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S'poreans doing overseas charity work have hero mentality

By: Ng Tze Yong

YES, we're envied, admired and respected.

But loved? Not so.

This is the unfortunate reality of how foreigners view Singaporeans and the charity work we do overseas, according to Mr Hassan Ahmad, the chief executive of local humanitarian agency Mercy Relief.

The reason: Some Singaporeans who go on overseas relief missions sometimes like to think of themselves as heroes.

'Sometimes, we go into these impoverished communities and we tell them: You need this, this, and this,' said Mr Hassan.

'So instead of finding out their needs, we come with this hero's mentality and we tell them what they need.'

'At the same time,' Mr Hassan emphasised, 'it is done out of goodwill so it's hard to blame them too.'

Last Wednesday, Singapore's humanitarian agencies celebrated the inaugural World Humanitarian Day.

And as Singapore's humanitarian sector looks ahead, what its leaders hope for is this deeper understanding of the complexity of humanitarian work among ordinary Singaporeans.

'We need to seek the meaning beyond heroism,' said Miss Soh Lai Yee, a 32-year-old who has volunteered extensively with the Youth Expedition Programme under the Singapore International Foundation (SIF).

'Everyone signs up with good intentions, but what needs to be done may not be the most glamorous and rewarding, something that necessarily makes you feel wonderful about yourself.'

'Welfare tourists'

Dr Terence Chong, a sociologist from the Institute of South-east Asian Studies, has a name for this mindset problem: Welfare tourism.

'When many young affluent Singaporeans go overseas to do humanitarian work, they become 'welfare tourists',' he said.

'There is often no long-term commitment to a project or cause. The 'welfare tourist' is there to experience poverty, catch a glimpse of human suffering, lend a hand, and then come back to the comforts of Singapore with a nice CV and lots of stories to tell their friends over lunch.'

This phenomenon, Dr Chong added, is 'part of the self-help culture where helping others is seen as a way to self-enrichment... (and) also part of a consumerist society where people can go out and buy such 'feel good' experiences'.

Whether Dr Chong is right or not, one thing's certain: Singaporeans' response to natural disasters has increased dramatically in the last 10 years, according to the Singapore Red Cross (SRC), which celebrates its 60th anniversary this year.

'Previously, it was only major humanitarian organisations who ventured overseas,' said a SRC spokesman.

'But in recent times, people are banding together and going directly to the disaster zone to help.'

The local humanitarian sector is a developing one and there is no one agency that collates relevant statistics and figures.

But there are indications of Singaporeans' compassion for the needy overseas:

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In the past 12 years, the SRC has received \$120million in donations - for disaster relief in almost all the continents.

According to a National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre survey, the number of Singaporeans who volunteer has also nearly doubled in the last decade.

The number of charities registered has risen from 1,564 in 2002 to 1,944 in 2008. SIF is also seeing growing interest in corporate social responsibility and philanthropy.

Given this enthusiasm, Mr Hassan's assessment of the biggest obstacle facing local humanitarian agencies in the next decade is surprising: A lack of talent.

'It's about having street smarts, to a certain extent,' said Mr Hassan.

Singaporeans, ever-efficient, tend to be straight-talkers, he said.

'When we go overseas, we don't have the patience or know-how to negotiate with other people and we often find it hard to understand their double-speak,' said Mr Hassan.

'In places like China and Indonesia, they are so eloquent you won't believe it. They may appear to agree with you, but that's only because they don't want to say no.

'If you don't understand that, then when it comes to implementation, you have a problem.'

Mr Eugene Wee, the 28-year-old co-founder of Radion International, a local humanitarian agency that works with impoverished communities in Thailand, blamed it on the 'culture of competitiveness and efficiency' that Singaporeans are brought up in.

'Not enough focus is given to developing inter-personal skills and character-building, resulting in a generation that may be less culturally sensitive,' he said.

Respectful

The process of help, said Miss Soh, needs to be 'humanised'.

'We cannot just parachute in. It cannot be just about meeting Deadline A, Deadline B and Deadline C. We have to be respectful,' she said.

At the same time, there lies a Catch-22 situation for the Singaporean aid worker.

Deadlines, key performance indicators and quotas are 'what Singaporeans have learnt to respond to at school and at work.... it's what gives us a sense of success and achievement'.

It won't be easy to change mindsets. But for starters, Mr Hassan hopes schools will do more to provide students with overseas exposure that is more than just 'skin-deep'.

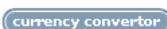
At the same time, the idea of teaching street smarts can be problematic.

Asked John (not his real name), the principal of a secondary school: 'Street smarts.... what do you mean by that? There are many different definitions.

'If you do business in China, for example, being street-smart may mean you have to grease palms. For someone from our culture, it is very difficult to accept something like that.

'So street smarts is not always a virtue.'

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