

# Strategic Policy

## Working together to support Laos in becoming self-sufficient

Solidarity is the driving force behind the **Foundation Friends of the Khong District** (Stichting Vrienden van het Khongdistrict -SVK). We help the people of the Khong District to improve their living conditions themselves. The local population of the Khong District takes centre stage in our organization.

Within the framework of the SVK individuals are encouraged to take the initiative and are supported in their efforts. People learn to work together to realize their goals. These goals are important for the individuals involved, for the organization as a whole and for society, that of the Khong district in particular.

We have developed a close working relationship with a local committee in Laos – the **Khong District Community Development Association (KCDA)** and with the local authorities. The KCDA is an independent organization that forms the crucial link between the local population in Laos and the Foundation in the Netherlands. Together with the KCDA, we determine where help is the most needed and how we can contribute most effectively, efficiently and sustainably.

We inspire, stimulate, activate, facilitate and evaluate (I-SAFE) local activities.

This policy plan is flexible enough to accommodate new challenges.

## 2. Two main principles

Our activities are largely determined by two main principles.

### Supporting initiatives of the local population

The purpose of these initiatives is to improve living conditions, with a view to social change. Focus is on the following areas:

- Further development of the competence of individuals and groups
- Improvement of health and hygiene
- Improvement of education
- Establishment of at least a basic income for all

### Raising awareness

To make people in the Netherlands and Belgium (and other richer countries) aware of how great the differences are in terms of opportunities between these richer countries and Laos; to demonstrate that they can help Laotians to create new opportunities for themselves and thus positively influence their future.

## 3. Our priorities

The local population participates in all the activities and there is always a contribution at local level. There is always more than enough time and opportunity for the local population to discuss new ideas amongst themselves and think about how our support can best be put to use in turning ideas into activities. The local population is involved, often by way of the KCDA, in planning the project,

its execution and final evaluation. From the start, it is clear that our input is temporary and the whole idea is that the inhabitants of the Khong District progress to stand on their own feet.

We stimulate village communities to share their newfound insight, experience and knowledge with others.

We also stimulate them to feel a responsibility towards the donors and volunteers who support their projects.

#### 4. How do we go about our work in Laos?

We work closely with the KCDA, an independent local committee.

We work from the bottom up. We originally started working with one village community; this expanded to a local committee that in 2011 was officially registered by the Laotian government. The working area is the Khong District. The KCDA is regularly in touch with organizations at district, provincial and national levels.

##### Our activities are based on experience

In 2002, the local committee in Laos started quite simply by finishing off the roof of a school. Since then, the activities of the KCDA and SVK have expanded and we have learnt a very great deal. That's how our growth model has been established. For example, the KCDA provides training in the construction of toilets, helps villagers to build schools, instigates improvements in education, works with volunteers to provide instruction in English and further develop ecotourism. Experience gained in carrying out these activities is all put to use in subsequent projects, such as the livestock project, which enables local farmers to discover that their income increases with better care for their animals.

##### The local population is involved in setting up, executing and evaluating the projects

We listen carefully to our partner, the KCDA. By way of coaching and training, the KCDA brings about greater know-how and causes change to take place. The registration of the KCDA opens doors to structured help from other organizations and authorities, in Laos and outside its borders as well. And the registration makes it easier for local authorities to work together with the local population, external experts and researchers.

A large part of the support for the Khong District consists of financing wholly or in part the selected activities. The KCDA only works with village communities, not with families. In close collaboration with the village communities and local authorities it establishes where the problems lie, sets priorities and suggests solutions. The existing local structures are crucial in this process. With our guidance, the plans take on a more concrete form (SMART). When the plans have been agreed, the KCDA puts together a written proposal and sends it to the board of our Foundation in the Netherlands. The board assesses the proposal and if it is approved, the financial contribution will be determined.

