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Looking at the state of the world today, there are not many reasons to be optimistic about the future. However, everybody who knows me also knows that I am a diehard optimist and so, amongst all the gloom and doom, I can see a real bright star of hope shining right in front of our doorstep. No, unfortunately it is not the Land of Smiles, which is still in the firm grip of the military, but the bordering country to the west. Yes, after many, many years of hopeless darkness, Myanmar is rising like a phoenix from the ashes and provides good reasons to be optimistic.

At the time of writing this article, Aung San Suu Kyi and her administration are organising the Union Peace Conference, scheduled for late August, which hopefully will become the cornerstone for lasting peace in Myanmar. The conference is inspired by the Panglong Agreement of 1947, which Aung San Suu Kyi’s father signed with three ethnic groups. During the first 100 days of NLD-led government, it became obvious that peace has the highest priority in her administration.

During a recent trip to Myanmar to open our latest two schooling projects, I witnessed real progress and development, even in remote areas of the country. I also came to realise that ethnic armed groups, who signed a ceasefire agreement a long time ago, have been able to develop their communities, given the stability and collaboration between themselves and the government, without losing their cultural values and identities. For instance, the Pa-O National Organization has had a ceasefire agreement with the government since 1991 and was rewarded by the 2008 constitutional referendum with its own, self-administered zone which consists of three townships in Taunggyi District. Our two schooling projects are located in one of these townships. So, during the opening ceremony, I was able to observe the fruitful cooperation between the Pa-O National Organization and the government’s education representative. I hope that more ethnic armed groups will follow suit soon and start to act in the best interests of their children.
Although Myanmar’s path to democracy is bumpy and there are still many pressing issues, such as the ongoing sectarian violence against the Muslim population and the human rights abuses against the Rohingya minority, the overall outlook has never been more positive. On the back of this positive outlook, improved infrastructure (electricity, air travel, banking and internet connectivity), increasing rule of law, and after 10 years of our having worked unofficially in Myanmar, Child’s Dream Myanmar has finally been registered as a local national charitable association. Marc and I had the privilege not only to preside over the founding meeting on 11 June, but also to select five suitable board members from amongst our large pool of talented and influential university scholarship alumni. It fills me with great pride and confidence that Child’s Dream Myanmar will be represented by our own alumni. Together with our experienced team based in Yangon, we will be able to contribute strongly towards the long-term development of Myanmar.

I hope that Myanmar can set a positive example for the rest of the world by overcoming differences and demonstrate that, if people communicate and work together, everybody can benefit.
One of the biggest and often neglected challenges to the long-term development of remote communities in Myanmar is the handling of widespread drug and alcohol addiction especially among young men. Last year we informed you about our new and exciting partnership with DARE (Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education) Network. In 2015 Child’s Dream supported the training of 15 new addiction workers and 20 village coordinators in Mae La refugee camp.
During the first half of 2016 DARE not only built a new treatment facility in Kayin State, Myanmar but also relocated its addiction workers to the new site. The 15 addiction workers were grouped into five mobile teams that rotate among the 20 target villages and the DARE treatment center. In the 20 target villages they conducted prevention and awareness workshops together with the village coordinator. The village coordinators have completed 190 prevention education sessions with 2,400 participants.

Additionally, in May 2016 a new DARE treatment center in T’ree Hpoe Kwee village opened its doors and accepted 27 addicts in their first treatment cycle. The most severely addicted and often violent people seek treatment first. This first batch of addicts tested DARE’s and the new addiction workers’ abilities to the extreme. A treatment cycle lasts 3 months and there is already a waiting list for the second treatment cycle which will start in autumn this year.

