

## WHEELS



*Bikes donated by S'pore group help Cambodian villagers find work and go to distant schools without public transport*

**ON THE MOVE:** Ex-NMP Eunice Olsen looks on as schoolchildren (above and below) saddle up on their new rides in Oudong, Cambodia.

PICTURE COURTESY OF FRANK FOO

# Basic bikes change lives



**DANSON CHEONG**  
tnc@sph.com.sg

## TWO WHEELS GOOD

**Singaporean film-maker Chan Gin Kai has seen at first-hand the difference a bike can make.**

Not one of those flashy carbon steeds that many cyclists dream about. Just a basic bike, built out of heavy-duty steel and designed to take a beating.

For Cambodian families living below the poverty line, such a bike makes a world of difference.

Mr Chan was in Cambodia in January doing research for a film when he met aid workers there.

One of them was ex-NMP Eunice Olsen. She donated a bike to a family that had been relocated from a slum in Phnom Penh to a village 15km outside the city.

The distance is a mere half-hour by bike – but for this family, that makes a huge difference.

Said Mr Chan, 42: "Previously, the father was working as a carpark attendant in the city and made US\$80 (S\$98) a month to support his daughter and his HIV-stricken wife. But now, he doesn't have a job.

"But with the bicycle, the father can now travel to the city for work and take his wife to the hospital each week for HIV treatment."

The donation, said Mr Chan, proved that "it doesn't take much to help people".

So six months ago, the film-maker turned humanitarian led an initiative to donate 60 bikes to schoolchildren in the village of Oudong, 40km north of Phnom Penh.

Just last week, he was back again – this time with friends – and with more bikes.

Calling their cause Wheels for Hope, the group – all cycling enthusiasts – are riders looking for a way to give back to the less fortunate with the bicycles.

One of the members, Mr Ye Zhen Qiang, 42, a church

worker, explained: "We're a like-minded group who came together a few years ago, and always wanted to be involved in a project benefiting the less privileged."

To raise money, the group sent out Facebook messages in August to friends, family and fellow enthusiasts. Within a week, they had sponsors for all 78 bicycles.

The bikes – which cost US\$35 each – were bought from a Cambodian distributor.

Each bike donated was tagged with a Wheels for Hope logo as well as the donor's name.

Last Friday, the bikes were distributed to students and families of HIV-positive patients from Oudong, as well as students from the Goldstone School in Phnom Penh, run by charity organisation Hope Worldwide Cambodia.

Mr Chan's brother, film producer Chan Chong Kai, was also part of the group and flew over to film testimonials on how the bikes have changed the villagers' lives.

The 39-year-old said: "There was one kid who had just finished high school, and his new college was about 20km away. It was very challenging for him because he couldn't afford to spend money on public transport."

On average, the students from Oudong – aged eight to 12 – have to travel about 6km to school each day.

It is a journey of almost 90 minutes on foot, but only a third of the time by bike.

The distance was even greater for students at the Goldstone School, where they had to commute up to 10km each day.

Team member Frank Foo, a 38-year-old photographer, said: "It's not a joke, a lot of them tell us they feel like giving up and going to find work rather than spend hours walking to school."

The team pointed out that with a bike, students are encouraged to remain in school and families also gain an extra source of income as they can travel to markets to sell their wares.

The group has since returned to Singapore, but plans are already in the works for another project in the Cambodian village of Kampot.

Said Mr Ye: "We will continue doing such philanthropic projects, whether it is Cambodia or somewhere else, in the future."

■ For updates and information on future projects you can join the Wheels for Hope Facebook group at [www.facebook.com/groups/wheelsforhope](http://www.facebook.com/groups/wheelsforhope)



## Cycling out of poverty

**In Singapore, with cars, taxis, buses and the MRT at our disposal, commuting by bike here is almost a novelty.**

Yet, in other parts of the world, even the most basic of bicycles can change lives. This is where bicycle charities like Wheel for Hope and World Bicycle Relief come in.

These organisations go to rural communities and give needy folk bicycles, sometimes also equipping them with maintenance knowledge to keep their rides in working order.

Many of these communities might be several kilometres away from amenities like schools, clinics, markets or potable water sources.

A bike then becomes a lifesaver. For some Cambodian kids, a 90-minute commute to school takes about an hour less.

The easier it is to get to school, the more likely they'll be inclined to continue their education, graduate and escape the cycle of poverty.

Unlike other aid programmes that dispense food and other necessities, the bicycle gives its recipient a means to an end. And doesn't the old adage say it's better to teach a man to fish than give him one?

In this case, perhaps by giving these people the means to ride on their own two wheels, they will find the strength to stand on their own two feet.