### Defining success

**It is important that all those involved (local population, the KCDA, local authorities, advisors and trainers, the board) are fully aware of their role in the process and understand the final goal.**

That is why we started on a very small scale (finishing a school building roof) and it is the basis of our continued expansion. We coach those involved in compiling SMART plans and in the execution of these plans. In this, we apply the principle of 'Controlled Experimental Learning'. Little by little, the people acquire more responsibilities and under controlled circumstances are able to learn from any mistakes they make. Skills once learned are applied in new, more difficult projects. The board and the KCDA communicate with each other on a regular basis. In this way, everyone, both in Laos and in the Netherlands, learns together and from each other. It is important to be able to measure the efforts made. Clearly understood results help the individuals involved to consciously experience the success of their efforts. This is very stimulating when it comes to starting even more challenging projects.

### Volunteers

**The difference volunteers make is undeniable in all aspects of our organization, including help given to people in the Khong District to increase their ability to function independently by learning new things, cooperating and grasping new opportunities collectively.**

A volunteer hardly costs anything; a volunteer is passionate about what he or she does and it comes from the heart. A volunteer is not an expert in everything and is therefore open to learn from others. Laotians are very sensitive to this and the volunteer fits in easily with their own culture, not confrontational but more sensing, and above all consultative.

Volunteers plant the seeds for new ideas and help bring the ideas to fruition. This does not happen all in one go, of course, but since it is an on-going process and volunteers are continually active in our projects, ideas become plans and in due course the plans will be executed. This also means that there is time to weigh up the pros and cons of an idea, and to consult others.

Volunteers stay for at least three weeks in Ban Thamouang where they teach English classes, help people to use a computer, stimulate children to read and come up with new ideas for ecotourism or for cooking classes, for example. At a later stage, volunteers help in the implementation of new ideas.

Volunteers visit our projects, talk with the people involved on the spot and report back to the board.

### Trust and guidance

**We work in cooperation with the KCDA which is responsible for putting together the plans, detailing them and then executing the projects. We are**

**then responsible for monitoring the projects. Our relationship with the KCDA is one of trust.**

The intensity of our guidance depends on their possibilities and specific questions. In other words, we have to adjust to their situation and we must also dare take risks. Follow-up can be very important, but we are not an operational entity ourselves because our priority is the long-term viability of a project rather than the immediate results.

Given that the execution of a project is at the same time a learning process, we understand that planning (timing, budgeting) is often difficult for our partners. It is important that they have the right to make mistakes. Administrative requirements must not get in the way of our guiding a partner nor may such requirements mean exclusion of certain activities.

Awareness of success is a major driving force when it comes to self-development. We help the KCDA to see where they can develop themselves.

The elderly enjoy a great deal of respect in Laos. The older generation is therefore often chosen to hold important positions. We encourage the KCDA to focus on young people. Young people are more open to new ideas, have more energy and more time to learn new skills.

Monitoring is conducted by way of on-going contact with our partners, visits by volunteers and reporting by local authorities. We have chosen to adopt collective assessment (together with our partner) instead of an imposed form of evaluation. It is not so much about carrying out checks, but rather participating in a process which permits recommendations to be made. The assessment provides opportunities for analyses and formulating recommendations. We therefore consider the assessment as part of the pedagogical process and not as an administrative formality and we apply the results to strengthen our organization and the KCDA.

We aim to have one or more independent person or organization to evaluate the activities in the Khong District on a regular basis.

### Expertise, communication and technical support

In Laos, the KCDA is trained and coached by a Laotian expert in development work. These experts have at least fifteen years' experience in development work with foreign organizations and have an extensive network at provincial and national levels. They advise the board with respect to policy and specific projects in Laos.

From the Netherlands, communication between the KCDA and the SVK is in the hands of a Laotian woman, born in the Khong District, and resident in the Netherlands since 2000. She advises the board on matters of local culture and customs.

We stimulate the KCDA to cooperate with other NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations), such as the Learning House for Development and TACDO. This helps the KCDA with know-how about involving the local population in new projects and effectively monitoring them.

### Cooperation: one movement and one network in Laos

Laos is seeing an increasing amount of development aid. We encourage volunteers to visit the projects and let us know their observations, opinions and any advice they may have so that we may benefit from their insights. Locals in the Khong District can also visit projects, and they will also learn from what is being done.

