

You Are Not Alone: Restoring Hopes and Increasing Optimisms of Underprivileged Single Mothers and Families through Philanthropy

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Abstract

As an APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) University, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) aspires to become a 'humaniversity' role model. It plans to achieve this by consistently reaching out and engaging the bottom billions of the socio-economic pyramid. In 2011, the School of Distance Education (SDE) and School of Communication initiated three philanthropic programmes aimed at improving the lives of underprivileged single mothers and families. The first programme, which was held at the Dewan Millenium Kepala Batas, successfully provided aid to 300 underprivileged individuals identified by the external collaborator of this programme; Persatuan Kebajikan Delima Kasih Pulau Pinang. The next programme held at Padang MPSP Ampang Jajar involved another 300 underprivileged single mothers. In the third programme in Kampung Nelayan Sg. Batu, Teluk Kumbar, 50 individuals representing poor families were provided with assistance. From the implementations of these programmes, the team has grown to understand that continuous support from various philanthropic quarters through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives is essential in its continuous efforts of helping to eradicate poverty. The team has also learnt that financial assistance does not remain the essential ingredient in poverty eradication. This article discusses the success story of how USM through the Division of Industry and Community Network (DICN) has successfully matched and pooled facilities, funding and resources from the University and industries to benefit underprivileged single mothers and families. This act of providing underprivileged single mothers and families with resources and funds were aimed at helping them to achieve and maintain a sustainable livelihood.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR), philanthropy, underprivileged single mothers and families, volunteerism

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*...You are not alone in this world,
 To raise your children to be the finest, that they can be.
 You walk blindly through life, wearing your heart on your sleeve,
 At this moment, you are being commended, for being thee'.
 You exude strength unbeknownst to me,
 Guided by faith, so your heart is content
 I know you often cry at night, thinking of how your life should be
 spent...*

Single Mother by Lana Grissom

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility or better known as CSR has started since the mid-1920s, and has been described by many diverse definitions (Freeman & Hasnaoui 2011). The CSR definitions are based on social, economical, political and environmental perspectives. Such as economic development, legal and environmental protection together with ethical practices, stakeholders' involvement, moral obligation, corporate responsiveness, transparency, and accountability (Rahman, 2011). According to Freeman and Hasnoui (2011), CSR activities include terms known as corporate responsibility, corporate citizenship, sustainability, and corporate social performance.

In Malaysia, awareness about CSR has been rapidly developing. Most recently, both the corporate and public sectors in Malaysia have been earnestly adopting good CSR leadership and practices. The promotion of responsible acts from these sectors is part of the solution towards achieving sustainable development and giving back to the community. This is in line with two of the five strategic thrusts of the 10th Malaysian Plan (10MP), with the first: 'moving towards inclusive socio-economic development'; and the second: 'building an environment that enhances quality of life'. This initiative has also been embedded within the structure of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

Since 2007, USM has been demonstrating its commitment towards the encouragement of CSR practices. Leitao and Silva (2007, p.10) suggested that "there are two fundamental dimensions of CSR that should be 'exported' to the framework of Universities. First, the promotion of a true culture of Social Responsibility, within the organisation, using a permanent question: How University is socially responsible? This may be evaluated through the elaboration of annual reports that should be prepared by top managers that are responsible for the CSR. Second, the development of social marketing actions should be executed, in order to better communicate and interact with citizens. This kind of actions should be based on an integrative approach oriented to cooperating actions with distinct organisations."

While USM is established as a public university, it has long embraced the culture of sustainability in its academic and social responsibilities. The university has constantly encouraged CSR practices which is well-accepted by its workforce through the Division of Industry and Community Network (DICN). In line with its mission, vision and function, DICN aims at spearheading the promotion of sustainability, development and transformation of Malaysia's economy, social, culture, education, health and development through the close engagement between industries, the university and communities. As such, DICN has voluntarily brought together resources and funds for community-university-industry engagement projects in order to enable industries to fulfil their CSR responsibilities whilst allowing governmental agencies and non-governmental agencies to resolve community issues and needs.

