

May 2016

This case study was prepared by Rob John for a forthcoming working paper on corporate philanthropy, to be published by NUS Business School.

The UBS 20/20 Social Impact Leaders Group (UBS 20/20 group) Impact Circle Initiative (Hong Kong)



[PHOTO: Members of the UBS 20/20 impact circle visit a school in Daliangshan, China]

[CREDIT: Courtesy UBS 20/20 Social Impact Leaders Group]

An encounter at a UBS philanthropy forum led to an exciting initiative in “next gen” philanthropy.

Simon Feng Ou grew up in Taiwan, was educated at Bowdoin College in the U.S., and spent time with his family’s sports equipment business in China before pursuing a career in the sustainable energy sector. En Lee is a Singaporean, who having spent over a decade in London and Hong Kong working in finance and law, has spent the last six years pioneering impact investing in Asia. Meeting at the UBS global philanthropy forum in Switzerland, Simon recalls how he and En ‘lamented how few philanthropy events catered for the younger generation’. Moreover, very few of them discussed innovative approaches like social entrepreneurship and impact investing. Deciding to change that, Simon and En gathered together other like-minded individuals in their 20’s and 30’s who wanted their giving to create meaningful and sustainable impact. In 2013 we started a group called UBS 20/20 Social Impact Leaders Group hoping to engage next-generation leaders through peer-to-peer learning for the purposes of collective action’, says Simon. , ‘but also we wanted to have an issue-centric approach to provide an effective solution.’ After several workshops

together, Christina Tung, Head of philanthropy for UBS in Asia Pacific, suggested the group form a giving circle in partnership with UBS Optimus Foundation (an independent grant-making foundation set up by the bank in 1999 with a focus on child well-being).

The wider purpose of the UBS 20/20 group is to support and incubate at least 20 new “social impact leaders” in Asia by 2020, empowered by expertise, resources and networks, to create positive, sustainable social impact through action. The giving circle is the group’s first collective action. The group’s twenty or so members, mostly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and China, pooled their funds together and commit to attend at least three of the four physical meetings held each year.

The First Project: Sichuan, China

For an international group of busy individuals in mid-career, the relationship with UBS Optimus Foundation has proven invaluable in providing focus and structure. ‘The Foundation has expertise in early childhood development, so working with their advice we narrowed down to a shortlist of three non-profit projects we might support in that field, finally choosing a grassroots organisation in Daliangshan (大凉山), a mountainous area in Sichuan Province, China’, says Simon. As this was our first Impact Circle project, we decided to start with a philanthropic grant but be proactively involved and seek accountability in outcomes. The UBS Optimus Foundation also helped the group by holding workshops on project design, grant management and impact assessment, and has matched project funds raised by the UBS 20/20 group members. The project aims to provide early childhood development to the Yi ethnic minority community in the Daliangshan through a “public-private philanthropy partnership” involving local government and grassroots organisations with academic and international partners.

Learning Together

A site visit to Daliangshan was organised in late 2014 giving the group an authentic on-the-ground experience and understanding for what the project aims to achieve. Group members originally intended to be actively engaged as the project progressed, but Simon admits, ‘it has been difficult to coordinate all the different parties, so we rely more on UBS Optimus Foundation providing us with project updates during our quarterly meetings.’ Despite the logistical challenges, Simon feels it has been a more positive insightful experience than just passive giving alone: ‘Although it’s been time consuming and harder than we originally anticipated, it’s been more fun and collaborative, and has given us a

May 2016

detailed analysis of the problem and the solution; we're also much more willing to go on a site visit when part of a group.'

The Circle's lead in supporting a grassroots organisation resulted in other potential donors showing interest in continuing and expanding this partnership with UBS Optimus Foundation. There is also encouraging policy news with the Chinese Government announcing USD370 million investment in early child development in Daliangshan, including a new teacher training college. The local charity supported by the Circle is now officially registered as an NGO, and all early childhood development centres in the remote mountains now have legal status and are recognised by the government, removing a big threat for both the local charity and the children.

Policy Impact

It is early days for the impact circle and the UBS 20/20 Social Impact Leaders Group, but Simon feels some valuable lessons have already been learned: 'Despite coordination difficulties, we were able to keep the impact circle members of the group fully engaged and updated on project progress. The positive changes in Government policy mean that more than 30 percent of Yi children in Daliangshan have access to early childhood development centres or day care. With all these positive outcomes, it has been an amazing journey for all of us. We hope that our next project's timeline would be longer than 12 months so we can see it develop from start to finish.'