate to others so that they learn to let go and trust others, (iii) explore new ways of being with the effect of finding their true self and (iv) inspire others by creating a shared purpose so that they know the difference they want to make. 'Even' Steve Jobs had coaching support: Intuit chairman Bill Campbell.

In reality, however, there are numerous problems which make it very difficult to leverage on coaching advice such as leaders' unwillingness to open up, perceptual blindness or the existence of mind traps such as one's own image as the selfless ("I have to do my duty") martyr leader who takes on too much and becomes resentful due to coping problems. Coming to terms with the perceptual forces and often negative emotions behind such traps, e.g. by taking a deep breath and being truthful about the situation, is critical in 'getting out of the box' and to make a conscious choice about what to do next by looking objectively at one's options. Such options figure prominently in the so-called GROW coaching model. During the first stage, coach and coachee need to figure out what the end point or final expected outcome (the Goal) to be achieved via the coaching engagement might be (e.g. to resolve a conflict a coachee might have with a colleague). Secondly, the coach needs to motivate the coachee to describe the current Reality, including issues and potential (perceptual) barriers and what has been tried with whom, when, how etc, and with what effect (acting out the role of one's 'enemy' and stepping into that person's shoes during a dialogue with the coach may help to see things differently). Once the current issues and obstacles have surfaced and are understood, the coachee's Options to deal with them need to be discussed as well as related benefits and possible downsides. Finally, the coach must motivate the coachee to hold himself/herself accountable to commit to specific actions and follow-up measures (the Will).

Present moment-awareness together with clear comprehension of what is taking place here and now can help to untrap one's mind. Mindfulness requires non-judgemental, focused attention, a skill which can be acquired. Pausing in the midst of a hectic day, sitting silently and observing one's breath (and thoughts) or identifying one's fears,

priorities, values etc. once one's ego has quieted are proven ways to become more mindful. A quiet ego can help to cope with ego threat so as to become less defensive and to manage difficult conversations with both directness and empathy.

The power of mindful leadership becomes more obvious if we contrast it with less-mindful (or 'mindless') leadership. Symptoms may include not paying attention to or not having awareness of the activities one is engaged in, including the internal states and processes (emotions) one is experiencing. Less mindful leaders often only pay partial attention to the people they come in contact with. As a result they might be perceived as disrespectful, incompetent and aloof.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

- Less stress and anxiety
- Better mood and increased well being
- Improved concentration and memory
- Accepting reality
- Being in control of one's thoughts
- Focused (present) attention
- Internal awareness
- External awareness
- Lack of absentmindedness
- More empathy, patience and kindness

(Source: Chay et al, 2014)[1]

The world of high performance sports provides us with some inspiring role models of successful leaders such as the legendary US basketball coach Phil Jackson (Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers) who had been groomed to become a minister in line with his family's tradition but found his true self in sports. Contrary to tai chi or yoga which did not "stick" with his players, his players were receptive to his mindfulness trainings, e.g. via mediation and stillness practice. In his books and interviews, Phil Jackson has revealed some of his powerful training and team-building principles such as 'One Breath – One Mind' or 'No Man Goes His Way Alone' aimed at building up the mental strength of his coaches through mindfulness or to manage the god-like aura around star player Michael Jordan so as to create space for other team members. His comments underline his own deep authenticity, a key enabler of his success as coach.

"You have to be able to psychologically help your players, support-wise, be in touch with them, so I think managing people is very important" (Phil Jackson).

The advice coaching experts give to coachees receiving feedback is similar to what followers would expect from a "collaborative" leader: the ability to listen to feedback without any interruption and with the intent of learning something new; not being defensive; summarising what was communicated or discussing how one can improve and the way forward. Likewise good practices of giving effective coaching feedback resemble what leaders are supposed to do when they engage their followers: the ability to focus one's (constructive, factual and specific) feedback on behaviour, not the person or to concentrate on behaviour the subordinate can realistically change. However, contrary to the world of sports, in the world of business, mindless, inauthentic leadership is still very widespread. The fact that former BP CEO Tony Hayward took time off to go sailing with his son during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill (for which he was heavily criticised) or corporate groupthink where the desire for conformity and a wrong sense of loyalty together with the illusion of invulnerability can lead to unethical decision-making outcomes such as bribery might be interpreted in this fashion.

