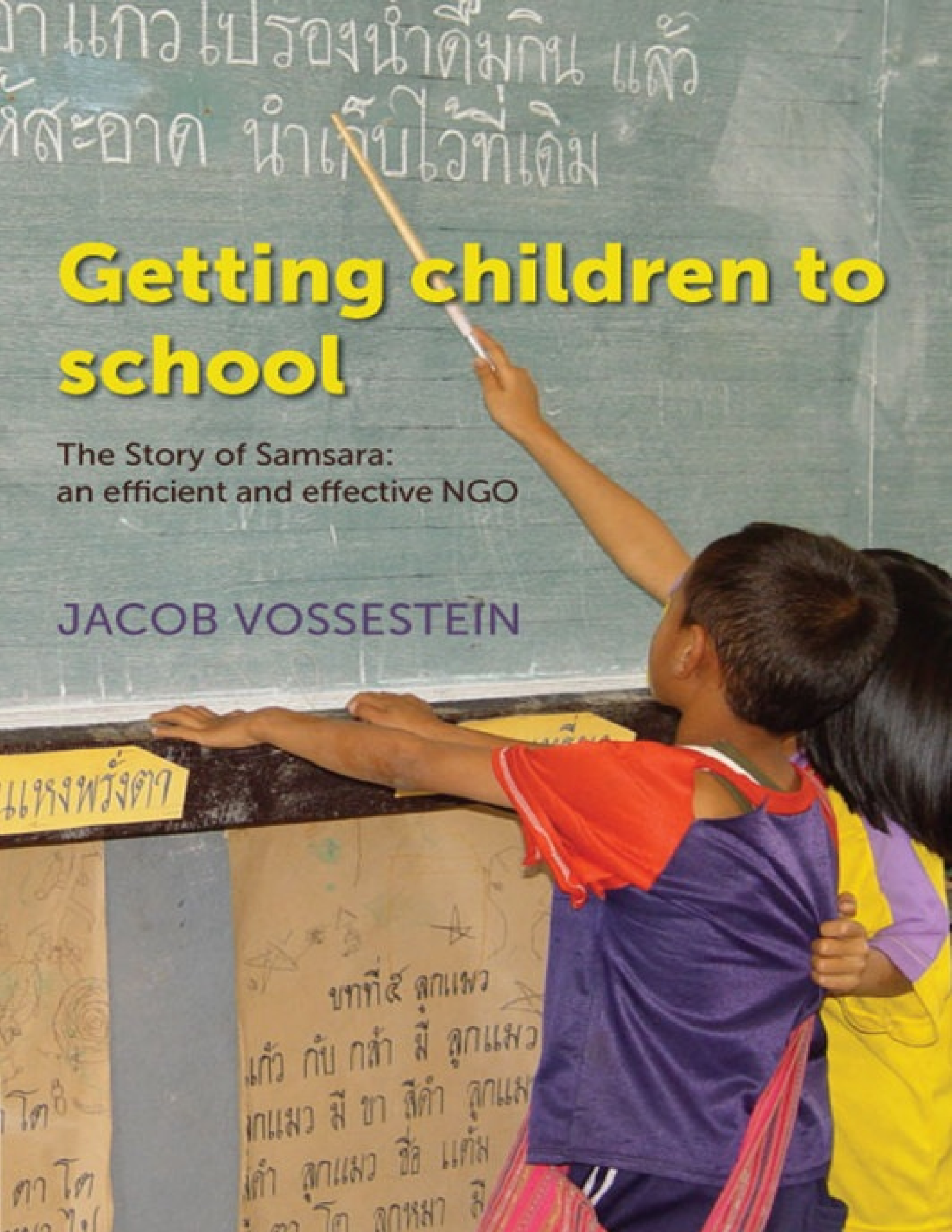

Getting children to school

The Story of Samsara:
an efficient and effective NGO

JACOB VOSSESTEIN

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In Loving Memory of Manus Brinkman

Chapter 1

The Samsara Foundation and its Work – An Outline

The Samsara Foundation is a medium sized Thai NGO of Dutch origin that is active in the field of improving school facilities in Thailand's Northwestern province of Mae Hong Son. The rugged terrain in this mountainous area has poor, difficult infrastructure (the province is among Thailand's least developed) and this has affected the quality of education. So Samsara's mission was and is: "Getting Children to School".

This book offers a model of development assistance that Samsara has found to be extremely effective. They believe it can be of interest and useful for other small-sized and start-up ngos that aim to have a significant punch beyond their weight. It can assist in avoiding some of the pitfalls that beset even the most careful and responsible ngos.

Backgrounds

In the Mae Hong Son area along the border with Burma/Myanmar, the Karen, Hmong, Shan, Lisu and Lahu peoples constitute the majority population. The Thais in this province live predominantly in urban centers and in the valleys, whereas the Karen, Hmong, Shan, Lisu and Lahu make up the vast majority of the mountain peoples.

In the past, many children in this part of Thailand could not even get primary education since the distance between home and the school was too great. They would have had to walk for hours every day to attend school, though some did indeed do this. Even when they could stay in school dormitories and eat there, the facilities were often so bad – broken, dirty, too crowded – that this was not an attractive option.

A similar story can be told for the teachers. The Thai government requires all recently graduated teachers to start their teaching career away from home. In several cases, the quality of teachers' dormitories was so bad that young teachers refused to live there, or their parents objected.

However, with better housing conditions teachers from other regions are more willing to stay in the mountain schools for some years at the start of their teaching career. Samsara therefore provides dormitories for both children and teachers. In addition, they also provide clean water to the schools, hygienic kitchens, canteens and toilet buildings. Also, in quite a number of cases they install solar panels enabling school television and better communication with the outside world.

Through Samsara's activities, thousands of children from mountain villages located far away from the nearest school can now comfortably stay in solid dormitories, drink clean water, eat good food in canteens which is prepared in hygienic kitchens, use clean toilets and enjoy the use of school television. The same goes for scores of teachers. So it is with good reason that Samsara's name in the Thai language stands for three essentials: Good Education, Good Health and Good Life.

The Samsara team themselves describe their organization in this way:

"Our organization and the way we realize our projects can be characterized with these terms:

- a straightforward and clear approach;
- thorough and unambiguous reporting;
- minimal overhead cost in both management and the execution of the projects.
- a simple management structure, and
- all people involved are unpaid volunteers, from the board and the project managers to the builders.

Samsara is convinced that this approach can be a good example for other small-scale private organizations, and that hereby Samsara may contribute to a wider acceptance of development assistance. Samsara achieves maximum results with a combination of low overhead cost, the involvement of local communities and maximum delegation of responsibility to local organizations. It is important to note that Samsara's activities are executed in cooperation with Thai authorities."

Why this book and for whom?

With almost fifteen years of experience in development assistance, the Samsara team are convinced that the operational model that they have developed – practical, determined and precise without being bureaucratic – could be inspiring for both beginning philanthropic organizations as well as established ngos. They decided that the Samsara story deserves wider publicity both within and beyond Thailand and has relevance beyond education-related circles.

With this book Samsara aspires to help improve the quality and efficiency – both in energy and in finance – of other philanthropic organizations. Of these, two types can be distinguished. First there are the "supporters", the donating and fundraising individuals and organizations who are usually located outside the country where the projects take place, and then "the implementers", the individuals and foundations that receive this support for executing projects in the field. Supporters often donate to more than one executor, while the executors often receive money from more than one supporter.

At the receiving end, new executing ngos may learn here how the Samsara approach can help them avoid many pitfalls such as overlooking local insights and initiative, excessively strong idealism or unforeseen entanglement in local power games.

More experienced and perhaps larger executing ngos may be inspired by this book to cut down on their costs and energy input by avoiding fragmentation of tasks, by focusing their work on certain themes or by concentrating on one, or few, geographic areas.

In times of declining sponsorship for development assistance, and hesitant spontaneous donations, both types of executing ngos could profit from Samsara's insights on how to do more with little money.

Donating ngos at the supporting end may be inspired by this book in their choice of organizations to support through learning more about matters such as focus, keeping overheads to a minimum, making oneself ultimately redundant, and other matters. No one wants to give forever without any horizon in sight, and no one likes to give money that in hindsight turns out to have been wasted through inefficiency and bureaucracy, let alone corruption and abuse. All these aspects will be discussed in this book.

Samsara's history

Samsara started its activities in Thailand in 2001, initially on a very small scale, as the Dutch Samsara Foundation, *Stichting Samsara*. Set up by Annelie Hendriks and some of her friends, the work was backed up by funds from friends and relations in the Netherlands. From 2003 to 2007, with more activities and with a need for a legal basis in Thailand, Samsara worked through FERC, the (Thai) Foundation for Education for Rural Children. With an ever wider scope of activities, it became necessary for Samsara to become an independent Thai foundation itself, with Thai board members as well. Thus Samsara Foundation Thailand became official in 2008. Thai law requires local foundations to carry a Thai name. Luckily, the name Samsara – the Buddhist concept for renewal and new life – which had been coined in the Netherlands, could be transposed to the Thai foundation, since in Thai language a very similar sounding term means 'the three essentials'. This was then interpreted in Samsara's statutes to indicate 'Good Education, Good Health, Good Life'.

Meanwhile, the Dutch branch of the foundation, *Stichting Samsara*, continued its activities. Chaired first by Hans Schoonman (from 2001 to 2009) and then by Pieter Marres (from 2009 on), it always supported the Thai Samsara Foundation with a bi-annual newsletter to its sponsors, by updating the website, with sponsor actions, with sponsor projects in cooperation with the Dutch Wilde Ganzen Foundation, and by maintaining good relations with existing and potential other sponsors. When in 2016 the Thai Samsara Foundation will cease to exist, the Dutch branch will also discontinue its work.

It may be good to emphasize that from the start, and specified in its statutes, Samsara explicitly limits its activities to Mae Hong Son, the poorest province of Thailand. Expanding into other areas of Thailand (let alone to other countries) would require new statutes and new feasibility studies.

In spite of the geographic enlargement of scale, as an organization Samsara remained compact. This was achieved by broadening its insights and skills, by economies of scale and by always working on good relations with local institutions and individuals as well as sponsors abroad. Running a solid philanthropic organization whilst continually proving its reliability to its sponsors requires more than the meticulous realization of the core tasks. With the help of the Thai board members, Samsara keeps precise track of its income and expenses, reports to sponsors, writes weekly blogs, produces YouTube videos on its activities and keeps both an English and a Dutch language website up to date. Visiting overseas sponsors need to be welcomed and if possible, taken on the regular inspection tours to projects.

A very special and sometimes time consuming task lies in Samsara's attempts to trim down bureaucracy and paper work, internally but also with the supporting organizations abroad. Held responsible by their own supporters and accountants, the much-appreciated sponsors may ask for more details than can possibly be provided. Often their requirements have been developed in a highly sophisticated environment that does not take the local situation into account. To bridge this gap is therefore sometimes a real challenge as will be discussed in more detail later on.

Samsara succeeded in becoming a highly respected and well-known organization in the area, its good reputation extending even to the Ministry of Education in far-away Bangkok. In 2013, by recommendation of three schools receiving its assistance, Samsara was awarded with a royal

approved decoration, handed out by HM Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. This royal award was not the only mark of appreciation. In 2011, Samsara had been awarded the 'Golden Pin' by the Thai Minister of Education, after previously presenting Samsara with a Plaque of Honor in 2007. In the Netherlands, two contributing organizations, Wilde Ganzen and NCDO, jointly extended their 2009 Best Project Executers Award to Samsara.

Samsara accomplishments
Samsara has two fields of activities: the Building Program and the Scholarship Program.

Samsara's three phased Building Program:
In the first phase, which started in 2003 and was completed in 2011, Samsara provided primary and middle schools with better facilities for students and teachers in the southern part of Thailand's province Mae Hong Son.

In 2011, Samsara started the second phase with providing the same facilities at schools in the northern part of the province and this will be completed in 2015.

In the third phase, started in 2014 and to be completed in 2016, Samsara will provide the same facilities at the nine[1] high schools in the province.

When the three phases of Samsara's work in Mae Hong Son province will all be completed, the Samsara foundation will consider its work done and disband itself, so there is a clear horizon of activities.

Samsara's Scholarship Program:
For the first ten years (2003-2013), the program concentrated on scholarships for hill tribe children going to middle schools, vocational schools and high schools in the south of Mae Hong Son province. By 2013, the Thai government had improved its own financing of students attending middle and high schools, so from then on Samsara only sponsored students wanting to go to vocational training or to universities.

Taking all this together, in more detail, between 2003 and 2016, Samsara will have realized:

- 77 dormitories for students
- 108 dormitories for teachers
- 103 school canteens
- 6 libraries, and providing text books to 65 schools
- 88 toilet buildings
- 100 small constructions such as kitchens
- 86 catchment tanks for rainwater
- 125 large clean water installations
- 60 small clean water installations
- 80 solar power driven projects
- 80 sets of furniture for existing buildings
- 25 buildings for washing and drying clothes
- Scholarships for 800 students, covering the expenses for on average three years

This has all contributed considerably to 97% of all hill tribe children now being able to enjoy primary and middle education with more able to continue their studies onto either high school or vocational training.

The overall cost of these activities over fourteen years amounts to 150 million Thai baht, roughly the equivalent of 4.8 million US dollars, or 3.5 million euros. Later on we will take a closer look at what the indirect impact of these concrete projects has been and continues to have on the wider society in the areas involved.

The people in Samsara

Samsara's Board of Directors consists of Mrs. Annelie Hendriks, a Dutch citizen who founded the Dutch Samsara Foundation and is now vice chair and volunteer director of the Building Program of the Thai Samsara Foundation. In her work she is greatly assisted by Mrs. Ratana Kheuankaew, a Thai citizen who assists Annelie not only in the building project but also as an interpreter and go-between. The supporting Dutch Samsara Foundation (*Stichting Samsara*) consists of four members: Pieter Marres, chair, Connie Rinia van Nauta, secretary, Angelique Lombarts, fundraising and communication and Patrick Kinds, treasurer.

Chair of the Thai Samsara Foundation and volunteer director of the Scholarship Program is Mr. Carl Samuels, from the United States. His activities focus on fund-raising, finding continuous sponsoring through his extensive network in the American business community. Also involved are two Thai nationals: Mrs. Sirirat Chareonwong, who is secretary to the board, and Mrs. Darunee Wongrattanatarn, who is the treasurer. Together they administer Samsara's financial administration every year and also help out with precise translations.

Volunteer workers for Samsara are Mr. Max Wöhl, a Swiss national who is an electrical engineer in charge of the transport and construction of solar panel systems to the schools. Mr. Tony Kids, British, does the financial administration for Samsara's Scholarship Program. Finally, the late Mr. Manus Brinkman, Dutch, volunteered in the photo and film documentation of Samsara's projects.

Outside the Thai Samsara Foundation but greatly contributing to Samsara's work, many local people in Mae Hong Son's provincial Departments of Education should be given credit for enabling Samsara to realize its projects. Also much credit goes to the directors of local schools, many of whom were very helpful and positive. Without naming them, Samsara would like to thank them for their invaluable enthusiasm and practical contributions.

The scheme of this book

In this book, we will follow Samsara's success factors.

- Adapting to the local situation
- Working in demand-driven manner
- Stimulating local responsibility
- Focusing on one theme and one region for extra impact
- Creating and maintaining good relations with supporting sponsor organizations
- Avoiding bureaucracy and excessive overheads with a lean and mean organization

For more detail and more photo material on the Samsara projects you can go to our websites and blogs: www.samsara-foundation.com (English) and www.stichtingsamsara.nl (Dutch).

There are also several YouTube videos on the Samsara project, again both in English and in Dutch. You can access them through the websites, or by simply typing in *Samsara Foundation* or *Stichting Samsara* in YouTube.

We hope this book will inspire you into getting more results for less money in your own philanthropical development project.

