

A classroom was filled in two days with donated items after Mr Gabriel Teo sent e-mails to 300 people. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN



# Heart work for Kenya

Volunteer Gabriel Teo plans to build educational facilities to help Kenyans

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**A**n ambitious school and community project is going up in Kenya – with a Singapore heart.

Seventeen years after giving up his career to do volunteer work in the East African republic, Mr Gabriel Teo is planning to build educational facilities there in May.

Estimated to cost between \$1.5 and \$2 million, the project will consist of a primary school for more than 400 students, a nursery school, as well as a community centre, library, hostel, computer centre and cafeteria.

Mr Teo, 47, a former tax accountant, says: "We have already cleared the land and dug a well, and we hope that it can be a model school for the area."

The shared facilities will be open to the entire community and will benefit more than 2,000 people, he adds.

So far, \$150,000 has been raised

through private donations. Mr Teo hopes to raise a third of the budget by the end of June, through private and corporate donations, as well as fundraisers.

The project is being built under the auspices of the Tana River Life Foundation, founded by Mr Teo, which aims to enhance rural education.

Based in Idsowe Village in Kenya's Tana River District, the non-governmental organisation currently sponsors the school fees of about 600 secondary school and college students. It has also built infrastructure such as classrooms, science labs and a bakery. The foundation is entirely funded by donations and fundraisers.

The foundation's key projects include "mitumba", or reused goods. This involves selling donated clothes to the neediest women in the village for a nominal sum, so that they can resell them at a higher price and keep the profit.

Mr Teo, a bachelor, explains that it is akin to a micro-credit scheme, only with "credit in the form of stock for sale". He says: "We don't want to create a dependency and we are not going to be Santa Claus."

Thousands of items of used clothing are currently sitting in a classroom in the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Vir-

gin Mary in Hougang, which has been helping with the logistics of the task.

The donated items will be sorted and shipped to Kenya at the end of next month. In addition, shoes, new bags, stationery and sanitary napkins will also be sent to benefit the sponsored students and the new school.

Mr Teo, a Malaysian who has studied and worked in Singapore for more than 15 years, sent e-mails to 300 people on his mailing list to spread the word about the clothes collection. "They filled a 10m by 10m classroom in two days," he says.

He is assisted by 15 to 20 volunteers each day.

Architect Jason Wang, 63, is helping to design the educational community project for free, with a team of three from his employers, international architectural firm Aedas. Since 2000, he has helped other NGOs build a handful of orphanages in countries such as Cambodia.

Mr Wang, who was introduced to Mr Teo in 2010 through a friend, helped him to work out a brief for the project and approached Aedas to pitch in.

Says Mr Wang: "Here was a chap going out to help the poor, and I respected what he was trying to do."

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