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**BY INVITATION**

# Many drops can create an ocean of giving

The question is: Will you set aside 5 per cent of your Christmas shopping budget for charity?

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

All of us have vivid childhood memories.

One of mine involves walking home happily with my mum after we had picked up a welfare cheque for \$45 from the Joo Chiat Road welfare office. If my memory is not playing tricks on me, I distinctly remember that the welfare office was next to the assembly point for the rubbish trucks. Despite this unsavoury location, visits to the welfare office were happy occasions.

Were we poor? I ask this question because my family had a roof over our heads, access to school education and I could read books at the Joo Chiat public library. We also had three meals a day, although I was put on a special feeding programme on the first day of school, as I was underweight.

While the Government clearly helped us to deal with our relative poverty, our fellow wealthy citizens did not. Another powerful childhood memory comes from the time when my father was sent to jail for gambling away company funds. Soon after that, a wealthy fellow Indian Singaporean family drove up in a Mercedes car to our home. They came not to offer sympathy or support but to remind my mum that my dad had not repaid his debts to them and they expected my mother to do so. How did they expect an unemployed mother of four living on welfare cheques to repay my father's debt?

S'poreans lack generosity

I TELL these stories not to evoke sympathy but to drive home a very controversial point about Singapore. While the Singapore Government retains its socialist roots and continues to help the poor, many of Singapore's wealthy citizens shun the Singapore poor. This is one of the more tragic dimensions of Singapore that has not been fully understood.

Since this point is controversial, let me cite some irrefutable data to drive home the point. In the latest World Giving Index released this month, Singapore went up significantly from 114th position out of 146 to a recent high of 64th position, after having been at 91st position in 2010 and 2011. This sharp and sudden change in ranking casts serious doubt on the methodology used in the World Giving Index.

Nonetheless, even if we are at 64th position, it is still a poor position for Singapore. After all, by some rankings, we are one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest, countries in the world. A Knight Frank and Citi Private Wealth report released on Aug 16 last year found that Singapore had become the wealthiest place per capita, beating Norway, the United States, Hong Kong and Switzerland. Singapore also has the highest proportion of millionaire families in the world.

Mr. Lee Poh Wah, CEO of the Lien Foundation, has observed that "if I compare the two countries, Singapore and America, and I normalise the population, Americans give five times more than Singapore". Five times more! This is a big deal. Does this mean that the average Singaporean heart is one-fifth the size of the average American heart? Why are Singaporeans so ungenerous?

No absolute poverty

NO ONE has a definitive answer. If I had to speculate, I would guess it is because, unlike many societies, Singapore has few people living in what is called "absolute poverty". Almost no one is starving or homeless in Singapore, even though some families still struggle to put three meals on the table.

While absolute poverty is not a challenge, there is enhanced relative poverty. Today, Singapore is the second most unequal economy in the developed world, behind Hong Kong. Its Gini coefficient has risen from 0.442 in 2000 to 0.4878 in 2012.

### Workfare bonuses

THE Straits Times carried a major story in its Home section on Nov 30. What did this story say? It said that about 348,000 low-wage workers would receive their fourth and final payment of the Workfare Special Bonus by Dec 1. The story went on to say that former cleaning supervisor Tina Many, 57, was looking forward to the \$300 bonus she would receive. "I'll keep it in my savings and slowly use it to buy food and groceries," she said. That's exactly what my mother did with her welfare cheque over 50 years ago.

Why is this story significant? Please notice the number of workers receiving cheques: almost 350,000. We have a citizen workforce of 1.71 million. In short, a fifth of the workforce has to get additional financial support, which fortunately the Government is providing. The big question is this: What are Singapore's wealthy citizens doing to help these people?

Fortunately, all is not lost. Caritas Singapore is leading an effort, called Singaporeans Against Poverty, to understand better the nature of poverty here. They have released a series of powerful advertisements which show the gap between Singapore's rich and poor.

Writing in The Straits Times on Dec 7, (National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre chief executive) Laurence Lien suggested that Singaporeans could consider doing more than "empathising, volunteering or donating". I agree. If Singaporeans could heed his suggestion and do more for the poor in Singapore, it would enhance social cohesion and strengthen the sense of common destiny among all Singaporeans. Taking more care of the relative poor brings many national benefits. Starting to give more to the poor could jump-start the process.

### Feeding the poor

THIS is why I am going to end this article with another powerful memory, this one as a young man, not a young boy. In 1969, I accompanied an Englishman as he distributed cooked food from his jeep to feed lonely widows and other old people living in abject poverty in the desperate slums of Kolkata, India. There I personally saw poverty almost at its greatest depth. If this Englishman did not turn up, these women would have starved. When I saw this, I was relieved that Singapore did not have this kind of abject poverty.

It was therefore a real shock for me to discover recently that like Kolkata there is an organisation in Singapore that is also providing meals to the poor. It is called Willing Hearts. It prepares 3,000 meals a day to feed thousands of people. I was therefore heartened when the staff and faculty of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy decided to donate all the proceeds from a fun play we are doing to Willing Hearts.

Our donation will be a drop in the ocean. But if every Singaporean who goes shopping this Christmas season could ask himself or herself a simple question, "Is Christmas for shopping or for giving?" and then donate 5 per cent of his or her shopping expenses to a deserving charity in Singapore, it will create many drops which will lead to an ocean of giving. And an ocean of giving is what Singapore society needs to launch now to demonstrate to the rest of the world and to our own poor citizens that Singapore society is not one of the least generous societies in the world.

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He is the author of *The Great Convergence*, which has been selected as one of the best books in 2013 by the Financial Times.