

Interview with Muhammad Affan Othman on Small Changes

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Introduction

Small Changes, a community organization in Malaysia (www.smallchangesmy.org), was founded in 2011 to raise funds and provide support for underprivileged individuals in the community. With an interesting tagline of *Cultivating Volunteerism, Empowering Generations* this community organizations has raised hundreds of thousands and has attracted tens of Malaysian students from local and overseas universities. The team consists of an enthusiastic group of young Malaysians who believe that it is possible to create big differences in the community with small changes. I had the pleasure of meeting the team in one of their social event in Kuala Lumpur. What you are going to read is the responses provided by the Vice President of Strategic Planning Unit, Mr. Muhammad Affan Othman, who kindly consented to an E-mail interview.

The interview

VN¹: Perhaps we could start with a short introduction of *Small Changes*. Could you please tell our readers about your organization and its objective?

MAO²: *Small Changes* started from an idea coined by our founders in which they aspire to create social awareness by making one small change at a time. For example, they started helping flood victims in flood prone locations in Malaysia such as in Kelantan and reaching out orphanage by offering them some help in terms of financial aid. As the organization grows, they started diving into more projects that have diverse aims such as tackling education inequality, which is translated into our *Seeds of Deeds* initiative, which has been done annually since 2014. However, since 2016, *Small Changes* has decided to shift gears and start to focus on becoming an organization that offers a platform for volunteering for youths and at the same time empowering both its volunteers and its beneficiaries. These will be made possible through our projects that allow Malaysian youths to participate and become empowered as they are actively participating in a nation building effort. Through these projects, volunteers could experience a change of perspective in their worldview since most of them tend to come from a pool of people that do have a well-off background. They can see the disparities that do exist within Malaysia's realities when they actively participate in our projects.

VN: What made you think of establishing *Small Changes*? What makes it special?

MAO: *Small Changes* is an organization that was established with the aim of spreading consciousness among youths and empowering them in Malaysia. We often hear complaints about structural problems that exist in our society. Problems such as why we fail to speak English properly, low self-esteem among teenagers, and how we are always backwards as compared to other individuals in the first world countries. *Small Changes* capitalizes in its pool of volunteers where we try to incorporate volunteers from different backgrounds such as some who are studying abroad and some who are studying in local institutions. The ones who obtain their education abroad help share their exposure; for example, utilizing strategic tools that they are exposed to abroad which could help solve certain social problems that exist in Malaysia. Our volunteers who are studying locally could share the current issues that are deeply rooted in Malaysia and they, too, help to engage in discussions with officers from governmental institutions as a way to have constructive dialogues.

VN: Do you have any interesting stories from your experiences with training underprivileged (if we should call them so) children?

MAO: The underprivileged students from schools that *Small Changes* have reached out to so far have a problem of low self-esteem and they have a tendency to internalize their problems on their own. Conflicts and dilemmas are natural aspects of living except for we deal with them with various methods. To some, they are easy to handle, but more often than not, people do not know how to deal with their conflicts. The students that we have met, I would argue, do not have the proper skill in handling their dilemma. They have to meet the expectations set by their caregivers but at the same time they do not have the resources to meet these expectations. Sometimes, just engaging a normal conversation

¹ Vahid Nimehchisalem

² Muhammad Affan Othman

with them is enough to know that they are struggling. What Small Changes is doing is to make our volunteers aware that everyone needs help and a person of privilege should always be mindful that the privilege that one has should be shared. On the other end of this spectrum, we are also helping the students see that they do have an important role in the society.

VN: These days most academicians and researchers in the area of education are obsessed with gaps in research. Has your experience revealed any interesting areas for impactful research?

MAO: I would suggest that researchers should study the effectiveness of non-governmental organization initiatives in aiding areas such as education, students' performance after joining such initiatives, and myth about the Y generation (since most of them are doing more good than bad i.e. becoming volunteers, etc.).

VN: Apart from gaps in research, do you see any gaps in educational practice that call for action?

MAO: We do feel that teachers in general should be more open to the help that Malaysian students may have to offer. We do understand that there will be skepticism, but as an organization that takes pride in creating social awareness, we aspire to be held accountable in the initiatives that we implement. For example, the seeds of deeds camps are led by facilitators who have prior experience in working with youngsters and have had extensive volunteering experience. From the pool of experienced facilitators that we have, we make sure that our volunteers are trained by them with useful tips especially when dealing with high school students.

VN: How can our readers (mostly academicians) join Small Changes in case they have ideas or would like to volunteer to help?

MAO: As a non-governmental organization, we welcome everyone, especially university students as we want them to be exposed to certain realities that are not obvious to them. Not only that, our organization encourages people to volunteer, which means that people are forgoing their own self-interest putting others first. This is an effective mechanism in creating better human capital, as they are equipped with positive values that could help make a greater change in Malaysia.

As for academicians, we welcome any form of collaborations, particularly in the area of programme content development and impact measurements. We believe research-based inputs will further refine the impact desired to our beneficiaries, solidify the aims and purposes of foundation of the organization.

VN: What are some of the future directions of *Small Changes*?

MAO: *Small Changes* plans to diversify in its efforts of creating more volunteering opportunities so that more people can do good and create change for the better. There is also the opportunity for the volunteers to be part of Small Changes' committee. That is definitely what we hope to see where our volunteers would be interested in holding leadership roles within the organization and continue to spread our values.

We also aim at planning more critical projects. Small Changes aspire to invest long term planning to advance community that acts as the beneficiaries. We aim to generate a sustainable model to empower community as a whole rather than children-focused motivational camp. Following long term planning of project, we do include impact measurement mechanism to obtain real quantifiable measures on the impact of our project, to refine the lacking and reiterate on the best steps to take.

VN: Do you have any final words for IJELS readers?

MAO: To make huge changes in a short time span may be exasperating. The reason may be we humans are inherently good and just; however, we are not taught the proper way to make effective changes. Since we uphold to the notion of "Small Changes, Big Differences", we understand that indeed making change bit by bit can really create an instantaneous effect. Teaching a 17-year-old to speak up in a three-day-camp is challenging but to see the results, only if we were to be patient enough, is indeed a fulfilling feeling that no one ever told us about.