A LOOK BACK TO THE FUTURE

10 years of Smiling Gecko Cambodia

Smiling Gecko®

Dear friends of Smiling Gecko

We have come up with something special for the 2024 annual review. Instead of just looking back at the last twelve months, this time we want to go further and look back at the last ten years. Because that's how long Smiling Gecko Cambodia has actually been around.

Ten years in which an incredible amount has happened. Ten years in which we have repeatedly set ourselves new, bigger goals. We have achieved many of them, but we are still a long way from achieving others.

For example, we are still dependent on financial support from external donors. We don't know exactly how much longer this will be the case. What we do know, however, is very clear: There is no alternative to continuing. We must not abandon the people here in Cambodia. That is why we will continue to do everything we can to sustainably improve the situation on the ground. We would like to thank everyone who supports us in this endeavour. Today, yesterday and in the future.

With best regards

Hannes Schmid
Founder Smiling Gecko
Co-Founder Smiling Gecko Cambodia

Ngon Sokleap
Co-Founder Smiling Gecko Cambodia

Alain Biner
CEO Smiling Gecko

THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

Hannes Schmid's Smiling Gecko story began almost 24 months before the founding of Smiling Gecko Cambodia, when he became aware of the abuses in Cambodia through a fateful encounter with an acid victim. It took him to the inhumane slums of Phnom Penh and to Dr Jim Gollogly's Children's Surgical Centre, where he treated children suffering from acid burns. The indescribable misery that Hannes sees and experiences is the impetus for everything that follows. In June 2013, Hannes met the young lawyer Ngon Leap. A stroke of luck. They share a vision of giving people a better future. They both want to show them a way out of poverty that focuses on the people themselves. Their ability to learn, their work. Their will to free themselves from the grip of misery.

One of our first major projects was to buy 70 tuk-tuks and rent them to families in the slums for a symbolic one Dollar a month. This enabled them to earn an income of around 300 Dollar on the streets of Phnom Penh. Enough money to stop relying on food donations that we distribute elsewhere.

2014/2015
THE FOUNDATION:
THE CAMPUS IS BORN

April 2014 will forever remain in our memories. It was the day that Smiling Gecko Cambodia was officially registered. Finally, we were no longer just an aid organisation from Europe, but recognised in the country we work tirelessly for. We bought the first nine hectares of land in Sameakki Mean Chey district, about 60 kilometres north of the capital Phnom Penh, and immediately began to cultivate it. Our idea was to settle the families from the capital's slums, whom we had been supporting for months. We wanted to turn them into farmers. Over the next few months, we built twelve farmhouses, each with about 4,000 square metres of farmland, which became home to 80 people, from infants to grandparents. The foundation for today's Smiling Gecko Campus was laid.

With 30 hectares under cultivation, agriculture is now one of our main pillars. We use the produce to feed our staff and school children. Guests at the Farmhouse Resort can also enjoy the organically produced food, and efforts are being made to market it in Cambodia or export it in processed form. They are also an essential part of emergency relief packages for rural communities in times of crisis.

2016
FIRST DIVERSIFICATIONS

We focused on diversification in adult education early on. The beginning was quite spectacular. It started with a fire. Not in Cambodia, but at a timber construction company in Switzerland. From there we received the equipment salvaged from the fire, which formed the basis of our own carpentry workshop. Today, 22 people work here, carrying out almost all the timber construction work on our site, as well as contracts from the region and beyond.

Our tailoring workshop, which employs up to six seamstresses depending on the order situation, is less about learning a trade and more about working under humane conditions. The situation in Cambodia's huge garment factories is precarious, but here the women have regular hours, health insurance and a decent wage. We may not be competitive, but we don't have to support an inhumane industry for our sewing work.

The most recent workshop on campus is the metal workshop, which we opened about seven years after the carpentry workshop. Again, we looked at what we needed most on campus and what there was a market for in Cambodia. This is the case with metal construction. This applies both to the products that will be made here and to the people who will be trained there in the future and who will probably be taken out of our hands. The latter also applies to our hotel staff, which we will come to later.

2017
LAUGHTER MOVES IN

After supporting a local school in the neighbourhood of the campus since 2015, the time had finally come in November 2017: we were able to open our own school and kindergarten. The first class comprised 135 girls and boys aged six to seven, who we were able to teach bilingually in Khmer and English in our wonderful school buildings. Since then, 16 more classrooms have been added. And above all, of course, 377 more children. And every year there are 50 more children. 50 promises of a self-determined future without poverty.

We launched our scholarship programme just in time for the turn of the year 22/23. The background to this was the school's constantly growing financial requirements, which now amount to around two million dollars a year. Thanks to the scholarship programme, around 15 percent of children now receive individual support. This is a pleasing development, which we naturally very much hope will continue.

