Social innovations that benefit many

Winners of the Lien i3 Challenge are passionate about their causes

SINGAPORE — One aims to use rats to sniff out landmines at the Thai-Cambodian border, another collects clothes for the rural poor in India and the third aims to get individuals contributing towards scholarships for Cambodian and Vietnamese children.

These were three of eight proposals that clinched the inaugural Lien i3 Challenge — aimed at catalysing social innovation to benefit Asian communities — at an awards dinner on Friday night that capped the Lien Centre for Social Innovation’s first-ever conference bringing together the world’s most impactful social innovators.

The eight winners will share the $1.1 million prize money to carry their ideas to fruition, with each receiving a grant of $50,000 to $250,000. The three winners MedicaCorp spoke to hail from different parts of the world but are equally passionate about their causes.

Professor Mic Billet recalled how his colleague at Belgium’s Antwerp University thought him crazy for thinking that rats could help to detect landmines.

His former student, Mr Bart Weetjens, had approached him, wanting to do something to help landmine victims whom he had met.

“He wanted to develop prostheses for them, but I said, ‘We have to take out the anti-personnel mines,’” recalled Prof Billet, 71.

Landmines are traditionally detected via laser, metal detectors or dogs. These methods cost up to US$13 ($4) per square metre (psm) covered and are too expensive for the developing countries.

Using African Giant Pouched Rats, which are about 30cm long and sometimes kept as pets, the cost is only US$1 psm. Rats also work three times as fast as other manual methods, said Prof Billet.

Their non-profit organisation, Apopo, has trained about 100 rats now sniffing the fields of Tanzania and Mozambique in Africa. With the Lien grant, they will embark on the Thai-Cambodian project within a year.

HELPING THE RURAL POOR

Like Apopo, Indian non-governmental organisation Goonj (which means “echo” in Hindi) was prompted by its founder’s encounter with people in need. As a graduate student in 1991, Mr Anshu Gupta travelled to earthquake-hit Uttarkashi in Northern India, hoping to photograph the disaster.

It was his first time exposed to “sharsh realities in rural India”, but he was touched by the warmth of villagers.

Wanting to do something for the poor, Mr Gupta, 39, set up Goonj to divert unwanted clothes and other materials in cities to the rural poor. Clothing is a basic need, but when you talk about development issues, it’s usually about domestic violence, global warming, never about clothes”, he said.

Started in 1998, Goonj now sends over 40,000kg of material to rural dwellers every month.

One of its programmes, Cloth for Work, gives out clothes in exchange for village development work such as the repair of roads. Materials that are no longer wearable are made into rugs, pouches, and even sanitary napkins, said Mr Gupta.

He will invest the Lien grant in his team of 150 and develop reference materials for those keen on adopting Goonj’s concept. There are no plans to expand operations. “We don’t want Goonj to grow as an organisation, we want Goonj to grow as an idea,” he said.

THREE NATIONALITIES, ONE CAUSE

What happens when a young Singaporean, a Canadian and an American with a shared passion for social causes come together?

An online platform that will allow individuals to fund the education of South-east Asian children.

Singaporean Jens Tam, Simon Tam and Sara Ortega met in China on a social initiative, inspired by the online micro-funding portal Kiva.org, the trio thought: “Why not do that for scholarships?”

A web portal that will allow individuals to set up scholarship funds is now in the works, and the trio are identifying Cambodian and Vietnamese non-governmental organisations to partner.

Over 18 million children in South and East Asia who are of primary-school age are not enrolled in school.

It will likely take US$50 to US$270 per scholarship to make a difference. Canadian Mr Tam, 25, said: “Kids in rural areas don’t really need that much.”

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Technology is changing the way individuals and companies give to social causes, and it is changing the way social enterprises need to benefit from and do their part.

By holding a “yes” or “no” dual-dimensional virtual world facial job to help children in times of crisis. For Life, the American Cancer Society raised nearly $50,000 this year. Various support groups in the United States also utilise Second Life to counter members.

And on social-giving platform ammachi.com, companies are giving their employees virtual gifts souvenirs to donate to charities of their choice.

These were just two of an inaugural social innovation conference held at the National Institute of Social Management University, organised by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

Social impact was the setting for more than one of the world’s most influential social entrepreneurs, including Terry Matthews, whose non-governmental organisation, WeForest, has planted nearly 100 million trees in sustainable communities for a dough-free Philippines, and Andrew Mitchell of Opportunity International, which helps poor building entrepreneurs and provides microfinance loans.

The participants also highlighted the issue of social financing, with experts calling for the business and social sector to engage in a two-way dialogue. Even in the wake of the global economic downturn, the numbers of massive social issues are enormous, including the inability of financial institutions, stakeholders should not create a “false dichotomy of business bad, social good”, said Mr Rob John, co-founder of the Asian Venture Philanthropy Network.

There are business principles that social entrepreneurs would do well to adopt, such as the idea that the letter can impact, he said.

What the social sector needs is the risk and trust and cooperation of companies with a nose for philanthropists willing to still their money in worthy enterprises.

Professor Mic Billet, chairman of non-profit organisation Apopo, said MedicaCorp would like to engage with NGOs in Singapore to contribute to his cause of detecting landmines — by training rats to detect them.

Such a move would be sound investment in the long term, in the form of economic development in a “safe world” free of the explosive devices, he said.

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