



School Transport Project: Increasing access to education for children and young adults from marginalised Karen communities in Northern Thailand

Project proposal



Submitted to:

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Date

The Karen Hilltribes Trust

Tower House, Fishergate, York, YO10 4UA

Director: Billy Curryer | director@karenhilltribes.org.uk | +44 (0) 1904 373 001

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Project Overview

Project name: School Transport Project

Aim: to increase access to quality education and future employment possibilities for Karen children and young adults through the provision of school transport services

Location: Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand

Executive Summary

Access to quality education is part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It is one of the most important tools to break the cycle of poverty and prevent exploitation of the most vulnerable. In northern Thailand, an area that has seen little development over the years, the enrolment of Karen children in primary education is just 51% (compared to national average at 89%) whilst only 1 in 4 Karen children complete their secondary education¹. One of the main reasons for the low number of children enrolled is the distance to schools.

The Karen Hilltribes Trust (KHT) is dedicated to increasing access to education for marginalised Karen communities. One of the most vital ways it does this is through the provision of school transport services. The school transport services are an essential and practical way to increase access to education for these communities.

About Us

The Karen Hilltribes Trust (KHT) is a community led organisation working with vulnerable Karen communities in remote Mae Hong Son, one of Thailand's poorest provinces. KHT's mission is to empower communities to improve their health, livelihoods, and access to education through projects designed, built, and maintained by communities with support from an experienced local team.

Working in partnership with target communities, and based on expressed needs, projects promote self-reliance leading to improved well-being whilst helping Karen communities retain their unique identity and culture. Community-based assessments and project monitoring help ensure that outcomes are sustainable, impactful, and cost effective.

Since inception in 1999, KHT has: provided over 55,000 people with clean drinking water and improved sanitation facilities; brought 2,500 acres of farmland back into production through the construction of flood-resistant irrigation systems; and increased accessed to education for over 12,000 children and young people through the provision of school meals, transport and accommodation, and higher education scholarships.

¹ ACHR 2005

Project Context

Thailand has made remarkable progress in social and economic development over the last four decades, transitioning from a low-income to an upper-income country in 2011, and now ranking 87/188 in the UNDP 2015 Human Development Index.² However, improvements are mainly focused in the urban and popular South with poverty and inequality continuing to pose significant challenges across the rural regions and for Thailand's ethnic minorities.

Mae Hong Son is a remote province situated on the Myanmar and Northern Thailand border. About 64% of the population of Mae Hong Son live below the poverty line and many of these belong to marginalised ethnic minorities such as the Karen.³ The Karen people are among the most socially deprived and discriminated groups in Thailand, with limited access to basic socioeconomic services such as health and education. A disproportionate majority depend on subsistence agriculture with an average annual income of 24,500 THB per household (644 GBP).

In addition, school performance and retention rates are low. The enrolment of Karen children in primary education is 51% (compared to national average at 89%) and only 1 in 4 Karen children complete their secondary education⁴. One of the most pressing reasons why children in Karen communities do not complete their education is that children are unable to access schools. Most villages within the province have a primary school within ten kilometres of the village. However, secondary schools are limited to the larger towns and can be located up to 50 km away, whilst higher education establishments are even further.

Access to education is therefore largely dependent on transportation capabilities. As many families live below the poverty line, there is usually little income to cover such expenses, resulting in children leaving education to seek employment or support their parents at home.

Some children and adolescents have access to motorbikes to travel to school. However, travelling to school this way includes a great risk. Thailand has the second highest road traffic fatality rate in the world, being particularly dangerous in the rainy season due to landslides and limited road maintenance. Many parents therefore decide to keep their children at home to reduce the risk of them getting hurt on the way to and from school. Girls especially are kept home, as parents would also be worried about their daughters' safety when traveling alone to school.

Another option available for Karen communities is allowing their children live in dormitories whilst studying. These dormitories often have poor living conditions and are relatively expensive for Karen households, therefore causing increased financial strain and reduce parents' involvement in their children's lives and education.

