

# For the Greater Good

IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CHARITY SCANDALS, OPERATION HOPE FOUNDATION'S **ROBERT KEE** TELLS MELISSA GAIL SING WHY CHARITIES WITH A BUSINESS APPROACH HELP THE NEEDY BETTER



**A**S FAR BACK AS IN 1994, 64-YEAR-OLD BUSINESSMAN and amateur magician Robert Kee would make regular visits to orphanages in the Philippines, Cambodia and Nepal where he would leave the children in awe with his magic shows. But even magicians can get tricked. Like many, Kee first got involved in philanthropy by funding various overseas projects. He donated money freely, rarely questioning how the funds were used, but when the money got into the wrong hands one too many times, he decided to stop the donations.

## BETTER GIVING

**FROM LEFT**  
Founder of Operation Hope Foundation Robert Kee says, "A filmstar can raise millions of dollars for a charity, but who will execute the project and how will the funds be used?"; building a brick container for the bath water recycling project; Kee with some of the children at Hope

"I could not guarantee how the money was being used and with charity, you never know the other party's agenda, so sometimes you get tricked," says Kee, whose newly released book *Changing Lives: Hard Truths About Helping the Poor* offers his personal insights into running overseas charities in under-developed countries.

### Focusing on "How"

Despite the negative experiences, Kee wasn't about to put charity behind him. "I realised that the only way to give substantial help to the poor is through long-term projects," he shares.

In 2001, he co-founded Operation Hope Foundation (OHF), which helps impoverished communities in developing countries by taking

experience, OHF manages all its overseas projects, setting up orphanages and seeing to every last detail. This kind of direct control not only allows for greater accountability but also a high benefit-to-cost ratio (where cost is the total cost of the project and benefit is the estimated value of what the beneficiary actually receives). This unusual approach sharply contrasts with the majority of charities working overseas – they tend to act more like middlemen, dispensing financial aid to local charities who then carry out the work, not realising that often, as much as 90 per cent of funds can go to an organisation's costs.

Citing the example of the floods in Nepal, Kee says, "If a team of 10 flies over, is put up in hotels, and a Paiero and professional photographers are



### Charity as an Investment

Kee, who is the managing director of Applied Digital Systems, an electronics manufacturing company, brings his business savvy to the foundation, offering a more effective way to give.

Since its inception, OHF has kept costs low and given maximum benefit to the beneficiaries at its 120-child orphanage and livelihood training centre in Prey Veng, Cambodia, and a 40-child orphanage in Kathmandu. Kee readily shows the monthly report, which details expenses for everything from transport usage to dry food consumption, to prove that every cent goes to the child.

Preferring to have a tight control over operating costs and not rely on third party operators, Kee is involved in all aspects of the orphanage operations, from securing land title deeds to creating computer lesson plans for the training centre. He runs the foundation with the micro-management style of a small business owner, and is convinced that a charity all about heart and no brains is a lost cause. "When you venture into charity as a businessman, your objective is to make money (for the charity), so everything is very clear," says Kee, who visits Cambodia every two months (he finances all his trips, with no salary or expense claims).

A penny counter he is, but the OHF orphanages he runs are no shabby outfits. The one in



*"Donors must not focus on the 'what' of a charity's efforts, but the 'how'"*

### HEALING WITH FIRST WORLD TECHNOLOGY

A trained electrical engineer and Colombo Plan Scholar, Robert Kee sees First World technology playing a crucial role in improving the lives of the poor. In Cambodia, some 90 per cent of rural villagers do not have piped water, relying instead on rivers or wells, which can be hundreds of metres away. At Hope Village Prey Veng, rainwater is collected and recycled for drinking and cooking. This is part of OHF Solution, one of the foundation's five programmes, which seeks to develop solutions through technology by collaborating with local and foreign tertiary institutions. It has also come up with a low-cost vegetable processor that reduces the perishability of crops so farmers can change higher for their produce. Kee is now looking at recycling bath water. "Some NUS students have come up with the ingenious solution of using reeds, whose roots have bacteria that converts the soap into food for the plant," says Kee. OHF is also looking at ways to make compost using enzymes; low-cost ways to collect and store rainwater for agriculture;

GIVING  
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