

# Pioneers for the Poor

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*TBN Asia has been recently launched as a registered charity in Singapore and held two successful and well-attended first events – TBN cafés. It also organized two TBN Expo trips to Malaysia and Indonesia and is supporting a range of social impact projects there.*

*Mason Tan, the Chairman of TBN Asia, Jeremy Han, the Vice-Chairman and Louis Lee, the Secretary joined us for an exclusive Pioneers for the Poor interview on the new developments in TBN Asia and shared their experiences setting up and driving TBN Asia forward.*

**TBN: We would be very interested to find out about how TBN Asia started. Could you tell us a bit more?**

Mason: We started, as Louis is a member of TBN UK. Later, approximately a year ago, we met Dato Kim Tan, who is a core founder of TBN, in Singapore. We recognized that there is a value to have a similar organisation like TBN UK in Asia. We really liked the value proposition of TBN, where people come together contributing their time, talent and treasures to help fight poverty through sustainable enterprise.

**TBN: Could you also give us an overview of venture philanthropy in Asia and the positioning of TBN Asia therein?**

Mason: Venture philanthropy, unlike in Western countries, is still a very new concept in Asia. Many people here are thinking of philanthropy more as charity and rarely as sustainable enterprises. There are some other organisations in Singapore focusing on venture philanthropy, but we see a unique value in TBN Asia.

Firstly, we focus on using financial disciplines and enterprise solutions to fight poverty. Secondly, we concentrate on making trips to neighbouring countries in South East Asia to build the awareness of our members of issues around them and to inspire them to take action.

**TBN: You have a very dedicated core team with many of whom we have been corresponding before. Could you share more information about this core group of people driving TBN Asia forward?**

Louis: The core team consists of ten members. Mason is the Chairman and overlooks everything. Jeremy and I concentrate more on the operational side of things like the café sessions and Expo trips. Really, the core members have no distinct duties, as well all do this on a voluntary basis next to our jobs, but we collaborate and help each other out whenever needed.

**TBN: How did you get other members involved and decided to register TBN Asia as a charity in Singapore?**

Mason: Over time, we spoke to different groups of people and shared how TBN operates in the UK. We found that there are similar needs and passions amongst the people here.

Before we arrived at the decision to incorporate TBN Asia as a non-profit, we held two café sessions. Each of them was well-attended with at least 40 people and this encouraged us to take the next step.

**TBN: What were some of the challenges along the way to set up TBN Asia?**

Louis: Before the incorporation of TBN Asia, the main challenge was to organise the TBN café session – to find venues, funding and attract people. With all grace given to us, we found good venues and attracted more people than we expected. TBN UK supported us and we also engaged people from the investment sector through Mason's contacts. Further, Dato Kim Tan, who is influential in this area, helped gather people for the events. He attended one of the sessions, which drew in a large crowd.

Towards the incorporation then, we had to decide whether we would launch TBN Asia as charity or private limited. Through talks with the local government authorities, we found out that it would be beneficial for us register as a charity. The process of getting incorporated was difficult in itself, but we also have to make sure TBN Asia is sustainable, which includes defining our membership structure. This is where we are right now.

**TBN: You have mentioned the TBN café sessions several times and they seem like a very intriguing way to get people engaged. Could you tell us a little more about how they work?**

Louis: The concept of café sessions is similar to the TBN Partners Days or National Conferences in the UK, but on a smaller scale. In TBN Asia, we define three groups of people – entrepreneurs, investors and skilled professionals – and invite them to join the café sessions. We usually have up to three entrepreneurs per session pitching their ideas, which are pre-screened by us, to the investors and skilled professionals.

The event itself is free-rolling and defined by the participants. The skilled professionals and investors can challenge and question the entrepreneurs and if they want to take a step further and volunteer with the entrepreneurs to help solve their needs, we will step in and help to facilitate this process.

**TBN: You also briefly touched upon the topic of TBN Expo trips and their importance to open members' eyes to social issues around them and to inspire them to get involved. Could you share your experiences organising and conducting TBN Asia's two Expo trips with us?**

Jeremy: I went on the Indonesia trip, so I can share some information on that. We visited a potential project – a business that produces baby bags, clothes and more. They deliberately

situated themselves in rural areas, where there are large unemployment issues with people migrating to the city to find work. Hence, there are many broken up families with a lot of single mothers. The business provides jobs for them to improve their livelihoods. This is a very good example of the type of projects that TBN would like to support – projects with a clear strategy to help the poor. We went there to learn from these enterprises.



#### **TBN Asia Team learning how cottage industries provide employment in rural areas**

#### **TBN: Speaking of projects – what is your approach to projects and what are some of the exciting projects TBN Asia is currently involved in?**

Mason: We believe in applying a community approach. So, we are adopting a village in Central Java, Indonesia. We want to make sure that what we do as TBN Asia will bring impact to the community at large, not just to certain businesses and families. In addition to the enterprise producing baby merchandise that Jeremy mentioned, we are also looking at affordable housing and housing construction material businesses. We believe that bringing various projects into a single village will have a larger impact than one project spread out over various places.

We have further invested in a mail-ordering catalogue in Indonesia that currently has 200,000 members. 80% of the sales are outside the main island of Java, in rural areas, where members are allowed to be sales agents for the consumer goods. For Malaysia, we are looking at two projects – a fish hatchery and fish feed farm as well as a chilli farm. This is just a very initial range of projects that we are looking at currently.



#### **From maid to factory manager – cottage industry empowers poor women in Indonesia**



**A Malaysian low cost fish fry & fish feed farm that uses recycled soya waste & provides sustainable livelihoods for rural farmers**

**TBN: What is next for TBN Asia? What do you look forward to?**

Mason: We want to make sure we are having an impact – not just on the community that we adopt, but also on our members.

Jeremy: We really look forward to having one or two strong projects that everyone can be involved in and to showcase what TBN does. We believe that TBN is not just about talking about making a positive change, but we want to get people involved and excited about this.

**TBN: Do you have any final comments to people who would like to get involved with TBN Asia?**

Jeremy: We have the café session, where anybody can get involved. Overall, we are looking for people who believe that business and sustainable enterprises are the way to overcome issues of poverty, provide jobs and to lift up the dignity of the poor and that requires more than just charity. It requires time, effort, networking and support for businesses to grow and that's what we need – talent and people who are committed.