Media reports about ongoing leadership failures in business and society suggest that absentmindedness in combination with insufficient attention and (internal & external) awareness can derail leaders. Regular mindfulness activities such as slowing down, concentrated (reflective) breathing techniques in support of honest sharing sessions with a focus on deciphering important lessons learnt during challenging leadership moments (e.g. with regard to inauthentic or insufficiently mindful leadership behaviour) guided by a good coach can be very useful in achieving mindfulness mastery. Mindfulness can also help to manage undesirable distractions, reduce stress and improve one's immune system. In sum, mindfulness appears to be a critical trait of leaders in East and West and a key resource to become a master of morally unimpeachable, positive leadership.

About the author

Thomas Menkhoff is Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources in the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. He has formerly taught in the National University of Singapore, the University of Cologne and the University of Bielefeld in Germany. His current research interest is concentrated on knowledge management and Chinese entrepreneurship in Asia, on which he edited a triple issue for the Journal of Asian Business together with Pang Eng Fong and Hans-Dieter Evers entitled "The Power of Knowing – Studies in Chinese Business in Asia" (2008). His latest publications include: "Governing and Managing Knowledge in Asia" (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2nd ed. 2010 – together with Hans-Dieter Evers and Chay Yue Wah); "Beyond the Knowledge Trap – Developing Asia's Knowledge-based Economies" (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2011 – together with Hans-Dieter Evers, Chay Yue Wah and Pang Eng Fong) and "Catalysts of Change – Chinese Business in Asia" (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2014 – together with Chay Yue Wah, Hans-Dieter Evers and Hoon Chang Yau). In 2009, Thomas won SMU's overall Most Innovative Teacher Award.

[1] In search of "Asian" conceptions of leadership with a focus on mindfulness. In: Thomas Menkhoff, Chay Yue Wah, Hans-Dieter Evers and Hoon Chang Yau (eds.), Catalysts for Change – Chinese Business in Asia. World Scientific Publishing

TEXT BY DR LIM LAI CHENG | PHOTO BY SERGEI ZOLKIN

EDUCATION SYSTEMS CAN GET BETTER

Southeast Asia is home to 600 million people. It is a region of possibilities, but economic growth is often hampered by poverty, inequality and the middle income trap. Many of the developing countries in Southeast Asia have natural resources but primary production will never be enough to grow an economy.

In order to reduce poverty and inequality, and move up the economic value chain (and out of the middle income trap), skilled labour, an educated workforce and state autonomy, (principally, the ability of the bureaucracy or government officials to act on policy without falling prey to corruption) are vital.

The Mckinsey Report, "How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better" (2010, Mckinsey) posits that any school system can improve from any starting point and this can be done in as short a time frame as six years. Based on more than 200 interviews with system stakeholders and analysis of some 600 interventions carried out on 25 purposively selected systems, the report identifies the reform elements that are replicable for school systems elsewhere as they move from poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent performance. The three key aspects that system leaders must integrate include a) recognising the stage the education system is in b) introducing a set of interventions relevant to the stage and c) ensuring that the system adapts to the interventions to take into account the history, culture, politics and structure of the school system and nation.

POOR TO FAIR:

According to the report, systems that are young have to first ensure that there are enough schools and education access for all. Basic needs such as meals, clothing, transportation, toilets and classrooms will need to be looked into. Teachers and principals have to be provided with training through standard materials to scaffold their learning. This can be done by providing educators and administrators with manuals, or prepared lessons with instructional objectives, lesson plans, and materials that are standardised. System leaders will have to visit to observe, meet and motivate staff and discuss performance and ensure that the curriculum is strictly adhered to. By way of motivating and rewarding efforts, proficiency targets can be set and measured against student performance at regular intervals. The targets, at this stage, would be the achievement of basic literacy and numeracy among the students.

FAIR TO GOOD:

For systems that seek to strengthen their foundation, an organisational structure should be established to ensure accountability and clear decision lines. There has also to be an equitable funding model for all schools that is transparent and efficient. Where student outcomes are concerned, there has to be reliable assessments put in place so that data on performance, obtained through a centralised authority, can be used to identify areas such as subjects, gender, age or ethnic groups that require special attention and support. To further enhance teaching and learning, curriculum designs and models appropriate for the various age groups and subjects will have to be established, and textbooks and assessment standards provided to ensure adherence across the schools. Close monitoring of the progression of students through each education level, streams and tracks to ensure academic focus and pace would be helpful to keep students in school and engaged. This will ensure teacher and school accountability.