² Jahan, 2016; World Bank, 2011

³ Jolliffe & Prydz, 2016

⁴ ACHR 2005

The provision of a school transport service is therefore a simple solution to ensure access to education for Karen communities. Without a service, there is a greater risk of: school drop-out at both primary and secondary level; low school enrolment for girls reducing their chances of a better future; and children being put at risk whilst travelling to school. The school transport services can ensure family unity and provide alternatives for families struggling financially to support their children safely accessing education.

KHT sees school transport services as an essential tool to provide Karen children and youths with access to education. Without it, many children would have to stop their education as there would not be a safe, affordable, and accessible way for them to get to school.

So far KHT has run the project for 15 years and is slowly handing over ownership to the local communities. By ensuring local ownership of each bus route, this project can achieve sustainable change and empower communities to become self-sufficient.

Project Goal and Objectives

The goal of this project is to provide access to education for marginalised Karen children and youths living in the Mae Hong Son Province.

Our objectives are:

- Identify further actions that would increase access to education
- Increase accessibility of education, especially to girls in these communities, and thereby increase the number of children that complete secondary education.
- Promote and increase literacy in Karen communities
- Promote and increase future employment opportunities
- Empower the Karen communities to become self-sufficient

Project Activities

Through the School Transport Project, KHT supports the running of 18 school buses. The school buses provide a practical means of keeping children in school whilst also allowing children to stay at home, keeping parents involved in their children's education. By supporting a driver from the local community to take children to and from school each day, children are spared travelling up to 50 km per day on foot or motorbikes just to go to school. This means children have time and energy for their studies increasing their engagement with school and reduces potential risks involved in having children travel on their own.

The KHT school transport services employ 18 drivers from the local Karen communities to operate the services, which transport 396 children per day from 30 different communities to 10 schools across the Mae Hong Son Province. Each vehicle transports on average 20 children (see table 1 below for exact numbers), and, depending on the distance each vehicle travelled, costs between £30 and £140 a

month to run. The school transport services run every school day and some routes pick up children from multiple villages. Altogether there are 18 different bus routes to 10 different schools. The drivers receive financial support from KHT, for running the bus services on a monthly basis, contributing to cover cost for fuel and maintenance.

Employing drivers from local Karen communities helps ensure sustainability in the long-term, as the communities take ownership of the individual school transport routes. Each community has a village committee that is given the responsibility for the route to increase community involvement in the project, and for 13 of the 18 bus services, households contribute between 300 THB and 550 THB per month towards to the costs. For the five routes where the communities do not contribute to the cost of the services, households expressed to KHT in June 2019 that they could not afford to contribute any level of funding towards the services on a monthly basis. With ownership and responsibility, dependency on outside support will reduce over time and empower the Karen communities to become self-sufficient.

In time, the communities will be able to cover the total cost of the services and will be able to take over full control and ownership of the transport services. As every community has different prerequisites, the process of transferring ownership will differ from community to community. To improve livelihoods and increase financial stability in the Karen villages, KHT also conduct projects to provide the Karen with sustainable livelihoods, clean water and access to higher education through scholarships. KHTs long-term vision for these communities is to make them self-sufficient. To reach this goal, access to education is a must.

Below is a list of the villages each driver will work in and to which schools they are expected to transport the children to.

Table 1 Village name, number of children and ages per bus route

Bus route	Village name (s)	Total children	Ages
No. 1	Ban Huay Pueng Kao, Ban Huay Pueng Mai	36 (17M/19F)	5 - 15 years old
No. 2	Ban Khun Mae La Noi Tai, Ban Khun Mae La Klang, Ban Khun Mae La Nua	19 (9M/10F)	11 - 16
No. 3	Ban Huay San	15 (9M/6F)	5 - 11
No. 4	Ban Huay Pong Lao, Ban Mae Khor	6 (3M/4F)	8 – 12
No. 5	Ban Mae Sapei Nua	28 (15M/13F)	4 – 12
No. 6	Ban Mae Oompai Tai	19(11M/8F)	4 – 15
No. 7	Ban Mae Sapei Tai	16 (10M/6F)	14 – 18
No. 8	Ban Palarn, Ban Mai Sang Ngam	23 (8M/15F)	4 – 14
No. 9	Ban Pattana Pu Ku, Ban Nangeiw, Ban San Jao	15 (7M/8F)	13 – 18
No.10	Ban Mai Pattana	22 (12M/10F)	7 – 18
No. 11	Ban Mae Au, Ban Mae Hard, Ban Hua Pon	18 (4M/14F)	12 – 16
No. 12	Ban Kham Suk, Ban Mae Yuam Luang, Ban Na Ngeiw	14(6M/8F)	12 – 18
No. 13	Ban Santi Suk	40 (22M/18F)	5 – 19
No.14	Ban Huay Rin	63 (23M/40F)	5 – 18
No. 15	Ban Mae La Luang, Ban Santi Pattana	15 (11M/4F)	6 - 18
No.16	Ban Huay Ku Pa	19 (5M/14F)	5 – 19
No.17	Ban Thung Pa Kha	48 (28M/20F)	7 – 18
No. 18	Ban Huay Kai Pa	21(10M/11F)	13 – 18

