





## PASSION FOR CAMBODIA

Peggy Goh with the Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister at the inauguration of the St Paul's Institute in March

# S'pore philanthropists turn more hands-on

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"When they see the projects for themselves and meet the ultimate beneficiaries of their gifts, they also get a sense of reward that they would not have otherwise gotten from a written report alone," Ms Santi says.

"Site visits also enable donors to understand the circumstances and root causes of problems that make philanthropy necessary in the first place," she adds.

Local architect Tay Kheng Soon, who has run his own practice Akitet Tenggara for over 30 years, would agree.

He now frequently travels to Thailand with Lien Aid, a partnership which began with building an eco-community centre in Lam Plai Mat. On these visits, he has come to know the children from that community and now speaks with pride of the 10-year-olds – "some of the poorest children of Thailand but so incredible, so confident" – who now run the centre's radio station and came up among the top in a recent national exam.

"The learning process is really a privilege – that's my payoff. As a result, I'm not just an architect anymore," he says. It was voluntary work on projects like these that helped him craft his "rurbanisation" strategy of developing areas which are neither rural nor urban but combine traits of both in a sustainable way – an approach now used by Indonesian and Sri Lankan authorities too.

With his technical expertise in non-traditional architecture, Mr Tay persuaded the Thais to use locally available materials of rammed earth and bamboo (initially disparaged as cheap) to save costs and build the environmentally sustainable Lam Plai Mat centre.

Similarly, Philip Wang, a professional engineer and a relative of Mr Khoo's who visited the Sichuan schools, says: "I'm quite keen to see how local architecture or building engineering consultancies can use some of their skills to benefit international development. It's not always that easy, because of the different contexts."

There is the benefit of philanthropists' own interests sustaining longer-term needs of a development-type project too. "We have found that by getting involved, philanthropists are able to retain their interest in the real pleasure of philanthropy," says Ms Santi. "When they do get involved and apply their talents, they are able to inject the energy and sustained focus to overcome the challenge of creating durable positive change."

Peggy Goh, co-founder of listed offshore services firm Ezra Holdings, says that motivated by "God's higher commission to bless others, especially those who are needy and less fortunate" and her "passion for Cambodia and her people", she sees the tertiary education she helped build for the rural community in Takeo as a dream fulfilled.

Madam Goh, whose family is 16th on Forbes Singapore's 40 Richest list, gave US\$795,000 to the St Paul's Institute, which officially opened last month. But finances aside, she was heavily involved in the actual work of roping in Lien Aid to manage the project and oversee construction together with the Catholic Church of Cambodia, and then getting Ngee Ann Polytechnic to share its educational know-how with the new institute.

Firmly convinced of the value of development work and the impact it can have, Madam Goh says her experience with overseas development in the area of education will now spur her advocacy of other ways of doing philanthropy, like micro funding and improving healthcare.