DARE provides culturally appropriate non-medical treatment in four phases; detoxification, recovery, education and reintegration combined with Western style counselling. Thanks to its holistic approach DARE was able to help 69% of its clients to become and remain substance free since treatment.
Can you imagine how it must feel to live in a place that discriminates you all the time? Can you imagine how it must feel to be born without nationality, without any paper that confirms you exist? The simplest everyday tasks such as buying a SIM card, getting medicine, going to school, driving a motorbike or purchasing a bus ticket turn into risky endeavors because you might get arrested. This is the real life for most Burmese migrant youth living in Chiang Mai. They were born in war-torn Shan State, where they had little chances to get educated, were at risk of being conscripted into the army and had no hope for a decent job. Many came to Thailand in hope for a better future but unfortunately plenty of dirty, dangerous and demeaning (3D) jobs with almost slave-like conditions awaited them.
Child’s Dream is teaming up with Shan Youth Power, a community based organization run by a young and highly motivated team, to provide support to these migrant youth living in and around Chiang Mai. According to the law in Thailand, stateless children are allowed to attend Thai government schools, however, like so many other good laws, they are not enforced and, therefore, the principal and the school committee decides whether their school accepts stateless children or not. And even if a school accepts them, the costs that are associated with studying especially in high school level are simply unaffordable for them or their parents. Child’s Dream decided to work with Shan Youth Power to expand our high school scholarship programme. As of this academic year Child’s Dream supports 14 high school scholarships for stateless Shan youth living in Chiang Mai. The mentoring and coaching of these students are done by Shan Youth Power.
Our university scholarship programme is now in Cambodia! USPCB, for short, offers full university funding for outstanding individuals from Cambodia to study a bachelor degree in Cambodia. We are currently finishing our first pilot year with eight students, studying in six universities.
USPCB aims to produce well-educated alumni who lead the development of Cambodia. We prioritise applicants who ideally have a combination of a good academic record, work experience, and of course experience being a leader. Equally important are the students’ future plans, which are assessed based on relevance to the Cambodian context and the impact they can achieve with their degree. Students during this year of the pilot phase of the programme must either be currently working in Siem Reap province OR have graduated high school there; the programme will expand the intake area to three more provinces next year, and the entire country the following year. Applicants must be aged 30 or under at time of application.
FROM THE OFFICE

Larry the Excel expert

Our long-time friend and supporter Larry from Hong Kong spent four days with us to teach us better Microsoft Excel handling. He volunteered to train two groups of team members during four days: beginners in a morning group, and a more advanced group in the afternoons. When peeking into the meeting room you would have seen 12-14 Child’s Dream people intensely staring at their laptop screens and at a screen with Larry’s projected magic Excel cells. Luckily it started raining during that week, which brought down the Chiang Mai temperature a bit, else the two small air-condition units in our meeting room would not have been be able to keep up with the needed cooling. Thank you Larry!
Higher Education workshop

Two cars and ten Child’s Dreamers drove off to a lovely little – inexpensive, mind you! - resort with wooden houses and lush gardens near Mae On, Southeast of Chiang Mai. Thomas, Head of Higher Education, had initiated this first Higher Education workshop ever. One of the two houses we had booked offered us a very suitable meeting room, as it had a small living room downstairs where we could install a projector, a screen and where we had sufficient space to write on flip-chart paper to present our group findings. We spoke about higher education in general, about our own higher education programmes, and assessed strengths and weaknesses in a proper SWOT analysis. Each one had been given the assignment to present their own work in a maximum of 10 slides. This had one purpose of informing each other in more detail what we work on and how these puzzle pieces come together in a larger Child’s Dream higher education context. Secondly, we wanted our younger team members to work with slides, to present, and to have to speak up in front of audiences, which many of them initially fear to do.
SIX laptops

Our very big ‘Thank-You’ goes to Ruedi Moser and Roger Gianesi from SIX Group Ltd. (Zurich Stock Exchange) who once again made great efforts to secure second-hand laptops from their company for our many programmes and projects. Over the years, we have received well over 200 such laptops. A well-organised group of additional helpers facilitate transportation of these laptops from Zurich to Chiang Mai. Thank you Daniel Waldvogel, Mike Meier, Andrea and Ruedi Isler for storing the laptops and hand-carrying the weight! These laptops are an extremely useful and very important tool for our students in remote areas of our work.
Gradually, the work done in our Basic Education team is shifting from educational infrastructure to quality of education. In January this year, our Basic Education team was trained in “Facilitating and Moderating” by an external trainer from the Joyful Wisdom Institute. The focus of that January workshop was learning how to organise a simple workshop and how to come up with activities for varied groups of participants based on a ‘Participatory Learning’ method. For some of our projects, we organise trainings, workshops, children’s activities or high school scholarship camps by ourselves; in others, we partner with other organisations or outsource activities to external facilitators.

