Laos is beautiful. The people are very poor, yet so peaceful and friendly. Everywhere we go, everybody always carries a smile on the lips. Our trip takes me from Vientiane to Vang Vieng, Sainyabuli, Luang Prabang and then to the North of Laos.

We visit many different provinces, schools, education ministers and local communities. In some places, CD has already built a school so we're checking on the progress. In other areas, we are told that a school needs to be built/restored, so we pass by for an evaluation. Then again, we are meeting up with other NGOs to learn about potential collaboration possibilities in order to profit from synergies. There is also a lot of relationship-building that needs to be done with local government officials or village heads. It's a very diverse, busy trip filled with meetings, visits and talks.

The schools that we visit are all completely different. There are primary schools, secondary schools and high schools... some schools consist of wooden piles and a few blades of grass on the roof. There are no tables, the students are squeezed together on some benches, the "blackboards" are filled with holes... and the teacher is often not present, the students study on their own.
what do they do during rainy season, I wonder?

Other schools have real walls and their own water filter system (which purifies the water from the wells, so that the children can drink it). The students wear pretty school uniforms, farm in their own garden (where they cultivate vegetables), play pétanque or volleyball and sip fresh young coconut juice (the coconuts grow in the school area). Some schools come with boarding houses where students live in tiny huts right by the school as their own homes might be too far away.

students growing their own vegetables
Children are the same everywhere in the world. They are a little shy at first but still curious enough to come closer... before they run away giggling. There's nothing more beautiful than seeing these children laugh. When I walk into a class room, all the students stand up and greet me: "Good afternoon, Teacher!". When I leave, they stand up again and say: "Thank you, Sir!"

I like it here!

... aren't they adorable?

The Laos Team takes me everywhere they go so that I get a glimpse of their work. Usually, our tour in a certain area starts with a visit of the local POE (Public Officer for Education). Relationship-building with government officials is a crucial component in social/charity work, this is where everything starts and ends. After the POE, there is a meeting with the local Village Head. More gifts, more tea (or coconut juice). Once this is done, we can start visiting existing or new projects. I like how the Laos team – despite respecting the importance of relationship-building with officials – rarely accepts meal invitations from government people. Goy, the Head of the CD Laos Team, explained to me that they often eat with villagers but she doesn't like to eat with government officials because she doesn't want to take any kind of bribe. [I noticed that everybody in Laos is extremely skinny... except government officials that are all chubby]

A man – who hasn't been a monk at least at some point in this life – is not considered a real man in Laos. Gee in our team was a monk for 12 years (!), lived in a temple and got up every day at 4am so that he could meditate. Just like young men in Switzerland attend military service, the men in Laos go to the temple. No matter where we are, there is always a monk wearing a bright-orange robe. A gorgeous sight!
The northern region of Laos is... very rough. The landscape is very different than in the South; very often, we would drive for hours and hours on lonely roads [not sure they deserve the word "roads"] without seeing any other car or a person. It felt like crossing endless jungle... until suddenly, a tiny village with a handful of huts emerges out of nowhere.

If you are born in a village like this, you will probably stay here until the day you die. Only a few lucky ones own a motorbike or maybe even a car, most people walk or have to take a "public bus" [a funny-looking sibling of a tractor with three wheels, which moves slower than I do]. It has to be noted that we are moving in a permanent cloud of dust, the visibility is probably less than 1 meter. I have never seen anything like this, except maybe in the dessert. Whoever complains about smog in the city has never experienced the country-side in Laos. We are driving very, very slowly because we are so worried about hitting a child/turkey/puppy/grandmother which is not completely unlikely. Little children are working half-naked along the roads. They are red, from all the dust [the soil here is completely red]. I'm seeing a girl that is no more than four years old, cutting grass with a huge knife, with a naked baby on her back. Old women are schlepping firewood. They too, are completely covered with dirt and dust.
I have seen a lot of poverty in my life, be it in the slums of Cape Town or across Southeast Asia (e.g. in Cambodia), but never have I encountered poverty as devastating as it is here. The houses are completely penetrable bamboo huts. There are no sanitary installations, people sometimes need to walk for miles to get access to drinking water. Toilets are holes in the ground, the brownish river is the shower. Some villagers live right next to an electricity pole but don’t have electricity in the house because they cannot afford the installation. The bumpy roads are in horrible condition and sometimes very steep. But to me, the most disturbing part is the natural condition, in which these people live. In the dry season, there is this incredible dust. We kept coughing in the car, I cannot imagine what it is like to work along these streets. During rainy season, there is red mud everywhere. I was told that the CD car was repeatedly stuck in the mud, and they had to sleep in the car once in the middle of a jungle. The villagers live for months in the rain [I’m convinced that these houses cannot keep out the water... and clothes will never dry in this environment]. In order to get to school, the children have to wade through thick, red mud for hours every day.

