

# Reaching out in time of need

**“They are not beggars and they are not proud to line up to collect food. The alternative is to steal to feed their families — like the guy who stole baby formula milk and got jailed; or the guy who stole petai and got jailed.”**

— Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan on why the ECM Libra Foundation embarked on a RM3 million food aid programme to help the vulnerable who lost their income because of the Covid-19 pandemic



The following are excerpts of an interview with Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan, ECM Libra Foundation chairman, about the work of the organisation.

**The Edge: What prompted the foundation, which usually focuses on education, to initiate this food aid programme?**

**Datuk Seri Kalimullah Hassan:** Early this year, when looking at funding educational programmes for the Orang Asli in Bandar Muadzam Shah in Rompin, we came across a settlement of families living off a rubbish dump, collecting recyclable rubbish, which was sold to contractors from Kuala Lumpur. We noticed that the children looked undernourished.

During the MCO (Movement Control Order), we received urgent appeals for help for some of these communities, as the rubbish dump had been shut down and the Orang Asli had lost their source of income and had no food to eat. The MCO made it difficult for us to reach them, so we transferred funds to an NGO and they bought and distributed food to them. We had many appeals for help, including to source and supply PPE (personal protective equipment), ventilators, face masks and sanitisers. We had no capacity for that and we were glad that The Edge started its Covid-19 Fund, to which we could contribute to ensure the front-liners and hospitals received these equipment. Apart from that, given the problems faced by the Orang Asli, we decided to fund food aid programmes, especially in the area we were locked down in — Kuala Lumpur.

As it turned out, we found there were thousands of urban poor who had lost their jobs. They were skipping meals and there are many documented cases of parents stealing, pawning their jewellery, selling their cars and motorcycles, just to feed their families. We then decided to expand our programme after the MCO was lifted. We envisage the programme can be sustained for six to 12 months, after which, when the economy recovers, most of these vulnerable groups would be able to get on their feet again and we can wind down the programme.

**The foundation has committed RM1 million and pledged up to another RM1 million to match amounts raised from friends and associates. How much has been raised so far from them?**

We have received confirmed pledges of more than RM800,000 in less than a week of the launch. Our friends have big hearts. Some others have inquired and are in the process of getting approvals from their respective committees.

The friends who have pledged include Tan Sri Lee Oi Hean of KL Kepong Bhd and

Batu Kawan Bhd; Datuk Yeoh Sock Hong of YTL Power Bhd; Tan Thiam Hock, the founder of cosmetic line Silkygirl; Datuk Kelvin Tan of TSH Resources Bhd; restaurant chain Kampong Kravers (M) Sdn Bhd; ECM Libra Foundation Trustee Lim Beng Choon; entrepreneur Ralph Marshall; The Edge Media Group chairman Datuk Tong Kooi Ong and Lendlease chairman Dinesh Nambiar.

The response has been amazing, not only from my friends, but also organisations such as KPMG, which offered to audit the programme pro bono, as did law firm CCA Law and former Bar Council president Rangunath Kesavan, who oversees the funds disbursement. However, I have since decided that the ECM Libra Foundation will fund the whole programme ourselves for a minimum of six months and we will not be asking the pledgers or potential pledgers to donate.

I have shared the list of NGOs that work with the marginalised groups with my friends who have generously offered to donate. If they so wish, they can fund communities and groups of their own choice.

**How many people can be fed and over how long with the RM3 million? And where?**

Currently, we have 1,427 families of at least four persons a family and 640 individuals, mainly single mothers, urban poor and vulnerable individuals, on our list of recipients. We will be adding to that list. We have been providing cooked food for the 640 individuals since the MCO was enforced in March. The families are part of the Food Aid programme launched last week. Most of them have already received their first monthly ration, which they collect from hypermarkets such as Dairy Farm's Giant, which has an extensive peninsula-wide branch network, and other hypermarkets in areas in which Giant does not have a presence. The recipients are located in various parts of the country, in particular the semi-urban and rural areas. But the majority of them are the urban poor, living in the Klang Valley.