Project Impact

For the past 15 years, the School transport project has ensured access to education for approximately 396 children per year, for the full duration of the school year, by allowing them to overcome the barriers to education. From the evaluation that KHT conducted in July 2019 it also became clear that the project is important for a number of different reasons, listed below:

- Parents with primary school children feel comfortable sending younger children to school on the transport service. Without the service, they would worry about them making the long journey on foot and instead keep the children at home. Therefore, for many children, primary education would not be accessible without the school transportation service.
- Parents expressed that they were more likely to keep their daughters at home if there was no access to school transport. Therefore, the school transport services are essential to ensure that girls have access to quality education.
- Parents of adolescents feel safer sending their children to school with the bus service rather than letting their older children with access to a motorbikes ride to school on difficult mountain roads alone. Thailand has the second highest road traffic fatality rate in the world and the roads are especially dangerous in the rainy season as there are landslides and limited road maintenance. Using the bus services reduces the risk of traffic accidents and is therefore an important measure to ensure safety whilst accessing education.
- Families express gratitude for the bus services as it allows their children to live at home instead of staying in school dormitories. Living conditions are often poor in dormitories and are relatively expensive for Karen households. Dormitories would also cause additional financial strain and reduce parents' involvement in their children's upbringing, development and education. The school bus services are therefore important to ensure family unity and provide alternatives for families that are struggling financially to keep their children in school.

After conducting the evaluation, KHT is convinced that the school bus services are an essential part of breaking the cycle of poverty and increasing quality of life for Karen communities in Mae Hong Son Province. KHT is therefore looking to continue funding the project the next school year, whilst conducting further reviews and other projects in the area so that in time, the Karen communities will become self-sufficient and can run the service themselves.

This project is part of KHT's strategy to contribute to the SDGs with special focus on goals 1, 4, 5, 8 and 10. Other projects focus on goals 2, 3 and 6. KHT's aim is to achieve all the goals on a local level by 2030.



Project Management

The project is overseen in Thailand by the Education and Livelihoods Programmes Officer and local Karen Operations Manager. Together they will conduct continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the project achieves the expected outcomes. All funds will be monitored and administered by the finance team.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to track the progress of the project, every six months the drivers supply KHT with data about the students using the school transport services. The approach will utilise a participatory method, by asking bus drivers to self-report data concerning number of students using the service along each route. The drivers will also collect reports collected from the children and KHT will collect of monthly attendance reports with primary and secondary schools to ensure accountability. KHT will also conduct focus groups with communities to increase transparency and additional focus-groups with students' parents, bus drivers and teachers will then be held to ascertain information regarding the impact of the project.

Budget

The table below highlights the annual budget for the School Bus Project.

Conclusion

With your support we can provide 396 children with access to education. Together we can ensure to increase literacy in the Karen communities, provide Karen children with a greater chance to attend school and, in time, provide them with greater opportunities in life. The school buses are a simple first step to break the cycle of poverty that Karen communities live in. In time the goal is to ensure each Karen village is self-sufficient with a high quality of life where possible. Together with your support we can work to achieve Goal Four or The SDGs - to provide all children with access to quality education.



Thank you for your consideration of supporting vulnerable children, families and communities in Mae Hong Son!