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## **CHILDREN, CHARITY, AND A CHIANG MAI DREAM**

Northern Thailand is such a charming place it would be all too easy to miss them: the kids on amphetamines, the child prostitutes, the orphans. Riding elephants, visiting orchid farms, eating in charming cafes and riverside restaurants, shopping the night markets, they become invisible to the tourist's eye. Even a lot of the expats living here can readily overlook the reality of life for the poorest of the poor, and they can certainly turn away from the ugly facts about what many have called "the super-crisis" in The Golden Triangle, where Burma, Laos, and Thailand join borders.

Here are just some of the disturbing facts about the Mekong Sub-Region: An estimated 70,000 children are forcibly conscripted into the army in Burma where they suffer abuse as porters, human shields, mine sweepers and sex slaves. Almost 80 percent of illegal migrants into Thailand from Laos are child workers. Somewhere between 60,000 to 200,000 children in Thailand are abused through child prostitution. And Thailand has more than a million illegal Burmese migrant workers in addition to the 140,000 Burmese refugees living in nine refugee camps in the country.

There are two young men in Chiang Mai who don't turn away from these facts. They confront them head-on, and they make a real difference for the most vulnerable population here – children.

Daniel Siegfried, 27, and Marc Jenni, 35, were both well-heeled bankers working in Singapore just a little over two years ago. But they were both growing disenchanted with the affluent and potentially dissipated lives they were leading. So, to make a long story short, they quit their jobs with UBS, Switzerland's largest bank (both of them are Swiss), and came to Thailand where in 2003, they started a charity called Child's Dream. Applying their business and banking skills to the job of saving kids, they have raised over \$600,000 and started more than two dozen highly successful projects. Here are just a few examples.

In Mae Hong Son, Thailand one completed project provided shelter for about 40 children, most of them orphans (and girls) who fled across the border from Burma because they'd lost their parents to drugs, prostitution or death. Along with pleasant and sturdy housing, they built a school with a fully equipped kitchen for vocational training and a water system with a filter and generator. For an investment of less than \$23,000 Child's Dream, in partnership with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangkok, has helped prevent child exploitation and trafficking by providing education and shelter to vulnerable children.

In another project in Burma, children whose parents are drug addicts who use their kids to beg or who sell them into prostitution, the school Child's Dream built helped prevent migration and exploitation by offering education and a safe haven. The entire project cost less than \$5,000. Another big school was built close to Mae Sai, right on the Thai/Burmese border in a 'de facto refugee camp', providing education to more than 350 children. In Mae Sot, a new project will offer day care and educational services to more than 285 children of Burmese migrant workers, while nearby 96 Muslim children will benefit from new sanitation facilities and an extension to their school. In Ban Kwai and Ban Mae Surin Refugee Camps where about 22,000 Burmese refugees live, 2700 children between three and five years of age will receive a set of warm clothes each for the cold season, and nursery school uniforms. And throughout the region, students of migrant

schools will be able to make full use of the education provided by having writing pads, pens and books supplied.

Child's Dream is based on a vision in which providing support for orphans and children living in poverty is unconditional. Religion, gender, nationality, and ethnic affiliation play no part in its work. Integrity underscores all funding, independence and diversity are key, and there is full financial transparency. Neither Marc nor Daniel draws salary and they don't plan to; they will derive income when their saving run out by establishing a charity consulting and advisory group, largely designed to foster dialogue between corporations and other donors and NGOs. Dedicated to containing growth so that the approach they've developed is not compromised, the organization's founders envision something resembling franchises in the future.

Winston Churchill once remarked that "we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Daniel Siegfried and Marc Jenni are two young men who made a good living; now they are making a good life. Their work will make a huge difference for thousands of vulnerable and exploited children in this part of the world. We would all do well to learn from their experience, and as they say, to "develop a better balance between material preoccupation and true human values." I, for one, am deeply grateful for their work. It has helped me open my eyes in the land of elephants and orchids.

To learn more about Child's Dream, visit [www.childsdream.org](http://www.childsdream.org) or contact them on [info@childsdream.org](mailto:info@childsdream.org)

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