

## **Building better lives.**

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More and more Singaporeans are forsaking cushy jobs to volunteer for overseas community projects. CHEAH UI-HOON finds out more

THERE'S been a push for Singaporeans to go overseas to work, supposedly for better job experience or higher pay, plus more networking opportunities. But the idea of working overseas for altruistic or even recreational reasons is also catching on among a growing group of people in 'cushy' jobs here. They go with little or minimum pay, and take personal leave, all to meet specific needs in developing countries in the region.

Peter Ng, 39, got his first taste volunteering overseas on a three-month information technology (IT) networking project in Ambon, Indonesia with the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) seven years ago.

'When they contacted me again in 2001, this time to go to Bhutan for a year-long project to set up a computer network and to teach IT skills, I thought, why not.' So he quit his job, packed his bags and went. 'My principle is to do what you want to do, and not worry about what's down the road five to 10 years ahead,' he says.

Not all can do as he does, he admits. But certainly, opportunities for people to volunteer in community services outside Singapore have been increasing in the past years, thanks to the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) and newer organisations like Habitat for Humanity Singapore.

Becoming the norm

Want to build a house in Sri Lanka? Or train others to teach English? How about teaching 'social marketing' in Batam and East Timor? Or computer skills in Bhutan? And provide mental health counselling for children in Cambodia?

Apparently, quite a number of Singaporeans do. Since Habitat for Humanity Singapore set up its office here, interest in its house-building projects has picked up quickly, says Hosea Lai, the national coordinator. Volunteers don't have to be skilled as there are supervisors on site.

'I've gotten calls from people saying our organisation is a godsend, that it's something they've been looking for because they don't want to go for conventional holidays but to do something more meaningful,' he says.

Enquiries stream in mainly from professionals in their 20s and 30s, many of them women. 'We sent out a total of 10 teams of eight to 12 people last year to different countries in the region, but this year, it's only March, and we already have 10 teams so we could have another 10 teams by the end of the year,' Mr Lai notes. Each team consists of eight to 15 people.

Last week, Habitat Singapore launched a campaign to build 100 houses in Batam and the Asia-Pacific region in a year.

Notes Lee Mui Ngah, SIF's director of policy who was formerly heading the Singapore Volunteers Overseas (SVO) programme: 'Just take a look at how our volunteer platforms and numbers have grown. When we started out in 1991, we just had one platform which is SVO. The idea was to get individual Singaporeans to go out for a year to do community development work.'

Since then, SIF has supported more than 500 Singaporeans who volunteer overseas through three platforms within SVO - infield assignments (where you stay in the host country for at least one year), specialist team projects (short term but recurrent training for trainers) and communities in partnership projects (where voluntary groups can design their own community service project with some advice and funding from SIF).

From teaching English and healthcare, the skill sets have expanded to business, IT or office management, special education and even food technology.

'The skills imparted by volunteers are quite eclectic, though a lot are medical in nature. The more unusual specialist projects are community mental health work in Timor Leste and Cambodia and social work training in Myanmar,' says Ms Lee.

Specialist team projects, for instance, are very popular with working professionals because they commit only a week to 10 days a year, for a period of three to five years.

'For the general working professional, they find volunteering on specialist team projects quite accessible because it means their jobs and commitments here aren't disrupted, but they also go out and make a sustained and real contribution,' she says.

Specialist teams also have a good multiplier effect because it conducts training of trainers, where the local trainees go on to innovate on the skills learnt and disseminate it to others.

And since the start of the SVO-Communities in Partnership scheme, more Singaporeans have come forward to help needy communities in countries like Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia, she says. 'The types of volunteers have also expanded to include retirees,' she adds, but they're mostly professionals in their late 30s, and female.

Corporate support

Citigroup - through its sports and recreation club, Citiclub - is an organisation getting into the overseas volunteer scene. Just last year, they sent two teams to Udon Thani and Chiang Mai in Thailand to build houses under the ambit of Habitat for Humanity - which is present in 92 countries, 26 of them in the Asia-Pacific region.

