Education and health care for children in the Mekong Sub-Region: An interview with the founders of the Child’s Dream Foundation

Hello! I am Hassie from the Tsutsutsu SDGs PR team of Nishikawa Communications Co., Ltd. (NICO).

Today, I would like to introduce the Child’s Dream Foundation (hereafter, “Child’s Dream”), a Thailand-based charity.

NICO has been donating to Child’s Dream since 2019. However, partly due to it being an overseas organization and the scarcity of Japanese information about it, awareness of the charity has not improved within the company, and this was a point of concern for the SDGs PR team.

With this as the background, I received the news that the two founders of the organization would visit Japan.
It would be a great opportunity to interview them and write an article!
I was so excited to talk with them.
What kinds of activities does Child’s Dream conduct?
Why does NICO donate to it?

I am going to tell you the story behind our donations to this charity, as there has not been an opportunity to properly convey this before.

Child’s Dream and NICO

First, I will provide some general information about Child’s Dream.

Child’s Dream is a charity that provides support to poor children living in four countries in the Mekong Sub-Region: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Headquartered in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Child’s Dream marked its 20th anniversary in 2023.

Donate. It’s simple! We need money to make dreams come true.
childsdream.org
Complicated issues, including economic inequality, civil war, and political instability, are intertwined within these countries, and this puts the people there in a difficult situation. Children are particularly vulnerable and bear the brunt of this, and many of them cannot even go to school. Children who miss out on a proper education have trouble finding jobs that earn decent wages and are unable to escape from poverty.

Helping children get out of this negative cycle is the goal of Child’s Dream. Based on eight basic strategic goals for education, employment, and health care, including building schools and other educational infrastructure, providing skills training to enhance employability, and supporting basic and essential health care, Child’s Dream has implemented more than 1,000 support projects.

Those strategic goals are in line with the various goals established for SDGs as follows.

**Goals directly related to the activities of Child’s Dream**

3.GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING  
4.QUALITY EDUCATION  
10.REDUCED INEQUALITIES

**Goals indirectly related to the activities of Child’s Dream**

5.GENDER EQUALITY  
6.CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION  
8.DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH  
13.CLIMATE ACTION  
16.PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS  
17.PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
Child’s Dream is primarily funded by donations, most of which are from Switzerland, Germany, and Singapore, and donations from Japan, representing 5% of their total donations (2022), are not a large source of funding for it.

At NICO, we became aware of Child’s Dream through our Singapore base, and we have been donating to it since we began working together in 2019.

NICO donated its proceeds from the Very Special Music Festival to Child’s Dream | Nishikawa Communications Co. Ltd.

In addition to financial support, in 2019, NICO staff visited a school in Cambodia and interacted with the children there.

We have not had the opportunity for a while to visit or engage in other activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but we intend to continue providing a wide range of support in the future.
Why support the Mekong Sub-Region? How Child’s Dream was founded

Today, I am interviewing Mr. Marc Thomas Jenni and Mr. Daniel Marco Siegfried, the founders of Child’s Dream.

———First of all, could you tell us about your daily activities?

Mr. Jenni: We split our responsibilities between us appropriately. I am mainly in charge of the operational side of things. I work to create the skeleton of the organization, including fundraising, marketing, communication, HR, IT, legal affairs, accounting, and auditing.

Mr. Siegfried: I am responsible for providing support to children. Communicating with the team directors for the four countries, I evaluate projects while ensuring that the more than 1,000 projects in progress are in accordance with Child’s Dream’s visions, missions, and strategies.

———How do you know each other?

Mr. Jenni: We are from Switzerland, and we worked for the same bank. The two of us were working in Hong Kong and Singapore, and our experiences there led us to launch our support activities in Asia.

———Quitting a stable job at a bank to found a charity must have been a big decision. Did you have any struggles or worries?

Mr. Siegfried: Yes. I think there were always some worries and concerns, but the desire to help others was stronger than that.
I had been working at the bank for 10 years and had started engaging in social work, and I left the bank because eventually my desire to help others was stronger than my worries about my future.

**Mr. Jenni:** For me, it was a bit different from Daniel. I was with the bank nearly 20 years. It is not that I did not like the job, as it paid well and was a good job.

But I was also bored because I was doing the same thing every day. I wanted to do something new, so I quit the bank. And then Daniel called me.

**Mr. Siegfried:** I had resigned from the bank one month before Marc and was doing volunteer work in Chiang Mai. I was considering starting my own organization when I heard that Marc had resigned, and I asked him to come to Chiang Mai to help me.

**Mr. Jenni:** When I first heard that he wanted to start an organization, my initial reaction was he's crazy (laugh). He's a chartered financial analyst, I have a master's in finance, neither of us have children, and he wants to establish a children's charity.

But because I was well aware that these countries faced challenges, I decided to do it after talking about it a lot with him.

**Mr. Siegfried:** From the start, we have worked together to decide the organization's name, create its logo, and build its website.

Looking back over the last 20 years, I am proud of our achievements. We have reached 1.2 million children and are providing support for education, health care, and other things. Of course, it is not just the two of us but something our team has achieved.

At the beginning, it was a dream, and now the reality really became true.
Mekong Sub-Region, an especially poor area in Southeast Asia

———Why did you choose the Mekong Sub-Region in particular as the support area among the vast areas of Asia?

Mr. Jenni: When I resided in Hong Kong and Singapore, I often traveled to Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. I found them to be very fascinating places, and I liked the food, I like the climate, and I liked the people.

And as I saw how people were living everywhere I went, I learned that poor children were not going to school. Even today, there are children in the streets begging.