GOOD TO GREAT:

Systems that want to move from good to great will have to raise the bar on professionalism and constantly improve the quality of teachers. This can be done in two ways: expect stronger credentials from new teachers at the entry level, and enhance pre-service training and certification standards. Rather than solely relying on teacher trainers, incentives for peer-learning, self-learning and self-development can be provided. Teachers can also be coached to strengthen their teaching skills and their ability to plan lessons and analyse student performance to improve their teaching. To be able to retain the best within the profession, clear career pathways will need to be created so that educators will commit to professional growth and be able to expect commensurate pay increase, the longer they remain in service. A balance needs to be struck between flexibility and autonomy given to schools to pursue their specialised programmes and goals, and accountability through evidence-based self-evaluation and improvement will be important.

GREAT TO EXCELLENT:

The journey from great to excellent encompasses the creation of environments that will unleash the creativity and innovation of its educators and stakeholders. When the system has a highly-skilled set of educators, and systems and frameworks are routinely used to ensure standards and accountability, even more autonomy can be meted out to teachers to develop themselves professionally and try new ideas to further support and customise student learning. Features of an excellent system include strong parent-community involvement and ownership of school programmes, the proliferation of communities of learning, strong mentoring programmes, the sharing of innovative practices across schools and adequate administrative support for teachers and principals so that they can focus on instructional leadership.

Within all stages, several key considerations are vital: ensuring age appropriacy and relevance of the curriculum and standards for the country's needs; ensuring appropriate reward and remuneration for teachers and principals of schools, valid and reliable assessment of student outcomes and academic performance, data systems that can inform policy reviews, and well-scripted policy documents and education laws to ensure compliance and the communication of intent and standards expected.

THE SINGAPORE EDUCATION STORY:

Singapore gained independence in 1965. At that point in time, the school system was still in disarray. The Education Act of 1957 had required all schools set up by community groups to be registered and syllabuses for different language medium schools to be streamlined to ensure similar content. Equal treatment in education was declared for the major ethnic groups in Singapore. Attempts were also made to ensure that the basic salaries of government and aided schools were pegged to qualifications and experience and not set arbitrarily. However, freed from the vagaries of colonialism where only the children of the elite received formal education, there were hardly enough schools to cater to all the children in the newly-independent nation.

For a country with no natural resources, it was imperative that efforts be channelled towards building a workforce that could support the aspirations of a new nation needing to sustain itself. The late 60s and early 70s saw the government building schools and replicating them all over the island in cookie-cutter fashion, and at breakneck speed. Teachers were hired en masse to fill the schools, and many of them given contracts right after they finished their "A" levels (the equivalent of a high school certification). They taught in the morning and went for training in the afternoon.

English was adopted as a working language, so that the people could plug into the global market, and bilingualism became a cornerstone of the education system to anchor children to their cultural heritage. The focus of the curriculum was technical studies, science and mathematics to meet the needs of an industrial economy. Nation building was key and social values were taught in school through the introduction of a national anthem, pledge, and subjects such as Civics. This was important as Singapore was still reeling from a period of communal violence, industrial strikes and racial riots. As most families were poor and primary healthcare had been hitherto neglected, the schools became centres where underweight children had to drink milk under the supervision of their teachers, be taught to brush their teeth as a habit and be vaccinated at regular intervals to ensure they were immunised against communicable and infectious diseases.

In the early 70s, while the British troops totally withdrew from Singapore, the oil crisis hit the region and the world. Singapore held fast to its plans for mass education. The priority, apart from the acquisition of literacy and

numeracy skills, was to build a cohesive society and a rugged nation. Uniformed groups were introduced in schools. Because the new industries that had been set up in Singapore by multi-national companies necessitated technical skills, vocational education was instituted with the set up of the Adult Education Board as well as the Industrial Training Board. This later merged to form the Vocational and Industrial Training Board.

