

SUSTAINING SUPPORT FOR CHARITIES

Children from disadvantaged families begin life on an unequal playing field.

Their families may not be able to afford their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter due to financial hardships, illnesses or difficult home situations.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has widened this gap further.

Disadvantaged families, who were already struggling to stay afloat, bore the brunt of the pandemic as some of them may have lost their main source of income. Yet, their needs continued to increase as their children required additional support to meet day-to-day necessities for groceries, digital devices for home-based learning, and more.

Similarly, the charity sector was not spared. Many charities were hit by a drop in donations due to the cancellation of physical fund-raising events as a result of safe distancing measures. Charities also faced mounting pressures since disadvantaged families now had greater and more pressing needs.

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

As a broad-based grantmaker, Tote Board is committed to uplifting vulnerable communities through its grants. In 2006, it introduced the Fund-Raising Programme to support the needs of underserved communities. To date, the Programme has supported more than 3,000 fund-raising projects in the non-profit sector.

To help charities, Tote Board increased its funding through the Enhanced Fund-Raising (EFR) Programme in April 2020, and the Government stepped in to provide additional funding in May 2020.



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Additionally, Tote Board expanded its matching contributions to cover digital fund-raising projects on approved platforms, namely, Give.Asia, Giving.sg, RayofHope.sg, Simplygiving.com and charities' corporate websites. This has helped charities maximise their returns with significantly fewer resources, as digital fund-raising projects are 2.5 times more cost effective than physical ones.

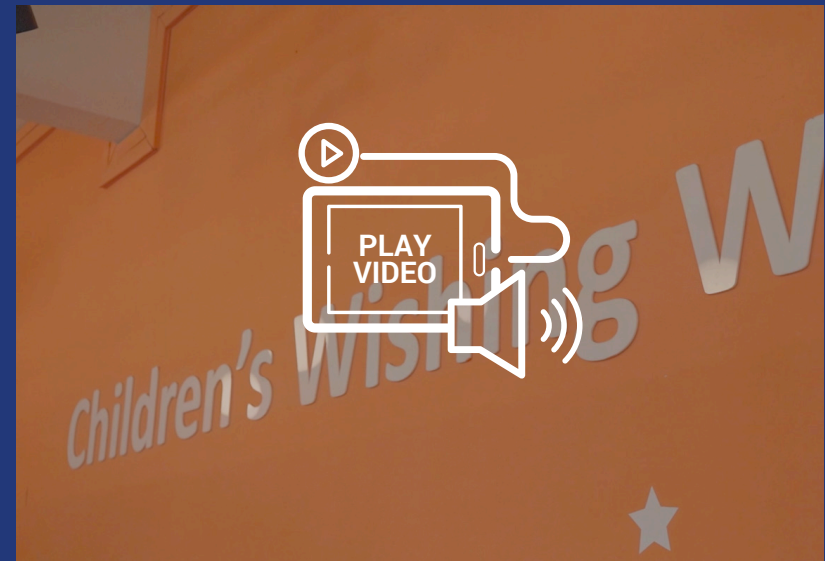
In the new normal, digitalisation has become a pivotal capability that helps to improve the resilience of the charity sector, so that its funding and operations are comparatively less affected during unforeseen situations such as the pandemic.

As of March 2021, more than 80% of EFR applications received focused on digital fund-raising or tap on a hybrid model – showing that many charities recognise the benefits of digital fund-raising.

MAXIMISING EVERY CHILD'S POTENTIAL

Children's Wishing Well (CWW) is one of the charities that received support through the EFR Programme. CWW provides a range of academic and non-academic programmes to support the holistic development of children and youths. For example, CWW gives their beneficiaries tuition and supports their interests and talents in areas such as sports, the arts and information technology.

Explaining the work that CWW does, Ms Joanna Tan, the charity's Chief Executive Officer, says, 'I think the common narrative in the social sector is to portray the beneficiaries as being needy. But at CWW, we focus on every child's potential, so all our programmes are along the empowering narrative.'



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As a charity, CWW has witnessed first-hand how the pandemic affected its beneficiaries. It was forced to halt some of its ongoing programmes such as FRESH (Fresh gRoceries for Every Student's Home), where volunteers bring the beneficiaries to the supermarket to teach them how to select nutritious food, do budgeting and buy groceries. The programme was stopped when safe-distancing measures kicked in, restricting volunteers from interacting with the beneficiaries.

Explaining how discontinuing FRESH affected its beneficiaries, Ms Tan says, 'When the circuit breaker began, there was a huge rush to the supermarket to stock up on food, but our beneficiaries did not have the money or the ability to do the same.'

Since FRESH could not be continued in its usual format, Ms Tan and her team came up with a creative solution – by turning CWW into a “mini-mart”.

They converted FRESH into the Groceries-for-All programme, where supplies were ordered from the supermarkets and placed at CWW's premises for the beneficiaries to select what they needed. This ensured that their beneficiaries had access to the daily necessities such as rice and oil, and even supplies not usually found in grocery care packs, such as fruits and vegetables, eggs, bread, household detergent, and shampoo that they were unable to afford. The programme ran from March to December 2020 and helped close to 1,500 beneficiaries.

Beyond that, the shift from studying in the classroom to home-based learning during the pandemic also meant that their beneficiaries did not have the resources to learn remotely.

To tackle this issue, CWW started their Laptops and Broadband Access for Home-Based Learning (HBL) programme, which provides the children with new laptops.

The centre was also allowed to stay open during the pandemic to provide the beneficiaries with a conducive environment to study, along with trained teachers who can guide them.

COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

Besides affecting their operations, the pandemic also posed another thorny issue to CWW – donor fatigue.

'As COVID-19 drags on, donors are restricted in their ability to continue giving over such a prolonged period,' Ms Tan explained.

'Seeing how COVID-19 has stretched on for more than a year and the needs of our beneficiaries keep increasing, we are very grateful for this funding to keep supporting our beneficiaries and empower them to eventually get out of the poverty trap.'

Ms Tan revealed that CWW does not receive any government subvention. It relies on corporates to provide 60% of its funding and individuals to donate the remaining 40%. With the ongoing pandemic, CWW has seen its donations dip by 50% as compared to the same period last year.

In fact, for three months since the start of 2021, the donations received were insufficient to cover operating costs. Despite this, CWW continued to assist the families in need by dipping into their reserves.

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In the past, CWW depended on physical fund-raising events such as flag days, hosting children's bake sales and organising sports-related fund-raising events. However, the yield for such events was low and it was labour intensive.

In contrast, Ms Tan shared that digital fund-raising was much more effective than physical fund-raising. Not only is it able to operate with relatively lower manpower, but it can also capture a wider pool of donors.

Ms Tan also noted that donors are increasingly more discerning. They want greater transparency in how their donation is spent, a benefit that digital fund-raising provides.

The pandemic might have curtailed traditional fund-raising methods, but the resulting digitalisation efforts initiated greater innovation and long-term remedies. In the future, Ms Tan foresees that CWW will be leveraging more digital fund-raising to further their causes and carry on shining a light of hope for their beneficiaries.

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