- Let Laos Learn: How can you help those interested in learning English?
- Fruitfriends: How can volunteers help the local population to help themselves?
- Room to Read: Free library books for schools in Laos
- SNV Laos: Advice on establishing, executing and evaluating specific projects, such as promoting biogas installations
- Spa Champassack: How can local people earn extra income from tourism?
- Learning House for Development: KCDA training and coaching.
- Kingfisher resort: How can the local population benefit in a sustainable manner from, amongst other things, homestays?
- Saelao Project: How can volunteers help the local population become environmentally aware?
- ??? : How can the local population benefit from the know-how and experience of volunteers?

## 2. HOW DO WE OPERATE IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM?

### Our approach

Our strength lies primarily in our volunteers who, in a short time, have turned our Foundation into a unique organization, with the core of activities firmly in the hands of participants in Laos and in the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, we have an increasing number of volunteers reinforcing our organization by, for example, helping to run daily affairs, improving our website, designing promotional material and brainstorming about how we can do things even better.

### We encourage volunteers to take the initiative

The reason we have come such a long way is because we leave a great deal to the discretion of the people directly involved: they have a lot of freedom putting their ideas into practice. We encourage our volunteers to take the initiative. The on-going development of our organization is therefore a process in which vigorous-minded people get the chance to take the initiative themselves. As part of this, in

order to provide some guidance and, above all, to stimulate people to take action, we have formulated a number of 'job opportunities' which clarify our policy to those new to the organization.

### We have work and internships for graduates

It can be very challenging for new graduates looking for a way to put their talents to good use to find a suitable job straight away. We can offer them unpaid work or an internship in Laos or in the Netherlands. This allows them to gain some relevant experience and to show potential employers that they have put their time and ability to good use.

For those fortunate enough to have a job but still searching for ways to apply their creative talent: we are more than happy to help them out with a temporary assignment to challenge their skills!

Costs incurred for transport or administration, for example, or for time spent are not reimbursed in the Netherlands. It is more important that the donated funds are largely spent in Laos. This sometimes means that we have to wait to find the right volunteer for the job.

We are particularly interested in people who are able to work independently although we are of course there for guidance. We are not just looking for creative and innovative ideas: above all we need people who can (also) put the ideas into practice.

### Cooperation: a movement and a network in the Netherlands

Our Foundation is supported by many organizations, companies and individual people in the Netherlands:

- Volunteer Work in Pijnacker, Noordorp, the Westland and Delft: help in recruiting volunteers; capacity building for our volunteers by enabling them to follow courses.
- Fonds 1818: Course for recruiting volunteers; support for developing reading materials.
- Haagse Hogeschool: Various studies in the field of, for example: PR, fundraising, cooperation with other organizations/companies, finding and keeping volunteers, transparency.
- Hogeschool Utrecht: Students have developed a learning method to make children aware of the differences between rich and poor and the usefulness of charities.
- Hogeschool Rotterdam: Students have developed promotional material to encourage donors to support a water project.
- Studio Jeu Vorm en Functie: Produces our newsletters and other PR material.
- Business Print: Prints our newsletters and promotional material at reduced cost.
- La Lettre: Sponsors clothing with our logo
- Read to Grow Foundation: Donates books in English.

## Information and political action

We keep our supporters informed by way of newsletters and circulars and information is provided to the wider public via the website and social media. We are not in any way involved with politics or religion.

## Instruction and raising public awareness

We aim to make people aware of the differences between the Netherlands & Belgium and Laos. We show that everyone involved has some kind of positive effect on the future of the adults and children in the Khong District. We give people ideas about ways in which they can really make a difference, by (temporarily) becoming a volunteer, making a donation, or by making our work known to family and friends.

## Fundraising

We do not beg, we inform. Word of mouth communication plays a very important role. We also keep our supporters and donors well informed digitally and by post, maintain an up-to-date website, put the social media to good use and make presentations.

We can keep people who donate more than 750 euros informed as to how their money is spent. If the donor so wishes, the authorities in the Khong District will issue a certificate detailing the specific project which has been financed, and thanking the donor.

Social media is becoming ever more important; less use will be made of postal services and more and more we will be actively listening and looking around to find people who will support our efforts.

We will make even better use of the network we have created over recent years.