The systematisation of the Singapore education system began in the early 80s, after the Goh Report (Goh Keng Swee, 1978) which introduced streaming at Primary 3 to prevent education wastage. A curriculum development institute was set up and specialists were enlisted to write textbooks for use by the whole nation. The standardisation of instructional materials enabled a consistent delivery of the curriculum no matter the calibre of the teachers across schools. By the mid 1980s, special streams and tracks were also put in place to cultivate special talent, such as the gifted education programme which catered to the top 1% of the school going cohort (identified through a national psychometric test at Primary Four). The strongest schools were given independent school status and more funding so that they could innovate and differentiate themselves from the mainstream schools. To ensure stronger accountability, a school appraisal system was put in place and schools were openly ranked on academic performance to raise competition and standards nationally. The reward system and career progression of teachers were also centrally managed, pegged to how they were assessed on a common set of competencies used in all schools to measure performance and potential.

As the Singapore system became stronger and performance outcomes on international assessments such as The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed Singaporean students to be internationally competitive, the system leaders confidently embarked on a process to envision new possibilities. The "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" initiative which was introduced in the mid 90s involved many school heads and leaders across the nation. The drive for innovation led to the setting up of autonomous schools, the launch of Singapore's IT Masterplan and the devolution of textbook writing to commercial publishers. Schools were left to do their own self-appraisal and externally validated only once in five years. Many schools began to establish their own niche in different fields and co-curricular activities to differentiate themselves. New pathways were created for different types of learners and specialised schools were set up to develop the diverse talents of students, such as in the area of sports, the arts, and mathematics and the sciences.

It is not by chance that Singapore has created, in fifty years, a high performing system. It is a system that is based on meritocratic or merit-based principles, which allows equal access for all. Singapore has created, through its centralised education system, social cohesion, unity of purpose among schools as well as an ethos of dedication and hard work. Still, because the context has changed and Singapore in 2015 no longer looks and feels like what it was in 1965, work is in progress to address areas that are starting to work counter to social progress and national cohesion. The Singapore education system, by 2015, has become highly stratified and the social divide continues to widen because the same policies that had won the system its accolades and success – based on the principle of meritocracy, no longer allow for very much social mobility.

Outside of the five stages presented by the Mckinsey report, Singapore has to find new solutions to ensure that its education can keep on getting better. This time around, it will no longer be merely to develop a highly-skilled workforce to plug into the global economy. It will be to ensure that Singapore is able to engender a more equitable society and build a stronger social compact among its people. Recent government policies have aimed to re-focus parents and students' unhealthy obsession with grades attainment to the need for life-long learning, personal mastery and values. To enhance equity, the education ministry has also attempted to spread resources more evenly across schools, reduce elitism by paying a lot more attention to academically weaker students, strengthen vocational and skills training and expound a wider definition of success (beyond the academic). The deliberations and search are ongoing, to find the next formula or right education model for Singapore.

The Mckinsey report stopped at "excellent" to describe a high performing education system. Perhaps it will have good reasons to extend the scale to incorporate the next stage that all strong systems should aspire towards, and that stage can be termed, from excellent to remarkable.

The education systems of the eleven countries in Southeast Asia are clearly at different stages of their evolution. The Mckinsey analysis and framework for development provide a very useful guide for countries that wish to improve student outcomes and the skills level of their workforce. The starting point is an honest appraisal of where the system is and have system leaders muster the relevant resources to move it one notch further. This has been possible with the least as well as better-resourced countries in the world. What it takes is political will.

About the author

Dr Lim Lai Cheng is Academic Director of the Institute for Societal Leadership at the Singapore Management University. Prior to joining the university, she had worked as teacher, head of department, deputy principal and she was principal of three schools. She has served on various national committees on education reviews in Singapore. She is advisor to the African Leadership Academy in South Africa and the LEAF Foundation in Slovakia and a Director of the Principals' Academy Inc, Singapore and a member of the steering committee of the International Positive Education Network.

TEXT BY TONY LAI | PHOTO BY PICJUMBO

WHAT VALUE DESIGN?

