Singapore’s role in Asia’s development

Professor Lam Swee Sum was a banker turned academic. However, there was another defining moment in her life two years ago when she was approached by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to head a project that would use a Temasek Foundation grant to develop the capacities of countries neighbouring Singapore. Through that project, she discovered her passion for social entrepreneurship and philanthropy.

Under her leadership, the NUS Business School team and participants drawn from four schools of Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines, as well as a Filipino non-profit organisation, Gawad Kalinga, jointly developed a curriculum to equip both university students as well as those working within communities in the non-profit and social entrepreneurial sectors with knowledge and skills. The course and training program taught students and participants respectively how to develop business plans that would be relevant to the needs and resources of local communities. For instance, if the community was close to a waterfront, it might leverage the location as a way to bring in tourists. Participants then went back to their barrios to implement these plans and make an immediate impact.

She says, “The kind of work we do is targeted to leverage resources in the host country; it enables them to take whatever we create and take the ball and run.” This means that after instructors
leave, the Ateneo de Manila schools and Gawad Kalinga have the materials they need to continue training new generations of social entrepreneurs and non-profit leaders.

**Singapore’s role**

Professor Lam’s experiences with the Philippines project helped her to see Singapore’s role in Asia’s growth and development. She believes that Singapore must use its strength as a research and education hub to train social entrepreneurs and non-profit organisations in Asia to perform their roles more effectively and to make a greater impact. The Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP) was established precisely to carry out this mission, she asserts. As the director of ACSEP, Professor Lam believes that the centre can change the landscape of the social entrepreneurship and philanthropy sectors in Singapore and in Asia. She says, “Through our comparative advantage we hope we can help build these sectors. This is our whole objective.”

**Changing the local mindset**

While ACSEP is invested in making a difference in countries around Asia, the centre also seeks to change the way Singaporeans think about the non-profit and social development sectors. Within NUS, ACSEP seeks to show students the broad range of career options that they have. Professor Lam says, “Everybody (in the business school) aspires to be an investment banker and I keep telling them that the world has changed. The life of an investment banker is no longer as attractive and the incumbent risks are so much higher. The non-profit sector . . . offers you stability, meaning in life and work, and a very rewarding career.”
ACSEP has started to offer courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in social entrepreneurship and philanthropy. It also plans to offer courses to those already working in the sector who would like to become even more effective at what they do. As demand increases, ACSEP plans to introduce more courses. At the moment, however, Professor Lam says that the centre is focused on building the foundations. “It is about creating awareness which requires us to be more visible in the press and to generate interest in the sector. It is a whole slew of initiatives, not only at the student level and in the sector itself, but also amongst our own faculty members who can potentially engage in relevant research.” Professor Lam opines that faculty research will feed into the NUS Business School curriculum and generate discussion in the classroom. This research will also bring in executives from the sector in order to generate more research questions responsive to present and emerging needs. “The whole eco-system will grow organically. This is the challenge we have in the center as a whole. Capacity building at all sites.”