'I thought that the philosophy was great, it's a cause that I could relate to,' says Paul Kwee, the president of Citiclub. 'Everyone should have a decent place to live in - it's so fundamental.'

When the club sent out a mailer to the 3,500 plus staff in the organisation, some 80 people expressed interest in the programme. 'In the end, 27 went out in the two teams we formed, but there were also a handful who joined 80 of our counterparts from Citigroup Thailand on a weekend build in Korat.'

This was Citiclub's first community project overseas. 'At first I thought there might be some who'd think we should only support projects within Singapore, but we didn't get any protests of that nature. We do carry out community projects here, but why should we limit ourselves to these shores?' says Mr Kwee.

What did Citiclub take into consideration when deciding on a volunteer programme for the staff? 'Employee safety was paramount,' says Mr Kwee. 'Also, the organisation should have a good infrastructure which helps us focus on the work we're volunteering for. Obviously, their philosophy should also match our corporate ideals.'

It helped that the parent company in the US was already a major supporter of Habitat for Humanity, although Mr Kwee didn't realise that until the Singapore Citiclub got involved.

Thus, the company approved three days' unrecorded leave for the staff who went on the build. 'Yes, that was unprecedented, but management was fully supportive and gave us their approval,' he says.

Other companies which have sent teams on Habitat for Humanity builds include Cargill International, Alexandra Hospital and the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore. Companies have been quite supportive of overseas volunteers, notes Chia Meng Tze, senior director of SIF's SVO programme. 'When we've asked employers to release their staff for specialist teams, I'd say they've been supportive ... A few have given unrecorded leave. The Ministry of Education, for instance, gives full pay leave for the first six months when their

teachers go on a two-year programme.'

This is the kind of institutional support SIF would like to see for Singaporeans who volunteer overseas. 'To be fair, we can't ask for a blanket approval of unrecorded leave. It's really a case for volunteers to have personal negotiations with their employers.

'But in the near future, we'd like companies and institutions to volunteer their staff on placements, while retaining their salaries and seniority in the company. And that it becomes a part of their career track - just like the government getting their civil servants to do a one-year stint in the private sector,' Ms Chia says.

This is an aspect of corporate social responsibility which goes beyond giving funds, she says.

#### Personal sacrifice

After two overseas stints and facing the difficulty of finding a job when he returned, Mr Ng advises volunteers to be realistic if they're looking at long-term volunteer work.

'I don't mind volunteering, but I realise that I have to make some personal sacrifices, like job uncertainty,' he says. His experiences haven't enhanced his resume, he thinks, at least not in the Singapore context. 'I don't think the majority of employers, even in the government sector, see my experience as adding to my job skills, maybe only my EQ (emotional quotient) skills.'

When he went for job interviews, Mr Ng says some employers were interested to know what drove him and what he gained from it. 'But in the end, of course, it was still a matter of whether I was the right person for the job.'

'But I'd recommend volunteering overseas, of course. I think it's been spiritually balancing. When I first came back from Bhutan, which is a compassion-driven society, I could see the contrast with Singapore, which is quite an artificial society.'

Awareness about volunteer work is still pretty low, but increasing, thinks Melissa Kwee, president of the national committee for the UN Development Fund for Women (Unifem Singapore). 'A lot of people have good intentions but don't have the skills, or know where to go to volunteer,' she says. Unifem Singapore, for example, has a targeted recruitment of volunteers for specific missions which support Unifem issues like women trafficking, economic independence or political inclusion programmes.

'But there is a growing realisation among Singaporeans that we can share and give. And also how little it takes to make a difference,' she says.

Volunteer opportunities can be found at <http://www.sif.org.sg>, <http://www.habitat.org.sg>, and <http://www.unifemsingapore.org.sg>.