

FOR someone who refers to himself as “Spiderman”, and who is constantly on the ground just after (sometimes even before) disaster strikes, Hassan Ahmad is surprisingly soft-spoken. The 45-year-old, who is today the technical adviser and executive director of the Corporate Citizen Foundation (CCF), was first “bitten” in 2001, when he volunteered with the Singapore International Federation-led medical mission to Afghanistan.

He was sent both for the opening and closing missions – the opening mission to recon the location, and the closing mission to extract the team without promising more than they would be able to deliver.

“It’s always easy to go in because people always welcome you. But then, after you’ve done a great job, especially with Singapore medicine (it’s difficult to leave). So they said, ‘Hassan, you go down and speak to them so that we can have a smooth exit. Don’t promise anything, but neither do we turn down anything because we may have other donors or supporters who might want to send support from Singapore. So keep it open.’

“Of course it’s easier said than done! They feed you, they ask you why are you going, you are my brother, my sister, and of course the doctors and nurses said they will come back,” he says with a laugh. “That’s when I learnt that diplomacy has to be tempered. You can’t just go in there and be diplomatic, thinking you can get away with it, because you will disappoint people. It was tough, but fortunately before I left I had my own contingency plan, I had donors on standby.”

And in that way, the man who “never saw myself doing this”, mutated like Peter Parker into Spiderman, into a humanitarian.

PUBLIC, PRIVATE, PEOPLE

According to Mr Hassan, he was nursing a slipped disc – he stepped down from Mercy Relief in October 2013 to heal – when HSL

Constructor called him. The construction firm had raised some funds and wanted him to look after its corporate social responsibility (CSR) portfolio. Like most other small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it parked its CSR under its human resources department. But with the funds, Mr Hassan saw an opportunity.

HSL Constructor was set up in 1994 by its three founders who left another engineering company which they found to be overly trigger-happy when it came to cutting staff costs. Then, the new company’s main ethos was to treat its employees fairly and develop human capital. In 2013, the company underwent a rebranding exercise, and at the same time updated its vision to read: “We are all empowered to build a greater HSL for a better world.”

“The ‘greater HSL’ part, they already know how to do the business; but for the ‘better world’, they needed somebody and so they approached me,” says Mr Hassan. “So I came in, and the philanthropy division was tasked to look into two things – to continue with the CSR projects and package them into a more structured CSR engagement; and on the overseas front, to form CCF. We could have called it HSL Foundation but we didn’t because we wanted to be the catalyst. The vision was to be the catalyst for corporate collaboration. But to be the catalyst, we can’t just advocate. We had to put in money, we had to do it and show people that it can be done. That we have all the assets we need in the public sector, assets that are lying idle, that can be used for disaster management.”

CCF’s partners include Thomson Medical and Pacific Flight Services which provide medical and air support; Golden Season which supplies portable water purification systems; and MediaCorp’s Channel News Asia.

Explains Mr Hassan: “The first people we went to see was Pacific Flight Services. We could have gone with (private airlines) but with Pacific Flight Services, we are not subjected to commercial scheduling. That, and their planes are smaller – which means we

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– Hassan Ahmad, technical adviser and executive director, Corporate Citizen Foundation



SPREADING THE HUMANITARIAN WORD

BY MINDY TAN

As technical adviser and executive director of Corporate Citizen Foundation, Hassan Ahmad goes where he is needed urgently. But apart from disaster relief, he is also very much focused on sustainable development.

need a shorter runway, and we can land close to the disaster area.

“After you go in, you need media . . . we go in early because we want to bring out information to the rest of the world. We are experienced enough to assess and evaluate. With a lot of mainstream media, the news they broadcast is newsworthy for the layman, but not for humanitarians.

“They may say water is required, but what is the issue with the water there? Is the quality of the water affected? If so, what kind of contamination? Or is it the transportation of water? If you say we need medical personnel, are they paediatric cases or orthopaedic cases? Or are people exposed to the elements so there are upper respiratory tract infections (URTI)? If you don’t report this . . . accurately and appropriately to say exactly what is needed on the ground, people will send surgeons when it’s just a simple URTI problem.”

This alliance has not gone unnoticed. CCF has in fact been tasked to replicate its model in the other nine Asean countries. It is currently focusing on the Philippines and Indonesia – widely regarded within the humanitarian circles as the hypermarket and supermarket of disasters.

“For the Philippines, we have already identified certain companies with the right assets to come together. These are the same assets, like aircraft, media, water, telecommunications.”

Having such a network in place is also useful so that CCF – if it is required to go in – can leverage the use of these assets and also deploy on-the-ground teams to do the initial recon. Says Mr Hassan: “Because of our experience, the plan is for us to conduct training, like how to do evaluation on the ground.” Following the Philippines and Indonesia, it is looking to reach out to Cambodia and Laos.

KEEPING THE FAITH

Part of what makes Mr Hassan so confident that such collaboration can be replicated in other countries is the way that the private sector has reached out to him over the course of his humanitarian career.