After partying "like it's 1999", two major interlocking themes led to the resurgence of design from the 2000s. The first was the emphasis on innovation. A wave of new ideas, fuelled by the release of the World Wide Web to mass audiences, flooded the world from Netscape to Amazon to Facebook and even Angry Birds. Business gurus like Gary Hamel, Clayton Christensen and even Michael Porter began to reemphasise the value of creation, originality and innovation in their strategy perspective. A new way of thinking was necessary for organisations to cope with the radical new world ahead of them because incremental improvement was not going to be sufficient. The second was the transformation of Apple after years of languishing in the niche markets with the Macintosh and iMacs. The second coming of Steve Jobs, after a critical stint with Pixar, finally integrated form with function and the world was captivated both by the external usability of the iPods, MacBooks and iPhones, as well as the deep internal intelligence of the iTunes store and apps platform. In both instances, design took centre stage.

For decades during the industrial and manufacturing era, design was relegated to a post-production activity. Designers were simply asked to make something already produced 'pretty'. But that was never how design was taught to designers. The basic curriculum of design begins with identifying a user need through a process of discovering insights. Insights enable designers to reframe a situation and/or a context.

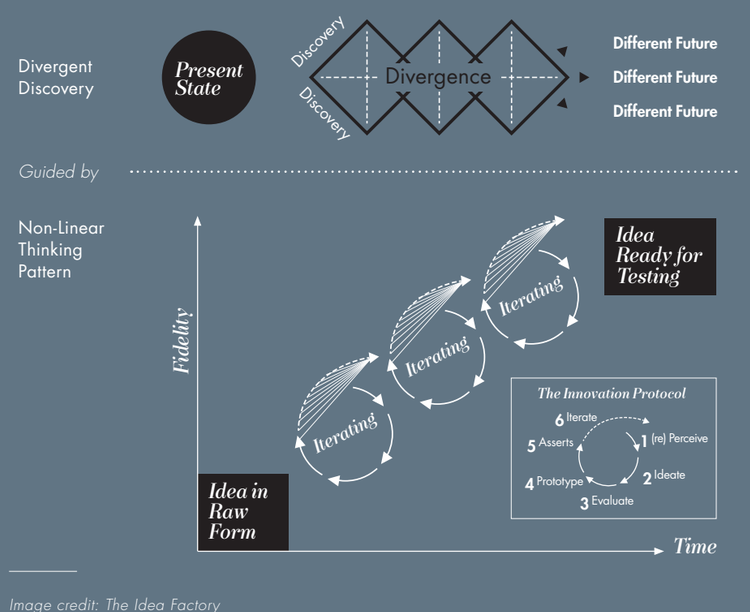


Image credit: The Idea Factory

Insights then drive creativity and a flurry of ideas will emerge and the best ones are often the amalgamation of several smaller ideas. They start to form a system as a pattern emerges. Ideas start to become solutions. It is then visualised – drawings, cardboard models, LEGOs, etc. and so begins the process for prototyping – turning ideas into workable models in order to iterate the idea even further. Heightening the tempo of creating ideas only to slow it down later to create viable prototypes. This is design thinking. This is the process for innovation.

By the end of the first ten years of the 2000 era, design thinking's credibility was on an all time high. It provided the process for Levis Strauss Asia Pacific to grow its business, enabled Pernod Ricard Taiwan to innovate its distribution channels and Kellogg South Korea to uncover new breakfast markets *. Beyond business, something else started to take place. Organisations in the social-driven space like the Singapore Ministry of Education and SINDA (a self help organisation for the Indian community in Singapore) invested in design thinking to find new solutions to complex social issues. Even Roche Australia used design thinking to find new ways to encourage people in Sydney to follow through on their organ donation pledges *. A new trajectory was clearly emerging. The need for new answers to society's problems was growing but is design thinking the saviour? What value design?

Societal issues are complex. They may look seemingly uniform or consistent on a global scale but once the intricacies within a country context are recognised, any doubt about complexities is removed. Societal issues are both multi-faceted as it is multi-disciplinary. So many things come into play – the history of the issue, the demographics of the issue, the politics of the issue, the economics of the issue, etc. So many answers have been attempted so often that we cannot help but wonder if the right questions have been asked. Yet the landscape for social change has never been more vibrant than it is today. With a growing number of social enterprises across all of Southeast Asia, many individuals and organisations are attempting to do good well. Different business models are being experimented with at social enterprises such as the Yangon Bakehouse in Myanmar while private equity funds like the Lotus Impact Fund are investing in social enterprises in Vietnam. New variations are emerging and emerging fast.

