

Education

# A growing pearl on the outskirts of Vientiane

Katharina Bracher

When Gerlinde Engel peeks through the window of her tiny house early in the morning, she feels proud and satisfied. "I still love to see the kids slipping through the gate to the campus, eagerly waiting for class to start," the 77 year old German lady admits. She is one of two board members of "Angels for Children", a German fund that has been supporting and funding the primary school in Sikeud village, Naxaithong district, Vientiane, since 2004.

Mrs Engel, a forceful and jovial woman with a giant heart for children, has been living on the campus ever since they started to rebuild the public school in 2004.

"Back then, the school literally consisted of a few shattered benches standing beneath a leaky roof," she recalls. But her very first impression of how pressing the need was for better education in the area came when she got talking to workers at the nearby Trio Export, where she was sent in 1994 to build up a garment factory.

"I just couldn't bear the fact that even my most intelligent and hard-working sewers in



The high standard of Sikeud Primary School has earned several prizes, including one from the President of the Lao PDR himself in 2011.

the factory were illiterate – most notably the women," Mrs Engel says.

She once started as an ordinary seamstress in a factory herself, so she likes to share her rich experience with other workers. "Everybody, women included, can make a living by themselves or contribute to their family's income," Mrs Engel is convinced.

She herself had to care for a son after her husband died at a relatively young age. This is why she went abroad to work in China in 1989. "I had to support the studies of my son in some way," she says. Today her son is a renowned cardiologist at a hospital in the south of Germany.

Mrs Engel cancelled her plans for retirement and began

to prepare to create a fund with the help of her family in 2003. They called their fund "Angels for Children", because their family name "Engel" means angel in German and their aim was to support the future of children who weren't lucky enough to be born into a better-off family.

Mrs Engel returned to Laos, the country which she considers to be her home for almost 17 years now, to act as the delegate of the fund and to oversee the progress of construction personally.

"We purchased the neighbouring plot of land, a cemetery, to build a sports field for the children. I couldn't imagine building a school where there's no space for physical activities," Mrs Engel remembers. Most of all, the children needed a proper toilet, because back then, to answer nature's call, they had to crouch behind the bushes growing in the cemetery.

The new buildings were ready to move into in 2004. "We started with 150 pupils," Mrs Engel says. Today, the number of children has risen to 440, and the fund built a secondary school in nearby Phanhaeng village in 2011, where 666 children are being taught.

By the end of this month, a new primary school in Phanhaeng village will open up just next to the campus of the secondary school, where



Mrs Gerlinde Engel, a board member of "Angels for Children".

an additional 340 pupils will find a new schooling place. There will be also a canteen for the children and staff of both schools.

From next month, the total of 1,440 students in the area will be enjoying an education with a renowned reputation: The outstanding quality of the secondary school has earned several prizes – from the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports for example and the President of the Lao PDR himself in 2011. Apart from that, the United Nations has officially acknowledged the school's outstanding achievements.

And this is not the definite size of the growing pearl in Vientiane's outskirts: The fund plans to build an Upper Secondary School on the same campus as Phanhaeng Secondary School. "My dream is to prepare my graduates for a future, where they can freely choose what kind of education they want to pursue, whether vocational training, or a higher education at university," Mrs Engel says.

The school today offers extra lessons from 3-4pm, when the weaker learners can choose from additional lessons in writing, reading and English, while others join different sports classes such as karate, volleyball, kickball and traditional dancing.

"We also select the more talented students to separately teach them more intensely," Mrs Engel says. When the teachers distribute their monthly rewards to the best performing pupils, about 80 percent of them are female. "Our most talented and ambitious students are in fact girls," she says. In her opinion, education has to start very early – especially when it comes to foreign languages. "You have to start when their tongues are still able to form foreign sounds."

That's why English classes start in pre-school, where the

five-year-olds learn their first words in English. "By third grade, every single one of our pupils is able to write their name in English," Mrs Engels proudly asserts.

The schools also place a strong emphasis on health and hygiene. The week before the holidays, three volunteer doctors from Germany came to examine the children. They isolated about 60 out of 400 children, who had to be sent to a specialised doctor as they were suspected of having a serious illness like hepatitis.

On the brighter side, all the children leave the school building every morning to collectively brush their teeth, instructed and severely supervised by a senior student with a loud whistle that nobody dares to ignore. The youngest pupils from pre-school brush their teeth along with the older students, all forming a neat queue like little birds sitting on a telephone line.

But there are still a lot of obstacles to overcome, as the Lao directors of all the schools funded by "Angels for Children" are painfully aware. For example, both schools focus on improving reading and writing skills. "This is still the subject we struggle with the most – like almost every other school in Laos," Mrs Engel says. She has been worried ever since she learnt that, even in her school, a lot of children still cannot read and write properly by fourth grade. "We need to have more support from the parents too," Mrs Engel says. And the school has to invest even more in the training and skill enhancement of teachers. "But this needs a lot more financial resources – which we cannot achieve without the help of private donors," Mrs Engel says.

Katharina Bracher, a journalist with the Swiss newspaper "NZZ am Sonntag", is currently working as a volunteer at the Vientiane Times.



Three volunteer doctors examine pupils at Sikeud Primary School.



Every morning, the pupils have to clean their teeth.

**Modular Buildings & Warehouse Structures**

- Site Offices, Accommodation Blocks, Schools, Toilet / Shower Blocks
- Steel Warehouses, Storage facilities, Workshops .

Phone: 020 22496446 (Lao); 020 22236446 (English)  
 Email: ssongkane@osss.com.au; jhonan@osss.com.au

Web: [www.osss.com.au](http://www.osss.com.au)  
 ZHEJIANG PUTIAN INTEGRATED HOUSING CO.LTD