He recalls that when his team wanted to go to Bangkok during the floods, KPMG put them in touch with KPMG in Bangkok which linked them up with its client, Borneo Motors, which were able to provide them with the appropriate transport required to convey their boats and relief supplies. When they needed accommodation, the team was put in touch with Ascott where they were housed for free.

“That’s the power of the private sector network! When I was with Mercy Relief, Hong Leong (one of its donors) would say ‘Hassan, if you go to the Philippines where we have our Millennium & Copthorne (M&C) hotels, you are most welcome to stay.’ When we went to Chengdu after the Qinghai quake, we stayed for free.

“If you look at the free rooms Ascott and M&C gave us, there was no media coverage. So what did they get in return? It’s the feel-good factor.

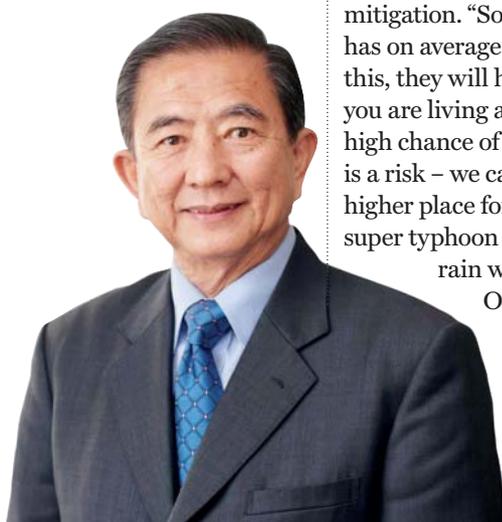
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◀ **A HOUSE, A HOME**
The COU-IRO Orphanage in Sangla Tokha was reconstructed by CCF after the Nepal earthquake. Lim Choo Leng (standing, right of signage) and Hassan Ahmad (second from right, topmost row), pose with partners, benefactors and beneficiaries

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– **Lim Choo Leng** (below),
Chairman, HSL



“You don’t buy loyalty but when you express compassion and care and concern, and you have the people that have expertise to go in there with your staff, and your staff are really able to contribute to (alleviating) their people’s plight, these people will be more loyal to the company. And I think these intangibles are more valuable than say putting in S\$50,000 and figuring out how much publicity you can get,” he says.

PAINTING THE BIGGER PICTURE

It is not just disaster relief that CCF is pushing for. In fact, CCF is believed to be the first private sector initiative and alliance focusing on capacity building for vulnerable communities in the areas of sustainable development and disaster management.

“One of the reasons I came to CCF is that you can’t delink the two (disaster relief and sustainable development). If you don’t uplift their lives, they won’t even bother about the longer term,” says Mr Hassan.

“When a hungry man comes to you, you don’t educate them about disasters. You need to feed them first. Once their current, immediate, existing, basic needs are taken care of, then they will start looking longer term, then they will start looking at risk mitigation.”

Looking ahead, CCF is looking to delve deeper into disaster risk identification and disaster risk mitigation. “So say, for example, the Philippines – it has on average 24 to 26 typhoons a year. Out of this, they will have one to three bad typhoons. If you are living at the foot of the mountain, there is a high chance of landslides. So we will tell them there is a risk – we can tell them: build another area at a higher place for them to escape to in the event of a super typhoon or an earthquake followed by heavy rain where the topsoil is already loosened.

Once we identify the risk, we can mitigate.” The mitigation is not just about building structures, says Mr Hassan. There are also plans to

prepare reading material which can be distributed at petrol kiosks or convenience stores. Quizzes and lucky draws can be held as a means to disseminate the information.

“In order for them to do the quiz, they have to read. In order to answer, they have to understand. So first we get them acquainted, then we get them to understand. Whether they appreciate is another thing,” he says. “These are the things we will be doing soon. After we stabilise ourselves from disaster management, we will go into disaster risk identification, risk mitigation and preparedness of the people.”

THE EXTRA MILE

Ultimately, a lot of what makes CCF so successful is the support afforded by its partners, and also HSL Constructor, which initiated and put in seed funding of S\$1 million. It has, in addition, seconded Mr Hassan, its head of philanthropy, to CCF on a full-time basis. It continues to provide full secretarial and technical support through its philanthropy and sustainability division and allows complimentary use of office space for the initial CCF headquarters so as to support the incubation of the new foundation.

So what’s in it for HSL? Says HSL chairman Lim Choo Leng: “If HSL practises and promotes good corporate citizenry for the real good of society, it could well help mould our staff to be a responsible and conscientious group of individuals. A company can only continue to get better with good people running it.”

He adds: “The sustainable growth of a company does not merely hinge on its economic strategies or technological strengths. A company that shares real goodness would naturally generate goodwill within the ecosystem that it exists or operates in. The value of a company goes beyond its revenues. Goodwill brings about comfort, confidence and ultimately, trust. The value of that trust is priceless.” ■