**There is a view that by providing food on the streets, it will actually encourage more people to become dependent instead of going to get jobs, even part-time ones. In short, this will promote a dependency culture. What is your response to this?**

Yes, I have heard those views expressed when I have told some friends and ac-



Tony Fernandes distributing food packets to the needy at The Chow Kit hotel

quaintances of our programme. But you should visit these people. There is no pride for them to receive food like that. A couple of months ago, in one of our food distribution programmes at The Chow Kit hotel, which prepares the food for us, I ran into AirAsia's Tan Sri Tony Fernandes having a meeting in the lobby lounge. I asked him to distribute the food packets to the couple of hundred people who were lining up outside the hotel — thinking it would be a nice touch to get a celebrity to meet them. I was watching them, to see whether they reacted to Tony, one of Malaysia's most recognisable faces, giving away food. They all shifted their eyes downwards and did not look any one of us in the eye. These are working people — whether they are labourers, construction workers, odd-job workers, washerwomen. They all lost the meagre incomes they earned before the pandemic. They are not beggars and they are not proud to line up to collect food. The alternative is to steal to feed their families — like the guy who stole baby formula milk and got jailed; or the guy who stole petai and got jailed. They are not beggars.

Earlier this week, I went with an NGO to deliver food at a block of flats built for the hardcore poor on the outskirts of Damansara. One of the recipients was a blind masseuse operating from the Malaysian Association of the Blind building in Brickfields. He had three children and had lost his income during the MCO. He thanked us profusely. When I told him we would continue to provide food for him for at least six months, his reply was, 'I hope I can go back to work sooner so you won't have to,' and he said a prayer for me.

Further, the NGOs check the background of all recipients. They actually visit these families and have a registry. Like Datuk Munirah Hamid, who runs the Pertiwi Soup Kitchen. That is one fierce woman you don't want to cross swords

with. She checks on all recipients and knows many of them by name or by sight. Once she finds anyone taking advantage of the scheme, she crosses their name off the register.

In our case, my colleagues and I also visit recipients — whether it is recipients of our educational charity or food aid programme — to see for ourselves. Over the years, we have been to the interiors of Sabah and Sarawak as well as Orang Asli settlements deep in plantations in Perak, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan. In almost every one of these cases, we find that people are generally not proud to depend on handouts. Of course, there are exceptions, but it is a very small number.

Similarly, there are many generous people in Malaysia — both among the wealthy and the middle- and lower-middle classes — who opened their hearts and wallets during the MCO to help the needy. You will be surprised that the poor themselves are very generous. They are not stingy when it comes to helping those even poorer than they are. But if you want to be judgmental about helping poor people, then we must also acknowledge that there are also among the well-to-do who talk a good talk but don't lift a finger to help ... So, yes, there will be people taking advantage, as we have all kinds, but, no, I don't think this programme will create a dependency culture.

**Most people are sceptical that the 'Battle of the Bulge' squash match between the two heavyweight Tan Sris — Tony Fernandes and Salim Fateh Din — will take place. Have a date and venue been fixed?**

Haha ... I have been asked that question by many people who know both Tony and Salim. The two of them have known each other for a long time but, whenever they are together, they trade barbs. So, many people thought that this match would not happen and many still think that.

I have known both Tony and Salim for many years. One thing these two share in common is that they have a passion for charity. From the day former head honcho of Astro and Maxis, Ralph Marshall, proposed the match to raise funds for the food aid programme, both of them agreed to and have consistently said they would have the match. Tony is younger and an all-round sportsman but Salim, though almost a decade older, is the far better squash player. And both are very competitive. It will be an interesting match.

Astro offered to broadcast the match and its executive, Vincent de Paul, himself a squash player, has been in contact with Salim to organise the game. We plan to have the game in August or September, when spectators are allowed. As you are aware, it was only a couple of weeks ago that the restriction on contact sports was lifted. Salim has proposed that the game be held at Nu Sentral, which was developed by MRCB, of which he was the CEO. Vincent de Paul is proposing the Bukit Jalil Stadium.

I believe the match will be held. If there was a doubt, by publishing these comments, I think we have left them with little avenue to wriggle out. Any monies raised by Tony and Salim from the match will be donated to a food charity of their choosing.