



# Giving comes with a duty

Founder Bernard Sabrier puts himself at the frontline when running Children Action, a foundation that aims to make a difference in the lives of children

By GENEVIEVE CUA

**P**HILANTHROPIST Bernard Sabrier, who made his fortune in finance, is a frequent donor to various causes and charities. But for years he had been irked by the inability to get a handle on how efficiently his money was being used.

About two decades ago, he started a foundation Children Action with the aim of making a difference in the lives of children. It focuses on extending medical and psychiatric or psychosocial help in a number of countries including Vietnam, Argentina and Switzerland.

Since its founding, Children Action has honed its approach to a fine mixture of the tangible and intangible. Its achievements are impressive: more than 48,000 direct beneficiaries between 1994 and 2013, for instance.

Its operating model is also enviable in its efficiency. Mr Sabrier and a “small group” of donors bear the foundation’s expenses. In turn, the foundation seeks to create a multiplier effect on donors’ funds

and time to maximum impact, at the same time controlling the risks to its volunteers – typically heads of surgical departments and senior doctors from Europe.

Mr Sabrier reckons the foundation creates a value-add of three times or more for every donated dollar.

“I was always a bit frustrated because I felt that the money I was giving, I didn’t know if I gave one dollar, if all of that was used or 50 or 30 cents. I couldn’t measure properly the impact of what I was giving.

“My first goal when I started was to build a platform where I could measure efficiency and where I could have a form of leverage on my money, where I can attract the best professional people.”

Mr Sabrier is a veteran banker who currently runs Unigestion, which provides asset management services to institutions and pension funds. Geneva-based Unigestion has assets under management of US\$15.5 billion. It opened an office in Singapore in 2008 and Mr Sabrier heads Unigestion Asia.

Children Action’s activities span medi-

cal missions, as well as support for social and family infrastructure in places such as Buenos Aires, Lima and Bucharest. These efforts take the form of support for teenage mothers, for instance, helping them to bond with their children, which should lower the risk of abandonment and alleviate a host of other social issues.

The structure of Children Action is akin to that of a company with a board of trustees, auditors, legal advisers and an ethics commission.

Says Mr Sabrier: “The big problem in the charitable world is that because people do things with their heart, they think they do it well. But you don’t do well only with your heart. It’s a balance between your heart and saying no to a number of things. You have a lot of ethical issues. Many charities don’t have an ethics committee.”

Building a bridge to help shorten children’s journey to school may have ethical issues, for example. “The committee may say if you build a bridge there, the child doesn’t need to travel 10 kilometres to school, maybe it becomes two kilometres.

But there is a big city here and they may get spoilt on other things. For every single project, the ethics committee... gives us an assessment of the ethical risks.”

One of the first things Mr Sabrier sought when he set up Children Action were benchmarks or markers to give an indication of efficiency. This was relatively simple, he says, for medical missions where a child’s recovery is measurable. In such missions, he says the group can do a lot “with a reasonable amount of money”. “The average cost of an operation (on a mission) is about 400 euros (S\$670) per child, which is nothing.”

With other projects which have a psychiatric or psychosocial objective, measurement of impact may be a challenge.

Still, he says: “We have quite good metrics now.”

One of the group’s major ongoing commitments is to help reduce the suicide rate among teens in Switzerland. Together with University Hospitals of Geneva, it established a crisis unit to focus on suicide care and prevention. The centre offers a multi-



### GROWING PAINS

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PHOTOS: CHILDREN ACTION

disciplinary team to form a "safety net" around the teen and his or her relatives.

Since efforts began in 1996, the crisis unit has cared for more than 3,100 teens. Geneva has seen a major decline in suicides among 15 to 24 year olds – from more than 15 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1995, to five in 100,000 inhabitants in 2010.

"We know that each teenager who gets to the centre will have treatment, versus less than half in the past. Most kids try suicide by taking medicines, but they don't die because it's hard to make it right. Now each of those kids will get proper treatment.

"We know by asking the kids that nearly 80 or 90 per cent will go to university and have jobs. After that they will lead normal lives. When you are 14 or 15 and you try to commit suicide, it's not because you want to die. You're trying to find a solution to other problems, and when you are through that, you become normal again."

The suicide prevention project achieves a leverage of 3.5 times – that is, Children Action has put in 13 million Swiss francs (\$\$18 million) in the last 14 or 15 years, and its hospital partner has put in 40 million Swiss francs.

Projects to strengthen family support, such as those in Peru targeted at single mothers, are less measurable. "We have 800 girls that we take care of. They have babies, some (girls) are as young as 11. The average age is 13 or 14. It will take longer. We want to measure how many go back to school, stay with the same partner and get married. How many have other children with other men or the same man. How many find jobs, have stable homes, and will their children be better at school

than other children elsewhere."

He says it is important to set limits to what a charity will undertake. Children Action does not intervene in the heat of a crisis, such as an earthquake in Argentina or the tsunami in Asia in 2004. That is because there are organisations such as the Red Cross and Medecins Sans Frontieres which are better equipped to deal with crises. Children Action did, however, rebuild 450 houses for those left homeless in Sri Lanka 12 months after the tsunami.

