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.
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 this extremely materialistic expatriate life”, he started volunteering with a couple of charity projects in the region, helping street kids, orphans, children 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 the “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-heel family friends 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 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 programme management, says that helping children is a way to help parents.

He says the children have a better chance of growing up to be successful adults and that it gives parents a different way to look at their lives.

Not all about the money

“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.”

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

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 earmarked for the fast track early when UBS in Zurich picked him for its talent development programme when he was just 19.

Wong Kim Hoh
Senior Writer

Many 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 reconditoned 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 earmarked for the fast track early when UBS in Zurich picked him for its talent development programme when he was just 19.

"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 particularly 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 Thai-Lao border.

"She yanks at her T-shirt to reveal the 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."