Jacob Vossestein, in close cooperation with the Samsara team

The pupils are of ethnic backgrounds

Hmong

Hmong

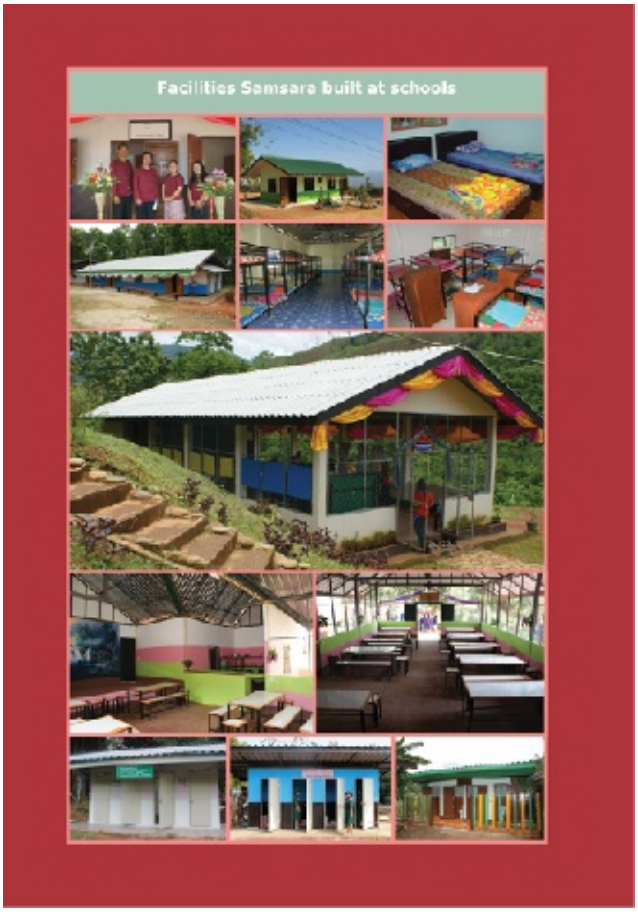
Karen boys

Karen girls

Lahu

Lisu

Original facilities looked like this


Facilities Samsara built at schools

Chapter 2

Adapting to the local situation

It may sound obvious, but knowing how things work on the spot and having at least some local personal relationships to consult, greatly helps to realize one's goals. This is just as true for development assistance as it is for the business world. Let us take a look at how this came about in the case of Samsara and the means by which they were able to work so successfully in a culture so different to that of the west from which very many ngos come.

- Time spent getting to know the area in both a formal and informal way are essential.
- This learning will assist in behaving respectfully and aid all communications.
- Finding local partners, identifying local capabilities and also limitations.
- Fitting methods of work to the customs of the local peoples while still adhering to internationally accepted standards of safety and hygiene.
- Practicality, practicality, practicality: many examples of this will be given.

As described, Samsara's founder, Annelie Hendriks, was widely experienced in various Asian countries before taking her decision on settling in Thailand. Having chosen the Chiang Mai area, she set about finding and leasing a plot of land and commencing the construction of her future home. Contacts with local authorities, architects, building firms and suppliers of, for instance, tiles and sanitary products gave her insights into the workings of the Thai building industry and the local bureaucracies. Both sets of experience later proved very useful to the work of Samsara.

Spotting and purchasing materials for her house, Annelie learned not only the local price of things but also the level of technical competence; opportunities and barriers regarding the import of certain equipment; local prices/quality standards and the ways of bargaining and negotiating. Dealing with potential suppliers of materials and services gained her good experience with the range of both prices and after-sales service, on the relation between promises made and follow-up, on the quality of materials and various options for future repairs.

Now building a private house in an urban area is definitely not the same as the construction of dormitories or kitchens for schools in poor rural mountain areas. However, certain basic aspects are comparable: negotiating with suppliers, getting people to meet the required building guidelines, understanding the local customs and business culture, exploring the market and judging quality, just to mention a few aspects.

Working with banks

On very practical issues too, there are plenty of things to find out: how the banking system works, the official terms and conditions for transferring money by a foreign not-for-profit organization, whether some banks are more cooperative to work in your line of activity, what services are offered and discovering best interest rates. As an illustration of how circumstances can be unexpectedly different: in Samsara's early days, intra-bank transfers were not yet possible in Thailand. Sometimes Samsara had to fetch 300,000 baht (roughly

$ 10,000, € 7,000) in cash from its own bank and literally bring it to another bank where a mountain school had an account. For such tricky transport, Ratana let two of her strong boxing students accompany her and Annelie, as private security guards…

Even if a starting NGO cannot have similar intense preparation, it is wise to get as much information as possible on the situation in the field. While the Internet is a very useful tool, on the ground preparations are essential. Visiting the future work area several times to do field research and explore the situation helps, as does making contacts with locals and expats. Finding which other ngos are already working there helps select the best niche to step into. It is obviously better not to compete with existing activities in your field but rather to complement those. By working together with organizations already there, a beginning NGO can profit from both their experience and their contacts in the area. People active in the chosen field of work and in the area, both locals and people from other cultural backgrounds, are crucial for gathering information and for putting things in perspective. Getting to know the target area also enables you to explore the local market for products and services that will be needed to run your project and accomplish your goals.

Local capability

In the early days of Samsara, Annelie Hendriks was fortunate enough to find her invaluable local partner Ratana by mere chance, since initially Ratana merely stood-in as a garden landscaper for someone temporarily not available. But the personal click was there immediately. Apart from her work as a constructor, Ratana runs a boxing school for deprived youngsters, and from this experience with children in difficult circumstances she was interested in joining Annelie on one of her first trips to the mountain schools, also as an unofficial interpreter. Ratana did and does all the field work as an unpaid volunteer, but the production of school furniture with her boxing pupils in the city gains her some modest income. It may be nice to know that one of the boxing boys, who had been a rather poor student at school, turned out to be a true welding champion and later found a good job in a Chiang Mai construction firm. Another one became a construction designer by profession and now designs Samsara's school buildings and furniture.

Samsara does not work with employees, only with unpaid volunteers. The foundation does not employ anyone on a regular basis, so even the chauffeur to drive the extremely winding roads to Mae Hong Son is hired on a day-to-day basis. (The provincial Department of Education provides a four-wheel-drive van with a chauffeur for the really rugged mountain roads to often remote schools.) And of course, as briefly mentioned and as will be explained in more detail later, the actual building of dormitories and the like is done by volunteering parents and overseen by the school directors receiving a government salary.

Now only doing things with volunteers may be hard, certainly at the start. Only when an organization can make clear that its targets are in line with local needs and will produce tangible benefits to the community, will people be interested in becoming involved without payment. Intelligent and skillful people can be found everywhere, and so too are people willing to do volunteer work and those with a sense of social responsibility. They are out there somewhere but it takes patience, energy and local contacts to identify them.

When settling down in the Chiang Mai area permanently, Annelie joined local network organizations like the Rotarians and went to monthly expat dinners. Meeting all kinds of people and talking about her Samsara plans brought her into contact not only with sponsors but also with others active in philanthropy. One of these was Carl Samuels. His interests and experience in fund-raising and his network in the USA and with Americans residing in Thailand turned out to be of great help in financing the expansion of Samsara from a small to a medium-sized NGO.

In a slightly later stage, Annelie and Carl came into contact with Thai people willing to be members of the board, and also with the key people in the Thai administration. Meeting the right people can only be stage-managed to some degree, it also takes good fortune and being at the right place at the right time. But what surely does not work, Annelie realized, is sitting back and staying at home. She started showing her face and talking about her project more than once, hoping that her story would be interesting and convincing enough to have people talk about it to others and then introduce her to significant contacts and organizations.

Enthusiasm is absolutely required to set up an NGO, but it may easily lead to the pitfall of impatience. Mistakes are hard to avoid when working in unknown lands under unfamiliar circumstances, but a slower pace reduces the risk of running into them. Errors are not only costly, but worse than that, they may turn out to be counter-productive, perhaps even ruining one's image with local relations or overseas sponsors.

Besides all kinds of official regulations and procedures, there is the less tangible software of culture. One must get a good insight into local circumstances. In any locally established NGO there will – and should – not merely be foreigners involved. The local culture will enter the organization through the contributions of the host country nationals whether they be committed volunteers, related officials or suppliers. When working with people from another country, a few things are essential, such as knowing the basic requirements in behaving the proper way (including body language), asking or refusing things in ways different from one's own, knowing what to expect regarding time management and deadlines and how to phrase criticism and solve conflicts. There are innumerable points where the culture of an NGO's foreign workforce is bound to differ from the local one. Involving local people and organizations, good networking and having friends in or near high places can greatly help, so once again, solid networking comes in.

When Samsara expanded to the northern half of the province, where it didn't know anyone, it was clear that the local authorities there were at first quite hesitant about the foundation's intentions. Assisting Samsara would imply extra activities outside their original scope, and officials probably also wondered if it wouldn't pose a threat to existing positions and reputations. It took some effort with high officials from the Ministry of Education in Bangkok and the Department of Education and with already cooperative school directors from the southern half of the province to overcome this apprehension. Later the representatives of the northern Department of Education in the province turned out to be very helpful and in fact crucial to Samsara's work there.

Local circumstances

Samsara operates in Thailand's northern, mildly tropical climate with three distinct seasons. The dry and cool 'winter' season runs from October to February, when nights can indeed be quite

chilly in the mountains. By March a very hot and dry season has started. It is marked by peasants' slash-and-burn routine to prepare the land for the next growing season. Farmers grow corn and other plants to produce gasohol (a type of fuel) for large companies. They burn large tracts of land so the air is full of smoke. Together with temperatures rising to 40° C, this saps energy and makes life very unpleasant. By July, the rains come, bringing more moderate temperatures but sometimes also serious floods, landslides and heavy damage to villages and infrastructure, as happened in 2011. The rainy season normally ends in October.

Both drought and rain clearly influence Samsara's logistics. In the dry season the bumpy country roads are passable – even if very dusty – but they become pools of mud after some weeks of rain, making inspection visits very time-consuming or outright impossible and even dangerous. Such conditions obviously affect Samsara's ambitions and work scheme: in the wetter periods, transport from the city to the mountains is hard, and even parents in the villages cannot continue building. In town, however, Ratana's boxing pupils can work on constructing supplies of furniture needed when transport is able to resume later in the year. Meanwhile, the board members are actively trying to raise more funds from their home countries by writing reports, letters, articles for magazines run by sponsors, and blogs.

School furniture

In its early years, Samsara bought the bunk beds and other furniture from large western supermarket chains in Chiang Mai. But after transporting them to the villages, much of it either proved far too flimsy for rural conditions or was soon damaged by the intensive use of school children. So constructing them oneself according to the insights gained on the actual spot where they would be used, turned out to be a far more effective method. For readers doubtful about Samsara's business arrangement with the boxing school: Ratana comes from a family producing furniture and has her own small construction company, so letting her produce the furniture was a safe and easy win-win option. With the increasing amount of schools, the annual furniture production is by now quite impressive: it amounts to 900 bunk beds, 300 single beds, 1200 school tables with 600 benches, 700 school desks, 150 cupboards of all kinds – per year! Small wonder that part of the production is now being outsourced to locals in a nearby village, gaining them an income as well. Even with the furniture, the local conditions can be stressful. Ratana and her team produce the furniture in her house, and until it is transported to the schools far away, it needs to be stored there too. In late 2011, the rainy season was unusually heavy and large areas in Thailand were flooded, including in and around Chiang Mai, where mud and sand was all around, and even got into houses. Ratana's home too was invaded by water and mud, and all the furniture had to be lifted from the floor. The best place to keep it was the elevated boxing ring where her pupils practice their sport. So on this, a pile of school benches and cupboards had to be stored till the waters receded.

When the rains have stopped and temperatures fallen to more human levels, Samsara picks up the field work again. The trips to the mountains (usually taking four days) are resumed, for inspecting the progress of school constructions and seeing if new requests from schools can be rewarded or

not, to sign contracts and to transfer the ownership of fully completed buildings (meeting Samsara's requirements) to the Ministry of Education. Furniture is delivered for class-rooms and dormitories, solar panels are transported and installed. Even so, roads can be difficult, and in one particular case, Max's team had to make use of a rather specialized kind of transport to deliver the solar panels so badly needed to a very isolated village: not only was a helicopter hired from the military for the panels themselves, but even an elephant was needed for all the other necessary materials! It took a while to make the elephant accept the strange technical objects being loaded on its back… Even without extreme conditions, transport in Thailand's mountain areas can be difficult. On one of the inspection tours, there were two schools to be visited. Judging from the map, this looked uncomplicated as they were only 5 kilometers apart as the crow flies. But maps and reality are not the same: the quality of the roads and the steep terrain turned into a four-and-a-half hour bouncy four-wheel-drive trip along forest tracks, since there was no more direct road anywhere nearby…

School seasons in Thailand follow the climatic seasons, so they differ from those in the western world. The main school holidays are in the very hot season of March and April. This is not always known 'back home', and Samsara has experienced situations where donors had to be urged to postpone a goodwill trip since few people would be present, let alone the school children. One more school holiday season in Thailand is in the month of October, again differing from most western holidays, so one had better take this into account, together with the virtual blockade of roads by the rains coinciding with European and American summers when perhaps sponsors would like to visit.

Another seasonal factor that can influence a project like Samsara's doesn't naturally come to mind to urbanized westerners: the harvest season! In the Mae Hong Son area, this is November, after the rains have stopped and before the sun bakes the soil. Though Samsara can pick up the field trips again at this time, the villagers are way too busy harvesting, and it is impossible for them to contribute work to building, no matter how important. So construction will have to wait until the crops have been secured and stored away.

Building in a tropical climate

Thailand has abundant supplies of strong, beautiful and fast growing bamboo, available for free just about everywhere, also along roads where it can easily be cut and transported. It seems logical and environmentally sensible to use this plentiful material for building school dormitories and the like. Yet, Samsara has learned not to use bamboo, or any other wood for that matter. Not only are wooden structures cold at night and hot in the day time (and night temperatures here may drop to near freezing point while day temperatures can soar to 40°C/104°F!), but wood cutting is of course a major threat to forests. Moreover, once bamboo is cut and starts drying out, it gradually loses its strength, becoming vulnerable to wood rot and decay, so requiring renovation way too soon. Finally, the hollow bamboo stalks provide shelter to all kinds of insects and even birds, creating a breeding ground for pests. In theory, treatment with chemicals could prevent this, but the temperature issue remains, so Samsara requires all buildings to be built of brick and cement. At first thought that might seem less sustainable, but in reality the opposite is true, because in the long term these materials are more lasting and require less maintenance. (Only in

one case did Samsara let a school be built in wood as it was in a remote area with very difficult roads making the transport of loads of bricks virtually impossible.) Likewise, doorposts and window frames must be made of impregnated wood, while for windows – often semi-open in the tropics – no lattice of wooden or bamboo strips should be used but rather iron netting.

In a climate with torrential rainfall in the wet season, it is not advisable to paint walls white. It may look nice and clean at the start, but during the rains the ever-present red lateritic soil will stain the walls, and once this happens standards for cleaning and maintaining may easily slip, certainly with many children around. When dirt and stains creep in, people tend to be less careful with litter and rubbish. So Samsara specifies that the lower part of walls be painted with dark colored oil paint (expensive to local standards but provided by Samsara) while roofs must protrude to keep the walls dry from mud splashing. Surrounding the building, a paved or cemented footpath must be made, also helping to keep both the walls dry and floors clean. For hygienic reasons, floors should be tiled, rather than made of cement. On the same grounds, a Thai law stipulates that toilet blocks for dormitories must be built on the outside, with a separate entrance.

Keeping in mind the local circumstances, Samsara produced a manual for building with some very down-to-earth specifications on construction techniques that were learned on the way. These are handed out to the directors and janitors of the schools during regional get-togethers with Samsara.

Local levels of technology

Everyone who has ever worked in a developing country would confirm that a major weakness in technology is: maintenance. No one seems to feel responsible once a machine or some other technical feature has been installed. Maintenance is all the more difficult if the technology used is complicated. Many an NGO or local company donated fancy machinery to projects without also supplying the right instructions and tools for repairs. So sooner or later things will go wrong, and the people meant to profit from it are left with broken equipment they cannot restore and cannot afford to have repaired.

