SINGAPORE has achieved much in the area of philanthropy, with countries like China seeing it as a role model. There is of course room still for development and improvement.

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said during the Philanthropy in Asia Summit in September that between 2006 and 2010, individual donations in Singapore had tripled, reaching 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). The participation rate for voluntary work also increased from 15.5 per cent to 23.3 per cent in the same period.

By way of comparison, in the United States, individual donations come to over 2 per cent of GDP and the participation rate for voluntary work is between 30 per cent and 40 per cent.

The World Giving Index recently released by the Britain-based Charities Aid Foundation showed that among the 146 countries surveyed, Singapore was ranked 114th last year.

I have some suggestions on how Singapore's philanthropic efforts can reach greater heights:

* Include philanthropy in "Our Singapore Conversation"

Philanthropy helps to instill correct values, narrow the poverty gap and ease social conflicts. Since there is now "Our Singapore Conversation" to seek public views and review existing policies, I suggest adding philanthropy as one of the dialogue topics.

* Build up "Asia's Philanthropic City"

Philanthropy can become part of Singapore's international branding. The city can consider setting up new statutory bodies, hosting related international conventions, awards and training in this field; and encouraging international philanthropic organisations to be regionally headquartered here.

* Rank charity organisations

There is a Charity Navigator in the US to assess charities, while Beijing's Civil Affairs Bureau has its Star-rating. Since November, Singapore now has its Charity Governance Awards. But there is still no authoritative or publicly recognised assessment of the sector from the
Government or a third-party organisation. Ratings - and how these are arrived at - can help the public in choosing their preferred charity or charities and such assessments encourage greater striving and self-discipline by charity organisations.

* Greater media coverage

Here, Singapore can perhaps take a leaf from the experiences elsewhere. For example, in the last few years, dozens of journals on philanthropy have been published in China. Well-known magazines and portal sites have dedicated columns or weekly issues on philanthropy. China Central Television is considering a channel on philanthropy.

* Developing specialised studies, grooming talent

Currently, only the National University of Singapore (NUS) offers a bachelor's degree in social work, while the NUS Business School recently offered some relevant modules. But there are neither undergraduate-level studies related to philanthropy and social enterprise, nor master's studies and PhDs in this field.

However, some start has been made. NUS, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University now have one new research centre each in this field. In this context, there is a need to nurture and groom high-end philanthropic talent.

* Tap immigrant investors

Thanks to the Global Investor Programme (GIP), a scheme that allows entrepreneurs from abroad to obtain permanent residence in Singapore, many immigrant investors have settled here. Perhaps some tweaks to the GIP scheme could be made to encourage such immigrants to take an active role in charity work here. For example, policymakers may want to consider donations from these investors as part of the GIP funds, or channel a portion of the GIP investment profits for charity.

* Encouraging foreign charities, professional service providers to locate here

Some months ago, I had meetings with a charity research centre linked to a famous US university and a listed French company that provides fund-raising services for non-profit organisations. Both had to give up the idea of setting up branches in Singapore because of the high start-up costs.

If the Government can offer the same incentives and approaches used in attracting international research organisations, these entities will come.

* Enhance income levels of charity practitioners

Local charities commonly have a hiring problem - "hard to find, hard to recruit, and hard to retain professionals". The remuneration package is the crucial factor.

Would the Government consider, say, increasing the charity practitioner's income through an increase in his personal tax threshold, tax rebates and tweaking the Central Provident Fund contribution rates?

Doing so might increase the charities' competitiveness in the job market. Various major financial groups can also consider setting up a fund to reward excellent practitioners or subsidising professionals who need such help.
Philanthropic growth requires not only leaders' encouragement; it requires practitioners' thoughts and actions too. We must look at the areas needing action when we sum up past experiences, gather our thoughts and ideas, and work towards bringing Singapore's philanthropy to greater heights.

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Ryan Teo provided the English translation.