The foundation also does not intervene in countries at war and this is to protect volunteers. "Our surgeons are leading surgery departments in Paris or Geneva. They go for a week. We hope not to lose any of them."

### Right mindset

He says it is important to approach giving with the right mindset. "It's not something to get guilt out of your system or to look good or get a reward. I don't have medals, and (if offered) I will refuse it. I think giving is a part of yourself. You have to be happy to be in the camp of givers, and not receivers.

"If you give, like anything in life, it's a responsibility. When I say that, it's not that you have a responsibility to give when you are wealthy or successful, but it puts responsibility on your shoulders. When you start a programme people expect you to do things. You can't stop the next day or next year. If you do a programme and one day you are not there, is it sustainable?

"Can someone fund it? Will they have learnt enough to do it by themselves? Most people never realise – they think giving stops

at the last 'g'. But giving starts with the last 'g'.

"When you decide to give, you put yourself at the frontline. You have responsibilities, and you have to organise it the same way you organise a business. You need leadership, understanding and a lot of humility. You have to know that you don't know, that you are ready to learn, that there are local issues. You can try to make it as transparent and efficient as possible."

It is important, too, to understand local needs and culture. "We learnt that you can't go somewhere and say – do it this way. People would never do it the way you think because they have their own culture, problems and issues. The only way is to understand their needs, have a professional response and guide them towards the way that is manageable for them in the local community with the type of equipment they have."

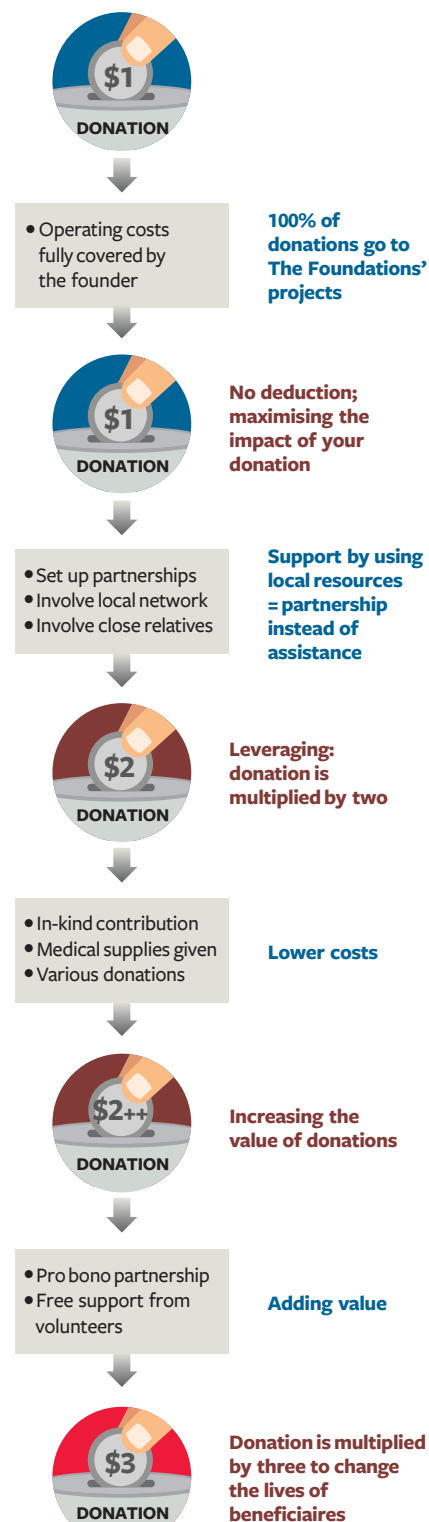
When the foundation started doing surgery in some developing countries, there were rats in the room and flies buzzing around wounds. But out of over 11,000 children operated on, there were only around three fatalities. "If we had operated in Singapore or Geneva, we may have lost two. But when you imagine the conditions... we understood very quickly that we had to bring only very, very experienced professors or heads of surgery departments, because conditions were tough.

"They have to understand how they can get the most benefit and changes for the lives of the children. For most of them, it's not about aesthetics. It's about life or death, work or no work, being integrated in society or not." ■

### THE FOUNDATION

#### Multiplier effect

How your donation is multiplied by three



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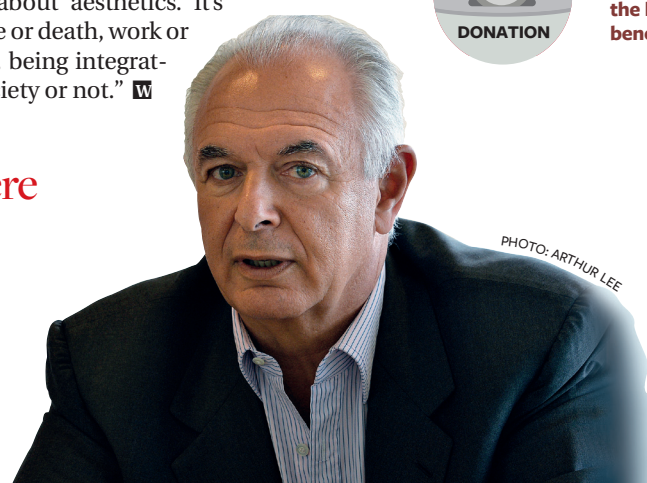


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