As an example: Samsara found that some schools already had very large and strong water installations donated by a commercial firm from distant Bangkok. Unfortunately, research before installing them had been minimal or absent, so the installations produced mud, or undrinkable sulfurous water, or no water at all. Or even if they had functioned properly at first, the technology was geared to moderate use in city areas but not to rougher rural circumstances and agricultural needs. When they broke down, there was no one around to fix them and the donor would not send technicians all the way from Bangkok, so the result was that all five of these expensive installations were sitting idle.

Besides public relations and publicity, another factor may play a role in donating fancy technology: claiming social responsibility. Owning sophisticated machinery may also be prestigious to the receiver, even when the device is broken or does not work properly, e.g. by lack of electrical energy, or by forbidding cost thereof. But the sheer fact of having it on show suggests a glossy lifestyle, connections to the rich and famous, foreign contacts, or such. So plenty are the DVD-players, heavy duty tractors, MRI scanners and other sophisticated device sitting

un(der)used in places where electricity and petrol (or DVD's for that matter) are lacking, where no one can handle the equipment, where no repair is available in case of breakdown. It also occurs that no one can read the manual, since it is online only and perhaps not in a language spoken locally.

The message might be, particularly for an NGO starting up a new project: think twice before donating complicated, or even simple installations from abroad which are not known locally, because whatever you offer, it will be graciously accepted since it will enhance both the donor's and the receiver's prestige. Refusing would be impolite, but technical appliances should fit in with locally existing levels of technology; not necessarily state of the art or the latest perfect innovation but rather something local people can understand, handle, and maintain. It is better to have yesteryear's undemanding technology functioning than the latest novelty breaking down, sitting idle and frustrating everyone involved. For this very reason, Samsara regularly refused fancy water installations presented from abroad, preferring to put in solid but simple technology the users are already acquainted with at home. They know how to handle it, and spare parts can be obtained nearby at affordable prices. No precious donor money is wasted. Likewise, Samsara has also refused gifts of complicated computers for use high up in the mountains.

Local work conditions

In western countries, work hours and work conditions are legally regulated, with trade unions protesting if a company doesn't stick to the rules. In non-western countries however, far less is regulated, or adhered to. Hygienic and safety standards at the work place may be quite shocking to westerners. The way people deal with electric wiring, plumbing and the like is often improvised and very dangerous, while protective gear is an unknown luxury, let alone insurance. Also in Thailand, people working with chemicals, welding metals or demolishing structures loaded with asbestos often just wear shorts, T-shirts and plastic slippers, with little more protection than a cloth wrapped around the face or some flimsy gloves as used by amateur house painters. Obviously work-related diseases, accidents and even cases of death are widespread, but given the humble position of such workers, not much attention is paid.

Needless to say an NGO should set a good example, and adhere at least to internationally accepted basic standards of safety and hygiene. This may be difficult when outside contractors are involved, or in Samsara's case, when local schools organize the work scheme and housing conditions of teachers. To prevent calamities, Samsara has chosen to only construct one-storey buildings, not only because taller buildings require more sophisticated techniques but also because a second layer could more easily collapse and cause victims among the builders, the students or the teachers. When building the Samsara canteens and dormitories, machinery is hardly used anyway, because it is just not available in the villages and neither is electricity. Luckily, Samsara has never witnessed any great misfortune, but even so, there have been cases of trucks sliding off the road – one more reason to stop all building activities in the rainy season.

Teachers in poor areas of Thailand often originate from more sophisticated parts of the country, since the government requires this experience at the start of a fairly secure and privileged career in education. Rural schools were often so short of finance that they had little more to offer the newly arrived teacher than a plywood shack with very basic bedding on the hard floor and an

outside sink and toilets, usually quite unhygienic. City parents bringing their daughter or son recently graduated from a teacher's college to her first job were sometimes so appalled by the conditions that they refused to allow their child to stay there. Unfortunately, taking them back to their home region also implies halting their career in education. Samsara therefore also finances the building of teachers' dormitories, far more hygienic, comfortable and safe places to stay. This both helps the schools to find and keep better staffing, and the individual teachers do not let their studies go to waste.

It strikes visiting westerners that each of Samsara's teachers dorms is shared by two people, a condition – living with your colleague – somewhat odd to westerners. But not only is this normal in the mountains, it is even preferred, since living alone is hardly an attractive option to people from strongly family and group based ('collectivistic') cultures. The school director, however, will always have a room of his or her own, not only given the hierarchical cultural set-up but also to prevent any privileged position among the teachers.

Providing meals

Besides the school buildings and facilities, there are of course the students themselves to be taken care of, children ranging in age from about 6 to 18. In Thailand's mountain areas, many of them cannot go home in the evening, their villages being too far away and hard to reach. They need food and washing, but their parents are not around and since the Ministry of Education only provides the school building and elementary materials like pens and notebooks, there is no money for cooks, caretakers or cleaners. So, unusual as it may sound to many westerners, it is also the teachers' task to care for the students outside class hours. Besides educating them, teachers must also provide other care for the boarders, as well as caring for any sick children and those with disabilities. Moreover, they are expected to prepare food. Since mountain schools are small, the government budget for food is small too, and food cannot come from outside in the rainy season when roads are impassable. So schools have set up their own vegetable gardens, fish-ponds and chicken coops, and the teachers must manage these and cook all the meals. Of course they involve the students in chores such as cleaning the dormitories, watering the gardens, cutting the vegetables in the kitchen and washing dishes.

Local circumstances change

Sudden events can have quite an impact. The 2011 floods in Thailand not only brought great damage and discomfort but also led to rising prices for building materials throughout the country. Moreover, the government cut the school budgets by about one third, for about two years, using that money for rebuilding the water-damaged schools in the center of Thailand, so Samsara's contributions were even more crucial.

Mentioning the cost of building: in recent years, several fits of building fever took place in Bangkok and other areas of Thailand, and this obviously also affected the price levels nation-wide. To prevent setback and disappointment, every three years Samsara adjusts the building budget to the new price levels. The donors are asked to help out here, and fortunately they do. Other price increases concerning transport to and accommodation near the more distant schools in

the north, and more expensive administration costs led Samsara to, over the years, raise the overhead cost from 3 to 5%.

Adjusting to circumstances

Small-scale adaptations are made continually. After completing a canteen, schools often asked Samsara for a kitchen too. It turned out to be more practical and also cheaper to make kitchens inside the canteen buildings rather than add them later. Since these canteens are often the largest covered space in a village, they started being used for school meetings and ceremonies where children could perform songs or dances they had learned at school to their parents. Schools asked Samsara to finance the construction of elevated stages for these canteens. Given the fact that such community bonding activities would be favorable to Samsara's mission of getting more children to school, it was decided to finance these. Some schools made them into almost theatre-like settings, one even painting forest scenery and scenes from Buddhist stories on the rear wall… In Samsara's early years, it only financed elementary schools, so it was sufficient to build a dormitory with two rooms: one for the girls, one for the boys. Absenteeism was still high and no pupils ever made it into higher school. Over the years however, through Samsara's activities, absenteeism declined and the need arose to set up and finance middle schools. As these students were older, it became necessary to keep boys and girls more strictly separate. Where possible, two dorms were built at opposite ends of the school promises. But some schools lack such space and so a teachers' dorm was always constructed in between the two dormitories. To prevent any undesirable escapades, the dorms were locked during the daytime. One other adaption here was that teenagers could no longer share the larger mattresses used in elementary schools. So this became the starting point for the use of bunk beds. Finding that the ones available on the market were not strong enough for all-year use at schools, the production of sturdier bunk beds was started up at Ratana's place in Chiang Mai.

Another example: although the furniture provided by Samsara can hardly be used for any other purpose than the original one, there were a few cases of abuse or even theft. One smart and practical measure taken was to do the final welding of the bunk beds for the children inside the new dormitories, making it impossible to take them elsewhere since they simply cannot pass through the door without damaging them. And in order to prevent misuse of clean drinking water Samsara installed special taps. Initially, regular sinks were installed near the schools, with several taps to let the children drink. As it turned out, both students and teachers started using this precious clean drinking water for all kinds of purposes where rain water would be good enough, like washing clothes or watering the school's vegetable garden. Instead of a probably not very successful campaign teaching everyone not to do this, Samsara introduced a small but practical solution copied from European city parks: taps only spouting water upwards. In the Thai case, these come from a tiled wall that doesn't permit alterations. They are easy to use for drinking but ineffective for filling buckets or attaching a hose.

Samsara used to provide very poor secondary school students with scholarships that were paid

out twice a year to individual bank accounts specially opened for this purpose. When at some point Samsara found out that this money had not been used, it turned out that the Thai government's financing of secondary school fees had suddenly improved. So the students had saved the money and told Samsara that they would like to use it for later university studies, which are not so favorably subsidized. For reasons discussed later, Samsara applies a policy that can be described as 'never a penny more than agreed but also never a penny back'. In line with this, the students were allowed to keep the extra, so their 3-year scholarships were continued but from then on Samsara obviously changed its policy. It now only sponsors students going to colleges and universities.

The conclusion can be that both local and national circumstances and changes may affect the organization's functioning, sometimes profoundly. Shifting political situations can have important consequences: key contacts who were a good ally may leave their post, be it after elections or by a coup d'état, for pursuing their career or some other reason. Legislation may change. The public financing of certain aspects surrounding the NGO's work can vary, both for the good and for the bad.

Continuous learning

The examples given here, both from Samsara practice and more in general terms, indicate how organizations can learn from experience. Not every mishap or unexpected twist of circumstances can be prevented, but it will be clear that a continuous process of learning takes place. Hopefully so, since experience tends to dwell in people's minds, and if, for whatever reason, staff members are replaced, the lessons learned may disappear with them. The same may apply to useful contacts, facts and figures or other personal knowledge. Unless, of course, good debriefing and reporting has taken place, enabling a good transfer of precious experience to successors on the job. This is true not only for technical and organizational data but also for 'who is who in our work' information – a kind of sociogram.

In the following two chapters we will look at the importance of a project being founded on the needs and demands of local people rather than coming like a parachuted present.

Mountain schools

Mountain schools are difficult to reach

From village to school is a 1 to 4 hours walk

Mountain schools in the rainy season

Chapter 3

Work is driven by demand

In 1945, when Papua New Guinea was an Australian protectorate, an anthropologist[2] mentioned how the colonials there mockingly used the term ‘cargo cult’ for the way the local population welcomed the gifts from charitable organizations with almost religious fervor. Goods and medicine arrived that the Papuans didn’t even know existed, at times dropped from airplanes like manna from heaven. Later, the term cargo cult was used for describing how island societies in the Pacific put great value on possessing things regardless of their actual usefulness, celebrating the arrival of the silver birds full of presents with religious rituals.

Cargo cult-like aid keeps popping up all the time. Western visitors to poor countries may be struck by difficult or inefficient or energy-consuming ways of working. They decide to do something about it, collect money and donate better, more modern equipment. Local people happily welcome the friendly gifts, and the benevolent do-gooders leave the scene, convinced that from now on things will go better. Quite often, however, it is found out later that the new machinery or utensils are sitting somewhere unused, since some essential aspect had been overlooked, either in the field of technology, infrastructure or culture – or all these together.

- Samsara wants to be the opposite of a cargo cult supplier.
- Needs must be genuine, locally desired, objectively assessed and priorities established.
- Keep focus on the mission and do not be knocked off course by other demands.
- Ensure local ownership so that the projects achievements persist in the long-term.

So Samsara gives no goody-bags that nobody ever requested. Instead the projects meet needs that were brought forward by local people themselves: school directors, janitors, parents and students of the underequipped mountain schools in Thailand’s northwest. In this chapter, we discuss how Samsara goes about discovering what the needs are, and then works to meet these with limited funds but most importantly always with strong local involvement. This safeguards the projects in the short-term and also into the future when Samsara is no longer around.

Projects should be locally desired

If no one asks for a project, don’t donate it. That is Samsara’s conviction. What is the use of a project if it doesn’t fill anyone’s real need? ngos had better be honest about their motives: are they truly helping people who are in need of a certain service or commodity but cannot afford to realize it, or is it mostly serving their sponsors or members with a need to feel virtuous, or perhaps some other hidden motivation?

If a need is not truly felt at grass roots level, assistance will accomplish little. New technology may be brought in and installed, a number of people will be involved and react positively, nice speeches will be held and local people will applaud out of sheer politeness. But as soon as the people from the NGO turn their backs, believing that from now on things will be better, lack of ownership sets in, with disinterest, neglect and a likely failure of maintenance, since nobody truly

feels that the device or service installed helps them solve a real problem. Proof of this is not only the overly sophisticated water installations already mentioned, but also computers installed in places without electricity, or solar power installations sitting broken, unused and beyond local repair in villages where no one would know how to contact the original donor.

Samsara brings in better facilities for already existing schools. Or rather: it brings in finance, some logistical know-how and materials not locally available that local people can use to improve the facilities of the school attended by their own children. How does this come about?

This is what happens. When a new area – that is, a new geographical extension of its program – comes under consideration, Samsara first consults with the provincial Department of Education on the general situation and needs, using existing relationships with school directors from earlier projects who have been transferred here. Soon, a general meeting with the staff of the department is held, in which the previous Samsara participants tell about the Samsara procedures and their experiences with these. The Samsara team only makes clear what can and cannot be expected: dormitories and canteens "yes" but libraries and computers "no". Then, together with the provincial department, a particular district is selected for the first projects. Schools in that district are urged to present a list of the facilities requested, and the reasons for these. (If no such list is produced, Samsara assumes nothing is needed there.) In a first tour of the district, all requesting schools are visited to determine the existing situation and verify the priorities, to find out whether the school director will be able to organize the volunteer workforce needed, and to check whether all Samsara conditions are properly understood. Samsara then lists all facilities needed per school, and allocates a budget to every item.

Only then does Samsara start approaching existing sponsors for funding these facilities, taking into account their special wishes or specialization. Some sponsors only want to finance things explicitly geared to children, so they are asked to pay for dormitories. Others may not want to build anything in cement, so they are asked to finance clean water installations. Yet other donors may not be quite so selective, so they are asked to pay for perhaps less appealing aspects like toilets or teachers' dormitories. Usually not everything can be allocated to particular sponsors this way, so Samsara uses an 'extra wish list' and asks one-time sponsors if it is alright to use their contribution for this or that. This list is more or less complete by January 1 of each year. Usually, everything requested is realized within a year, but whatever the outcome, the money should be available by the next September, just before the dry season, so that construction can start right away in October.

When the needed funds are available, a grand meeting is organized for the school directors of the district and their janitors. Using an illustrated power point presentation, Ratana explains the building specifications. A training in setting up clean water installations is given. There are short talks with each school director to hear if conditions are still the same: checking that nothing catastrophic has occurred in the meantime, clarifying that there still a sincere wish and capacity to realize the project, confirming that the director is the same person that was previously met. Then, last but not least, all contracts with individual school directors are signed by Samsara and also by the director or deputy of the provincial Department of Education. Within two days, 50% of the allocated budget will be transferred to the special bank accounts that all the participating schools are requested to open for the Samsara projects.

Back at their schools, the directors now involve the Parents – Teachers Associations and the village committees to recruit volunteers for the construction, usually the parents of the students benefitting from the project. Materials are bought and transported to the school, and the building can start. For a single building, three months are allowed, for two or three new buildings at one school four to six months.

In the south of the province, as a result of Samsara's efforts, the number of students in those elementary schools receiving better facilities rose from some 18,000 to 25,000. With this success in getting children to elementary school, demand arose to have them go to middle school as well, but these either didn't exist or they couldn't offer accommodation to children from far-away places.

