

Projektbeschreibung

Sao Bien. Room for Education - Background

Sao Bien. Room for Education. is an Austrian non-profit organisation, established in 2016, whose aim it is to support basic schooling for children by building schools in remote parts of Vietnam. It all began with Thomas Farthofer, a former fund manager and investment banker, volunteering in Hanoi in Spring 2016. He was deeply affected and impressed by what he experienced - the openness, kindness and readiness to help others, so much so that he decided to offer a sustainable support rather than just volunteering. So he initiated Sao Bien and started his fund raising. In July he returned to Vietnam with the view to progress the building of schools.

Thomas, who is based in Hanoi since Spring 2016, manages the project in Vietnam, supported by three board members, who are experienced in the work of NGOs, inspired and full of ideas of how to support the initiative. Since establishing Sao Bien they have been organising the finances, risk management and the administrative part in an impressive way.

The project fulfils all criteria that are important to Sao Bien and its supporters:

- Access to basic schooling for children between the age 6 and 11 years,
- Active in remote provinces with a high proportion of ethnic minorities
- Lean organisation with minimal administration overheads,
- Experienced project manager in Vietnam, who ensures an efficient delivery of projects, supported by the Austria-based board

What makes Sao Bien's activities unique? Most aid projects in this field focus on building schools in parts of the country that certainly need support, but which already have a developed infrastructure. Sao Bien, however, focusses on villages in Vietnam's poorest regions that are cut off when it rains and difficult to get to even when it's dry. Logistical and administrative problems pose costly barriers. The government as well as other aid organisations tend to shy away from these projects burdened by additional costs and obstacles.

Another innovative aspect of Sao Bien's work is their approach to co-operating with local organisations and authorities. The active involvement of these groups, combined with appropriate agreements, ensure that the new established infrastructure will be used in the designated fashion. The focus of an international organisation in this region also offers growing awareness for the problems of ethnic minorities in these regions.

Vietnam in facts and figures

Despite significant progress Vietnam remains on the OECD list of countries requiring support¹. GDP/per capita (UN, 2015) is nominally at 2,068 USD compare to 44,118 USD in Austria or a real purchase power (IMF, 2016) of 6,422 USD (Int\$) vs 47,856 USD (Int\$) in Austria.

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The difference in purchase power (ca. 1:3 Vietnam vs Austria, World Bank 2015), means that comparatively small amounts of money can have a major impact in Vietnam. Depending on the location and size, building a school in Vietnam might cost approx. 10,000 Euro.

Access to education, anchored in the 'Convention of the Rights of the Child'⁴ as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)⁵, is seen as the most effective way to break the cycle of poverty and turn it into a 'cycle of progress'.

¹ UN ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita), as at 15.1.2017)

² IMF ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(PPP\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP)_per_capita), as at 15.1.2017)

³ World Bank (http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&series=PA.NUS.PPPC.RF&country=#selectedDimension_WDI_Ctry, as at 15.1.2017)

⁴ „Article 28: (Right to education): All children have the right to a primary education, which should be free. Wealthy countries should help poorer countries achieve this right.“; https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf (abgefragt am 15.1.2017)

⁵ „Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning“; <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/> (abgefragt am 15.1.2017)

Despite enormous efforts by the Vietnamese government to improve the educational system, there remain significant gaps. In particular, remote regions with poor infrastructure, home to mainly ethnic minorities, are badly affected by significantly underdeveloped schooling for children.

Government-run 'Community schools' offer education to children who live in villages that belong to one district. Many of these villages are, however, quite a long way away from such Community schools and due to the lack of infrastructure, such as roads or modes of transport many children cannot even get to these schools, hampering a regular school visit.

In addition, many of the school buildings cannot be used when it's raining or stormy. Sometimes the schooling is taking place in communal houses that may be used for other purposes as well and won't always be available for schooling.

As an international organisation it is Sao Bien's aim to offer children access to education by building schools fit for purpose in remote villages (please see map in the appendix). A sustainable, successful realisation is only achievable in co-operation with the people concerned. That is why the planning of a school will always be done together with local authorities, heads of schools and teachers. Agreements will be negotiated with local authorities, stipulating the future use of the building as schools, that ongoing costs of running the school will be borne by the local authorities and that the school will be part of the educational system.

With local companies employed for the construction of the school, the local communities benefit right from the start from these projects. The motivation of the people to participate in the improvement of their infrastructure and their gratitude for the international aid is tangible, which in return is a major motivation for Sao Bien.

