

More S'pore groups raising funds for causes abroad

Number of permits issued doubles over five years

BY CAROLYN QUEK

FROM providing footwear to the unshod and an education to the unschooled to raising funds for the victims of human trafficking, more overseas causes are being picked up and pursued by people in Singapore.

The numbers are telling: The Office of the Commissioner of Charities (COC) is handing out more permits to raise funds here for overseas causes - from 36 in 2005 to 80 last year - to home-grown non-profit groups, working alongside corporate donors and seasoned fund-raisers like the Singapore Red Cross.

The money amassed has also gone up - from \$9.7 million in 2005 to \$24 million last year.

All in, \$170 million was raised between 2004 and last year, including the \$88 million collected by the Singapore Red Cross for victims of the 2004 tsunami.

Charity industry veteran Gerard Ee said the trend indicates the growing breadth of compassion here: "I feel optimistic when I see Singaporeans having a heart big enough to think beyond our shores and responding to help people affected by tsunamis and earthquakes, even though they are far away."

The trend squares with the finding from last year's survey by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), which showed that Singapore-

ans were becoming more giving. It found that, for the first time last year, donations by Singaporeans to causes at home and abroad passed the \$1 billion mark.

The bulk of the money still went to causes at home, but it did not stop the likes of Ms Deborah Chew, 36, and Ms Grace Chia, 39, from starting Project Happy Feet to provide footwear, schooling and job training to more than 1,000 children in Cambodia and Vietnam, after they saw the poverty in Siem Reap in 2007.

Like Lotus Culture, another group which has raised \$55,000 since last July through private donations for the victims of human trafficking, Project Happy Feet is also a "peace-time project", one distinct from disaster-relief efforts carried out by established groups like Mercy Relief and the Singapore Red Cross.

Both the founders of Project Happy Feet and Lotus Culture say they feel their help is more needed overseas, and that the social impact of their work would be greater than at home.

Mrs Sylvia Lee, 53, of Lotus Culture, said: "If you have seen the girls and seen what is happening out there, the choice and decision are very easy. If I have \$1,000, that \$1,000 could make a bigger impact out there than the \$1,000 you spend in Singapore."

But Lotus Culture co-founder Lee Pak Kheng, 60, who also volunteers locally, said her giving to local and foreign causes are not "mutually exclusive" objectives, and that giving to others in a foreign land "gives one new insight into doing good".

Project Happy Feet's Ms Chew said her group did not consciously choose not to support local beneficiaries; in fact, it



Project Happy Feet volunteers on an outreach trip to Siem Reap, Cambodia, in 2008, where they distributed basic supplies like slippers to children whose families were too poor to afford footwear. PHOTO: PROJECT HAPPY FEET

TOUCHED BY SUFFERING OVERSEAS

"We didn't consciously choose not to support the beneficiaries in Singapore, but we were really touched by what we saw overseas in Cambodia and Vietnam, and we felt that that was something we wanted to reach out to."

Project Happy Feet's Deborah Chew

will not shut the door on a Singapore beneficiary that comes knocking.

Groups like hers have guidelines to follow. For starters, they need the permit under the Charities Act to raise funds for a foreign charitable cause.

They do not have to be registered charities or Institutions of a Public Character, which can offer tax breaks to those who

make donations, but they must show proof to the COC that their overseas beneficiary is a genuine one.

NVPC director Kevin Lee, referring to the survey finding that Singaporeans are opening their wallets more to causes here and abroad, said: "Whether donors give internationally or locally is their choice. People will continue to give generously to

causes that resonate with them."

Charity veteran Mr Ee, when asked whether donations to foreign causes would shrink the donor pie on home turf, said some impact could be expected: "The pie is fixed. It is only that much money, but it just means the local charities have to be more professional and cleverer in how they present their cause so they get their share of it."

Executive director of Singapore Children's Society Alfred Tan agreed, but said he does not feel threatened, largely because there is room for more corporate donations to come in, "so it is not like we are going into a very tight market and trying to squeeze it".

Mercy Relief chief executive Hassan Ahmad views the growth of the donation dollar to overseas causes positively: "It is widely accepted that charity begins at home, but it shouldn't end there."

carolynq@sph.com.sg