Together with the provincial Department of Education, Samsara designed a scheme to extend twelve primary schools into regional primary and middle schools. They made an inventory of what it would take to do so, and together they visited the Ministry of Education in Bangkok to discuss this. They would then have to finance new school buildings and send more teachers while Samsara would start raising funds for dormitories of both students and teachers, as well as canteens and toilets. This was a project with an, 'if condition': only if the government would build, would Samsara build also. This was unlike the elementary schools where Samsara would build no matter how. It took the officials, also at the provincial level, some time to fully realize the implications of the 'if condition' but it worked. Every year for 4 years, the government built three new school buildings at three schools and then, with the aid of the sponsors, Samsara could provide the other facilities.

Prioritize the demands

There have been cases where Samsara was asked by school directors for other assistance than usually given: food programs, health facilities or other equipment than those needed for building. This may seem to be demand-driven and yet Samsara did not agree to these requests, since not only are these matters outside its core task and competencies, but also because these needs are met – to at least some degree – by the national or local government and by other ngos. Samsara sticks to the idea that an NGO should focus on a certain task and a certain area and not be tempted into other fields. Given a good network, it can of course refer people to an appropriate other organization to fulfill the needs.

Even so, adhering to its basic tenet of getting children to school, Samsara judges a hifi set or a computer is not a priority for a school that doesn't already have good dormitories or a proper canteen. Initially, Samsara also donated libraries and books, but this resulted in far less dormitories and canteens etc. being able to be financed. Given the fact that better boarding facilities get children to schools and better sanitary facilities greatly improve the general health conditions of the children, by 2007 Samsara decided to concentrate its financial contributions solely to the building of dormitories, canteens, toilet blocks and clean water installations. When the Ministry of Education in Bangkok noticed that Samsara's efforts helped in raising the numbers of children getting to schools, it was also more willing to finance other aspects in the area such as pre-schools and roads.

Samsara's decisions are taken on the basis of the objective: what is the most effective way of

getting more children to school. A case in point here is that Samsara does not interfere with the curriculum of the schools, or even try influence it. There have been sponsors who expressed their wish to have special educational methods introduced in the Samsara-assisted schools, or diminish the existing steep hierarchies in Thai society by teaching students to be self-conscious in the face of authorities and speak up. As long as there is no local demand for such changes, intervening content-wise would be a waste of energy and finance. Samsara's opinion is that by getting all children to school, by accommodating more teachers at mountain schools, the young recently graduated teachers themselves will introduce the necessary changes. In recent years, Samsara has already noticing this happening. Besides it is Samsara's opinion that changing content and hierarchical structures is impossible for an outsider anyway. Meanwhile, good education in all parts of the country is essential for people to develop a rewarding life that helps them sustain themselves and their family in good health, literacy and a wider outlook on the world around them. Samsara is happily contributing here, since what it tries to do is always: strike the right balance between 'demand driven' and its own number one objective: getting children to school. By concentrating on its core business, Samsara generates more impact.

Locally feasible projects only

Agreeing upon the terms of reference of a project is fine, but at an early stage research needs to be done whether the project is feasible in all details. Questions should be answered. Do local people understand the various parts of the project – at least enough to realize its future implications, effects and perhaps unwanted side-effects? Is the organization brought in and the staffing of it in line with existing social structures or will it bring about changes, and if so, do these threaten anyone's position or vested interest? In other words, are changes welcome or will they produce resistance? And on a more material note: will the technical equipment brought in hold under local circumstances of climate, infrastructure and general technical levels? Can local people (or professionals among them) operate and service the machinery? Is the right type of energy to work them (oil, gas, electricity) not only available but also financially affordable, now *and* in the longer term?

Samsara's activities should not disturb local relationships. The projects do not bring any new people into the community on a permanent basis, and therefore no one's position is threatened, no one gets more power or influence than before. The actual building of the canteens and dormitories is done by volunteering parents of students or future students. The experience is that if you pay salaries for the construction work, the village chief will let his family members do the work even if they live in another village and Samsara would lose all the advantages of working with the parents of the children as volunteers. Moreover, the communities where the parents live are very small and if you pay salaries to half of the parents there and not to the other half, this may easily create friction.

The students' parents

Samsara hardly has any contact with the students' parents themselves. Being village people, the parents of the target group hardly dare ask for better facilities, since they are poor and often illiterate peasants of non-Thai groups, and not truly in contact with Thai authorities.

They don't feel inferior but are aware of the fact that they are in a minority situation. Sensing that education is the key to improving their situation, they do feel the need to have their children go to school. But their knowledge of the outside world is limited and the very idea that a foundation ('a what?') would and could help them without wanting anything in return, is an alien concept to them. Finding that their children enjoy better living conditions in schools with Samsara-financed facilities, they become more willing to send all their children to school, thereby greatly decreasing the absenteeism that was previously so high in this part of Thailand.

Through the contact between parents and teachers needed for realizing the Samsara projects, the general contact between the school and the parents increases. Parents become less timid towards the better educated teachers from other areas of Thailand; they come forward with more questions about their children's education and start realizing that such government officials are more approachable than perceived hitherto. In turn, the teachers seem to take the parents' input more seriously, so the general contact gains in importance, also on issues like maintenance and keeping the school premises clean.

Also at the school level there should be no cause for jealousy. The improvements brought in by Samsara may enhance the status of the school director who promoted the project, but school directors in Thailand are not local people, they come from outside. They are rotated to other areas every few years, by the Ministry in Bangkok. So even when directors who successfully implemented Samsara' facilities stood a better chance of being transferred to a location of their liking (while failure might have led to a less favorable move), among the villagers themselves nothing changes. No new social structures are introduced: no new local institution or extra budgets for other purposes than the Samsara project itself. In other words, no local person or group gains any money or privilege from Samsara's presence.

A helpful school director

In Thailand, a layered competition exists for best school directors. Mr. Poonsak had already been the best school director of his district and was later selected as the best director of Mae Hong Son province (and later even of all of Thailand!). Working with Samsara in the southern part of the province, he was very energetic and helpful in realizing projects at various schools, mostly in his spare time, since he was in charge of a high school in the mountains. He not only helped with organizing the Samsara projects but also contributed in the actual building, even after sunset. He would also actively bring school directors together that hitherto had not even known each other, and would set up memoranda of understanding between Samsara and the Ministry of Education. Finding that it wasn't easy to convince parents from the Hmong people to help build dormitories for children of the Karen, Mr. Poonsak started classes in Thai language for Hmong mothers, so that they could more easily communicate with one another. Mr Poonsak's contributions did not go unnoticed by the authorities, and after some time he was promoted to lead a larger high school in the valley.

As we mentioned at the start of this chapter, Samsara does not want to be a distributor of presents falling from heaven, un-asked for, top-down, letting the recipients be passive. First of all, Samsara does not build the schools itself, it only facilitates. It lets the school directors do the main work: organizing and instructing the volunteers, buying building materials at the right price, ensuring these get to the right location at the right time and that the buildings adhere to the mutually agreed Samsara building designs.

Locally available materials

The materials are mostly local: the more simple ones – bricks, paint, metal parts – are available in the area and paid for by Samsara, with the suggestion to buy the materials for several schools at the time. Some schools decided to jointly buy materials in Chiang Mai, where prices are lower. Such bulk purchase insures a better price, given the economies of scale and the existing contacts with suppliers. Schools also cooperate in transporting the materials from the city to their area, with the help of a hired truck and volunteers from among the parents. Local people are involved also in transporting the materials from the highway to the more remote villages, along often steep mountain roads. In the wet season, these roads are impassible for trucks, being either extremely muddy and slippery, so transport stops. Even in the dry season, the dried up gullies and ridges are very bumpy and dusty. On forest tracks, the trucks cannot be used, so, in smaller portions, the materials have to be moved on by mopeds or even carried in baskets.

Unfortunately not all materials are locally available. More sophisticated equipment – clean water installations and solar panels – are purchased by Samsara itself, outside the area. The companies selling them transport their produce to the area, but even then volunteering parents will need to help in the last stretches. Even so, the installations need to be of a type that is known locally, where spare parts are available and where local knowledge is available as to how to handle them.

Ownership and shared interest

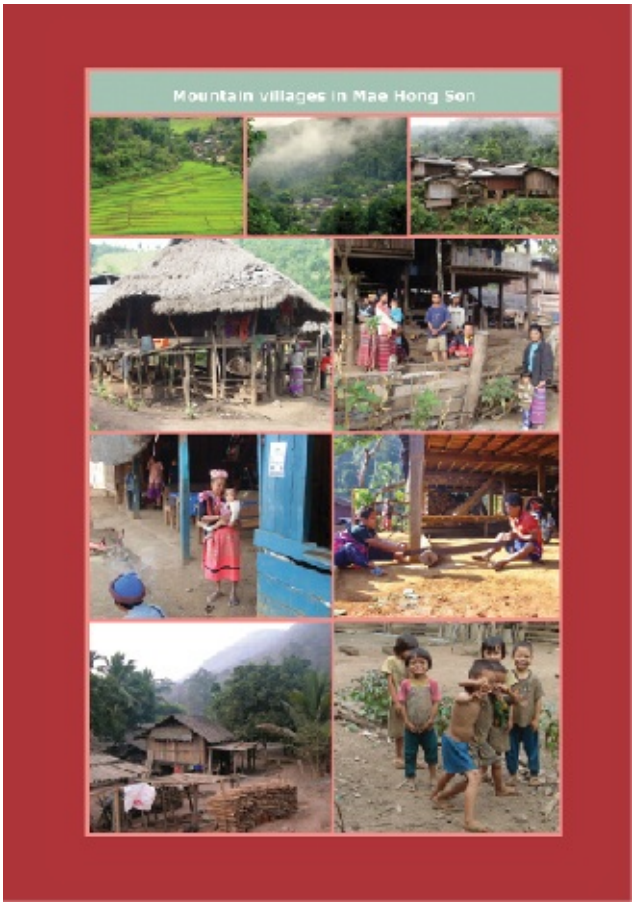
Samsara does not build the dormitories or canteens itself, not only because it has no employees to do so but also because contractors may turn out to not be reliable by not showing up at all in these difficult mountain areas, or even *embezzling* the budget. What counts more strongly than these reasons, however, is Samsara's belief that a project will only be lasting with the involvement of the target group, or in this case: their parents. The time, energy, concentration and physical labor invested guarantees that parents will develop a strong sense of ownership: it may have been donated by unknown foreign beneficiaries but it is <u>our</u> school building where <u>our</u> children are educated and enjoy a better life than at home. This idea will most likely result in better care and maintenance.

When the building is ready and in use, Samsara transfers the legal ownership to the Ministry of Education to ensure that the buildings will be included in any future improvements by the government. But parents still feel the building is theirs, so the 'moral' ownership lies with them. Remembering their input, they will be proud of the results of their work and therefore careful with it – *we* built it with our own hands, *we* here in the village maintain it and see to it that it is being used the proper way. Most likely, parents will tell their children to do likewise.

Samsara does its part and local people do their part, in the shared interest of improving school facilities, with better prospects for thousands of children. Samsara organizes and provides the funds and the furniture, and if need be other facilities like solar systems and scholarships, but the local people do their share with what they have most plentifully available: labor. School directors play an important role, in applying for the projects, organizing the parents' participation in building and other physical chores, overseeing the realization of the construction together with some of the teachers and janitors, who often participate since they live at the school. The deputies from the provincial Department of Education do their share: they facilitate the regular Samsara inspection tours to the more remote villages by providing a four-wheel-drive van plus a driver; they ensure that all people needed are present at the right time and the right place; they solve smaller problems schools may encounter and keep an eye on the progress made by schools.

Thus, everyone's involvement is essential in getting things organized in relatively short time spans and with minimum cost. Improving the facilities of over 350 schools in a vast and rugged area takes a lot of coordination, so only with the help and contribution of all parties concerned can this be accomplished. As a pleasant side effect, this frequent cooperation enhances everybody's involvement and creates optimum circumstances for smooth communication: everyone knows the other players.

In the next chapter we will explore more deeply how Samsara lets local people be responsible for the projects.



Volunteer parents building the facilities

Chapter 4

Stimulating local responsibility

Samsara is convinced that NGO projects need to be firmly rooted in the local context. Only if local people and local institutions take responsibility for the buildings and equipment will long-term effectiveness be guaranteed. Samsara wants to finalize its own involvement by 2016 and withdraw from the scene, making itself redundant. By then, only local people can assure the proper use and further maintenance of the things provided by Samsara. To achieve this, strong local grounding is needed. In order to attain this, three principles are adhered to:

- Establishing agreement and close cooperation between Samsara, the authorities at the Department of Education and the local schools on selecting the essential projects. This involves sharing the responsibility in executing the projects and having an official presence at the completion of any new facility.
- Managing projects based on results – not on the particular process used. Samsara does not ask, "*How* did they do it?" but rather seeks answers to issues like "Did they meet the deadlines and the results agreed to on the contracts?" and "Does the final quality meet requirements?"
- Stimulating good communication: at the school-level between colleagues and at the local level between schools and Parents – Teachers Associations.

Involve local authorities

Many ngos arrive in an area and start executing their project without reaching out to the wider society. Often this is out of distrust regarding the authorities, which is certainly the case in failed states. Samsara is of the opinion that failing to communicate with the surrounding society is a lost opportunity. Knowing about the initiatives of local authorities in a particular realm can prove to be very useful: doubling-up will be prevented, the projects can be designed and done in accordance with existing or developing official ones, while cooperative key figures may be very useful in connecting with the target group or higher authorities. Even if the authorities at national levels are notoriously malfunctioning, there will probably still be some constructive people at lower levels, either regionally or locally.

Likewise, being aware of any other NGO's activities in the area is advisable. Learning from each other's experience can take place, economies of scale may perhaps be realized, and other forms of joint effort and coordination can occur. ngos are not-for-profit and so should not compete but rather work together and enhance each other's activities. Sadly, reality is different. Samsara was told by the Department of Education that it had never been asked for cooperation by other ngos active in their area and involved in educational matters. Unlike many other Asian countries, Thailand is a free market-society where private initiatives can be deployed and go unnoticed by the authorities to quite some degree.

So Samsara turned out to be one of just very few ngos in Mae Hong Son province closely cooperating with the department and bringing its activities in line with existing needs, thereby

helping the department in solving certain problems. This obviously strengthens the department's readiness to take responsibility after Samsara hands over the facilities and to continue doing so by the time Samsara withdraws from Thailand altogether. The sad effect of other ngos not doing likewise may be the gradual or even rapid collapse of their achievements when, for whatever reason, the organization has to either decrease its activities or withdraw altogether.

Samsara involves the local authorities in all projects by having them co-sign all contracts between Samsara and the schools. They are asked to always send a representative from the Department of Education to accompany Samsara on its monitoring visits. The great advantage is that the authorities then also become responsible for solving problems that arise. Since Samsara never pays a salary for construction work, the schools involved will need to organize volunteers and the committee of janitors of these schools to lead the construction. In case of problems, the department will support the school with extra labor or money to get the job done.

After buildings and water installations are completed, Samsara transfers the legal ownership to the Department of Education, in other words: to the government. This makes good maintenance more likely in the long run, since the Samsara-structures become a part of the whole school building complex that from then on will be overseen and paid for by government institutions. This is contrary to the policy of many other ngos, who either prefer to let donated objects remain their own property, or to transfer them to the individual receiving body itself, but then the authorities will not feel responsible for them.

However relevant the close participation of authorities may be, Samsara works independently, not through the governmental system. The foundation has its own goals and guiding principles and although streamlining with national educational needs and issues is wise (if only to safeguard a better embedding now and in the future), keeping to one's own smaller-scale strategy is important too. The personal contacts between Samsara people and the school directors increase the chance that schools stick to the contract and act the way they promised. Also, Samsara transfers money installments directly to the schools, not through the department. For reasons of transparency, it would be unwise (both to donating and receiving partners) to have Samsara funds merge with the wider finances of the ministry. Involving more functionaries is bound to result in less efficiency, and moreover, in a society with limited transparency and confused administration, excluding middlemen in an NGO's financial procedures prevents favoritism, local corruption and bureaucratic delays as much as possible.

