



Feb 27, 2010
The Straits Times
By Zeslene Mao

Wanted: 1000 firms to help needy kids

A CHARITY initiative which encourages businesses to give to the needy as part of their corporate social responsibility has found an ardent supporter in Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean.

The project - 1,000 Enterprises for Children-in-Need - was initiated in December 2008 and officially launched in February last year by the Singapore Children's Society (SCS).

It aims to rally 1,000 or more small, medium and large businesses to adopt the SCS as their official charity and pledge to give donations yearly.

Contributions from businesses, ranging from \$1,000 to more than \$30,000, will fund the needs of children the charity serves.

The SCS, whose patron-in-chief is President S R Nathan, was established in 1952. Every year, the charity reaches out to 46,000 needy children, youths and families.

Recognising that 'children are the future of Singapore', Mr Teo readily agreed to be the patron of the initiative. He said: 'It doesn't matter if the contribution is big or small, corporate social responsibility must be a part of all companies. I want to help rally every business enterprise doing business in Singapore to be a part of this project.'

In the early months of last year, the SCS found itself in a tricky situation because of the global financial downturn.

Mr Kurt Wee, a 35-year-old investment banker who chairs the appeals standing committee at SCS, said: 'There was a 22 per cent drop in donations in 2008 due to the global financial crisis. However, when there is a recession, more people actually need help as they may have lost their jobs. The charity was caught in a double whammy.'

Confronted with a need to increase its services, but facing falling contributions, the SCS required a novel way to ensure that its donations could be sustained.

Mr Wee and Mr Koh Choon Hui, the charity's chairman, first formulated the idea for this project over a cup of coffee.

'We decided to reach out to small and medium enterprises to participate in this as part of their social giving, with modest sums from different companies all lending support to a good cause,' Mr Koh explained.

The society hopes to raise \$1 million annually over the next three years. Now in its second year, the project has 276 participating organisations.

The first organisation to provide seed money for the project was commodities trader Noble Group.

Mr Richard Elman, chairman of the company, said: 'Helping children is absolutely in the culture of our company.'

Noble Group and Singapore Petroleum Company have each contributed at least \$30,000 while OCBC Bank is the society's community partner.

Other companies are chipping in either as a leading, supporting or participating enterprise.

Despite being unable to achieve its aim of getting 1,000 participants in the project's first year, Mr Teo remains optimistic.

He said: 'I hope that in this second year of the project, we will hit our target of 1,000 companies and that this can be sustained year-on-year with at least 1,000 enterprises which will collectively stand as a steady pillar of support for the society's cause.'

Wanted: 1,000 firms to help needy kids

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Children from the SCS learning about sound saving and spending habits through an interactive board game. DPM Teo Chee Hean has agreed to be the patron of the 1,000 Enterprises for Children-in-Need project, which benefits the SCS. PHOTO: CAPITALAND

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