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A river is made drop by drop

Educational situation in Mae Sariang

By Annelie Hendriks; Photo's by Manus Brinkman and Annelie Hendriks The Foundation for Education of Rural Children (FERC), Chiangmai and the Samsara Foundation from the Netherlands have cooperated closely with the Department of Education in Mae Sariang 250 km west from Chiangmai for more than 2 years now.



Karen children at Mae Um Pok primary school

Mae Sariang is a small town where the department is located. They are

responsible for 168 schools, of which 90% are located in the mountains—often inaccessible in the rainy season. Mostly hill tribe children (Karen, Hmong) attend those isolated small and poor schools. Huge changes are taking place at most of these schools. As a result of the extension of the compulsory school age from 12 to 16 years last year, this school year is the first year of the secondary school level (Matayom grade 1) at many primary schools. The schools and villages that are too isolated have to send their children to 14 bigger schools in the valley of Mae Sariang. It is an enormous task. The location of the schools makes it a difficult task to build the necessary classrooms. Teachers have to be assigned, and trained to start this new level of education. A curriculum has to be developed, books distributed, new end term examinations to be organised and on and on.



Old canteen at Um Lo Sakaa

One year after the introduction of the new law, the influx of hill tribe children is growing fast. The schools are confronted with many more hill tribe children at their schools. Because of the distances between the villages and the schools and the lack of roads and transportation the schools don't only need to provide education for them but also food and accommodation. Most hill tribe children only go back to their homes twice a year during the school holidays. All schools have to prove that they are able to provide education at Matayom level and that they can attract enough children to their school. Only then will they receive more budget for facilities needed. Although this year you can notice everywhere that the government is improving the roads, building classrooms and transferring young teachers to the schools, the lack of many school facilities is obvious and more needed than ever.



Old dormitory at vocational school.

120 schools do not have safe drinking water, 100 schools do not have enough dormitories to let the children or teachers stay at the school, Most of the schools do not have canteens and kitchen facilities. There are not enough mattresses, blankets, medicines, books or stationary. As a result, children stay in sheds made out of bamboo, leaking in the rainy season or just sleep in a building under a roof but without walls, 70 to 200 children share one toilet; they cook on wood fires in a rusty pot in the forest with children huddled around it. Not such a pleasant lunch or dinner in the rainy or cold season. Often their situation and that of the very dedicated teachers is more than appalling.



New water installation at Sangwan Wittaya school

The teachers do what they can, they try to set up structures to protect the children from the weather but without any cash money available to them it is often a hard life for all of them. It is very difficult for the Department of Education to cope with all the issues at the same time. To provide

education under normal circumstances for those 168 schools in the mountains is already a difficult task but with all the educational changes, the great influx of children, the flash floods, the lack of funds, and only 3 vehicles available that can cope with the rainy season roads, they are often desperate.

Educational facilities needed During the last 2 years, while introducing new school facilities, we visited many of the schools. We have a pretty clear picture about what the schools need and have organised some questionnaires to map their needs according to the facilities. The need is huge but you can do a lot for not that much money. A mattresses sleeping 4 is 1,500 baht, a water installation including sink, tank, water purification machine 20,000 baht, the construction of a canteen or dormitory including all equipment and furniture 200,000 baht. Cement rainwater collecting tank or a facility with 4 toilets 45,000 baht. A scholarship at a Vocational School for a period of 3 year, 30,000baht.



Old toilet at Tong Sawat secondary school

All these projects are executed by volunteers of the foundations and built by volunteers from the villages and schools involved. We have established very good relationships with many of the school directors and the Department of Education and we have started to raise more funds. As the Samsara Foundation is only a small foundation, we approached other foundations for funds, as lack of cash is the main problem at Mae Sariang schools.

Contribution from many sources During the rainy season last year, Samsara Foundation and FERC managed to get financial contributions from the following organisations; the Foundations Samsara (The Netherlands), Wilde Ganzen (The Netherlands), De Beer (The Netherlands), Dito (The Netherlands), Hansje Silleviis (The Netherlands), The Watergraafmeerse Scholen Vereniging (The Netherlands), The Royal Netherlands Embassy (Bangkok, Thailand), Give and Live (USA) and private donors from USA, Canada, Great-Britain, The Netherlands, France, Bangkok, Chiang Mai. In total we received almost 2 million baht.



New dormitory at vocational school

All the projects mentioned below were executed in the dry season between the 1st of December 2005 and June 1st 2006.

Project realised In total at 40 schools we accomplished, including all necessary equipment and furniture; 12 dormitories of which 10 were for students and 2 for teachers, 3 canteens, and furniture for 4 already existing canteens, 3 facilities with toilets, 22 water purification installations, 2 rainwater collecting tanks. 10 schools received books for their libraries, 10 schools received educational equipment for their handicapped children and 25 students received scholarships. Last month every school organised the inaugurations of their facilities and the some of the equipment was handed over to the Department of Education. Thanks to the combined effort of many organisations and individuals we could establish a much better school life for many hill tribe children in the mountains of Mae Sariang. Ferc and Samsara Foundations would like to thanks all involved organisations and individuals for their financial contributions and volunteer work. For more information: www.samsara-foundation.com



***Bernie Mc Kenzie
Brown hands over scholarships to Mr Kasem Dir Sang Wan Wittaya
School and Mr Phisit, Director, Department of Education***



Handing over equipment for handicapped



With all the children in front of new canteen Um lo Sakaa



Karen children at Baan Naa Doi primary school



Villagers volunteer to build



New canteen at Um Lo Sakaa



New toilets at Tong Sawat secondary school

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