By keeping local authorities informed, and with the frequent contacts this implies, the government will be more aware of the scope and consequences of the project and will be most likely to support it. Certainly this will happen if there is no power shift to be feared or need for anyone to lose face. Needless to say this involvement can be very useful for an NGO to attain its goals. Seeing the NGO workers communicating and acting with established authorities will also secure the participation of others like, in the case of Samsara, the school directors. But even the general feel of importance and relevance given by the association with officialdom may positively influence the assistance given by suppliers and villagers' contribution of volunteer work.

All in all, Samsara's maxim is: '*Working with, but not through the local authorities.*' A great advantage here is that Samsara works across a far wider range than just with solitary schools.

The fact that the Department of Education covers a whole region containing many schools means that it also has an interest in keeping up good relations with the foundation in the years to come. So a good working relationship with Samsara guarantees more projects, which is not only for the good of the area and Thai society in general but of course also in the department's own interest. Cooperation with the same people in the same area over a longer period strengthens Samsara's position whenever difficulties need to be solved or negotiated. Besides, the provincial department sees the overall scope of Samsara's projects and weighs the interest of the hundreds of participating schools against the interest of only one school. Whenever a problem with a school arises the department will be inclined to solve that problem soon to prevent endangering all others.

Volunteer work

Samsara delegates the organizing and involving of volunteer workers to the school directors. How do they go about doing this?

It needs to be said that every school does things differently. The larger schools situated in the river valleys employ more janitors, so there it is they who realize most of the construction. But in more remote and smaller mountain schools, volunteers from the villages around play a larger role. Usually the students come from three to five surrounding villages, but the volunteers are nearly always people from one or two villages nearest to the school. This is remarkable because students from those villages can often walk home after school, so such volunteers in fact build for someone else's children. This may even imply that Hmong people also build dormitories for Karen children living further away, so it took considerable convincing by the school director and the teachers. More meetings and more home visits were needed to get it all together.

Usually many villagers help out with land clearing or jointly handing over buckets with cement and the like, but it is often a team of some six people who do the actual constructing. Some schools made use of the same few people time and again, sometimes paying them a little for this, while at others it was more of a rotational system for a larger group of villagers.

More collective chores were often done by women, while more specialized work was done by men. If a contractor happened to live in the village, he would be involved to organize the building – but only as a volunteer! Sometimes teachers knew a builder elsewhere who could be drawn in in his spare time. In one case, a teacher had connections to a school in Bangkok from which students arrived to help out in a village for a week.

At schools where no one had any experience in building, janitors from other mountain schools would come and help with more complicated jobs such as welding the frame for the roof. They would travel around to schools where Samsara projects were going on. But it needs to be pointed out that all this organizing and co-operating were initiatives from the schools themselves and their parent-teacher committees. Samsara did not play any active role in this but only provided the conditions to make it possible.

Manage by results

Samsara always works with the schools through written contracts – in Thai language obviously. Recording things on paper may sound bureaucratic or even distrustful, but in the context of likely linguistic misunderstandings and cultural differences, written contracts have proven to be a good method for guaranteeing the right follow-up. If confusion arises, all parties can refer to what was originally agreed and signed. In a culture without a true reading culture, however, such contracts need to be short and to the point. So in just one page and a half, they briefly state particulars on construction, the expected results, the overall budget, the conditions for payments made by Samsara and the timing of various parts of the project. The contracts also mention who were the sponsors for this particular project and the eventual transfer of the buildings to the Department of Education. Working with such contracts has the added advantage of making clear to the participating schools that in essence this is a business agreement in which all parties have their responsibilities.

The general idea on the financial side is that Samsara pays 50% of the budget needed up-front, so that the school can start buying materials. When after some time Samsara's assessment agrees to the building results so far, and the follow-up of the instructions have been given, another 40% is handed over for the continuation of the project. Since the Samsara team cannot constantly travel around, the assessment will sometimes be made after receiving photographs proving that the new building has reached its agreed target to this point. Both amounts of 50% and 40% are paid to the bank account that the school was required to open for this project.

The remaining 10% is paid only when, some months later, the construction is finished and fully meets Samsara's demands. Since the bank transfers can be slow and schools sometimes want to pay people who assisted in cash, this final amount is also given in cash to the school director if Samsara happens to be in the area. Whether by bank or in cash, an official document of the transfer is made, with the stamp of the school on it.

Things don't always go smoothly…

In constructing 400 buildings, there have been just two cases where Samsara's policy of 'never pay more' was put to the test – and one turned out to be not the fraud of the school. But first this one:

In it's very beginning, Samsara worked with a certain school director who later worked at other schools in the province, so Samsara met him various times. During their first contact, he had merely completed three quarters of a school canteen, but he said he was out of money. Since the rest would only be paid after total completion, he would exceed the budget. Looking around, Annelie noticed unused and no longer needed building materials lying around, and suggested he return to the shop and get money back, adding: 'And, by the way, that is a very nice new bungalow the headman of the village built himself next to the school… But listen, we'll be back in three weeks and then the canteen had better be ready'. Samsara drove off, without paying a baht more. When returning there, the canteen was finished, and Annelie said: "Very well, so you succeeded!" "Yes," answered the director, "but in such cases, other foundations would always pay us extra money"…

The second case: At an isolated school, a young female teacher had taken over the responsibilities when her school director had fallen ill. She had tried to continue the

construction of a Samsara building, but somehow she was short of 80,000 baht – a considerable amount (roughly $ 2,700, € 1,900). In three Samsara inspection visits, at first, she did not come up with a good reason for this, which of course made a bad impression. Only at the third visit she finally 'confessed' (since this certainly felt like loss of face to her!) that she had been deceived by the transporters, who had charged the young and inexperienced woman way too much for delivering the materials to the remote school. Trying to cover up this 'shameful' situation, she had already rallied 50,000 baht from the municipality but also from friends, relatives, the village through a religious tham bun ceremony. This Buddhist ritual includes donating money, which gains the participants spiritual 'merit'. The Samsara people were impressed with her efforts and handed her the short-fall of 30,000 baht on the spot. Within two weeks, the building was finished!

With the contract and as a part of the agreement, schools are given clear drawings with building specifications. Even though these are fairly simple structures, Samsara has learned by experience what is required to guarantee solid and long-lasting buildings: building in stone, roofs protruding against rain damage, painting three times over, painting the bottom part not in white, and other methods described earlier.

There are three parties involved at the signing sessions: school directors, the representative of the Department of Education and Annelie Hendriks on behalf of Samsara Thailand with Ratana as a Thai witness, and all of them need to be present. The start-up sessions with a first signing of contracts will be organized centrally, for instance at a larger school in the area's main town. Sometimes in such group sessions, it takes more than 600 signatures from Annelie, Ratana and the departmental representative, and Annelie has learned the hard way to wear a protective wrist band for this job….

Official opening and transfer sessions can only be done on the spot, since Samsara examines the finished building before the final 10% payment is made. Both are organized during Samsara's inspection trips to the area, taking place during the six months of the dry season. As a symbol of schools taking such hand-over and opening sessions quite seriously, they mostly arrange some sort of ceremonial, with several teachers present and students giving a presentation, often dressed-up in their ethnic costumes. Such rituals usually take place in front of the decorated new building and with refreshments for the honorable guests of Samsara and the Department of Education: biscuits or cakes with coffee or tea, always loaded with sugar. Given the number of schools where Samsara is active, and the long journey from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son province (three hours driving on a very winding road), there can be as many as seven such ceremonies in a few days during these long trips. Although such school ceremonies are time-consuming, the Samsara team values them as a sign of the project being taken seriously, demonstrating everyone's commitment. Invitations to these ceremonies are also a token of appreciation and prestige for the parents who helped building.

Not only do school directors take responsibility but also so does the department, since it is aware of the added value that Samsara brings to these mountain schools in a remote border area, that, until recently was not taken too seriously. So keeping Samsara content by showing concern and providing assistance is also in the department's interest, since the amount of money involved

in Samsara's activities is certainly not insignificant from the Thai point of view.

Speaking of finance, Samsara knows exactly what the cost of any new project will be. Quantities of materials needed are calculated, the cost of these and of any extra expenses required are all clear and predictable. Given this transparency, Samsara has a maxim on its financial policies with the schools: 'Never a cent extra, never a cent back', implying that schools must complete the project they agreed on and for the agreed budget. Extra money will not be provided, so schools need to act wisely with the amount given and organize enough volunteers to realize the project in all details. On the other hand, if somehow they manage to make savings while achieving the required quality, they may keep the remaining Samsara-money and use it as they wish. Not only does this policy make schools responsible, yet again, but it also saves both parties from extra and time-consuming bureaucracy, since keeping account of every detail in a country of often poorly administered procedures is virtually impossible. It is the result that counts.

This is not to say, however, that Samsara absolutely never wants its money back. Unfortunately there have been some school directors who did not live up to the promises made in the contract, mismanaging the project they had agreed to. If they still fail to do so – after more than one attempt to correct this and get the school to deliver – Samsara will be strict and demand the money to be returned to the foundation. Good relations with the people of the Department of Education are essential here, since whatever a mismanaging director may think of a foreign foundation, he or she will not be nonchalant with government officials. Also, in the wider context of the department's involvement, underperforming (let alone failing altogether) brings about considerable loss of face and might jeopardize the person's individual career. In Samsara's history, there have been three cases where directors were somehow reluctant to start a project and then the Department had to intervene to get the money back to Samsara.

Dealing with bad performance

One more example of things going wrong: At one school where Samsara had contributed four buildings, a new director had been installed by the government a year later. The man was known by both Samsara and the Department of Education from projects at another school, and the impression was unfavorable: he did not want to follow the building instructions and had been slow in accomplishing things – perhaps due to health problems. Unfortunately, he did not listen to advice let alone criticism, and did not accept any help. Working nearby, Samsara found out that his earlier shortcomings were being repeated: he was neglecting the new Samsara buildings, and the bunk beds had been demolished into a heap of scrap. The children slept in the former bad dormitory again. It turned out that he was doing this as a kind of blackmailing of the department, from which he wanted a new pre-school. Not having got that due to other priorities, he now used the Samsara dormitories for that purpose.

Since Samsara cannot run the risk that one such bad example might lead to others, it put on hold any future donations, which would be given by the same donor to similar projects at other schools. The department had to first make sure that the school where Samsara buildings and equipment were damaged and the students were sleeping in unsafe circumstances was brought back to order again. The whole situation led to great concern

among other school directors in the area who were still expecting Samsara money. After complaints from both Samsara and the parents, together with the Department of Education, the school directors decided to intervene: collectively they set out to clean the neglected Samsara buildings, repair the bunk beds and restore it all to its original purpose: dormitories for elementary school students.

Stimulate local cooperation

The facilities for the school are financed by Samsara while the schools do the buying and transportation of the necessary materials and equipment. The actual construction is delegated to the school's Parents – Teachers Association with instructions by Samsara based on previous experience. The local school directors are then responsible for the whole process and the results. In many villages this has brought them in much closer contact with the parents, because, coming from another area of Thailand and living at the school premises, the directors were hardly known by the parents, and vice versa. Moreover, the differences in language and status between the hill tribe people and the Thai school directors played a role here.

Now that the Parents – Teachers Associations – legally present but in most places dormant in reality – are more active, the contact between the schools and the village people is much closer, and increasingly there are students and others who can translate both ways. Apart from the request by the school director, an additional push to participate in building is the fact that Samsara pays for the food during the construction.

The structures Samsara finances are strong but simple and built in the same style as existing ones elsewhere in the valleys or bigger villages, albeit made of better materials. The bricks and paint etc. are of a higher and longer-lasting quality than those village people can afford, but the building techniques required are already more or less known and applied locally. Any new building instructions are well explained, using plenty of photographs for easy understanding by people who are illiterate or speak only their minority language. In addition, more attention is paid to the finishes, with instructions given on details, so that maintenance will be easier and the life span of the buildings is prolonged.

Since not everyone is an experienced builder, Samsara stimulates school directors and janitors to visit schools where Samsara has already build facilities to study the technique or the final results, and talk to their colleagues there to find out how they did it. Given the importance of such exchange both for the actual construction but also for the empowerment of local (minority!) people, Samsara compensates for the travel expenses.

Samsara also provides schools with solar panels and batteries so that they can watch school television, use educational dvd's and computers, and have light in the evening to do homework or enjoy some entertainment, and generally provide a safer environment for both teachers and students. School television and dvd's are important in the ninety schools that hitherto lacked electricity and (perhaps because of that) teachers. With TV and DVD, younger pupils can learn and do assignments while the teacher works with the older students.

Even though Samsara selects relatively simple technology for its schools, installing solar panels is a more complicated job than building a dormitory or canteen, so it cannot be left to the village people to do. Therefore, Max and his team come in to install it and instruct the school

janitors for the general maintenance of the panels and related equipment. The same happens with the water filtering systems. Before the actual installation, it is necessary to prepare people to understand what's involved, almost to develop a new mind-set. So building and maintenance instructions are given in group sessions in a central location, with the effect that participating directors and janitors get to know their colleagues better and can ask for nearby assistance from each other if somehow things get complicated.

The project proposals to Samsara are written and submitted by the school directors themselves, based on what they hear from parents, students and teachers. This enhances the feeling of ownership. The time lap from project proposal to realization is usually just a few months, which makes it all the more likely that people keep on feeling involved. They will do their utmost to contribute to the building process, and later ensure good usage of the buildings and materials provided. This can already be observed during the construction period, when parents and other volunteers (perhaps other villagers providing some extra skills needed) work quite intensively. Both when building and during later phases of the project they may not only learn new techniques, but also experience the value of working together and accomplish better results than by doing things on their own. Shared responsibility may in itself not be new in an agricultural society where people help each other in harvesting and a few other major tasks, but for an out-of-the-ordinary task like building a school or installing new water pipes, it is new.

In doing so, cross contact and coordination increases between school directors, school janitors, teachers, parents and local authorities. The joint effort of improving facilities for just about everyone's children easily creates a new spirit of co-operation in the village communities. Besides the initial start-up, this is done without Samsara's direct involvement, so villagers will be proud of the results they accomplished. This has proven to be a motivation for further participation by the parents in the affairs of the school. Before, frequently there was hardly any contact between the schools and the parents, since school directors and teachers all come from elsewhere, and hardly ever speak the same language as the 'ethnic' parents. Through the Samsara projects, schools need to rally local volunteers, and after good results, these are more likely to later help with drainage, constructing toilet blocs, clearing land or weeding around the buildings. Apart from working together an important added benefit is that the relation between teachers and parents allows for the discussion of educational issues.

Chapter 3 and 4 were about the importance of the local situation: local demand, local materials, local feasibility and local cooperation. In order to keep these manageable, the projects need to be limited geographically and content-wise. In the next chapter we will look at the importance of an NGO focusing its activities on one specific region and one subject to prevent spreading themselves too widely.

Samsara's furniture workshop

Transportation of materials and equipment

Clean water projects at the schools

Installing solar panel based energy projects

Chapter 5

Focusing on one region

One region

Setting up an NGO in the field of development assistance often stems from a personal encounter with some unfortunate condition in a country not one's own. Usually overseas visitors come across a situation that is unacceptable to the standards of their home country. Whether it is about children being brought up in unhygienic or otherwise shocking conditions, pregnant women lacking good care or facilities (and often both), patients with HIV, leprosy or some other stigmatizing disease being left to themselves, something is so utterly unfair that foreign visitors feel they could and should make a difference. Given the exchange rates, the rather different price levels and the ample availability of cheap local labor, significant improvements can be realized with relatively modest amounts of money. So the decision is easily made: let's do something about it! Concrete plans are made, friends and relatives in the home country are mobilized, money is collected, and perhaps with some contact people on the ground things get organized.

The activities also require actions perhaps initially not quite foreseen: permits and other legal documents, local transport, arranging accommodation for the organization, gathering information and data, relation building with key figures in the local government. Then there is the task of promoting one's activities, both back home but also locally, and so on. In doing these things, and also later in the process, one easily comes across new abuses. It is very rewarding to work on school facilities and improve them, but what to do when you discover that the students need better food also? Wonderful to arrange better care for poor and pregnant women, but how about her older children? Or: wouldn't it be a good idea to provide sex education for teenagers? It would be great to improve health facilities for patients of this or that disease, but how about dietary advice, or social work or some other intervention? And what about patients from villages just an hour away who beg for help also?