Medical facilities are pretty much inexistent. There is one pediatrician in all of Laos, can you imagine? Whoever needs serious medical treatment (if s/he can pay for it), has to drive into town (at least 8h in a car, if there is one) or go to Thailand where the medical standards are much higher. Medical check-ups are unheard of. I saw this one guy who had a tumor in his neck about the size of half of his head. He doesn’t have the money to have it checked, so he sleeps on his stomach.

All these things probably only seem atrocious to me, as the people here don’t have any possibilities to compare. They don’t own TVs, computers or cameras, and most of them seem to live a perfectly content life.
A few words about my favorite topic: FOOD. My general experience while traveling is that, the less people have, the more they are willing to give you everything. All the villagers that I have met in Laos have been more than generous and hospitable.
The meals are eaten by hand, sticky rice is on the menu from early morning to midnight. First, you wash your hands in a bowl. Everybody then sits around a table with huge bowls or little, individual baskets filled with sticky rice – everything is shared. You make little balls of rice with your right hand, and eat them dipped in chili sauce. There is always a vegetable soup to go with the rice. The soup will always include the same vegetables and taste the same no matter where you go. Sometimes, there is also fried pork, fried fish or a portion of chicken feet. The same food you'll eat three times a day, starting from 7.00 in the morning. After a few days, I started to feel like a walking ball of sticky rice myself. No fruit, no vegetables (besides the soup), no other preparations with the same ingredients.

[I'm only talking about rural, northern Laos here. As a former part of "Indochine", there is delicious food everywhere tourists would want to go to. I had the best banana/dulce de leche roti of my entire life in Van Vieng, and there is a fantastic all-you-can-eat buffet at the night market in Luang Prabang for CHF 1.00. I also enjoyed the fresh crêpes and filled baguettes everywhere, menus are often in Lao & French. Traditional Lao staples such as their stews, salads or grilled items are also yummy.] I spent many hours during this road trip day-dreaming about food.

As honorary guests, we are always invited for "Lao-Lao". "Lao-Lao" is a traditional, local rice whisky that many families produce themselves. The locals believe that the whisky develops "magical powers", if they put animals inside of the jars. I've seen "Lao-Lao" variations with snakes, bats, lizards, bugs, geckos, scorpions and so on. It is considered rude not to drink if offered home-made "Lao-Lao".

Now, I don't drink alcohol. I've tried all kinds of alcohol but I still don't like it, so I refuse to drink it for "social reasons". However, this was a tricky situation. The entire Laos Team of CD does not drink alcohol either. So here we were, mentally preparing ourselves all day because we knew we had to
drink in the evening. Oo, sitting next to me, drank the Lao-Lao quickly and passed on the glass (there was only one glass). After about five minutes, he excused himself to go to the bathroom. He told us later on that he had to throw up. "For the children, for the children", I kept repeating in my head while I tried not to choke on the Lao-Lao.

Building schools – and bridging the way so that the school can be built in the first place – is definitely not easy!

Here are some more impressions from Laos:

students at a primary school
The Royal Palace in Luang Prabang

building Dr. Linde's school in Xaignabouli (beside me, you can see the Laos Team)
beautiful mosaic wall-paintings at Vat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang

Vientiane's oldest temple: Wat Sisaket