Mr. Siegfried: I have the same impression. Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos are classified among the least developed countries by the United Nations and considered countries that are particularly lagging behind in economic development, even among developing countries. While traveling around the countries, I felt that they were most in need of support.

Another major reason for focusing on this area is that each of the countries are close to one another. Haiti and Afghanistan, for example, are also classified as least developed countries, but it is difficult to help both at the same time in terms of logistics, as they are far apart from each other.

On the other hand, Thailand is in the middle of the Mekong Sub-Region, and surrounding it are Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. We are in Thailand, and it is very efficient to provide support to the three countries from there. In addition, these countries belong to one economic zone called the "Greater Mekong Subregion" and share similar problems.

Holistic support combining education and health care
I understand that you are focusing on supporting education and health care. These two things are the keys to helping children escape poverty, aren’t they?

**Mr. Siegfried:** Our main focus point is education. Children who live in areas far away from schools, are ethnic minorities, or speak different languages are still often unable to access education. If they can complete primary and secondary school education at least and hopefully high school, they have better opportunities to break out of the poverty cycle.

In addition, it is also essential to support their health. There are many children who are malnourished. Some children do not know how to brush their teeth properly, do not know how to wash their hands, or do not know how to use a toilet. This tends to cause illnesses, and then the children fall into a vicious cycle of not being able to go to school, so it is important to combine support for education with support for health care.

When it comes to support of health care, you not only provide treatment for the children but also generously follow-up on the accommodations for parents, right?

**Mr. Siegfried:** Some support groups might just build hospitals or schools.

But when a child comes to the hospital, a caregiver, often the mother, needs to be nearby to support them. When it comes to schools, you need not only schools but also qualified teachers. In addition, you have to make sure they have running water and everything they need. I think we need to look at it holistically.

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**How were our donations used? Transparent and detailed report**

Here, I provide an introduction regarding the details about NICO’s donations.
Amongst the many types of support provided by Child’s Dream, NICO donates to a health-care support project called the CMF (Children’s Medical Fund).

This project provides support for the treatment of congenital disorders, such as heart disease, which are costly to treat. We selected this project because we believe at NICO that nothing is more important than health.

When you make a donation, you receive a report about the kind of support provided with the money. Of course, it is normal for a charity to issue an impact report, but what sets Child’s Dream apart is the detail in their impact reports.

Who the children are, where they live, what illnesses they are suffering, and what kinds of treatment they received. Their reports also detail how they recovered after treatment, with photos and illustrations.

Because NICO donates some of the profit from its business activities, we want to be sure that our donations are being used effectively. This detailed report is the reason why NICO donates to Child’s Dream from among the many charities out there.

———We receive a very extensive report, and this is a unique characteristic of Child’s Dream, is it not?

Mr. Jenni: That’s right. We are very proud of it. At present, we are dealing with huge sums of money, over ten million dollars. Our donors have placed their trust in us, and we feel that it is our responsibility to report about how their money has been used and what has been achieved.

And as a result, we hope that this will increase their trust in us and that they will continue to donate.
Your financial reports are also very detailed. Your management costs seem lower than for other charities. How do you keep costs down?

**Mr. Jenni:** We don’t do anything special. However, there may be a difference in terms of salary levels.

In 2022, management costs accounted for 6.4% of our total donations, and the majority of it was spent on staff salaries. Our funding comes from rich countries. On the other hand, the salaries of our staff are according to the salary levels in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, which are not as high as in developed countries, and this is how we are able to reduce our management costs.

**Mr. Siegfried:** I can add also that we do not have a marketing budget. I think a lot of organizations spend a lot of money on marketing and fundraising, but we do this all by word of mouth.

So, if a donor like NICO likes us, we hope that they will pass that on to others. We would be grateful if those interested in us could make a donation.

**Charity begins around you**

Is it possible to donate from Japan?

**Mr. Jenni:** You can make a donation via credit card on our website. However, when it comes to large amounts of money, it is a complicated procedure to transfer the money from Japan, as we do not have a Japanese bank account.

At present, a donor in Japan is working to register us as an NPO in Japan. If this NPO is established, it will make it a little easier to donate.

Do you have any big plans for support in the future?
Mr. Jenni: Things are getting worse in the area we are supporting. Laos, for example, is bankrupt as a country, a lot of people do not have jobs, and the budgets for children’s education are being cut. In Myanmar, there is still a civil war, and a lot of people are dying there every day. It is predicted that about half of the population will suffer from hunger by the end of this year.

We need more and more money to support them, and we plan to step up our fundraising.

———Finally, if there is anything you would like to say to NICO’s employees or the Japanese people, please go ahead.

Mr. Siegfried: First, we would like to thank the staff of NICO. We truly appreciate the support we have received.

For the people of Japan, in the future, a lot of people will come to Japan from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia to work. Most of them will work in manufacturing. I think that they sometimes face difficult circumstances in the Technical Intern Training Program, so I ask you to treat them as kindly and compassionately as possible.

Mr. Jenni: Compassion is important. Remind yourselves about how privileged you are and how you live in a rich country.

Of course, we all have a lot of our own problems. But we always have food, and when we turn on the lights, they come on. We are very fortunate to be able to be safe every day and to receive education and medical care as the norm.

You don’t have to do anything big. If there is an elderly person who lives alone in the community, you could give them a hand if there is something they need. That alone is enough.

If you want to go further, think about how rich countries can help poor countries. It is important to treat the poor with compassion.

———Thank you very much!

Starting with “how to solve poverty in poor countries” feels like too great a challenge, but their final messages reminded me that doing something small is also a way to provide support. It is important to start with what you can do.

Of course, NICO will continue to provide support in a variety of ways. We will keep you informed of any new developments!