Once support to a target group starts, there seem to be no limits to it. There are more people in the area who need similar help, there are nearby areas that could do very well with the same kind of assistance, there are adjacent matters and aspects that also deserve to be tackled, and so on. There is no end to needs, certainly in the western world, let alone in developing countries where financial constraints count much more. Since people setting up an NGO have a humane outlook almost by definition, questions for and hints at further aid will not leave them unmoved. And just here lies the major pitfall of fragmentation. Before you know it, you may be doing a variety of things for an ever-expanding group of people. One can only do so much with a certain amount of money and a certain number of people.

Extending one's efforts to other activities or to other fields creates a major risk. With other activities being set up, there is the chance that this requires competencies and skills not available among the existing team. Finding them will entail at least some investment of time, money and effort, which may detract from the core task or even jeopardize relationships with the supporters or sponsors who are not willing to go along with the new horizon.

In a new area (work field or geographical region), not only may the conditions of many factors

differ strongly, but one doesn't have the essential contacts from the start. Networking may help, and introductions from key figures in the original region but even so, new expertise has to grow. One may wonder how effective that is, compared to using one's existing experience in similar new projects. An NGO is not a supermarket chain that should always find new markets. It is not and should not be about quantity but about quality.

The Samsara experience is that highest effectiveness is realized by doing the same thing over and over again. That may not be all that exciting for the foundation's volunteers who do the job, but that should not play a role since it is the target group that counts, in this case the students, not the helpers nor even the sponsors in the background. So when Samsara had completed its work at schools in the southern half of Mae Hong Son province in 2011, and – after a strong request from the Ministry of Education in Bangkok – it was quite logical to expand into the northern half. The idea to do so became more concrete when a major sponsor was found, an American living in Thailand. With this important head start, it was less difficult to convince existing sponsors elsewhere to continue contributing, now also for the northern region.

This sounds like a contradiction of the above advise to stick to one area, but remember that in this case some of the contact persons/intermediaries at the Department of Education were the same, the peoples living in the area were the same, geographical circumstances were not exactly the same but quite comparable and in some cases school directors who had worked with Samsara before were now located in the northern area. Moreover, the work in the south was done. If new contacts were needed, existing relations could be involved to make the new connections and recommend and explain working with Samsara.

Obviously, focusing also produces a more advantageous position in negotiating and solving problems, since the department covering the whole area has a far wider interest than does one single school. So, as a foundation, you can be more demanding, for instance in asking assistance for schools that have problems in constructing, e.g. because there is no village nearby to find volunteers, or a school has only a temporary director, or a female director without any experience in construction. (In this part of Thailand, men virtually always help each other in building houses, but women are not involved; they support each other by planting the rice and doing other chores.) The relationship can also work as a mild warning: if we don't get this project in order, Samsara might withhold its assistance in the next building season. And what is quite important in Thai culture: the respect and trust Samsara has gained by successfully accomplishing things already over a long span of time, which virtually guarantees further good cooperation.

As to transport, it didn't make much difference to travel from the Chiang Mai area to either the south or the north of the province, although the north is more rugged and roads are extremely curvy, making the trip both longer and more tiring.

But it needs to be said, Samsara's advice to concentrate on one area stems from exactly this experience. Even when taking into account all the similarities just mentioned, the shift from the south to the north turned out to require some unexpected adjustment. The more rugged terrain of the northern area (a Karst area with almost vertical slopes and very rocky soils) implies that most people live in the valleys rather than on top of the mountains, as in the south. The resulting larger villages have schools in the community itself and most children can go home in the afternoon, also because roads are better here, so the need for *student* dormitories turned out to be far less than in

the south with its more spread-out population. But since these larger villages also have more modern facilities and larger schools, they are more successful in attracting and keeping teachers from outside. Nevertheless, housing conditions for these teachers had always been quite primitive too, so the need to build and improve *teachers* dormitories was greater. It took Samsara some time and a bit of a mind switch to adjust to this. It also turned out that – for understandable but in fact sentimental reasons – many sponsors were less thrilled to finance teachers dormitories than children's dorms, so it entailed more explaining to convince them to continue donating.

One very positive development resulting from the Samsara focus on one province is the intensified contact between nearby schools. Previously, they only briefly got together through sports events, but now they help each other in building, with the janitors advising one another, schools jointly buying materials and transporting these to their area, and a more general exchange of insights on construction.

One theme

Having developed the experience and skills and after organizing the best tools to improve the conditions of the mountain schools, it would be bold and probably even unwise to expand into other fields of assistance. Providing medical care is not Samsara's field of work, nor is food distribution or raising the production of vegetable gardens. Comparable to a commercial company, an NGO should define its core business and stick to it. The core business is most likely where the heart (the 'passion') is and has been, right from the start. It is also where most of the skills and expertise needed have been mobilized and developed, so that is where the true talents are. Compare it to buying flowers in a supermarket: it may come in handy that they sell them there, but you wouldn't want the salespeople there to arrange your wedding bouquet, or a wreath for a ceremony. They wouldn't know how to do it and the result would be poor indeed.

Likewise, an NGO should be a specialist, sticking to its core task, and letting others take care of other fields, and also of other geographical regions where conditions are different and networks don't exist. Yet countless ngos are active in various countries, or offer an array of activities in different fields. ngos growing larger tend to widen the scope of their work, e.g. from first only providing food for the children in a village to education and, eventually, even special education for disabled children. Or they stick to the same activity but start doing this now also in another area far away. If there is no overarching institution linking these areas (like in Samsara's case the two Departments of Education covering the whole province), it is very hard to attain relevant and lasting results.

Positive effects of focusing

When running an NGO in a certain field in a given area, as Samsara has been doing, both the experience and the network mature all the time. This leads to better expertise, more effectiveness and more efficiency: pitfalls can be foreseen, mistakes in choosing materials or suppliers can be avoided, instructions to all people involved will have matured and improved over time. No experience is lost: there is *transfer of knowledge and peer learning* taking place all the time. Not without reason, Samsara's slogan is: accomplish more with less money.

By focusing, the *skills and experience of both sides are developed*. The foundation people

deepen their insights into the practical aspects of their activities, and so do the locals, certainly those people who – in the case of Samsara – deal with more than one of the projects, more than one school. Repetitiveness may not be the most attractive option but it is the most effective one. Learning by doing is not achieved in just one go; the more often one does a certain thing, the better one gets at it, and focusing on one field of activity enables all participants to continuously improve their skills. This does not only apply to material jobs like construction or agricultural tasks but also in the more conceptual field of cooperating with authorities and suppliers of materials.

In the process, *relationships are built and expanded*. People working together need to become used to each other, especially so when they come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By focusing and going over things frequently, both parties deepen their insights into one another's ways of thinking, organizing and doing things, in the way they talk about these things, even in their English accents which is not the mother tongue of either party. Every new project of the same kind is dealt with more effectively and efficiently since people know what to expect from each other, in every aspect. No new explanations are needed, no instructions need to be given, no new terminology or even English accent needs to be learnt to be properly understood, and all of this obviously saves money.

Focusing and repeating the same set of activities also *establishes the ngo's good status and reputation* in the area. As indicated by the honors awarded to Samsara, the foundation has proven to be faithful to its promises, to be firm and unyielding in the carrying out of the task it set itself, and never withdraws halfway through the scheme. All of this would be much more complicated without focusing. With no limits set, projects can go on forever, in all directions, both geographically and task-wise. New situations, new people, new technical and infrastructural conditions – a logistical nightmare in which an NGO's reputation can easily be damaged and lost altogether. Helping a country with its development should not be a game for benevolent donors and their helping hands, but a structural contribution to the life and sustainability of a certain group of people – in Samsara's case: the ethnic minority children of one province.

When there is no more fragmentation, *the ngo's task will be effectuated more successfully*. In the Mae Hong Son area, Samsara's focus and determination have directly resulted in more government-paid pre-schools being set-up that pave the way for further education, so more young children attending elementary school, more of them proceeding to higher education levels, more teachers present even in fairly remote schools. Indirectly, Samsara's contributions to education have sometimes led the government to build paved roads to the schools instead of muddy forest tracks. This could contribute to more general benefits for villages along the road, since agricultural produce can now be transported to markets in a far wider area than before. Better roads even turned out to be favorable for pregnant women, who could now travel more comfortably to a hospital, if needed. Such unintended positive side effects would not have occurred if a policy had been applied of assistance being spread out over several areas.

With more contacts to the outside world, people in the area widen their mental horizon and develop a better understanding of how things work. It is outside Samsara's s cope of activities, but most likely, local people will gradually learn to improve their own circumstances by approaching the relevant authorities, a condition unthinkable for the people in the mountains just

half a generation ago. In other words, the NGO's concentrated focus on one field of activities causes *improvements in far wider circles*, like ripples on a pond. By focusing, one could say that Samsara has contributed its part to the wider province's development and the emancipation of ethnic minorities hitherto timid and without self-confidence.

In concentrating on one area of activities, the NGO keeps on meeting the same authorities. As mentioned before, corruption, bribery and general 'in-transparency' are widespread in many developing countries[3]. If an NGO works in many fields in many countries, it will have to deal with a great number of new contacts: authorities, rulers, functionaries, suppliers and all kinds of middlemen. Needless to say this provides ample opportunity for the unscrupulous to abuse the financial means of the foreigners to take their illegitimate share. Unfortunately, even a small NGO from the western world, with unknown quantities of hard currency behind it, is an attractive prey in the eyes of corrupt people. Of course even in long-term contacts *corruption and bribery* may crop up, but the chances are *far less*, since all players know one another and are aware of the wider networks surrounding them. Moreover, with direct and long-lasting contacts, less intermediaries are needed to get things going and done. Middlemen of some kind are often the people who may come up with proposals involving financial transactions, for in a way, bribery can be interpreted as 'a lack of network'. In relationship-oriented societies, knowing the right people is crucial, but if you do not know those, bribes can help to close the gap between you and the person with the power to grant you things or provide you with whatever you need. This aspect is too often overseen as a factor behind the wide spread of corruption: it is not always criminal motivations that drive people into corrupt practices, it can also be the sheer need of getting to know the right people in the shortest span of time.

So again, focusing on one field will widen, deepen and tighten relations, which in many cases will prevent the 'need' for bribing one's way into new contacts.

One last positive effect of focusing we like to mention here is in the field of *sustainability, durability*. In sticking to a core job, it is not only the local authorities and suppliers whom one keeps on seeing but also the target group and the actual results of the project. The fact that the NGO workers continue coming to the same area and are being seen by people who have met them previously, yesterday's target group so to speak, contributes to an enduring public awareness of the projects. Even when locals are not in actual contact with the NGO anymore, stories about their presence elsewhere revives the recollection of the joint project accomplished. It is hard to prove but very likely that this raises awareness of the need for maintenance of the project's building or installation, leading to its longer and continued use for its intended purpose.

Finally, one last positive effect of focusing. Part of the general western public's distrust of development assistance is the lack of control, of evaluation of whether the aims of the NGO are met by their work. Certainly for large ngos, going back to the area where a project was executed some years before, and now measuring the present effects of it, is a costly affair. For reasons of credibility, outside consultants would be best to do such a job, but these tend to be quite expensive to engage, and it would be hard to convince donors to pay for this. (Moreover, not knowing the local situation, it might be difficult for consultants to make a realistic assessment.) So in most cases, evaluation is not done. When focusing on one area, however, the NGO people come regularly to the area, or to one quite nearby. Given the smaller scale needed for a 'focusing

NGO', it can more easily even be the very same individuals that return to the area. So this enables *on-the-spot evaluation*, not with costly outside consultants but *by the professional insights of locally experienced people*. Given their great involvement there just some years before, they will not think lightly of abuse, failing maintenance or any other lack of effectiveness. Emotions like 'hey, now look what you've done to our building!', or 'hey, this wasn't meant to be!', will keep the NGO's own people from judging over-favorably, and will most likely prompt them to take action in some way – an action that will not cost much.

Focusing certainly also relates to the sponsors, but this will be made clear in the next chapter, where we will discuss various aspects of the NGO's own organization and the way it deals with its donors.

Chapter 6

Working with sponsors

As an unsubsidized NGO, Samsara is dependent on sponsoring organizations and individuals. In previous chapters we described how Samsara focuses on one topic in one area, and how it works result-driven. The combination of these factors has its influence on the relationship Samsara upholds with its sponsors. The following are some of the factors that contribute to the success of the evolving and long-term relationship with sponsors

- Sponsors are never taken for granted.
- Establishing and maintaining a relationship of trust is important, personalized work.
- Finding various methods for regular and frequent reporting of achievements
- Show impact of financial support that demonstrates money well spent

Samsara is still quite a small organization, but this only concerns the number of people directly involved. Financially, over the years, it grew from a budget of a mere € 4,500 a year to € 450,000, or roughly US$ 610,000 at present – a hundred-fold increase! In the beginning, Samsara only built things after having received sponsorship, so the procedure was: first money, then building; new money, new building.

While holding on to this principle, Samsara later started making longer-term plans and presenting these to potential or existing sponsors, asking them for a 4-year pledge. Provided of course that you deliver what you promised, this proved an excellent way of having sponsors commit themselves to you. The overall effect of this is that Samsara does not have a great number of sponsors but rather a very loyal small number who are faithful in their financial contributions and maintain a continuing interest in Samsara's results. Important factors here are obviously the general and very appealing aim of the foundation (getting children to school), the practicality of Samsara's approach, the concrete and measurable results over a short period, the very low levels of overheads as a result of only working with volunteers and finally a policy of clear focus.

With long-term planning and precise calculations, Samsara was and is able to present these plans to sponsors and ask if their budget allows them to finance a certain project over a period of four years. Annelie is quite convinced that, as a charitable foundation, you should never make excessive demands of your sponsors but, on the other hand, must not shy away from requesting further support. Be concrete, have a good plan with sharp budgeting to it, and usually sponsors will be willing to commit themselves to it. A good example is the following story, linking back to what was described in a previous chapter about Samsara's expansion into the northern half of Mae Hong Son province.

When the Ministry of Education asked Samsara to work in that area also, a four-year plan was drafted based on the experience gained in the south: for such a number of children at that number of schools, we need this total of dormitories, canteens, toilets and clean water installations. All this would require a large amount of money so the question was of course: how to finance this? Samsara first looked for seed money, an initial start-up sum from a major sponsor that would then

generate more money. This was found: this particular sponsor was willing to pay US$ 125,000 dollars per annum over a four year period. Samsara then approached other sponsors with this example and with the plan as a whole, asking them, on the one hand, for a smaller annual contribution than they had made previously, but on the other hand asking for a commitment of four years. For some donors this came to US$ 50,000 a year, for others € 1,300, 5,000 or 7,500. This strategy, which produces solid financial security, also keeps up the contact with sponsors. One can also more safely promise things to local institutions and ask for their good cooperation.

Samsara's sponsors

Before going into detail on Samsara's strategy in securing and keeping sponsors and dealing with them over a longer period, let's take a closer look at who these sponsors are.

As to the country origin of the sponsor funds that Samsara received over the last ten years, 40% comes from the Netherlands, another 40% from the USA and the remaining 20% from various places: Hong Kong, Thailand, Canada and Switzerland.

Looking at the categories of sponsor: 74% comes from private funds, either financed by family foundations, by foundations collecting support from friends or relatives, and – last but not least, by individuals. Among the family foundations these ones stand out: the Richard P. Haugland Foundation, the Kennedy Family Foundation, the ADM Capital Foundation, the Carl and Henrietta Herrmann Family Foundation, the Ralph Scriba Family Foundation – all five of these are American, and one is the Dutch Stichting De Beer and the Gisela Stichting. Supporter-based foundations are the Jan and Oscar Foundation from Switzerland and Asian Kidz Support from the Netherlands.

Then 25% comes from more institutional foundations such as Net4kids, Wilde Ganzen and the Dr Hofstee Stichting, all of them Dutch, and the Hongkong based Lloyd George Asia Foundation. The final 1% comes from small-project funds of the Dutch and German embassies.

