

## Singapore civil society groups branch out overseas

**Tessa Wong**

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Activist Bridget Tan is best known for helping exploited domestic workers and foreign labourers in Singapore, since she founded the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) in 2004.

But not content with helping those here, she has set up at least three sister organisations in Indonesia and the Philippines to take care of workers returning from Singapore, since 2007.

Home is one of three home-grown civil society groups which have set up overseas branches in the last five years.

The chief reason is that increasingly, the problems these activists face cannot be solved in Singapore alone.

The organisations Ms Tan has set up include a shelter and foundation to help local women in Batam, and a Manila group to help Filipino workers and survivors of human trafficking reintegrate into society.

Ms Tan sees it as a natural extension of the work she does in Singapore.

"It's like how, after receiving surgery, you still need care afterwards. We can't just help these workers here, and then throw them back to their countries," she said.

Meanwhile, Wings, a group aimed at helping older women achieve financial independence and set up by former Nominated Member of Parliament Kanwaljit Soin, has taken flight overseas.

Wings stands for Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully.

It has one branch in Hong Kong and another in the Japanese city of Saga, set up last year.

Dr Soin noted that Asian countries tend not to have pensions or benefits for housewives, unlike the case in Britain or Sweden.

Animal rights group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) is also setting up a wildlife research and education centre in Laos this year, and aims to eventually establish a network of outposts in South-east Asia, said executive director Louis Ng.

The Laos centre houses a shelter for bears. A key reason for the centre is that Acres had been battling the problem of bear bile products sold in Singapore for years.

"We realised eventually that we needed to go to the sources and address the problems there," he said. It is estimated that there are 200 bears in bear bile farms in Laos.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said Singapore's globalised nature means that some of the problems these activists address, such as human and animal trafficking, have increased in tandem with rising trade and labour flows. It could also be because the problems are just more dire elsewhere.

"When they look at the needs in the region compared to Singapore's, and see that the needs elsewhere are more desperate, these activists want to help," she said.

The three groups have mostly expanded by themselves, tapping their own network of contacts overseas to set up and helm the outlets. They raise funds on their own too.

But the Government is slowly stepping in.

Mr Ng said he was introduced to a Laotian sponsor for the Acres centre by the Singaporean ambassador to Laos. Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam also showed support by witnessing the signing of a memorandum of understanding for the centre in March.

Still, more could be done to guide them, such as matchmaking them with local contacts and providing them with grants, said these activists.

Pointing to how the government agency, International Enterprise Singapore, helps small and medium-sized companies expand overseas, Dr Soin said: "We are always proud of our businesses and our business expertise.

"But small NGOs (non-governmental organisations) should have some help, we can be enterprising too."

Said Ms Tan: "What we do helps foreign diplomacy and helps build an image of Singapore overseas as a country with a heart."

Observers noted, however, that there could be reasons why the Government has been tentative in giving fuller support.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies said: "The Government may not want to help for fear of being seen as interfering in domestic affairs in neighbouring countries, especially as some of these areas are politically sensitive, such as workers' rights and animal rights."