More should follow in philanthropists’ footsteps

BY JEREMY AU YONG

MORE should follow the likes of Khoo Teck Puat, Tan Tock Seng and Lee Kong Chian — and give back to the community after they have succeeded.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made this call to Singaporeans yesterday while talking about the widening income gap during his National Day Rally speech.

He noted that philanthropy was something already taking hold in the United States: “A lot of the new wealth...instead of just spending it, living extravagant lifestyles, they are setting up foundations, doing good works.”

The income gap is widening worldwide, and Singapore is no exception.

He used the example of sports to explain how competition for the best was stretching out incomes, leading to a gulf between the “best and the rest”: “Tiger Woods earns US$100 million ($152 million) a year... The No 2 earner in the world is Phil Mickelson. He earns about half of Tiger Woods’.”

The same phenomenon can be seen in other fields, with intense competition for talent raising incomes at the very top.

Successful Singaporeans can do their part to help the low-income by philanthropic giving, said Mr Lee.

On its part, the Government is active in coming up with strategies to narrow the widening income gap.

First is to sustain growth to generate more resources to help those in need.

The Government also emphasises training, skills upgrading and job redesign to raise the productivity of low-income workers.

“In addition to this, we have programmes like Workfare where we transfer to the low-income, but not without conditions just as a hongbao,” he said.

But tackling problems of the poor cannot just be left to the Government.

In his speech in Mandarin, he elaborated: “The selfless acts of philanthropists can move people, and set an example for others to follow. No government official can have such influence.”

He gave the example of the late Dr Ee Peng Liang, who was chairman of the Community Chest for many years. “He told me once how he had to admonish somebody who came to him for help, because he felt that the man was not making the effort to help himself.

“Dr Ee had the moral authority to scold this man,” said Mr Lee, adding that not even an MP or minister could have the same effect.

Currently, said Mr Lee, there are many examples of Singaporeans giving back to society.

He listed a few buildings named after their donors like Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the Lee Kong Chian Business School in the Singapore Management University and the upcoming Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Yishun.

He said: “More people should do this, according to your means and from your heart. Because collectively, these individual responses make our society much more compassionate, much more cohesive.”