Going forward, Vietnamese students will be working as volunteers, preparing marketing documents, helping with translations and the development of a network of other NGOs and volunteering supporters. The co-operation with local partner organisations, which have been operating in the chosen provinces for many years, is expected to ensure a close involvement of local people.

Financial plans

Following the successful delivery of pilot projects in 2016, Sao Bien is planning the construction of four schools each year every year, beginning in 2017. The plan is to get the required funding from various sources, avoiding the dependence on individuals or small numbers of sponsors. The aim is to establish long-term co-operations with corporations, organisations, social enterprises and High Net Worth individuals (HNWI) in order to secure a steady flow of funding.

This will be complimented by a broad network of supporters of this project. Based on a network of media, social media and frequent international Crowdfunding initiatives, small donations as well as occasional charity events it is envisaged that these two pillars of support will provide the required funding in the long term. For example, at the end of November 2016 a young American initiated a Crowdfunding campaign on www.gofundme.com in support of Sao Bien.

In addition, in the mid term Sao Bien seeks funding through public and private support and aid programmes, such as SozialMarie.

Details about a number of initiatives that are currently in negotiations can be found in the additional information for the Jury only.

Project implementation

The decision on the location of a school is based upon frequent field trips made by Sao Bien's founder, Thomas Farthofer, and his experience. Major criteria for the decision are how urgently a new school is needed, the number of children benefitting from it, the support of local authorities as well as the required budget for the building. Typically 40 children, aged between 6 and 11 years, will be educated in each school. Sao Bien also seeks to achieve a geographical diversification.

Questions regarding particular aspects of each school, such as number and size of class rooms and rooms for teachers, will be discussed with local representatives and teachers in the villages concerned. The realisation of the building will be done with the support of local partner organisations, such as the well-established NGO Centre for Sustained Development Studies and Volunteers for Peace Vietnam. They support Sao Bien in finding a suitable location, discussions with local authorities and the actual construction.

The first school in Pa Puoc (Province Son La, Van Ho district, Chieng Yen commune) has been built; a second one in Pha Bu (Province Lai Chau, Muong Te district, Pa U commune) is under construction.

Initiatives to further establish Sao Bein. Room for education.

Apart from securing the funding of future building projects, the current focus is on delivering the current building works and on building further co-operations and a required network.

The network already consists of co-operation partners, such as RongViet, a Vietnamese financial company, which in the mid term will hopefully act as a potential sponsor as well as an introducer to other Vietnamese companies. Sao Bien aims to attract more companies that will act as international partners, who recognise in Sao Bien an efficient and reliable opportunity to realise and demonstrate their social engagement.

Sao Bien has secured the support of a professional social media expert, who looks after the administrative side and marketing. The immediate focus is on the launch of a website (the domain name www.sao-bien.com has been secured), the activation of a PayPal account to enable easy donations as well as a fund raising initiative over Easter. The regulator's approval to offset donations for Austrian tax payers is expected in due course.

In addition, co-operation with Austrian and Vietnamese media will be intensified, which adds to raising the profile of ethnic minorities in the regions concerned.

Social media activities have resulted in a fast growing number of supporters on Sao Bien's Facebook-page, which has attracted approx. 2000 followers from 45 countries since its launch in late August 2016. This is a clear indicator of quite how accepted this project is and so are the declarations of support from artists and politicians. The former Austrian Foreign Minister, Dr. Jankowitsch, the Vietnamese ambassador in Austria as well as the Austrian ambassador in Vietnam have praised the positive contribution Sao Bien is making to the social and economic development of Vietnam.

Sao Bien. Room for Education. - A background story

There is an old story why help and support is often limited to a few. The story also explains the background behind the chosen name of „Sao Bien“, the Vietnamese word for starfish.

While walking along a beach, an elderly gentleman saw someone in the distance bending down, picking something up and throwing it into the ocean.

As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, picking up starfish one by one and tossing each one gently back into the water.

He came closer and called out, “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?”

The young man paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean.”

The old man smiled, and said, “I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?”

To this, the young man replied, “The sun is up and it is low tide. If I don’t throw them in now, they’ll die.”

Upon hearing this, the elderly observer commented, “But, young man, do you not realise that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can’t possibly make a difference!”

The young man listened politely. Then he bent down, picked up another starfish, threw it back into the ocean past the breaking waves and said, “It has made a difference to this one.”⁶

⁶ <https://andrew-ong.com/2008/02/06/the-starfish-story-you-can-make-a-difference/> (as at 19.6.2016)