This June workshop focused on ‘Lessons Learned’ from Basic Education projects and programmes implemented by each team. We learned about different tools and techniques such as determining timelines, competency and context analyses, synthesis of plans and goal setting, but also had the chance to practise for work effected in each team. Our expectation was to have an action plan for each team after the workshop; unfortunately this did not materialise as each team had just too many projects and programmes to look at. But now, at least, we know much better the capacity of each team, how to analyse a situation, how to do a SWOT analysis and how to come up with an action plan ourselves.
A donor’s perspective

By coincidence, in 2013 I saw a documentary about Child’s Dream and its founders on Swiss national TV. I couldn’t believe what I saw and heard! Could this really be trusted? It featured two young ex-bankers who, in a seemingly sudden attack of selflessness, renounced their bankers’ salaries to realize their goal in life of building schools and initiating health programmes in the Mekong Sub-Region, instead of managing assets and doing portfolio performance calculations. This strongly smelled of smart marketing and a made-up dream story! But very fascinating, if this indeed was all true!

My innate entrepreneurial distrust (not least of bankers) made me want to meet with these two individuals. This happened in autumn 2013 in Zurich, when Marc and Daniel, both very likeable, sincere and professional, gave us information about their projects. So that we could see with our own eyes what they had told us, they invited my partner, Monica, and me to Chiang Mai to be able to further convince us about what still seemed so incredible to us.

In December we visited northern Thailand. What we saw there and in Mae La Camp near Mae Sot left us speechless. Mae La is one of nine camps, in existence for over 30 years, which still
have 100,000 Burmese refugees. Compared to reality, Daniel’s and Marc’s descriptions in Zurich had been downright modest! The migrant schools, their structure, the very basic health clinics, the boarding houses, as well as hundreds of happy and amazingly disciplined children broke our hearts! Our initial, firm intention not to get carried away by our inner turmoil during our stay and not to finance a project proved untenable. We spontaneously decided to support not only one, but two, school projects in Na Tung, Xaignabouli Province in central Laos. Suddenly we were incredibly happy.

Marc and Daniel were probably as surprised as we were about our decision and they were very grateful. What followed after our return to Switzerland confirmed our impression of their high professionalism. Child’s Dream’s regular reports on construction progress with corresponding photos and descriptions of - mainly weather-related - challenges was impressive. This symbiosis of professional care and modest, selfless demeanor deeply touched us. This feeling was increased by the occasion of the opening of the two school buildings (one primary and one secondary for approx. 100 children each) on 3 December 2014, when all the students and the 650-soul village showered us with gratitude. Their hospitality was breathtaking. It was occasionally hard to fight back tears. The school buildings have a remarkable construction standard, despite Na Tung’s modest infrastructure and remoteness. Four weeks after the school opening, the final financial statement (below budget!) arrived. We were not even surprised, given the professionalism of the Child’s Dream Team.

Upon our return to Switzerland we, of course, told our friends and acquaintances about our overwhelming feelings and objective observations. This resulted in our friend, Peter Kapp, suggesting we tackle another project together - maybe a bigger one. The outcome of this idea reads like the procedure described above: we opted for the monastic school Aung Za Yat in Mandalay Province in Myanmar, a school for about 300 students. We attended the official school opening ceremony together with Peter on 10 December 2015. And again, the impressions were overwhelming: happy children and villagers, incredible hospitality – and, of course, grateful Buddhist monks who run the school.

The very moving experiences and feelings during these three school openings caused something addictive: Monica and I could not resist. We decided to finance another primary school in Na Cheauk, in the very south of Laos that we are opening on 1 December this year. As Na Cheauk is located very close to Cambodia, this will give us the opportunity to travel there too. We might even tackle a Cambodian project next year!

Did I tell you that this has turned out to be rather addictive?

Jo Schmitz, Baden, Switzerland
Charity Rating

We are very pleased to have been awarded a 5-star rating by Giving Back Association, Thailand, at the beginning of July 2016. This is the highest achievable rating. We are proud of our team who was instrumental in securing such a recognition. The award was handed over to Marc by M.R. Pridiyathorn Devakula, until recently, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand.