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Be open with accounts

THERE is much public demand for accountability, transparency and good governance nowadays, and this demand is not only made of the public and private sectors, but also those in the non-profit sector, particularly charities.

Malaysians can be a generous lot. In times of hardship and suffering, whether afflicting our own people or those overseas, we come forward to extend help in whatever way we are capable of doing. Students conduct charity car washes, dinners and other fundraising events; a child empties her piggy bank; a corporation makes a five-figure donation; communities band together to donate money, clothing and much needed essentials; and the Government mobilises large-scale humanitarian assistance.

Whether addressing immediate humanitarian emergencies or long-term issues such as alleviating poverty, improving access for those with disabilities or feeding and sheltering those who are homeless or marginalised, despite tough economic conditions, we have been able to support the work of organisations that strive to make a difference in the lives of others. Malaysian society has demonstrated that it has the potential and can have a caring, socially-aware and altruistic civic-consciousness which takes care of those who have fallen by the wayside. That we can look out for one another.

No one needs to be reminded that these are challenging times. However, for non-profit organisations especially charities doing social welfare, humanitarian assistance, disease prevention and health promotion, it is an exceptionally tough period. People are tighter with their wallets and purses. Donors and governments are more discerning on what programmes to fund and support from a shrinking pool of available resources. Corporations and companies have less to spend on corporate social responsibility initiatives. Discussions in

meetings among non-profit groups these days include at least one topic on funding or the lack of it.

In the past, a volunteer working at a booth of a non-profit organisation would be expected to know the cause or issue, the organisation and to direct people on how they can support the cause of the organisation. Today, the same volunteer would need to be able to answer a multitude of additional questions. More people want to know where their money is going, who it is helping, how the funds are spent, what assistance is being rendered, and how much of that RM10 donated actually goes to the people who are being helped.

Despite the poor volunteer being grilled on these issues, it is an encouraging development made possible by the opportunities created as a result of the adverse economic conditions. Donors, whether they are individuals, corporations, companies or governments, are becoming better informed and concerned on how their giving or contribution helps the cause in which they support. They want to know. They want to be involved. They still want to help but in a better and more focused way.

I am fortunate to have worked in this field for more than a decade and have now been entrusted to be on the board of two non-profit organisations running HIV programmes and conducting advocacy initiatives. And one thing I have learnt is that we need to improve our accountability, transparency and put the people we help at the centre of our work. Yes, sometimes we forget about the very people and communities we are supposed to help.

Strangely enough I do believe that the potential for charitable giving or donations is at its highest level than it has ever been. Whether it is RM5 dropped into the donation box of the local church, mosque or temple or one of Malaysia's many philanthropists making an anonymous

donation in aid of a child needing surgery, one-third of all Malaysians currently donate in some form or other to a charity or cause. *The Star's* "Do Good. Volunteer." initiative comes at an opportune moment when Malaysians are looking for causes and communities to support and assist as the need for help and assistance is greater than ever before.

To be a credible beneficiary of such support and trust, we need to do a better job at being accountable and transparent to our funders and the public by writing the reports and highlighting the efforts and impact of the work involved. We need to do proper accounting of the funds that we receive. It is frustrating to note that many organisations doing charity work in Malaysia still don't even have proper accounts.

We can be indignant about it and say that we don't have time to do the paperwork and that we are busy on the streets running programmes and helping others. Such attitudes do not help anyone. It is not about the RM10 or RM10,000 received from generous and concerned donors; it is about the next donation and the next one after that.

We need to show donors and the public where the money went and how it helps others. It is a disservice to our beneficiaries if we do not bother to ensure that our accounts are kept properly. Many also engage in transactions and activities which can be construed as conflicts of interest. These are some of the reasons why many social welfare programmes suffer from a malady of setbacks and deficiencies.

Good intentions, noble work and goodwill are simply not enough. It must be coupled and sustained with proper reporting and good governance. The people whom we help depend on us and have placed their trust in us to do so.

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