Beneath all these structural changes lies the question – what sort of answers are we providing today for the future of our society? How do we come up with these answers? Are we integrating our ideas into a solution or are we emotionally moved such that we simply want to get something done fast? How are we thinking about the issues when we have more access to better technology and fresher ideas? How do we equip those who are keen to enter the social space with new skills?

It is on that premise that design thinking may have a useful role to play as a complement to traditional linear thinking. Design thinking embraces the full complexities of a problem during the early divergent stage and this allows for fresh insights to emerge rather than linear thinking that tries to isolate the problem early. Design thinking welcomes a process that involves multi-disciplinary individuals so that the answer could be richer. Design thinking can and should be a skill that all leaders and members of societal impact organisations must have. Design thinking is just too important to be left to designers.

For that to happen, a new breed of societal leaders will need to emerge, one that is comfortable with ambiguity and working without a specific end in mind. Not the easiest for many. We can do this with undergraduates and start them young with these capabilities but societal organisations do not yet enjoy the domination of talent even though the early signs are encouraging. So perhaps the reality is that the value of design for societal change is still at the perception stage and hardly at the execution stage. Everyone knows it is important but how could it be embraced to create real change remains the final mile dilemma.

* The companies referred here are due to the author's direct knowledge of work done in the realm of design thinking during his earlier years with The Idea Factory.

About the author

As the Chief Strategist for the Institute, Tony Lai provides leadership on all areas with regard to strategy development and execution from a business and organisation perspective. His role covers the annual workplan planning, the Southeast Asia country insight process, regional marketing and engagement and capability programmes that target adults and undergraduates. He is also the non-executive director of The Idea Factory – an innovation strategy company that moved its global operations from San Francisco to Singapore in 2002 to focus on Asia. Tony's experience in both strategy and business has seen him hold positions in the past such as the Chief Operating Officer with APM Pte Ltd (a property management subsidiary of the ARA Group) from 2013-2014, Managing Director of Experiences at Mediacorp Pte Ltd in 2013, Assistant Chief Executive with the Singapore Tourism Board from 2009-2012 and CEO/Managing DIrector of The Idea Factory from 2001-2009.

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GROWING INTO INERTIA

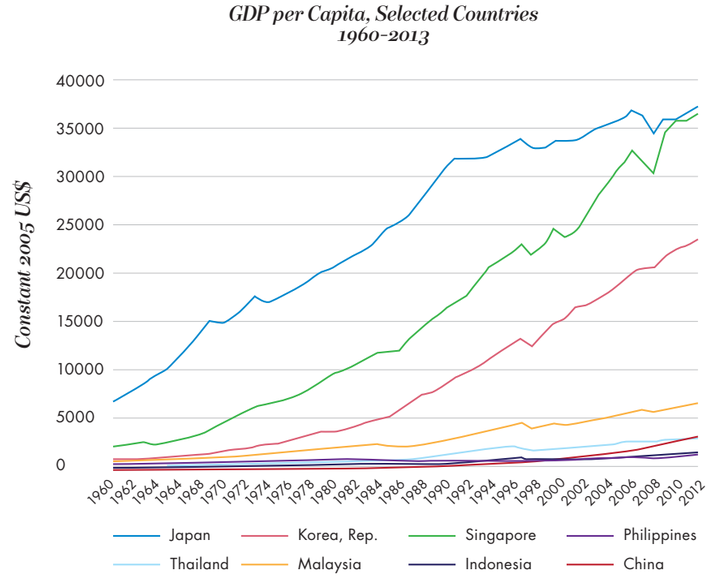

Figure 1. Source: World Bank Data

Recent years have seen a great deal of discussion about the "middle income trap." This concept, playing off the older idea of a poverty trap, describes a situation in which a country's economy is able to emerge from the low-income category through rapid growth but then the growth rate slows and the country spends an extended period of time in the middle-income category. Arguably, the country may never be able to move into high income status.

This "trap" is defined in relation to the extreme success of the developmental states in Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, which were able to move rapidly from low income status to high income status in a period of less than 50 years. Here in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines are now supposedly spinning their tyres in this economic mud, unable to attain the growth necessary for high income status. More prominently, experts have focused on the possibility that China will also spend the coming years in this trap (Figure 1).

While recently some economists have criticised the idea of middle-income traps, the empirical evidence that early rapid growth can be followed by a period of much slower development highlights the fact that growth is not always sustained at different levels of development. The implication is that the shift from middle income levels to high income levels requires a different set of policies, skills, and state capacities than that necessary for moving from low income to middle income.