When asked what makes our school different from Cambodia's state institutions, there is really only one answer: just about everything. Starting with our much better trained teachers, the bilingual education and the smaller class sizes with 25 children instead of 65. Then, of course, the music and art lessons, the sports, the lessons on the farms. Not to mention the medical care, the comprehensive hygiene measures and, of course, the school meals. All this comes at a price. But honestly, how much more expensive would a bad education be?

2018
FARMERS BECOME FISHERMEN

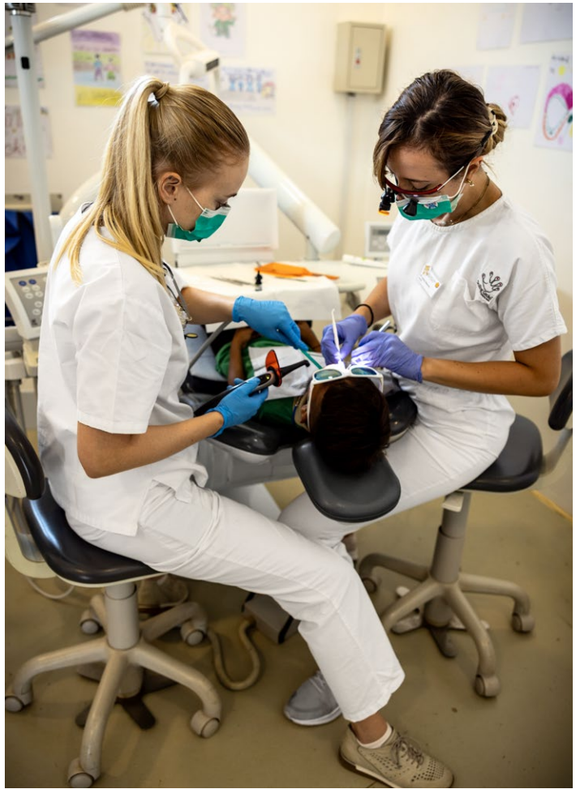
March this year saw a real milestone in our farming operations: With the help of scientists from the ZHAW in Wädenswil, the first 16 net-cages with cultures were introduced to our new fish farm in the specially created fishponds. Later that year, the laboratory was added, where we have been fertilising and hatching the fish larvae ever since. The farm has grown steadily and we now produce over 100 tonnes of fish each year.

Since 2017, we have been breeding chickens and pigs on campus, and in 2019 we were able to add cattle fattening. It must be said that the success of this has varied considerably. While we now breed 100,000 chickens per year, we have at least temporarily stopped breeding pigs after two unsuccessful attempts and will probably also part with the cattle. The latter is mainly for economic reasons, but a comeback for the pigs is certainly conceivable and something we are striving for.

In 2018, we were also able to put our canteen kitchen into operation. With 180 employees and 250 schoolchildren to feed twice a day, this step was inevitable. We now have 31 employees and trainees who prepare more than 130,000 meals a year for the school alone. And that's a good thing, because nutrition has a direct impact on learning ability.

2019
WE NOW HAVE SISTERS

In the first five years of its existence, the campus had grown into a small village. What was missing was the ability to provide medical care for our students and staff. We were able to change that in 2019 with the construction of the clinic rooms on the school grounds. We were finally able to provide at least primary and basic medical care ourselves. And again, the numbers are astounding. Last year, we had more than 4,500 consultations and 650 dental treatments.



As the school grew and the training centres expanded, so did the need for accommodation for our expatriate teachers and trainers. It also became clear that we could not rely solely on local staff at the Farmhouse Resort. From 2016 and then increasingly in 2018/2019, we addressed this with the construction of our staff accommodation, which now provides a suitable home for up to 110 individuals and families on campus.

According to the Asian Development Bank, Cambodia is one of the most vulnerable countries in Asia to climate change. In 2019, we got a bitter taste of what this will mean for the region. The rainy season, which brings abundant rainfall from May to October, more or less failed to materialise. This has had dramatic consequences for the farmers, who desperately need the rain to grow rice. For the people here, who already have no reserves, it is a severe blow that has been repeated regularly since.

2020/2021
THE DARK TIMES

We would prefer not to talk about the dark days of the coronavirus pandemic. But because they were so formative for an organisation as young as ours, we can't avoid them in this retrospective. It was devastating! From one day to the next, everything we had built up seemed to be in jeopardy. The income from tourism, the markets for our products, all our growth plans: reset to zero.

