



Social Entrepreneurship Snapshot

Name: *Ida Thien*

Organisation: *Closing The Gap Malaysia*

Country: *Malaysia*

How did your organisation get set up?

It was set up when my 3 Co-Founders and I met through Teach For Malaysia. I was running the Alumni Impact team for TFM, while the other 3 were Alumni of the Fellowship programme. Back then, we ran Closing The Gap as a side project (inspired by the Futures programme under Teach First) that was incubated under Teach For Malaysia. In 2019, the team was acqui-hired by a scholarship Foundation in Malaysia. Ever since, we have delivered our programme as a programme in partnership with the Foundation as well as Teach For Malaysia.

What was the context / background / story to your organisation being set up?

My 3 Co-Founders and I started our journey in 2016 when we had the humbling opportunity of working with a Form 6 student we met via Teach For Malaysia in order to help him enter university. Despite completing his STPM (*A-Levels equivalent*) examinations with flying colours, he faced many challenges due to his circumstances that made quality university access a distant goal.

It struck us how the odds were stacked so high against his chances of accessing tertiary education despite his brilliance. Higher education was his ticket to improving his family's trajectory. We decided to work with this bright individual over a span of a few months — today, we are incredibly proud that he has graduated from Sunway University with the help of the Jeffrey Cheah Foundation scholarship. Our experience and lessons supporting this student led us to start Closing The Gap in close collaboration with Teach For Malaysia, where we've since gone on to support 105 students to unlock more than 700 thousand GBP in scholarships!

What was the most useful resource to you when setting up the organisation?

Our relationship with more established organizations like AccessEd and Teach For Malaysia allowed us access to advice and guidance on running our organisation as well as in terms of refining our program - access to this mentorship was incredibly helpful! As our programme was adapted from Teach First's Futures programme, the Futures team then was also a godsent - as they happily shared materials with us. My Programme Director in Teach For Malaysia then was also from Teach First - and so we benefited a lot from his perspective and direction. Moreover, in the early stages, the Co-Founders were advised to set up a Steering Committee (much like a Board of Trustees) for the programme, to ensure that the team was held accountable to our goals and financial expenses. This was incredibly useful for us - not only did our Steering Committee provide useful advice and feedback to us throughout the creation of CTG, our Committee members also supported us in fundraising efforts, setting the strategy of the programme as well as leadership/management development.

Did you face any unexpected challenges?

While I have had a fair share of challenges, I would not say that there has been any particularly tough challenge that was insurmountable at that point in time. I have been blessed by supportive Co-Founders, team, mentor, Steering Committee (our Board of Trustees equivalent in Closing The Gap to ensure that we are held accountable to our goals) and amazing students throughout the lower periods of CTG. I'll be sharing some of the biggest challenges outside the realm of our educational programs that come with running an organisation:

- Fundraising: this is a perpetual challenge that all who work in the non-profit sector would relate with strongly. There were periods of running the programme when we had perhaps at best 3-to-6-months runway of cash. So we had to be incredibly frugal while continuing the steady effort to find partners and prospective funds.
- Capacity: Between 2016-2019, CTG operated as a 1-to-2 women team. My Co-Founder, Connie, and I had to oversee basically everything in CTG. It did not matter if I was an expert in fundraising, budgeting, events, marketing or programme- if the work calls for it, you have to get your hands dirty. And even now, as my team grows, the work stream has grown as well! As a result, I have become a big believer of learning things on the go. And often, a job done is better than a perfect job not completed.
- Leadership and self-belief: Ultimately, the biggest ongoing challenge is always a personal one. Never in my mind did I think that I will be leading an organisation so early into my career. The learning curve has been steep as there is no such thing as “focusing on your area of work”. All areas of work and the wellbeing of all team members are your responsibility at this level. As a result, impostor syndrome is inevitable. So the past few years have been a very transformative development journey for myself as I strive to live into the shoes of my role and own them.

How are things going with the organisation now – what stage of growth are you at?

We are currently stabilizing and expanding the scope of our work in 2 ways:

- 1) Growing our core CTG programme - we are exploring how to scale our programme to other parts of Malaysia, particularly during these pandemic times. It has definitely been challenging! The team was finally gaining momentum after 3 years when the pandemic hit, and we are now forced to adapt our programme once more. And while the first phase of adaptation is in ensuring our programme addresses our Scholars' needs in the near term, the next step would be determining the appropriate longer-term modifications to our programme and recruitment strategy for 2021 onwards, as it becomes increasingly likely that this will remain the norm for the next 2-3 years. The team is also aware that this shift is not just a matter of moving our programme online, as virtual programmes have proven to be significantly less effective in supporting our lowest-income Scholars. So if there are any organisations out there which are similarly tackling how we can adapt meaningful social and emotional support for students, we'd love to speak!
- 2) Another area that CTG is embarking is in the area of scholarship reforms - as mentioned above, we have been acqui-hired under a scholarship foundation since 2019. We are now overseeing the scholarship recruitment, selection and development process of the Foundation. This area of work is crucial for fair higher education access as many students in Malaysia do not pursue university because of financial and systemic limitations. Our aim is to push for more equitable and contextual giving of scholarships. In 2020, our shortlisted scholarships candidates were overwhelmingly from lower-income households, and did not necessarily come from the most elite schools, nor did they score the highest grades. It has been such an interesting journey for the team as we are now 'on the other side of the fence', when before this we could only prepare students for scholarship applications. We hope to finetune our selection and development programmes in the coming 2 years, such that we are able to work with other scholarship providers or corporate organisations to adopt a similar and fairer approach to scholarship giving - so that those who are truly deserving will be able to benefit from it.

What would your advice be for anyone setting up a social organisation or project?

I think my biggest advice in embarking on any project is to never do it alone! Having had a team or a mentor (in the form of my Steering Committee) was instrumental in helping me overcome roadblocks,

brainstorm ideas and power through frustrations, fatigue and challenges. Back when Connie (my other Co-Founder) was still in the managing team, we made sure to split our work ownership clearly, where she handled programmes while I handled management, fundraising, partnership and finances. The clarity in our work streams and the fact that we had each other to support or provide feedback was a big factor why either of us did not throw in the towel.

Another advice I have is - be ready to become a generalist. When you first start, you'll likely be running alone or with a very small team. There really is no such thing as 'I'm just a programme/partnership/marketing person' when you want to build an organisation. More often than not, you'll have to dip your toes into all areas of the organisation, even if it means that you are absolutely clueless to begin with. As such, you'll need to be prepared to learn as you go, ask for help and create your own structures/culture in the team. It is tiring, but definitely empowering to be able to have the autonomy to decide the direction of your product/service/programme while learning new skills on the job. It can be very uncomfortable most of the time - but we tell our Scholars to always put themselves out of their comfort zones, so its best that the team walks the talk too!