Here I propose that one of the reasons many states struggle to move beyond middle income status is they have yet to develop the capacity necessary to engage with these different developmental tasks. Not only are these policy challenges distinct, they are much more difficult. In this essay I discuss these different types of developmental tasks. I also briefly discuss the reasons that certain tasks are more difficult for states to accomplish than others before providing some thoughts regarding what would be required of Southeast Asian states to move out of middle income status.

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Economic growth requires that states be able to accomplish developmental tasks. A developmental task is a state action in the realm of policy-making and implementation directed at accomplishing a development goal. Such tasks range from macroeconomic policy

such as reducing tariff rates to education curriculum reform to building irrigation canals.

Development economists have promoted different sets of development tasks throughout the past decades. Beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, neoclassical economic arguments became dominant, advocating a set of policy recommendations that later became known as the "Washington Consensus." Proponents of these reforms argued that by removing the corrupt influences of the state, the market would correct itself through open competition. Thus the developmental tasks of this era were geared toward opening up economies and engaging with the world economy. While this approach was rightfully criticised, it did not negate the fact that some of these first generation reforms were absolutely necessary for countries to move toward economic growth, as there are certain economic principles which are universal, such as protection of property rights and market competition.

These first generation reforms were relatively easy for states to accomplish. This was due to the fact that, in many ways, they involved dismantling the state. For example, though not spurred on by the Washington consensus, Vietnam's doi moi reforms in the late 1980s removed state controls over agricultural production, which had stifled productivity for decades. State bodies that had previously controlled such decisions about what to plant, when to plant, and how much to plant were dismantled as farmers were granted long-term contracts over land and allowed to engage the market. In consequence, agricultural production grew exponentially, allowing Vietnam to become one of the world's top exporters of rice, rubber, and coffee.

Such accomplishments stand in direct contrast to later policy recommendations which were referred to as second-generation reforms. These include policies like education and health reforms, improved tax collection, and banking regulation. Such tasks involved re-empowering state actors and building up state bureaucracies, which required much higher managerial and political capacity and skill than breaking down state agencies. Not only is there no clear 'blueprint' about what the agency should look like when it is reformed, many of these changes also threaten entrenched interests. Thailand's failed attempts at education reforms provide an excellent example. Despite more than doubling education spending since 2000, Thai students have seen a decline in performance. The Thailand Development Research Institute has highlighted that many of the education system's shortcomings emerge from a lack of accountability for teachers and an outdated curriculum. Reforming teaching has eluded Thailand for a number of reasons including bureaucratic resistance, a focus on building infrastructure rather than teaching, and a highly centralised education system.

Thus, the first generation reforms might be thought of as the kindling that can start an economic fire, but second generation reforms are the logs necessary to keep it burning bright. Why, then, are they more difficult?

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES

While the dichotomy of first and second generation reforms is useful, it is better to look at development tasks in terms of what they require of the state. Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock (2004) have argued that two factors determine the difficulty level of a development policy for state actors. On the one hand is the information requirement, or the amount of discretion, necessary to carry out the task. Certain tasks require more detailed and specific information, either drawn from professional training or deep knowledge of a place. The more detailed this information is, the more difficult the task. On the other hand, the number of transactions necessary to carry out the task can determine its difficulty as well, especially when face-to-face contact is required between state officials and service recipients. This creates a two-by-two table of different types of policies (Figure 2).

Policies are those tasks which require extensive decision-making but require few transactions. These policies can be accomplished by the quintessential "10 smart people" in a meeting. Examples include things such as macroeconomic policies like changing interest rates. Many of the first generation reforms would fit in this category.

Programmes, in contrast, require few decisions but many transactions. In these cases, government officials have little discretionary power. Instead they implement policies according to rules which are laid out either in law or the agency. The issuance of driver's licences is a good example, as the civil servant processing the driver's application need only follow a set of guidelines and rules to decide whether or not to grant a licence.

Practices combine both high discretion and transaction intensiveness. These are among the most difficult policy tasks for state agencies to accomplish because they require the development of state capacity.

