

# From hunger to hope

IT IS an uncomfortable feeling... knowing that many Malaysians go to bed hungry and that their children go to school on empty stomachs; that they get by on one meal a day because they simply cannot afford to have two. It was precisely that discomfort that inspired the birth of the MyKasih Foundation, and the childhood experience of founder Tan Sri Dr Ngau Boon Keat. He knows hunger personally but also kindness, thanks to compassionate neighbours who helped feed him and his family during the tumultuous years of his early childhood in China.

Hunger can be debilitating — it takes away freedom and embeds such a fear of the future that many find it hard to make even small useful changes to their lives. More than that, it strips an adult of dignity and leaves an ineradicable humiliation. The parent who cannot feed his or her child will always feel like a failure.

MyKasih launched its Love My Neighbourhood project for the urban poor in 2008 and has distributed RM200 million worth of food aid since. What differentiates this initiative from any other aid programme is the use of the MyKad, the Malaysian identity card, and proprietary software that enables the poor to do their own shopping cashless at selected retailers with dignity.

Top sellers include beverages, seasoning, noodles, biscuits and rice — hallmarks of a typical Malaysian kitchen. Fresh food includes bread and eggs. A number of milk products are on the list for children, including infants. In rural areas, items like salted fish are a good source of iodine.

The original list of approved items, created 10 years ago in consultation with other NGOs with experience in food aid, represents the packaged food basket of a Malaysian household.



At the Dialog-MyKasih Foundation Financial Literacy Graduation Ceremony in November 2011, a shy Anjala Devi Marimuthu, 53, surrendered her food aid halfway through the year. She told the audience that she felt blessed and was very grateful to MyKasih as the food aid came during a crisis in her life. Since recovering from that, she wanted another deserving family to get a chance.



Eggs are an important source of protein for Malaysia's needy

Over the years, the list has grown. While there are essentially the same categories of staples, there are now more brands, package sizes and overall variety to accommodate changing tastes and availability. Most of the things on the list are easy to store and have a substantial shelf life.

Feedback comes from beneficiaries, on-the-ground social workers and retailers. Almost daily, retailers from all over the country call in to update the list and to report problems in the supply and demand trends.

The MyKasih system can take on an unlimited number of food products as long as it has a manufacturer's barcode. This means some things can be ruled out altogether, like cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, super premium food brands or gourmet products.

People in need of food aid come on the radar through recommendations by NGOs on the ground. MyKasih's targets are

productive people. Currently, there are about 4,000 adults on the food aid programme, the majority of whom have full-time work but cannot make ends meet. Some rely on one breadwinner because the other parent, usually the mother, is caring for the children. Some families have no income, for example when the husband is a drug addict. The wife who minds the children thus relies on handouts.

Many are already receiving other forms of aid, which is used on things like rent, utilities, school, clothing and shoes. Some are supporting a disabled child, elderly parents and bedridden relatives. MyKasih's food aid, usually RM80 a month, is meant to relieve some of these people's financial burden and lasts only for a year.

The main casualty of poverty is children. In some homes, a staple meal is rice boiled with salt. On good days, they get instant noodles; on lucky days, they get junk food. Mostly,



**"History has shown us that when you empower a woman, the economy changes, and thus a whole community reaps the positive difference."**

*Datin Nazrin Aneeza,  
MyKasih trustee*

they go to school tired, hungry and undernourished; teachers report that children actually faint from hunger. Babies are known to be fed a mixture of rice flour and water, shaken vigorously until it looks like milk. Acute hunger is mainly an urban problem and many households in small spaces are supporting multiple families. For others, the social isolation in a big city can be debilitating.

Rural families have a different kind of poverty. Some can still hunt, forage and even grow food, and the *gotong royong* spirit prevalent in most villages means neighbours share what they have. Still, the overall diet can be of very poor quality and there is chronic undernourishment. Those with land do better but they are often cash-strapped and cannot supplement their diet with bought food. Increasingly, rural families spend more time and energy looking for clean water.

Over time, the food aid programme is expected to shrink as MyKasih invests more resources in the school programme. Food aid, while a helpful temporary solution, is not expected to change mindsets in the long term. ■



Community leader Anjang Aluej explains, in Temiar language, the workings of the MyKasih food aid programme to residents of Kampung Sungai Papan, Gerik