



LE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG

In this day and age, it seems obvious that children should go to school. Yet in many countries around the world, this is still not the case. While helping in a home for prostitution victims in Pattaya, northern Thailand, two young women became aware of this fact and quickly realized that the problem had to be tackled at source. They decided to take action in that area because children of desperately poor families were exposed to such ills as prostitution, drugs and aids. In July 1995, after ten years of professional activity, Barbara Gautschi decided to dedicate herself to a humanitarian cause and left Geneva for Thailand. She met Prapapone Khotsanlee there, a Thai teacher with similar ideas on schooling and education. The LE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG association supports their activities in Thailand.

THE SITUATION

Mountain tribes

Originally from Burma, Laos, China and Tibet, numerous populations have settled in the valleys around Chiang Rai, in the heart of the Golden Triangle. They are spread among twenty ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Karens, Hmongs, Lahus, Akhas and Lisus. Each group has its own language, costumes and religious beliefs.

The tribes are destitute, isolated from urban infrastructure and marginalized by Thai society. By tradition, most are semi-nomadic and composed of farmers living from crops and hunting. As farming doesn't cover their basic needs, they start growing and selling opium, ignoring its side effects. They consume much of their production themselves, a practice which in turn triggers alienation.

Many get sentenced for trafficking. Aids causes significant damage amongst young adults.

In order to stop the tribes growing poppies whilst providing them with alternative sources of income, the King has promoted such crops as coffee, tea, vegetables, corn and fruit. Results have been promising, but haven't reduced poverty or trafficking of amphetamines produced in nearby Burma.

The Thai population

The tribes' plight has now extended to the indigenous Thai population. In northern Thailand, drugs and aids have erased a generation of "parents", shifting responsibility for their orphans to grandparents. The latter try to survive without official aid and mostly can't afford government tuition charges. Rarely can all children from a same family complete their schooling.

Children victims

Children are required to help in the fields from an early age and are married off, by arrangement, at thirteen or fourteen. They experience a form of modern slavery. Children are often left to fend for themselves, receiving little or no education.

Teaching is random at best and the diversity of spoken languages doesn't make the task of the Department of Education any easier. The department also struggles to find teachers willing to work conditions that are rudimentary at best. Government schools are often remote and difficult to reach by public transport, if not inaccessible during the rainy season. School fees and five compulsory uniforms must be added to this, an expense too big for the families.

For all these reasons, very few mountain tribe children are able to attend school. They thus become easy prey for drug and prostitution networks. In some villages, up to 70% of children aged eleven or more are snatched by the sex industry. Some children are sold by their families to prostitution or paedophile rings. Youngsters who leave their villages without an education to go voluntarily to Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai or Bangkok are doomed to pitiful working conditions and are almost bound to get caught up in prostitution or drugs.

TAKING ACTION

A Foyer is created

The “Sourire de Chiang Khong” association acts to reverse the inevitability of such outcomes. In 1999 a first foyer welcomed some twenty children close to Chiang Rai. The house quickly became too small for the then sixty children living there. In 2001 a second foyer had to open 30 km away.

Two years later, the association managed to acquire a piece of land and started building the current foyer. In 2005 Barbara, Prapapone and seventy-five children, who had been scattered around several places up to that point, moved in under the same roof.¹

The foyer increases its capacity yearly and aims to welcome two hundred children over the next few years, whilst supporting the same number remotely.

Remote support

Thanks to the seriousness of their work and the legitimacy of their requirements, Barbara and Prapapone have gained the trust of the villagers. They have always ensured that numerous children get support from a basic schooling and family structure, which in turn gives the children a reason to stay in the village. The foundation often helps finance the school's infrastructure or the meals it serves to pupils. Remote support contributes strongly to the anchoring of the SOURIRE in the area and reinforces its action.

Reception conditions

Before a child joins the foyer, Prapapone and Barbara question the family at length in order to assess his or her abilities, motivation and context. They also take into account the opinion of the village chief, who is aware of the living conditions of each family.

Admission is accelerated when parents are unavailable because of detention, illness or death and the child is at risk. But it is always subject to the parents' or remaining family's consent.

At the state school

The children of the SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG attend state schools, an important social integration factor. Thai schooling consists of three years in kindergarten, six years in primary schooling and six years in secondary schooling. Access to a professional school pre-requires three years of secondary schooling (university education pre-requires six). The foyer welcomes children from the age of six up until they either graduate from secondary school, complete an apprenticeship or acquire a professional diploma.

The fact that Prapapone is both from Thailand and a teacher herself facilitates our contacts with schools. We build trust with the teaching community and do not encounter admission problems for our children.

The children of the SOURIRE are very conscious of the opportunity this represents. They tend to be studious and obtain excellent school results.

Everyone is responsible

In addition to food, housing, clothing, close tracking of schooling achievements, sports and cultural activities, the Foyer offers the children an education based on personal responsibility, solidarity and respect for different cultures.

Barbara and Prapapone base their pedagogical approach on mutual help and everyone's involvement in community wellbeing. The children are not welfare recipients.