But we survived. Because we were able to count on unprecedented support and solidarity from donors and organisations, large and small, to whom we remain grateful. Together, we have managed to keep the campus alive and to keep most of our staff, our wonderful staff. A truly Herculean task.

Particularly during the pandemic, but also before and after, we provided essential supplies to people in need around the campus. Fruit, vegetables and meat from our own production, as well as rice, oil and toiletries: Since our inception, we have distributed more than 10,000 emergency parcels in countless missions, alleviating the misery of more than 1,000,000 families. Of course, we have only been able to do this thanks to vital financial support from abroad. For this, too, Cambodia thanks the world.

2022
THE NEW BEGINNING

This year the situation returns to normal, at least to some extent. Cambodia opened its borders to tourists (however they are not coming). But at least school was back to normal after we home-schooled the children with the help of mobile phones. Otherwise, 2022 was the year we made our last major land purchases. Since then, the campus has grown to its current size of 150 hectares. 150 hectares of future for Cambodia.

On an area of around 1,500m², our photovoltaic system, inaugurated in 2021, produces around 250 megawatts of electricity per year, which we feed into the synchronised grid. In terms of space, we could of course run a much larger system on the campus, but we would have to be as lucky as we were when we bought the first one. Funnily enough, we received it as a gift from Italian customs, who had previously confiscated it.

In response to the effects of climate change, and because we are constantly looking for (internationally) marketable products, we are constantly growing new species of plants on campus. Some are spectacular, such as our vanilla greenhouses, while others are more conventional, such as our thriving TCM plants. Or highly experimental, like our charcoal palms, originally from Brazil, whose fruit we hope to be able to trade in a few years' time. These açai berries are valued as a superfood around the world and command a high price.

2023
THE FARMHOUSE IS REPOSITIONED

We have taken advantage of the ongoing downturn in tourism to significantly improve the Farmhouse Resort's offering. Our thesis: you need special incentives to get people to spend more days in one place and pay for it. With the 8,000 m^2 Sanctuary Spa opening in 2023, the fine dining restaurant 'Un' and the new bungalow suites, we have succeeded in positioning the resort several notches higher. The numerous awards we have won since then are testament to this success. The only thing missing are the international tourists who, sadly, are still staying away from Cambodia.

She is not only the namesake of our top restaurant, but alongside Hannes Schmid, she is the face of Smiling Gecko: our chef Mariya Un Noun, whose amazing rise from slumdog to internationally acclaimed top chef tells exactly the story we envision for the project: With the right encouragement, there is a way out of misery, even in the cruellest poverty.

2024
GIVING CAMBODIA A VOICE

Arts and culture contribute to the freedom of expression and sustainable development of a society. They nurture intellect and self-confidence and drive social change. This is why, in our tenth year, we opened The Gong, a cultural centre on campus. Designed by the renowned atelier oï, the centre is a unique space for creativity and exchange - something Cambodia, still culturally backward after decades of civil war, needs as much as good schools.

In addition to its cultural and educational mission, the Gong and the adjoining recording studios also have specific economic goals: The building is intended to become a focal point for people interested in Asian architecture and, of course, to attract national and international music and video productions, which will find unique conditions in the creative environment of the campus. Both target groups are likely to stay at the Farmhouse Resort and will certainly take advantage of Gong's in-house catering.

The Gong Studios are equipped with modern facilities and offer Cambodian and international artists almost perfect conditions for artistic development. The same goes for the large adjoining auditorium, which is ideal for orchestra rehearsals and even live recordings. We are ready for the first hit to be produced here.

HERE'S TO THE NEXT TEN YEARS

Whether it is the recognition of our educational curriculum, individual areas of our agriculture such as fish farming or, most recently, the cultural centre 'The Gong': we are increasingly in contact with government agencies, which register and appreciate all our efforts to improve the living situation in rural Cambodia with great interest and goodwill. We have not yet reached the point where we have received government contracts or even funding. But we are working on it. Just like we are working on so many other things. Today, tomorrow and certainly in ten years' time.

In the next 12 months, we hope to finally be able to complete our new secondary school. At the moment, we are finally in the construction phase, which we have already had to postpone several times due to challenging weather conditions and, above all, a lack of residual funding. We urgently need the building and are therefore busily looking for sponsors.

Our efforts to establish a university of applied sciences on the Smiling Gecko Campus are much less concrete, but no less exciting. We are currently in an initial detailed exploratory phase involving a team from the ZHAW in Zurich, among others, who are already in talks with the relevant ministries. It would be a dream.

STILL VERY IMPORTANT: YOUR SUPPORT

Your donations have enabled us to achieve so much over the past ten years. Please continue to support us.
We and the wonderful people of Cambodia are eternally grateful.

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