From Samsara's experience, the following points are important for securing sponsors and keeping them. First of all, merely sending letters to all kinds of organizations is not very productive. What *did* help was this:

- Creating a good image, keeping a good track record of the activities and make this known through well-maintained and updated websites in (in this case) Dutch and English.
- Networking, networking, networking. In Thailand this meant becoming a member of the Rotary Club, of expat networks, of local networks. It also implied working on your name and fame so that people will refer others to you, and publishing in local and English-language media.
- Involving people on your board who have other networks. Carl Samuels had an extensive American network that Annelie as a Dutch citizen would never have reached otherwise.
- Low overhead costs and a clear mission statement that appeals to people: 'Getting Children to School'.
- Swift reacting to any question or e-mail that comes through the website or by telephone. Providing people with correct information. Being willing to meet people who are interested in your work.
- Providing proper and clear reporting on your activities.

- Rewarding loyal sponsors by, for instance, making a photo book of their projects.
- Taking sponsors or potential sponsors to visit the projects.
- Always be transparent: if you state beforehand that a canteen will cost 300,000 baht, then also report half a year later that it did indeed cost 300,000 baht. This greatly pleases sponsors, since often they have contributors of their own and it is unpleasant to have to report that things became more expensive than expected and that more money is needed. Samsara's policy of 'never a cent more' also relates to its sponsors!
- Always be clear on what the money was or will be used for, what you will do and what you won't do.
- If anything goes wrong, first try to solve it and only if that doesn't work, communicate the issue to the people involved.

Obviously all these points influence each other and are connected, so together they make the project successful.

Winning sponsors

Strategies for winning individual and family foundation sponsors are:

- *Personal relationships; these work best where trust already exists; or if they are new, have a strategy for building trust, which we successfully employed through learning as much as we could about the donor and their financial capability and preferences, before initial meetings.*
- *The mission of the ngo must appeal to the prospective sponsors; in other words, it is something which they identify with and favor.*
- *Effectiveness of the ngo, especially as measured by a high percentage of donations that reach the beneficiaries. Donors obviously like very low overheads of ngos.*
- *Feedback in language they understand and relate: simple and visual. Also, they love photos (in Samsara's case: before, during and after completion of building projects). Photos and brief biographies also work well for getting scholarships for students.*

Now Samsara may work well, but this could not have been achieved without the sponsors. They for their part also did a lot of things:

- They didn't try to execute projects on their own but went looking for a local and reliable NGO to do this for them. Most of them started with a Samsara pilot project and then came visiting the projects to see for themselves. Afterwards, they were positive about starting up a long-term relationship – which of course needs to be well maintained and not be damaged in any way.
- Once a good relationship has been established, collaboration becomes much simpler since from then on the allocated budget for every project is clear and no lengthy contracts or reporting is needed on all details. Such precision would only create a false sense of security, since sales slips, or pictures for that matter, can easily be faked and lose all true meaning. Building a long-term relation based on trust is much more effective.

- Most sponsors are content with factual reporting. What matters to them is that the money was spent the way it had been agreed. Even so, sometimes Samsara is confronted with endless application and reporting forms that need to be filled out, making us sigh: what is this all about, is this detail useful in any way?! Such forms come in widely different formats, making it quite a difficult job to answer all questions. Luckily most sponsors are happy with Samsara's reports, and some allowed a far more concise method of reporting, based on the long-term trust it had gained.
- The trust Samsara acquired resulted in all of its sponsors agreeing to a four-year commitment!
- Another very favorite circumstance is the phenomenon of 'matching funds', the enlarging by a donor organization of a sum already found through fund-raising. This is an attractive option for sponsors and donors since the amount offered can be multiplied. Our Dutch sponsor Wilde Ganzen applies this mechanism, which enabled Samsara to put itself on the map with amounts rising from € 4,500 to 45,000 – meaning that for the first time, Samsara could build several facilities simultaneously!

What makes a good sponsor?
In line with Samsara's own policies as evident in its Thai activities, it would prefer similar principles to be applied by its sponsors. This would encompass the following ideas:

- Focus on one country or one subject, since that makes it easier to build trust and long-term commitment, and have greater impact.
- Try to find a trustworthy and solid local NGO to work with, and build a good relationship with them.
- Manage by results, not by the process.
- Put decision-making and execution in the hands of the local NGO.
- Adjust to local knowledge and habits (i.e. remember the difference in seasons between Thai and western holidays; refrain from bringing visitors to Thailand when all schools are closed or when country roads are impassable).
- Give feedback to the individuals executing your project. Don't leave them in the dark as to your expectations, financial developments or thoughts about the overall effectiveness. Coming up with these after, say, a year of total silence on your side can be very confusing or disheartening. Remember that, in Samsara's case, everyone is a volunteer and has been working very hard to achieve results. Everyone likes to hear comments, be noticed, appreciated and stimulated to continue.

Preventing bureaucracy
As we discussed in chapter 5 on focusing, quite a few philanthropic organizations deploy their activities in several countries – the opposite of focusing. Now this may be appealing to the people running the NGO since it gives them the chance to visit several interesting places, but in Samsara's opinion, such fragmentation is a waste of input, energy and money. Working in various areas at the same time not only means you need more people to do the job, but are also likely to make more mistakes since circumstances usually differ greatly between different locations. Trying to manage this diversity with rules, contracts and endless questionnaires for reporting produces

more bureaucracy requiring even more costly personnel.

Some Dutch sponsoring organizations especially – more than the American ones which are more result-driven themselves – want very detailed reporting on what is done with their money. Dutch culture as a whole is strongly procedure-driven and strict on financial matters, so it is not malevolence in itself but a cultural idiosyncrasy, and therefore hard to counteract. Besides the charitable organizations themselves it is also of course *their* supporters, donating individuals, who want their gifts to be used the right way. Yet the precise requirements stem from little more than traditions and the resulting mindset.

In Samsara's opinion, it is fair that donors want to see the results of their contributions: "Look, this is the dormitory we built with your money, and here is the plaque stating your name, as you can see". But keeping account of every single cent, penny or baht spent on details of the project is a time-consuming affair and a major burden for a small or even medium size NGO. It distracts both attention and (volunteer!) work from the organization's core task. What counts is the result: is it done on time is it done correctly and is it realized within the budget?

One important lesson Samsara learned was this: never start a project until all the sponsor funds are actually in the foundation's account, even if they have already been guaranteed by the sponsor. It once occurred that an ostensibly secure and guaranteed sum of money could only be paid in two parts: one amount now, the rest in a few months to come. For a small foundation that makes it impossible to work, because how could it finance the whole work on its own? Samsara was happy it hadn't started up the project yet!

So on all these issues, trust is indispensable: there should be a fair degree of trust between the donating foreign organization and the executing NGO in the field that their money is spent wisely. If sponsors don't trust the NGO to which they donate, working together becomes difficult.

Prevent overspending

Samsara works with fixed budgets. Unlike the expenses, incoming funds are easier to keep track of: donations are made to banks in the western world with well-established internet banking systems. Many of Samsara's sponsors are quite faithful, certainly the more institutional ones, so the budget for next year is already known in the previous one. This enables the upcoming projects to be planned quite precisely: that many schools, so many dormitories, that number of solar panels. Here too, the principle of 'not a cent extra, not a cent back' greatly helps, since the allocated budget will hold: expenses foreseen will not be any different in reality.

The planning with fixed budgets also works the other way around: if the concrete needs in the project have been mapped and the budget for realizing this is known, specific requests can be made to sponsors and they will know how much of the total budget is already there. If part of the total sum is still lacking, an extra appeal can be made, but also conversely donations for that year can be stopped. The most uncertain factor is the rate of exchange. Currencies tend to be unstable, with sometimes significant fluctuations in both directions. In recent years, the international banking crisis and the vast loans to support weak economies in Europe also affected the rate of the euro against the Thai baht.

It might seem a wise policy to save any extra funds for periods when the exchange rates are less favorable, but sponsors want the whole budget to be spent on their particular project, not

saved up for something else.

For dealing with volatile exchange rates, Samsara has taken three steps:

1. If Samsara gets fewer baht than expected, it will tell the donor that the project cannot be totally completed for this sum. It is of course sensible to communicate this as soon as it becomes known, before starting on the building. Some donors will supply more funds, others will merely deplore it and not pay more.
2. When asking for funds in a period of fluctuating exchange rates, apply a rate less favorable, e.g. 43 baht for a euro rather than 45. If then it really gets to be 43, you don't run into problems, while if it is 45, there will be some extra money to spend on an extra project, and that is welcome news to a sponsor.
3. Try to find a donor to provide extra funds for just such cases. Samsara succeeded in this, and obtained a sum of € 5,000 annually to pay unforeseen expenses. This extra money can then be used for solving problems due to bad exchange rates on other donors' projects. But another use is also possible. E.g. a school had received a water tank from Samsara when the village suddenly closed off the water pipes to the school due to a lack of water for the village itself. With the extra money available, Samsara could pay for pipes from a new source and solve the problem.

Keeping overhead costs low

Worldwide, there is annoyance and distrust about what is suspected to be an excessive percentage of charity expenses going to administrative and fundraising costs, to the 'overhead' cost, rather than the true purpose of ngos. Samsara is very aware of this, and for years it managed to restrict such cost to 3%, and later, after inevitable price raises, to no more than 5% of all the money spent. Of course sponsors are happy with that, and it gained Samsara both trust and praise and even an award in the Netherlands for the best run organization with the lowest overhead[4].

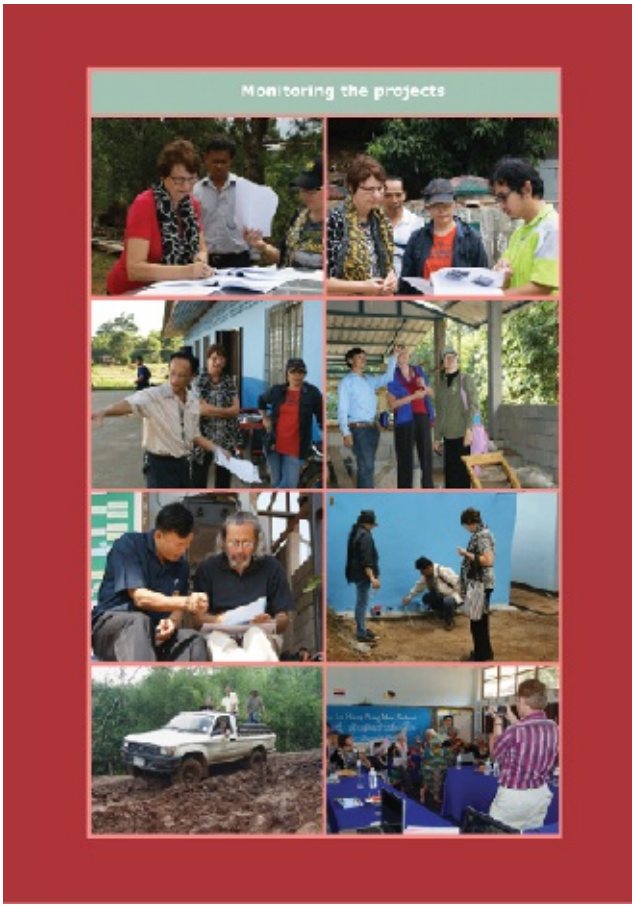
High overhead costs cannot fail to irritate sponsors and may even hit the media, which is of course very harmful. Samsara has been successful in trimming its overhead cost, but how did they do this? First of all, of course, by the policy of only working with volunteers. From the board members to the village people actually constructing the dormitories as well as Max and his team installing solar panels, nobody ever gets any income from Samsara. Only some food for the volunteers is paid for, plus sometimes some extra money is provided for hiring a technical specialist or a machine.

Another major factor in preventing high overheads lies in Samsara's policy of standardizing and decentralization. Using standard contracts and standard building designs and drawings, even when these must of course be adjusted to local circumstances, always saves time and money. By having the schools themselves organize things, in other words: by decentralizing the activities, Samsara prevents extra bureaucracy and thereby unnecessary overhead cost. This also occurs with the provincial Department of Education: let them do their share too. Likewise, if school directors need to be in the city for some other reason, with their pickup truck they can sometimes fetch the materials they need from Ratana's workplace. Sometimes the opposite, centralizing, is the answer to making savings: having school directors and janitors come to a central location to

be instructed together at one time. All such practical measures help in keeping down overheads.

The bulk of Samsara's 5% overhead cost comes from the expense of the inspection tours: rent of a minivan, petrol for the official government cars, board and lodging of the Samsara team and the accompanying government officer. (Guests who accompany these tours need to pay their own expenses). Ratana and Max receive a small allowance for the days they come along, since they need to close their business in the city on those days. Then there are expenses for secondary but necessary activities such as stationary, stickers with the names of the donors, photo books, and once in a few years a new computer.

In the final chapter we will draw some main conclusions.




Contracts, drawings and the manuals

Chapter 7

Final notes and words of appreciation

After having explored various aspects of Samsara's efforts to realize its ambitions, it is time for some final words, followed by words of thanks.

NGOs should not live on forever: Define an exit policy

Talking about finality, so far nothing has been said about the end of Samsara itself. An NGO needs not to live forever. A good NGO should have its own redundancy as an important option. The NGO's contributions to development should be a lever to self-sustainment, not a take-over of local affairs, no matter how friendly the intentions. This automatically implies that the sponsors and donors in the background should be aware that their sponsorship is finite and infinite at the same time. Finite in the sense that there will come an end to the need for them to donate, and yet infinite also: the scope of their contributions is vast, since the effect of their gifts will linger on long after the NGO has terminated its presence in the work field.

There can be great risk in foreign donors prescribing what would be good for a developing country. These can very well determine that for themselves – if not now, then in years to come. Apart from emergency help, countries should be able to manage themselves without foreign aid, so any assistance given should only be instrumental to accomplish that situation, that aim. For Samsara this means that now that it has fulfilled its commitment to create the conditions needed for virtually all of the children in the area go to school. The schools now have to develop themselves further. The quality of education will rise, and even though there will always be needs, the general level of education will improve due to the better circumstances created by Samsara.

Both the cherished employment of professionals within the NGO and the perpetuation of charitable feelings among their contributors can distract the organization's policy from its main core: development assistance. It will also easily lead to an unnecessary prolongation of its activities since that is good for the assistants' employment and even for the managerial and administrative jobs in the far away headquarters. When this happens it is quite justified that criticism arises on the overhead cost being way too high, that complaints are made about projects being hard to evaluate since they are never ending, that they are unsuccessful and that development assistance is like throwing money into a bottomless bucket. An NGO should work like a commercial business: set realistic goals whose progress is measurable, delegate tasks to the people involved and hold them accountable for the results. If a target has been reached, stop the project, or reset it for a new and visible horizon. It is developments in the field that count, not the private interests of anyone working in the NGO or donating to it.

Many larger NGOs employ professional people on a more or less permanent contract. Possibly this enhances their involvement but it also creates a direct interest in the continued existence of the organization, which is not necessarily good for the ultimate target group. Consciously or not, the people on the pay roll will safeguard their employment, even if the aim of the NGO no longer requires them. But without determining clear goals and fixing a deadline for

them, an NGO can go on forever, since there is no set limit. Samsara is of the opinion that an organization like itself should set clearly defined, fixed and measurable goals to arrive at, and when these have been reached, it should dissolve itself. Therefore it is sometimes better to work solely with volunteers: no livelihood or family is depending on their NGO activities. Experienced and skilled volunteers, often retirees are nowadays to be found everywhere and they are often willing to commit themselves for long periods of time. As previously described, Samsara will dissolve itself by 2016, when its target of 'getting children to school' in Mae Hong Son province will be fulfilled.

By then, the foundation will have realized more than it ever thought possible at the start. It did not only get children to school in the south of the province, but also in the north, and then even teenagers to middle and high schools throughout the province. So after completing all this, Samsara will dissolve itself. Nobody loses a job, nobody loses face, nobody will be harmed. This is closely linked to the principle of making yourself redundant as an organization.