Visitors are always struck by the fact that a group of one hundred children and adolescents can function so efficiently and harmoniously with so few adult staff.

The roots

On the one hand, an important aspect of the SOURIRE's approach is respect for, and conservation of, each child's traditions and customs. On the other, blending into the schooling system and society in general makes learning the Thai language a must. We thus organize weekly courses for the children in their mother tongue and encourage dancing, singing, embroidery, sewing and floral art.

Given their rural roots, the youngsters take to farming activities willingly. We cultivate corn, rice, pineapples, bananas and all sorts of fruit and vegetables. Other activities include fish farming, raising poultry (chicken and geese), tending to a pigsty and looking after a herd of cows.

Generally, parents appreciate the fact that farming activities are maintained. Our goal is not to encourage youngsters to embrace city life, but rather to build knowledge that is useful in their current and future environments.

During the school holidays, the children are free to return to their village to maintain a bond with their families and habits. Family visits to the Foyer aren't rare. Some orphans at the centre aren't so fortunate, of course

Speaking up

Every evening the children, organised in committees, meet to discuss the day's activities, speaking freely about positive and negative aspects. Adults in charge seize this opportunity to raise the children's awareness of drug problems.

Choosing

Our wish is to accompany children throughout their schooling in order to help them make their own professional choices. Nevertheless, children sometimes leave the Foyer along the way. There are various reasons for this: parents moving, family needs, personal choice of the child (leaving school, wedding) or a family belief that schooling is not useful, particularly to girls. It is said that changing this type of tenacious mentality can take two generations.

We want to encourage, but by no means force, a child to improve his or her living

conditions. The decision to persist or not in schooling or training belongs to the child, in agreement with his or her family.

Moving on

Most youngsters complete their schooling. Give or take a few rare exceptions, those who enter professional training persist until they get a diploma. In 2011 six adolescents went to university—a first for their village and for the Sourire!

All those obtaining a diploma found a job in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai or Bangkok. Some returned home to support their families. In a nutshell, they are all able to take care of themselves.

Some young boys and girls, once trained, give one or two years of their time to work at the Foyer.

As young adults, they do not forget the Foyer once they've left. They stay in close contact and maintain their friendship with those who stay. Many come back to tell their story. What great examples for the younger ones!

Officialdom

Since 2001, the association has been officially recognized as a non-governmental organization by the Thai government. In 2003, it received the status of foundation, thus guaranteeing its durability. Barbara received a "Volunteer of the year 2005" award in Bangkok. The fact that Prapapone is a Thai national contributes significantly to the quality of our relations with the authorities. We do not encounter problems procuring identity papers for children who don't have any. Indeed we take these steps for tribal children who, without an official identity, cannot be registered in schools.

Although we maintain close and essential ties with government services in charge of humanitarian matters, we do not ask for financial support. This is to preserve our independence as a non-governmental organization.

RESOURCES

The Association

The SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG is a non-profit association, independent and respectful of the social and cultural origin of each individual. Founded in 1998 in Geneva, it has at present more than two hundred and fifty sponsors. The Committee works on a totally voluntary basis.

Where does the money go

The SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG is a young organization with a human face. It is strictly managed and controlled. Its management expenses are under 5% and it guarantees direct help on site i.e. to the children.

How to help

To fulfil its aim, the SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG counts on various forms of support:

Sponsorships

Thanks to their regularity, sponsorships ensure the durability of the foundation's activities. To sponsor a child is to commit to 50 Swiss francs or 40 Euros a month.

Donations

All donations great and small directly benefit the children.

Support for specific projects

According to the wishes of donors, foundations, public or private institutions, support can be allocated to specific projects.

Initiatives

Birthday fundraising, massages, running competitions, theatre shows etc.

Own production

Farming, breeding and recycling carried out by the children themselves contribute in a small way to the needs of "their" Foyer.

From individual to collective sponsorship

Originally, the SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG was created thanks to individual sponsorships, with a child being attributed to each sponsor. This approach began to change as the first residents became adults and left the Foyer to go to work. New sponsors were asked to help

the children collectively and to put their trust in the work of the institution as a whole. Without taking anything away from the children, this new approach simplifies administration procedures linked to departures and arrivals and significantly reduces administrative expenses.

Feedback

In June each year, sponsors and donors receive an annual newsletter informing them of the activities in Thailand and here. At the end of the year, Barbara and Prapapone send them their traditional Christmas letter.

Members of the association and the sponsors are invited by email or post to an annual general meeting. The annual report and the statutes can be perused on www.lesourire.ch or requested at the address of the association.

OUR HOPE

A future

To deprive a child of an education is to deprive him or her of a fundamental right to dignity.

Through our short- and long-term activities, which occur in these underprivileged children's immediate environment, we want to give as many of them as possible a key to an open and happy future.

Our thanks go to all who trust and support us in the accomplishment of that goal. Merci à tous ceux et celles qui nous font confiance et nous soutiennent dans la réalisation de cet espoir.

LE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG

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