REALISING A DREAM

Choosing Chiang Mai, Thailand as the headquarters for their new charitable organisation was almost a no-brainer for Marc Jenni and Daniel Stegfried, co-founders of Child’s Dream Foundation. “Southeast Asia has always been very close to our hearts – we travelled the Greater Mekong Subregion extensively when we were bankers – and we saw a lot of need here,” says Daniel.

Set up in 2003, Child’s Dream is a nonprofit organisation that reaches out to marginalised kids and youth in countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. It works with local communities to grow educational opportunities and boost health conditions. On 20 January 2015, SilkAir adopted Child’s Dream Foundation as its official charity partner under a three-year Memorandum of Understanding.

While the decision on where to locate the foundation’s headquarters was not a problem, figuring out which social issues they should focus on was a challenge. Marc and Daniel wanted to ensure that they could help engineer sustainable change and development. It took about six months of field research, including engaging street kids in the Golden Triangle, to narrow it down to areas where demand was greatest – healthcare and education.

ENABLING PEOPLE

Both stress that they don’t simply step in to solve problems for the communities they work with because social development must come from the active efforts of those it affects in order to be sustainable in the long run. “We’re more like facilitators, working very closely with the communities and building partnerships to help the locals identify and address the issues,” explains Daniel.

“Before we teach a man how to fish, we want to make sure this is what he wants to eat.”

Over the past 12 years, Child’s Dream has driven a wide range of healthcare and basic education programmes in the Greater
Mekong Subregion. For example, it has provided life-saving medical procedures to more than 1,200 children, vaccinated some 50,000 more, and built over 210 schools to provide basic education for thousands of rural and underprivileged kids.

In more recent years, the organisation also established higher education and vocational programmes to help youths with potential enter university and find good jobs. This is perhaps where Child’s Dream has been most influential in terms of effecting real and sustainable change, despite the smaller number of beneficiaries. Marc reveals the impact is already visible. “Many of the 100 plus alumni from our university scholarship programme now work in sectors like social enterprises, NGOs, education or government where they can influence change not just for themselves or their families, but for their community and country. One of them, for example, is now one of the press speakers for the Myanmar president, while another holds a leadership position in Médecins Sans Frontières.”

The duo’s biggest dream is for the foundation not to be necessary in the future. As Marc explains: “Maybe 30, 40 years later, what Child’s Dream has set out to do will be achieved by then and we can say our work is done.”

For now, the focus remains on ensuring the foundation is run effectively and efficiently, including keeping operational costs under seven per cent of donations received. On 1 January this year, a new era for Child’s Dream was marked when Marc and Daniel handed over much of the operational management to five of their most senior staff. “We will be coaching them for the next couple of years to fully run the organisation. We’ll always be there but we want to invest more time in the strategic issues and in fundraising.”

Commenting on the partnership, SilkAir Chief Executive Leslie Thng says: “It has always been SilkAir’s goal to reach out to the communities in the Southeast Asian destinations we serve, and we are thrilled to support Child’s Dream’s good work.”

Facing page: This year’s regional team workshop for staff of Child’s Dream Foundation
Above from left: Co-founders Marc Jenni and Daniel Siegfried