

How to do good – better

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A recent event, where less-privileged children — who have a parent who was or still is in prison — were driven around Singapore in luxury cars, has drawn criticism from the public.

The event was organised as part of the Yellow Ribbon Fund-ISCOS Fairy Godparent Programme, which offers tuition bursaries and mentoring programmes. The aim is to give children positive role models and help them overcome the challenges of poverty or family breakdown that may result from their parent's conviction.

But, organisers of the well-meaning luxury car drive had a blind spot, as pointed out by writers to TODAY's Voices page. The writers felt the event had sent the wrong message to the children.

Letter-writer Winston Chin, said the event's "ostentatious display of wealth" might inculcate very specific notions of material success.

In addition, exposing the young children to the vast inequality in wealth in Singapore could do "more harm than good for their wellbeing".

Another writer, Mr Shahril Shail Abdullah, thought the programme had missed the point of philanthropic activity, and that it addressed issues that seemed peripheral to the needs of the children.

He suggested that building a library and giving books to the children might be more appropriate.

Others who commented on the event online expressed concern that this experience might create a sense of deprivation and blame towards the parents of these children, as they would not normally be able to afford these experiences.

The comments reflect Singaporeans' concerns with how philanthropy is conducted as more of them are becoming socially conscious and volunteering to various causes. The national volunteerism rate has increased from 16.9 per cent in 2008, to 32.3 per cent in 2012.

Organisations that facilitate and direct volunteerism efforts, such as SG Cares and Mercy Relief, have also seen more young people stepping forward to volunteer their time.

More private companies have departments committed to Corporate Social Responsibility.

Management schools are also emphasising the importance of companies having a triple bottom line, with companies increasingly looking into giving back to society, instead of merely concentrating on profit margins.

Measuring Success

However, we cannot judge all volunteering initiatives or goodwill efforts by the same yardstick. As in the social services sector, different programmes aim to deliver different outcomes.

To encourage more organisations and individuals to be engaged in philanthropic work, organisers should be given credit for the concrete action they have taken for a cause they believe in. In the case of the luxury-car drive, we should acknowledge that there are several benefits that arose from the programme.

First, we should not neglect or dismiss the lived experiences of the individuals participating in the event. The children who were interviewed by the media seemed to have enjoyed the event.

A participant said it has inspired him to own his own car in future. A parent was quoted as being “relieved” that the event provided some respite for the children, who are in the midst of preparing for their examinations.

The letter writers have accurately pointed out that relative deprivation — which is when individuals compare themselves with better-off peers — can negatively affect people’s emotions, behaviour, and even mental and physical health. However, studies have also shown that the effects of relative deprivation are also highly subjective.

The event had exposed the children to an experience that they might otherwise not have a chance to enjoy. Positive and fun experiences for children, like this particular initiative, can provide psycho-social benefits for the children.

Studies have shown that children relish the positive memories they have of their experiences. Children who have had positive experiences like this potentially feel less deprived and excluded from novel experiences.

Second, media coverage of events by volunteer groups help these organisations and their causes garner more public attention. In the case of this luxury car drive, it has drawn attention to the good work that the Yellow Ribbon Fund-ISCOS is trying to do.

Hopefully, this will lead to a snowballing effect, and the organisation as well as others featured by the media will be able to reap future benefits from such attention.

For these reasons, we should not be too quick to judge the luxury car event. The organisers ought to be applauded for their good intentions.

But, the fact that the programme has received some flak signals that Singaporeans are demanding higher standards of volunteerism and philanthropic activities. The quality of philanthropic activities can possibly be greatly enhanced if a participatory and collaborative approach was taken, where multiple stakeholders (including the general public, voluntary welfare organisations and volunteers) engage in fruitful conversation about what meaningful and sustainable philanthropic activity should entail.

If possible, event organisers should think about how best to utilise resources to create more meaningful experiences for their beneficiaries.

The concept of opportunity cost can be useful in assessing the possibility of using fewer resources to attain similar outcomes.

The idea that “some good is better than none” should not be the prevailing rule that guides philanthropic activity in Singapore. Instead, we need to consider how else, and how much

better, to achieve aims with the same amount of resources. Organisers can also aim to design programmes in such a way that can have a sustained impact on their beneficiaries.

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