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THE SMILING GECKO PRINCIPLE - START UP AGAINST POVERTY

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Since the middle of the last century, Cambodia has been ravaged by decades of civil war and suffered terribly during the Vietnam War and under the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge.

1.7 million people were killed as a result of malnutrition, disease or executions during the reign of the Pol Pot regime. The bulk of the nation's institutions and infrastructure was destroyed, leaving the majority of the population without any job training and causing them to live in poverty. As a result, Cambodia today is still one of the poorest countries in the world. In its capital Phnom Penh alone, tens of thousands of children live on the streets, in the slums and on landfills where they are exposed to hunger, illness and abuse.

VISION AND APPROACH

Apart from providing direct aid and supporting other NGOs, Smiling Gecko focuses on fighting the real causes of poverty and helping people to help themselves. Since 2014, Smiling Gecko Cambodia has developed into a social start-up company in the northern province of Kampong Chhnang. With its six-cluster projects on a 110 ha site, it already provides several hundred Cambodians with education, decent work and a sustainable income. Currently, the open cluster model is based on six pillars - school education and vocational training, agriculture, tourism, craftsmanship, production and trade - that go hand in hand and are supposed to be self-financing in the long run.

All cluster projects share the following common goals:

- Fighting hunger and poverty
- School education and vocational training for young Cambodians
- Benefit to the community
- Economy
- Ecology

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Conventional NGOs usually pursue a singular approach and then duplicate this in different locations (e.g. construction of wells, orphanages, medicine, etc.). This procedure leads to a situational improvement of the condition for the affected people, but not to a sustainable change of the basic situation or circumstance.

Contrary to most conventional NGOs, Smiling Gecko pursues a holistic approach with the cluster project, which leads to a sustainable improvement of the living conditions within a community. Already in the beginning of 2014, the vision is to expand Smiling Gecko as a holistic cluster project. Since then, many areas of work and training could be created in agriculture, tourism, crafts and schooling. By 2025, many additional projects in the field of industry and crafts will follow. Due to the economic orientation of the cluster projects, they are self-supporting and can finance the school and thus the education of the children. This creates an exemplary model of a functioning, rural community, which provides

education, decent work and sustainable income to the people.

This model is transferable to other regions and will substantially contribute to sustainable economic growth in Cambodia by 2050.

COOPERATIONS

The projects of Smiling Gecko are all designed to be sustainable, with concrete implementation on the ground impressively showing what can be achieved. Beginning with the planning phase and continuing through the implementation and operational phases, Smiling Gecko is fortunately supported by the wider public and numerous foundations, companies and various well-known Swiss institutions.

Institutions

- ETH Zurich
- Swiss Hotel Management Academy Lucerne (SHL)
- PH Zurich
- Center for Development and Cooperation (CDC), Bern University of Applied Sciences
- Center for Agricultural Education and Advisory Schluethof, Cham (LBBZ)

Foundations

- Hartmut and Ilse Schneider Foundation
- Primesteps
- Julius Baer Foundation
- Frey Charity Foundation
- CIMBRIA Foundation
- Hans Schmid Corporate Foundation

Companies

- PWC
- Ringier
- Raiffeisen
- Implen
- Bühler
- SICA
- Hilti
- Swisscom

THE CLUSTER PROJECTS

Education

Education is the linchpin for the development of any society and is therefore, a factor of paramount importance to the cluster project Smiling Gecko has set in motion. The nearby village school was given an overhaul in 2015, and in 2017, the first implementation stage of the innovative and modular village school project for which we have joined forces with the ETH and the Zurich University of Teacher Education has started. The project involves the creation of a pilot school for nearly 1,000 students varying in age from preschool to senior high school. The school is intended to serve as a model for the entire Cambodian school system and is supposed to be adaptable by countries outside of Cambodia as well.

Agriculture

Launched in 2014, the agriculture family project currently offers 12 families, who, in part, originated from the slums of Phnom Penh, a way to earn a regular and dignified living. The village closeby boasts an additional 300 local farmers who are able to cultivate their produce for the cluster project, thanks in no small part to the technical and financial support they receive from Smiling Gecko. Only a small portion of the food produced is intended to feed the families working on the farms. To a large extent, the sustainably and purely organically produced products are sold further. For example, to the Farmhouse Smiling Gecko and in the future, to the kitchen and cafeteria of the VILLAGE SCHOOL PROJECT supplies. It is also planned to supply hotels and airport caterings with prefabricated food products.

Tourism

Opened in December of 2015, the Farmhouse Smiling Gecko is the first guest house to go into service on the premises of the cluster project. At present, the operation employs a staff of 40 in the areas of food services and hotel business. In an attempt to tap additional revenue options, the farmhouse has expanded in 2016/2017 to offer additional leisure time facilities like a swimming pool, a yoga- und massage-centre.

Trade

The Smiling Gecko carpentry workshop started operation in August of 2016. The new operation has created additional jobs and apprenticeship positions for up to 15 young Cambodians. The carpentry workshop is in charge of any work that needs to be done on the cluster's premises, thus reducing the original costs and the maintenance costs associated with the infrastructure. For example, the carpentry manufactures and assembles the supporting structure and roof construction for the school buildings of the Village School Project. In addition, it offers its services to external parties as well, thereby generating additional revenue for the overall project on site.

Production

Another undertaking that is projected for 2018 is the construction of a sustainable garment education and production facility that will include comfortable housing with common and recreational rooms for the workforce. As a first, the garment production site is intended to train and to employ around 300 local people, paying fair wages and offering equally fair and safe working conditions.

Industry

To place our operations on a wider footing going forward, Smiling Gecko is forging partnerships with well-known national and international companies to establish even more commercial operations in the cluster area. This creates additional jobs at fair wages and under humane conditions while offering the possibility of regional, national and international training and continuing education in the industrial sector.

CONCLUSION

The holistic Smiling Gecko Principle is the successfully practiced model for the construction of a functioning, rural society and with its six subprojects designed to self-finance quickly after a start-up period and secure the people with education, decent work and a sustainable income. With appropriate support, the Smiling Gecko Principle is adaptable worldwide in third world countries and can thus become a multiplier for regional prosperity.


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