Charity work and community – what is the link?

Written by Mr Han Fook Kwang, Member, Charity Council on 12 Feb 2020

When you contribute to a charitable cause, you help directly the intended recipients of your generosity. It might be the poor, vulnerable, or aged - you decide whom you want to give to, and they undoubtedly benefit from your action. This is the most direct effect of giving to charity, and, for most of us, the matter ends there.

But there is one other indirect consequence which may be even more important but often overlooked. It has to do with the role that charities play and how it contributes to our nation's sense of community. When we give – whether in kind or by volunteering our services – we implicitly recognise that we are part of a community which we have a responsibility to take care of. We acknowledge that there are some members of the community who, for whatever reason, are not doing as well and require help. And when we offer that help, we strengthen the bonds that hold the community together.

Why is this important? I would argue that, at this stage of Singapore's development, building a sense of community among the people is one of the most important tasks ahead.

Singapore has done exceptionally well in developing its economy, and is now one of the wealthiest countries in the world. This is largely the result of its free market policies, based on meritocracy and being open to the world. There is much to be proud of in what has been achieved. But one unintended consequence of a free market society is that it may encourage individualistic behaviour. The competition for academic achievements, jobs and greater wealth can promote an every-man-for-himself attitude. To get ahead in the race, someone has to be beaten. It makes people afraid to lose out because the perception, real or imagined, is that there is a high price to pay when you do not make it. Hence, the "kiasu" attitude.

In such a society, it is not easy to build a sense of community.

Indeed, Singapore lags behind many countries on this front. It is not ranked highly in terms of donations to charities compared to many of the developed countries. Many people have also commented that the city is not as clean as before and it requires an army of paid cleaners to keep it

clean. In hawker centres, many still do not return their food trays whereas in many other cities, citizens do it as a matter of civic consciousness.

The painful reality is that Singaporeans have yet to develop a deep sense of community.

This is where charity helps. Being involved in charitable work, either running one or giving to one, demands an almost opposite set of motivations from that which drives a free market, capitalistic society. Instead of trying to get ahead at the expense of someone else, we want to help those in need, and work together with our fellow citizens to uplift the life of others. This very different set of values is exactly what is required for community-building.

Both the economic and people sectors are necessary in a city-state like Singapore. We need economic growth and a competitive spirit to do well in today's globalised world. But we also need a thriving people sector with as many people involved in charity work to develop a more balanced, all-rounded society.

It is therefore important for charities to try to involve as many people as possible and expand the network of volunteers and supporters. When more people are connected to charity work, or hear about what is being done to help those in need, the more the bonds of community are strengthened. Spread your message through inspiring stories of what your volunteers have done.

Society at large, be it the private or public sectors, should recognise this wider role that charities play, and do more to support them. Charities lead to a stronger community which benefits everyone.