



PHOTO: CHILD'S DREAM

Mr Siegfried, 32, with children during a feasibility and needs-assessment trip to northern Vietnam. His charity, Child's Dream, has built over 70 nurseries and schools for about 18,000 children around the Mekong River since 2003.

# Making a Child's Dream come true

**Ex-banker gives up job and big pay cheque to help needy kids in the Mekong sub-region**

He became an accredited chartered financial analyst with the CFA Institute – the world's biggest association of investment professionals – and worked for the investment bank in Seoul and Hong

These countries border the Golden Triangle – a vipers' nest of vices and humanitarian crises, torn by corruption and political strife and plagued by drug trafficking and people smuggling.

grammes, says the non-profit organisation raises about US\$4 million (S\$5 million) a year.

The biggest supporters are Swiss individuals and corporations, followed by their counterparts in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

"US\$4 million or US\$5 million is a good amount," says Mr Siegfried, who now draws a monthly salary of US\$1,000, a fraction of what he used to earn.

"We don't want it to get bigger because that means having to increase headcount. We'll be less efficient and have less contact with our beneficiaries," he adds, proud of the fact that administrative costs account for only 7 per cent of total expenditure, well below the industry average.

The management reports to a board and all accounts are professionally audited and posted on their website.

Running Child's Dream comes with its share of challenges.

"Sometimes, we have too many projects but not enough donors, but sometimes we have too many donors and not enough projects," he says wryly.

"Then there are the different timelines of our beneficiaries and our donors. The communities we help and the world they live in turn about four or five times slower."

Donors may want to donate funds or back certain projects but by the time the wheres, whats and hows are hammered out with the communities in question, the sponsors may have changed their minds.

There is the heartbreaking task of turning down beneficiaries who do not fit the criteria for help.

Mr Siegfried explains: "A mother wanted us to help a girl who was severely handicapped, both mentally and physically.

"We wanted to help her but we couldn't. If we did, wherever we went, people would bring us their handicapped children and we won't be able to do what we set out to do anymore."



**Wong Kim Hoh**  
Senior Writer

**M**any people thought Mr Daniel Siegfried had gone seriously loopy when he told them he wanted to quit his big-bucks job to set up a charity to help marginalised youngsters around the Mekong River.

After all, this was a man with a coveted position at Swiss bank UBS in Singapore, living large on an ample salary that allowed him a nice apartment, a stylishly reconditioned 1979 Volkswagen Beetle, gourmet meals, and luxurious holidays – business class all the way.

"Friends and colleagues said, 'You're nuts. Why do this to yourself? Why give up everything?'" recalls Chiang Mai-based Mr Siegfried, 32.

But he maintains that he has not given up anything by co-founding Child's Dream with a banker friend in 2003.

"In fact, I've gained everything," says the former banker who was earning about 200,000 Swiss francs a year when he quit.

The younger of two children of a real estate services manager and a homemaker in Zurich was ear-marked for the fast track early when UBS in Zurich picked him for its talent development programme when he was just 19.

Kong before coming to Singapore in 2001.

But the boyish-looking Mr Siegfried has always nursed a soft spot for those less fortunate.

In school, he always defended "outsiders" – friends who were foreign nationals, had difficult family backgrounds or "looked or behaved somewhat differently from the plain-vanilla kids".

Later, when based in Asia, he travelled extensively and encountered many communities he felt needed help.

To "compensate for his extremely materialistic expatriate life", he started volunteering with a couple of charity projects in the region, helping street kids, orphans, child labourers or those suffering from HIV and other diseases.

"I have a special fondness for children because they are our next generation. I just want to help them break out of their cycle of poverty," he says.

However, the more involved he became in his charity work, the harder he found it to be motivated by an "interesting but very commercialised job".

He was also disillusioned by the depth of corruption in a charity where he was volunteering and vowed that if he started one, it would be as clean and as professionally run as possible.

He did just that when he founded Child's Dream with fellow Swiss banker Marc Jenni.

"Some friends then turned their backs on me because for them it was all about bigger bonuses and better cars. But some other people, ironically those who were not so close to me, wanted to help," he says.

The two set up an office in Chiang Mai and decided to concentrate on the Mekong sub-region, which includes Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

The fallout affects children the most: In Thailand, one million kids – from orphans to child labourers – need protection; in Myanmar, 30 per cent of all children die before age five in areas of conflict; and in Cambodia, 45 per cent of all children are moderately or severely malnourished.

Both men beavered away without pay for four years, using their financial training to set up a professional outfit while drawing on their database of well-heeled former clients to raise funds.

Seven years on, Child's Dream has offices in Chiang Mai in Thailand and Siem Reap in Cambodia and has 30 paid staff. At any given time, they also have about four volunteers from all over the world, including Singapore.

They focus mainly on education and health. Good health care, says Mr Siegfried, goes a long way in reducing child mortality while education can pave the way for

## Not all about the money

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**MR DANIEL SIEGFRIED, who co-founded Child's Dream with a fellow Swiss banker. The charity now has offices in Thailand and Cambodia**

socio-economic opportunities for families.

Child's Dream has built more than 70 nurseries and primary and secondary schools for about 18,000 children in the region since 2003, rescued about 700 children with life-saving operations, and sponsored the university education of at least 100 students.

Tens of thousands of children have also benefited from health programmes, including those that provide malaria protection and vaccinations.

Mr Siegfried, who is also Child's Dream's head of project and pro-

out to do anymore.

"We get asked, 'If you can build this big school, why can't you help this little girl?' It's very hard for them to understand. So we try to help and place them with organisations which can do what they seek."

Despite these sometimes distressing difficulties, he says he wouldn't dream of doing anything else with his life.

"As simple as our approach is, it works and that is our biggest achievement," he says.

One affirmation that he is on the right track comes when young adults who have gone to university on Child's Dream bursaries come back to become teachers or headmasters in the schools the organisation has set up.

Mr Siegfried recalls one particular incident that told him even more forcefully that the charity is doing good. He was visiting a school the charity had built in a

refugee camp along the Thailand and Myanmar border when a little girl ran up to him, flashing a big grin.

He couldn't recall who she was, and so asked: "Who are you?"

She yanks at her T-shirt to reveal a scar running down her chest. The little girl was one of the children Child's Dream had saved when it paid for an operation to plug the hole in her heart.

"She was very sick and would have died. And now she's running around and going to school.

"That's when you know that every minute of your work has an impact and can change lives."

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**Child's Dream has a website at <http://childsdream.org/>**