This article highlights how USM through three DICN programmes helped pool together resources and funds from the university and industry and provided assistance to underprivileged single mothers, families, senior citizens and the disabled. The first programme was a collaboration by the Industry and Community Network (ICN) of the School of Distance Education (SDE) and ICN of the School of Communication. As this collaboration successfully created a meaningful, effective and sustainable community-university-industry linkage and engagement, it has been mutually agreed that all future programmes would be collaborations between these two schools. It has indeed been a heart-warming experience to also witness how our activities has received the support of the USM top management, our school deans, fellow staff members, students, and members of the society (public/private organisations and caring individuals).¹ We believe that this is important because the future of the children of the underprivileged depends on their ability to be independent and upon opportunities in terms of education and life experience.

Methods

The conception of a plan of action or methodology was necessary for making sure that these programmes were to be productively and effectively carried out. Strict adherence to this plan of action was essential as it will possibly ensure that all resources and funds were appropriately allocated to the largest number of participants. In order to achieve this, it was necessary that the participants for these programmes were identified through a strict selection process; a set of objectives in providing assistance to the participants was formulated; and carefully tailored programmes be structured so that allocated funds and resources can be properly distributed. These programmes, which commenced in January 2011, were inspired by an earlier research project on the employment patterns and financial abilities of single mothers in Penang conducted by one of us.

Participant Selection

These programmes were mainly tailored towards providing assistance for single mothers. A woman is classified as a single mother after her husband's death or when she is abandoned or divorced by him. While the majority of single mothers in these programmes belong to this category, there also exist single mothers whose husbands are incarcerated or currently in drug rehabilitation centres. While the exact number of single mothers in Malaysia cannot be determined due to conflicting numbers in press reports; these programmes are designed to assist the increasing numbers of underprivileged single mothers. In Malaysia, single mothers mostly are Malays and Muslims who receive irregular assistance and contributions from institutions such as tithe distribution (zakat) or other kind of donations from NGOs (Zarina & Anton, 2012).

A single mother is defined by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia as a woman who:

1. Raises her children by herself after the death of her husband;

¹ Special emphasis must be given to the guidance and leadership of Dr. Sakinah Abu Bakar, a Senior Lecturer from the School of Distance Education, has been extremely patient in guiding us develop the philanthropic activities of ICN.

2. Is currently divorced and has legal custodial rights of her children;
3. Is abandoned by her husband (not divorced) and does not receive living expenses for herself and her children (In Malay: *gantung tidak bertali*);
4. Is in the process of a lengthy divorce settlement and needs to care for her children;
5. Is living separately from her husband who does not perform his roles as a father and husband;
6. Is fully responsible for her children as her husband is seriously ill and needs special attention;
7. Looks after children who are not of her own without any assistance from her husband;
8. Raises a child or children born out of wedlock.

(Source: www.kpwkm.gov.my)

The participants selected for these programmes mainly consisted of single mothers and a number of underprivileged families from Penang. They are mostly women who are members of the newly formed non-governmental organisation (NGO), Persatuan Kebajikan Delima Kasih Pulau Pinang (PDKP) and from the surrounding areas of Ampang Jajar, Seberang Perai and Kampung Nelayan Sg. Batu, Teluk Kumbar.² While there does not exist a registered association to ensure the well-being of single mothers and underprivileged families, it has been brought to our attention that these individuals have been unselfishly given assistance by a volunteer, Encik Sazali Salleh.



Figure 1: Participant registration at Dewan Millenium Kepala Batas, Pulau Pinang

Objectives

The programmes consist of a number of objectives – short term and long term, to assist single mothers and underprivileged families. In general, these objectives are aimed at helping single mothers and underprivileged families to improve on their livelihood. This is because “maintaining a regular income and acquiring liquid and illiquid assets are crucial for single mothers in providing immediate necessities to their dependents and hopefully to provide a more stable livelihood for them and their children” (Zarina & Kamil, 2012, p.127).

The short term objectives are to highlight the plights of single mothers and underprivileged families, to provide daily necessities to the underprivileged and to create mutual awareness

² Formed in 2010, PDKP is managed by its current president, Ku Azwati Ku Hussain, who is herself, a single mother.

between contributors and beneficiaries. The initial presentation by PDKP had shown the stakeholders the difficulties and hardships of the disadvantaged single mothers and underprivileged families. Information obtained from PDKP revealed that many members of society remain underprivileged and are in need of assistance. Furthermore, during these programmes, daily provisions and clothes were distributed to the underprivileged. These provisions were distributed with the short term plan of helping the underprivileged overcome their daily struggles.

Meanwhile, the long term objective of this programme is to empower the single mothers with relevant skills and knowledge that will help them to increase their income and to help the children of underprivileged single mothers to achieve academic excellence. The team believes such forms of empowerment would enable the single mothers to become valuable members of society. By having such knowledge and skills, they could seek for employment as for example a seamstress and earn an income to help them care for their dependents.

The team also thinks that the welfare and future of children of underprivileged single mothers is of equal importance, as these programmes are aimed at preventing these children from living a life of continuous poverty. One of the key means of breaking out from poverty is by obtaining a proper education. In order for the children to be given opportunities for better forms of education, the team plans to provide academic assistance, especially to those who will be attending the Primary School Evaluation Test known as UPSR, Lower Secondary Assessment or PMR, and Malaysian Certificate of Education or SPM.



Figure 2: The face of our future

The Programmes

These programmes have been formulated to create a linkage between USM and disadvantaged communities. This link was successfully established when we observed how contented the participants were as we carried out these programmes for them. This has indirectly led to the change of perception that USM no longer exists as an ivory tower which is isolated from the community. These programmes which are mostly aimed at assisting single mothers have been well-received.

1. Dewan Millenium Kepala Batas

On 22 January 2011, the team carried out its first charity programme. Held at the Dewan Millenium Kepala Batas, Penang, the event was attended by 300 single mothers and underprivileged families selected by PDKP. The main objective of this programme was to create a meeting point for these individuals with potential employers and relevant agencies that could help change their lives. The programme which carried the theme, “Universiti Prihatin,

Masyarakat Terbela” (representing USM as a caring institution in a larger context of community), was launched by the Dean of SDE, Associate Professor Habibah Hj Lateh. The programme which was aimed at helping single mothers and underprivileged families alleviate their social and living conditions had also inadvertently given USM the acknowledgment as an institution that cares. This programme was also held as a platform for data and information gathering for the building of a database regarding the guidance and services rendered by agencies such as the Welfare Department, Pusat Urus Zakat (PUZ), Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), and the Federal Development Office.

Activities held during this one-day programme included free health screenings and consultations from Pusat Sejahtera USM and Advanced Medical and Dental Institute (*Institut Perubatan dan Pergigian Termaju - IPPT*); while a magic show and colouring contest were held for younger participants. The expenses for the programme were paid for using monetary contributions from the public, university staff members and lecturers, members of society and business organisations, who also donated clothes and toys. Such forms of cooperation and collaboration from the various quarters have made this event a great success.

It is hoped that this programme would serve as a catalyst for future charity programmes and that the plight of the underprivileged be noticed through continuous coverage. As this event was featured on Astro Awani, *Berita Kampus*, DICN Bulletin, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Kosmo* and *Sinar*, it is hoped that more members of society will come forth in providing their assistance in helping to sustain such programmes.



Figure 3: Volunteers sorting out used clothing



Figure 4: Fun activities for the children

2. Ampang Jajar, Seberang Perai

On 24 July 2011, the team carried out its second programme at Padang MPSP Ampang Jajar, Seberang Perai, Penang. The programme was attended by 300 single mothers and underprivileged families selected by PDKP. The main objective of this programme was to distribute food items such as rice, sugar, cooking oil, salt, dried noodles, tea, dates and clothing to the underprivileged to help them in their preparation for the fasting month of Ramadhan and Hari Raya AidilFitri.



Figure 5 and 6: Food items waiting to be distributed



Figure 7: Handing out food items to participants

The food items were generously handed out by the former ICN's Deputy Dean of the School of Communication, Dr. Mahyuddin Ahmad. The programme was successfully carried out with the assistance from the State Assemblyman of Pulau Betong, Y.B. Muhamad Farid Saad, the Seberang Perai Municipal Council and other anonymous donors.

3. Kampung Nelayan Sg. Batu, Teluk Kumbar

On 25 July 2011, the team successfully gathered together more than 50 individuals from underprivileged families. This third programme which was organised in conjunction with the fasting month of Ramadhan was held at Kampung Nelayan Sg. Batu, Teluk Kumbar, Penang. The programme was initiated by the team with the support of the village representative cum spokesperson, Encik Sazali Salleh. During this programme, food items such as rice, sugar, cooking oil, dried noodles, salt, tea, and clothes were successfully distributed to help lessen the burden on the mostly Muslim recipients during Ramadhan. The programme was graced with the attendance of the ICN's Deputy Dean of SDE, Dr. Che Supian Mohamad Nor; ICN's Deputy Dean of the School of Communication, Dr. Mahyuddin Ahmad; the Deputy Dean (Academic and Student Development) from the School of Communication, Dr. Azman Azwan Azmawati; and ICN committee members.



Figure 8: Bags of food items to be distributed to participants at Kampung Nelayan Sg. Batu



Figure 9: Participants at the programme



Figure 10: Participants choosing used clothing at the end of the programme

Programmes Outcomes/Results

The ultimate goal of these charity programmes is to improve the quality of life of the underprivileged. These programmes, like many other charity programmes, require a longer period of time for the materialisation of its desired outcomes. The three programmes have focused on engaging the university with the community and have achieved especially the short term objectives with numerous accomplishments.

First, these programmes have formulated a workable mechanism to reach out to part of the bottom billions – which are the underprivileged single mothers and families. By collaborating with civil organisations such as PDKP and also community leaders, a list of well-deserved underprivileged communities was obtained and stored in our database. The target groups of these programmes were clearly defined and appropriately identified.

Second, these programmes have offered welfare assistance to the target groups. In all three programmes, monetary contributions and donated food such as rice, sugar, and cooking oil, and clothing were distributed. Relevant parties such as Pusat Urus Zakat - PUZ (Alms Collection Center for Muslims), Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia - AIM (micro finance institution for the poor and low-income) and the Welfare Department have also provided platforms for the underprivileged

to seek for welfare assistance. Although the practice of distributing donations could be seen as transitory and short-lived, these programmes have fostered closer and long term university-community relationships especially in meeting the long term objectives – empowerment of the single mothers and to help the underprivileged children of the single mothers achieving excellence academic.

Third, a network of individuals committed towards philanthropic activities has been formed. This network includes individual donors (from within and outside USM), corporate contributors (through their CSR divisions), dedicated organisers and volunteers. The formation of this philanthropic network is expected to benefit future projects of similar kind. This could also be an impetus for the formation of a bigger network, that is, a university's foundation for the underprivileged.

Fourth, these programmes have fostered linkages and partnerships between DICN (representing the university), NGOs (e.g., Persatuan Kebajikan Delima Kasih), welfare agencies (e.g., PUZ, Amanah Ikhtiar and Welfare Department), the industry (e.g., such as HOYA, and TRR Heritage) and the community (e.g., underprivileged single mothers and families). This marks a significant achievement to our project. These linkages and partnerships which are expected to be further developed would perhaps create the momentum for the amplification of future projects such as a series of trainings on sewing and beading for the underprivileged single mothers.

Fifth, and most crucially, these programmes have created opportunities for volunteerism. The projects were driven by volunteers from various walks of life. These volunteers include donors who make voluntary contributions, ICN committees who dedicatedly ran the programmes, a handful of USM staff and students – and also certain members of the public. They were committed to making a difference – no matter how small – without expecting anything in return. This spirit of volunteerism demonstrated during the implementation of these projects is something that we and the University can take pride in.

Programmes Sustainability/Discussion

The success of the three programmes can be measured solely based on the contributions and donations received from the various quarters in the University and from individuals and organisations outside the University. This strengthens our belief that despite numerous unfortunate incidents occurring in our society, there remain a large number of individuals who are kind at heart. This led to the team realising that there exist various untapped philanthropic sources. For example, SDE students who mainly comprised of working adults, many who are holding important positions at their respective workplaces, were capable of making financial contributions. As such, they have capability and willingly helped through the CSR programmes of their organisations.

SDE students have also demonstrated a remarkable interest towards these programmes, simply because their contributions would enable them to post a notification on their e-learning portal, which is an important learning tool for them. On a separate note, we also discovered that some current and former SDE students were willing to voluntarily contribute their time towards these programmes. Their sense of commitment was also demonstrated when their family members and friends joined as programme participants. This positive turnout instilled us with a sense of belief that all future philanthropic programmes will receive continuous and sustainable support from all parties.

These programmes have also been funded by grants for community engagement. We are proud to announce that the DICN grant of RM20,000 has been successfully secured for future programmes. DICN has also been given financial assistance through the CSR grants from different corporate organisations. While we are aware of the numerous funding opportunities

from the CSR funds of various organisations, this does not necessarily mean that funding is easily secured. CSR funds have also been secured through informal communications with friends from different organisations. These forms of informal communications have produced positive outcomes, provided that we submit an application for contributions from their CSR departments.

Contributing Factors to the Success of the Programmes

The team has identified four key factors, which are:

1. Committed project members

The team behind these programmes comprises of academicians from the School of Communication and the School of Distance Education who are dedicated and willing to work towards achieving the common goals of these programmes. While it is not uncommon for a group which is made out of individuals from diverse backgrounds to have conflicting viewpoints, these differences were quickly ironed out via discussions and meetings. The sense of camaraderie and comradeship of its members is the main criteria holding the group together in ensuring the success of these programmes. This is also due to the hardworking nature of its members and in the securing of funding and financial support, which is becoming increasingly limited. Teamwork also ensures the minimisation of mistakes and a greater possibility of achieving the objectives of these programmes.

2. Institutional support

Community engagement programmes also require the continuous support of corporate institutions and other members of society. The support lent by institutions such as the Seberang Perai Municipal Council, Pusat Urus Zakat, Welfare Department, Federal Development Office, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, and local political leaders who chose to remain anonymous, which came almost by default, ensured that we overcame all minor difficulties faced in our programmes. The support from these institutions has provided the team with financial, moral, and material assistance. As mentioned above, the Deputy Deans from School of Distance Education and the School of Communication as well as their respective staff members have been supporting these programmes by providing programme materials, manpower, logistics and transportations. Apart from these two schools, support has also been received from the Engineering campus and the IPPT.

3. Collaborators

The team also collaborated with NGOs such as Persatuan Kebajikan Delima Kasih (PDKP); corporate companies such as HOYA Electronics Malaysia Sdn. Bhd, TRR Heritage and Magna Interworks; and the rural (*kampung*) folks. Besides helping secure a network for the team with other project members, which was carried out through various phases of negotiations, these collaborations allowed DICN to identify the target groups which comprised of single mothers and the hardcore poor. This enabled the team to continue planning for more sustainable and long term programmes.

4. Sponsorships and donations

Sponsorships and donations are vital to any community engagement programmes. Such forms of funding are best sourced from business and corporate organisations. As such, the team realised that establishing long term working relationships with business and corporate organisations is vital in sustaining and carrying out long term charity programmes. The team has therefore gone to great lengths to procure sponsorships and donations from business and corporate organisations which do not expect anything in return.

Challenges

The team faced numerous challenges during the implementation of its programmes. It must be noted that certain inevitable problems occurred despite the contribution of a considerable amount of time and effort into the planning of programmes. This is because of many individuals involved with the programmes were still new to the know-how of planning and executing charity programmes. One of the key challenges faced was the difficulty of gaining the trust and dependence of business and corporate organisations, NGOs, government agencies, and members of society. Very often, many promises made to the team were unfulfilled, while many programmes were met with scepticism.

The second challenge faced by the team relates to the timing of the programmes. This occurred because certain business and corporate organisations were or had already implemented their own CSR programmes. As such, it is of utmost importance that the team approaches these corporations at crucial moments in order to promptly secure funding for any future charity programmes. The third and final challenge faced relates to the donation of clothing. While the volunteers selflessly gave their time in helping to organise and sort out the donated clothing according to size, colour, age group and gender, they also came across a number of donated clothing which were in appalling condition. These clothing which were torn and unfit to be worn were properly discarded. It would regrettably reflect on the team as being insincere in providing proper help should these miserable items be handed out.

Programme Improvement

Despite the successful implementations of the three programmes, the team is committed to further develop its efforts in reaching out to and in improving the lives of the underprivileged. Certain areas which warrant further improvement are:

1. While these programmes have been assisted by agencies such as PUZ, AIM, the Welfare Department, and ICU, their continuous support is vital in ensuring the success of future programmes. As such, effective strategies must be formulated in order to secure their continuous support for future programmes.
2. The creation of public awareness about the existence and progression of these programmes is essential in ensuring its sustainability. Such forms of awareness must begin from within the USM community before making the programmes further known to the public.
3. These programmes have benefitted from monetary and item contributions from HOYA, Magna Interworks and TRR Heritage. While these contributions have greatly assisted the implementation of these programmes, the involvement of corporate institutions remains essential. Future programmes should therefore consider approaching other corporations in seeking for contributions from the CSR initiatives of current and potential corporate institutions.

4. The team aims to engage and transform the community. As the earlier programmes mainly involved distributing food items, clothing and monetary donations to the poor, future programmes should incorporate the self-empowerment of individuals. This can be achieved by equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge in helping them to improve their lives.

Conclusion

In order for Malaysia to achieve the status of a high income nation by 2020, economic and social inequalities need to be eradicated. The team believes that the plight of disadvantaged and underprivileged individuals must not go unnoticed by corporate industries, the state, and society. These programmes have bridged the gaps once separating the university, industries and communities; and have also pioneered the way for future philanthropic programmes after realising how Malaysians are ever ready in helping the underprivileged. Since the network and partnership have been established, what is required now is the increased participation of members of society. While the flow of monetary contributions only moves in one direction, the team members were contented to receive in return the smiles and grateful gestures from our participants. Such displays of gratitude, along with the sustainable support from industries and communities have provided us with the strength to persist and persevere through the many upcoming philanthropic programmes.

Transformation is a continuous process. The team is now gearing up for another transformation programme that would focus more on knowledge transfer. This programme aims to empower disadvantaged and underprivileged individuals with knowledge and skills that can help them generate income to improve their financial conditions. Amongst the core agenda in the knowledge transfer phase is a series of trainings on sewing and beading for the underprivileged single mothers, and a sequence of workshops for their children to boost their self-esteem and academic performance. While philanthropic programmes bring smiles to the lives of the underprivileged single mothers and their families, the knowledge transfer programmes empower them to lead better lives in the future. These programmes are in line with the growing importance of universities role far beyond CSR by providing leadership, expertise and resources according to the university-community-industries philosophy.

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