A good NGO should make itself redundant. This determination to bring things to a close after some time might frustrate certain sponsors' inclination to be charitable. Perhaps they themselves receive *their* money from individual donators who like to cherish their private feel-good factor. That is fine to the extent that they do help other people, but it should not become the main consideration of the NGO. That should be and remain the needs and bottom-up requests of the target group. Thence Samsara's maxim: if nobody asks for it, don't do it. Local people or institutions requested everything that Samsara carried out.

There can be great risk in foreign donors prescribing what would be good for a developing country. These can very well determine that for themselves – if not now, then in years to come. Apart from emergency help, countries should be able to manage themselves without foreign aid, so any assistance given should only be instrumental to accomplish that situation, that aim. For Samsara this means that now that it has fulfilled the right conditions needed to get virtually all children of the area go to school, schools now have to develop themselves further. The quality of education will rise, and even though there will always be poor teachers, the general level of teachers will improve due to the better circumstances created by Samsara.

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Samsara's main objective to be achieved in 2016

This book is about the 6 key factors that played an essential role in the success of the Samsara Foundation in Thailand.

1. Adapting to the local situation
2. Working in demand-driven manner
3. Stimulating local responsibility
4. Focusing on one theme and one region for extra impact
5. Creating and maintaining good relations with supporting sponsor organizations
6. Avoiding bureaucracy and excessive overheads with a lean and mean organization

'Getting children to school' was the ultimate aim that Samsara set itself to accomplish in Mae Hong Son province. We are proud to be able to say that Samsara has contributed significantly to getting the children of the ethnic minorities in those mountain areas to primary and middle schools.

When in 2004 Samsara started building accommodation for children and teachers at the mountain schools, some 18,000 children were studying at 178 schools in the southern half of Mae Hong Son province. By 2010, when Samsara built the last facilities in this area, the number of young students had risen to 25,000. What may be even more significant is the fact that in 2004 absenteeism among children living far away from school was more than 50% in the rainy season, resulting in these students missing many hours in class, thereby not getting the results needed to continue into middle school. At present, after Samsara's interventions, the figure for absenteeism and school drop-out is a mere 5%.

Girls and boys in education

The wider Asian trend of more girls continuing into higher levels of education than boys also occurs in Mae Hong Son province. Figures make this development more visible: In lower classes of primary education girls make up 47% of the students and boys 53%. By the end of primary education the figures are virtually 50-50, but in the lower classes of secondary schools the girls already make up 51% of the average school population, and in later years even 59% of the total. Since no research has been done into what causes this, Samsara does not know whether boys study outside the area, prefer vocational training to extended general education, or simply become school drop-outs. Most likely all three factors play a role.

Apart from these general figures, Samsara also experienced the rise in numbers of students in very concrete ways: as soon as a dormitory had been finished, all beds in it were immediately occupied by children. In small schools, within two years, Samsara saw the number of pupils rise by some 50 to even 100%! For example, in 2005, the Sang Wan Witaya school had 175 students. Samsara built dormitories for them and for their teachers, toilet blocs, structures for the children who stayed over at night to do their home work, clean water installations and rain water catchment tanks. By 2010, these improvements led the very same school to have 325 students!

Another indicator: in 2005, hardly any children of north-western Thailand's ethnic minorities attended high school. But in 2013, Samsara got the very urgent request from the Department of

Education to build dormitories for these students at the nine high schools in the province, since without these they would not be able to handle the strong rise in the number of ethnic minority students by sheer lack of facilities. Up to 2016, that is Samsara's focus point: high school facilities for this group of students.

All of this contributes to the realization of the "United Nations Millennium Development Goal: Achieve universal primary education", to ensure that, by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling in Mae Hong Son province. But it also helps these students to move on to higher levels of secondary education, while Samsara's Scholarship Program offers more chances to enjoy education at Colleges and Universities.

In fact this constitutes Samsara's seventh success factor. Earlier in this book a student by the name of Suuwit was mentioned. He was the first one to enjoy the benefits of Samsara's Scholarship Program after his teacher asked Samsara to sponsor him to enable him to attend middle and high school. Samsara sponsors have donated for his prolonged education until in 2014 Suuwit graduated from the Teachers' College in Chiang Mai. This allowed him to realize his wish to teach at the mountain schools in his region of origin.

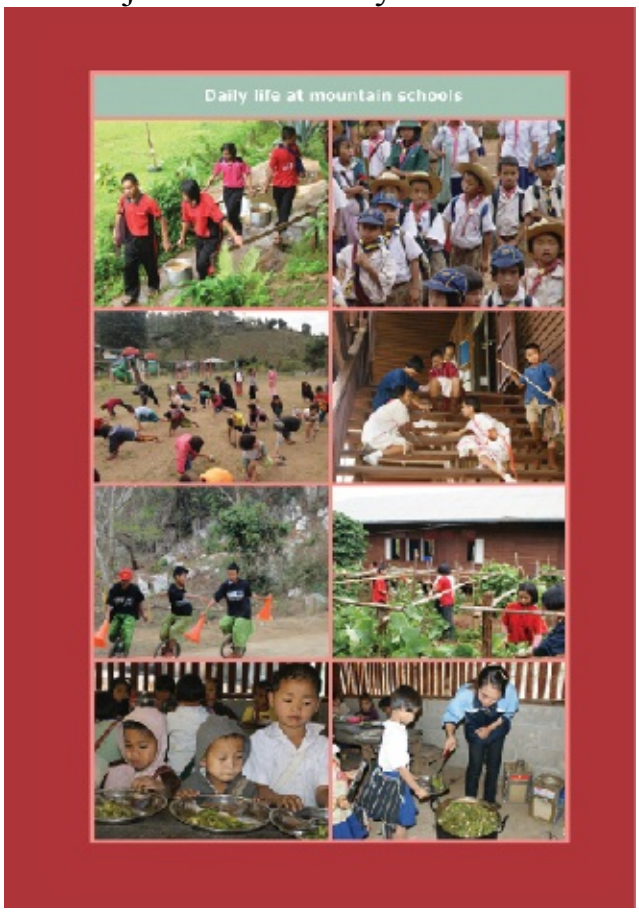
Suuwit demonstrates perfectly why people want to volunteer in Samsara's work. He is certainly not the only successful student. More and more children from Mae Hong Son province attend higher levels of education. With the numbers of primary school children rising year by year, higher percentages continue their education into higher secondary education and quite often into vocational training or university. Samsara has witnessed that a significant number of them return to their home area as a nurse or a teacher. They become role models – proof to new generations of children from the Karen, Hmong and Lisu minorities in Thailand's poorest province that it *is* possible to study further and secure a good job and a good position in life. Proof that a better future is also there for them to realize. Now not every student will become a teacher or a nurse, but since nearly all children now complete primary school, their chances in finding a better paid job are considerably better than those of their older brothers and sisters, and certainly their parents.

A good example of this may be the young woman Samsara encountered in a very isolated mountain village. As a child, she had been able to attend primary and middle school, both of which were improved with Samsara assistance. Then she attended high school in Mae Hong Son City, but she got pregnant. Although she had been a good student, she could not continue her studies because she needed to earn an income to support her child. Since she had learned to speak English at school, this enabled her to get a job in an Italian restaurant where tourists go. This paid her enough to support the two children she now had and so be able to offer them a better future as well.

Samsara's achievements are a strong motivation for its volunteer workers: the pleasant dormitories; the clean drinking water; the fact that good accommodation draws more teachers to schools; the harmonious co-operation between parents and teachers but also among the teachers of different schools who have advised and assisted each other in the construction of school buildings.

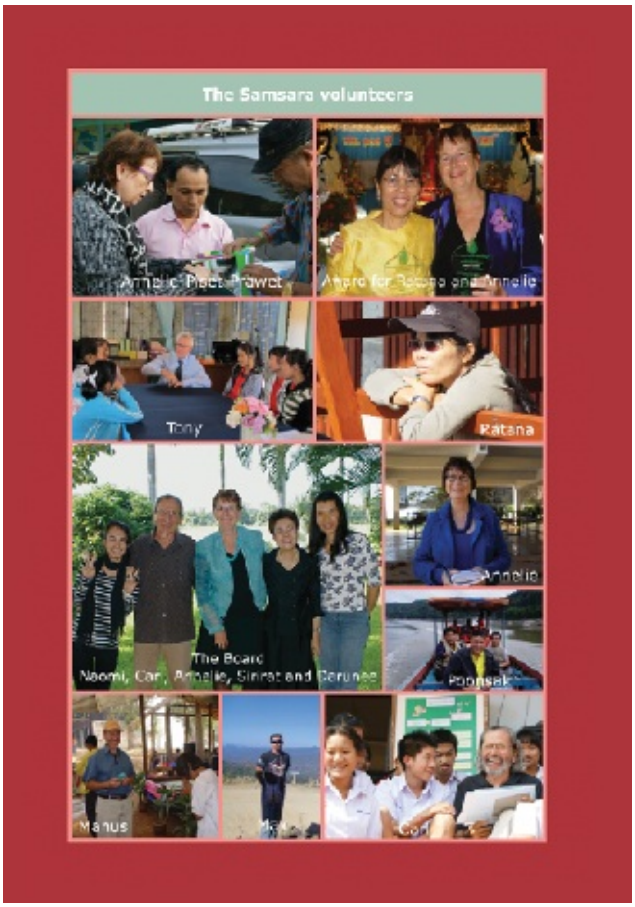
This all came together one beautiful moment in the fall of 2013: once a year, Samsara

organizes “get-togethers” for all scholarship students attending colleges and universities. They enter nervous and shy, hardly daring to speak out loud in English about their ambitions, such as becoming a teacher of Thai or English language, a sports teacher, a primary school teacher, a computer expert, a geographer, a public health worker, an agriculture development specialist, and so on. In order to overcome their shyness, the Scholarship Program team had thought up a method to get them talking more easily: let them discuss various subjects in subgroups and them present the outcome to the others. The subjects were not at all easy, ranging from national Thai topics such as the implications of the sufficiency economy, Thailand’s position in ASEAN and the general state of education in Thailand to more personal issues such as the value of a bachelor’s degree and the students’ own plans for the future. Discussions were lively and intense, everybody coming up with well-argued and formulated opinions, and disagreement was not avoided. After some 1,5 hour, all subgroups succeeded in summarizing their conclusions and were able to present their ideas to the plenary. This outcome was absolutely comparable to what American or Dutch students would have achieved. The event was proof that through education initially timid students from an underprivileged part of the world were able to use the chances offered to them and become self-conscious young adults with dreams and ambitions for the future together with the determination to realize these in just the same way as Samsara has realized its own ambitions.



Getting Children to School

Handover and inauguration ceremonies



Words of appreciation

The Samsara Foundation wants to thank everyone ever involved in realizing its aim of "Getting Children to School":

- The parents and other village people who volunteered in constructing hundreds and hundreds of buildings and other facilities;
- The janitors, teachers and directors of hundreds of schools, who greatly contributed in doing so;
- The representatives of the two districts of the provincial Department of Education in Mae Hong Son province who facilitated Samsara' projects and helped overcoming all sorts of problems;
- Mr. Tuenthong Srisawat, Mr. Somboon Pongchompu, Mr. Pbuumtiam Angsawat, Mr. Prawet Boonthawong, Mr. Piset Kantahom, Mr. Poonsak Jitsawang, Mr. Prajuob Kaewsiri, Mrs. Vilai Kaewvijit, for their long-term involvement in and supporting of Samsara projects;
- The drivers of the provincial Department of Education for safely transporting the Samsara volunteers during many thousands of kilometers across the difficult roads to the mountain schools;
- All the volunteers and board members of the Samsara Foundation, for their input and involvement;
- Ratana Kheuankaew for her crucial role – during many years! – in realizing Samsara's Building Program;

- Mrs. Khunying Kasama Varavarn Na Ayuttaya, former Secretary General of the Office of Basic Education Commission in Bangkok for her inspirations, suggestions and valuable introductions;
- All sponsors and sponsor organizations for their trust and their long term continuous financial support;
- The Dutch *Stichting Samsara* for its support and having been the first step in the realization of Samsara's work;
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- Sorn Sakbodin for the layout of the photo pages,
- and Gaby Aling for her assistance in getting this book printed.

Jacob Vossestein, the author of this book, wants to express his appreciation to Annelie Hendriks and the whole Samsara team for their hospitality and their willingness in having him interview them while in Thailand, take him along to several of the mountain schools, answer his questions for further clarification and correcting him on remaining misunderstandings and errors.

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Chiang Mai/Amsterdam, 2015

Appendix: Who is who in Samsara?

On the Board of directors:

Mrs. Annelie Hendriks, of Dutch nationality, founder and honorary president of the Dutch Samsara Foundation. In the Thai Samsara Foundation her title is board member, vice chair and volunteer director of the Building Program. She is also very active in fundraising, but first of all she is the energetic and inspiring motor of Samsara's activities. A bit of background: after studies in political science and inspired by foreign travels, Annelie worked in the field of cross-cultural business advice and training. Around 2000, following an old dream of living in Asia, she decided to move to Thailand's Chiang Mai area, joined there later by her partner Manus Brinkman. Setting up the Samsara Foundation gave Annelie ample opportunity to use her talents and extensive network for the good of the host country.

Mr. Carl Samuels, retired management consultant from the United States, living in Thailand since 2003. Carl is chair of the Samsara Foundation and volunteer director of the Scholarship Program. His activities in Samsara focus on fund-raising which enables even the poorest mountain village students to go to school and, depending on their talents, complete follow-up education. Carl's extensive network in the American business community helps Samsara in finding solid and continuous sponsoring.

Mrs. Sirirat Chareonwong, Thai, living in Chiang Mai, working as a manager in AIG insurance company in Chiang Mai. She is the secretary to the board.

Mrs. Darunee Wongrattanatarn, board member, Thai, living in Chiang Mai, works as a manager for the Siam Commercial Bank in Chiang Mai, predominantly for foreign clients. She is the treasurer to the board Sirirat and Darunee prepare Samsara's financial administration for the external auditing process every year. They maintain relations with the local government in Chiang Mai and submit Samsara's audit to them. Both are of great help when Samsara needs precise translations during important meetings with the government. Also, every year they organize and facilitate a meeting between Samsara and the scholarship students in Chiang Mai.

Volunteer workers:

Mrs. Ratana Kheuankaew, Thai, volunteering in the Building Program already for over ten years now, right from the start. In Chiang Mai, Ratana runs a Thai boxing school for deprived youngsters and next to it, Ratana has set up a small factory for producing the furniture needed for the schools: strong and solid tables, heavy duty benches and bunk beds. Her boxing pupils can work here too, thereby not only learning skills in wood and metal work, but also the discipline they often lacked in their upbringing. Besides these activities, Ratana also accompanies Annelie on the frequent inspection trips to the schools, and advises her on Thai situations and the right approach in dealing with all kinds of practical issues.

Mr. Max Wöhl, a Swiss national living in Chiang Mai. As an electrical engineer, Max oversees the transport and construction of heavy and vulnerable solar panel systems to even the remotest schools. Here too, Ratana's boxing pupils often contribute. If circumstances like harsh roads and bad weather occur or even coincide, such a project may require a week's stay in very uncomfortable conditions. So far, Max and his team have worked in some eighty schools in remote areas.

Tony Kids, Brit, does the financial administration, upkeeps the contacts with schools regarding Samsara's Scholarship Program and is responsible for the bi-annual interviews with scholarship students.

Manus Brinkman †, Dutch, used to work in the international museum sector. For Samsara, Manus volunteered in doing the photo and film documentation of the projects.

[1] One is officially located just outside the province but it serves Mae Hong Son students also
[2] Norris Mervyn Bird
[3] Let us refer here to the annual reports on corruption worldwide by Transparency International. Every year figures of many nations can be found at www.transparency.org
[4] The 2010 Doeners Award by the co-operating development organizations NCDO and Wilde Ganzen. The € 2,500 award enabled Samsara to build teachers' dormitories in a school hitherto not assisted.