TYPOLOGY OF POLICY TASKS

	Discretionary	*Non-Discretionary*
Transaction Intensive	Practices	programmes
Non-transaction Intensive	Policies	(procedures, rules)

Figure 2. Source: Pritchett & Woolcock (2004:194)

Government officials throughout the bureaucracy must be trained and monitored throughout implementation. Teaching is an excellent example of a practice. Teachers must make multiple decisions each day how they will implement government policies. They also interact regularly with service recipients. Second generation reforms generally require that states be able to engage with this type of policy task though developing their bureaucratic agencies.

Each of these types of development task provide challenges, although policies and programmes are generally easier to accomplish than practices. Drawing from my own research on water management in Southeast Asia, we can identify three different developmental tasks aligned with each of these types. First, the decision about where to place a dam is an example of a policy. This decision can be, and usually is, made by a small group of irrigation engineers. While the decision may be controversial and face challenges from the public, the actual task of deciding where to build and when to build is relatively simple. Indeed, irrigation agencies throughout Southeast Asia have a strong track record of building irrigation infrastructure.

Second, the replacement of broken water gates throughout an irrigation system is an example of a programme. These water gates are placed at the head of each secondary or tertiary canal, and over time they are subject to wear and tear. Their replacement is a routine matter. Implementers do not need to make major decisions about such repairs nor do they need to interact heavily with service recipients during the process.

Third, allocating water flows is a good example of a practice. This requires heavy farmer-agency cooperation, with local irrigation officials exercising great discretion in determining the timing of water releases. Farmers must be alerted ahead of time about water flows, and they must be monitored to ensure that they do not extract more than their fair share. Local officials are often pulled in many directions by their bureaucratic mandate, farmers requesting water, requirements of urban areas, and their own knowledge about water availability. Thus the local official becomes an important decider of water distribution. With so many demands, it is little wonder that irrigation systems are often subject to poor management. Indeed, irrigation agencies throughout Southeast Asia struggle to accomplish this task. Officials prefer to work on construction projects because, as one official in Thailand explained, "working with people is difficult."

My own research in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines indicates that irrigation agencies in all three countries have a great deal of experience with both building infrastructure and repairing it, but they have little capacity to engage in the practice of operating it. As a result, irrigation systems suffer from poor performance while bureaucrats continually focus on building new infrastructure. Such outcomes do not improve service provision or crop production.

While this example is drawn from irrigation, its lessons reach into other sectors. The capacity to accomplish policies and programmes is insufficient to move a state beyond the beginning stages of development.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Abstracting now from the topic of irrigation, sustaining economic growth requires that states develop the capacity to engage with these "practices." While early stages of economic growth can be achieved through a focus on the "policies" and "programmes" that were found in the first generation reforms, maintaining that growth necessitates that state agencies be competent at implementing policies, engagement with service recipients, and adaptive to changing circumstances. In other words, governments must be able to tackle practices.

I argue that one of the most important factors in developing such state capacity is comprehensive bureaucratic reform. While countries in Southeast Asia have proven that they are able to spur rapid growth through reliance on natural resources, cheap labour, and macroeconomic policies, most have not yet shown the mettle to engage with more difficult tasks that require decentralised decision making and engagement with civil society that characterise the practices necessary for second generation reforms. Civil servants in these states are faced with a negative set of incentives that have accumulated over decades of bureaucratic history, which inhibit their ability to accomplish the necessary tasks.

An example from my own research may make this clear. For decades, irrigation experts have argued that the transfer of water management responsibilities to farmer groups is necessary for efficacious irrigation. As a side benefit, including farmers in operations and maintenance would also result in reduced costs to the state. Despite the potential benefits, irrigation agencies in Southeast Asia have failed to incorporate farmer participation in water management. Incentives within the agencies discourage officials from working with farmers. Decisions about pay increases and promotions focus on construction projects rather than service provision, which leads many civil servants to consider working with farmers a "waste of time." Without reforms to these agencies, it is highly unlikely that these irrigation systems will ever fulfil their potential.

The same could be said of other state agencies. Unless incentives are turned toward quality service provision, the bureaucracies will continue to focus on "policies" and "programmes" and fail to address the more challenging issues. And until such tasks can be addressed, sustained rapid economic growth remain elusive.

About the author

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- Forces Affecting Societal Leaders in Southeast Asia
- Challenges and Innovation in the Social Space
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