

WHEN I GROW UP

A FILM BY JILL COULON



BEHIND THE LENS

60 Children of
the Mekong
YEARS 1958-2018

ALOEST
PRODUCTIONS

SYNOPSIS

On the banks of the Mekong, where access to education is a daily struggle, six children of different ages dream of a better future.

Like the pieces of a puzzle, the paths taken by Prin, Myu Lat Awng, Phout, Pagna, Thookolo and Juliet fit together to tell the amazing story of WHEN I GROW UP.



WHEN I GROW UP is first and foremost
a story of a coming together.

A coming together of a charity, Children of the Mekong, which has been helping to educate disadvantaged children since 1958; with a committed audio-visual production company, Aloest; with a film director, Jill Coulon, in love with Asia and with stories with a strong human interest; with a pair of world-famous musicians, Yaël Naïm and David Donatien.

These multiple talents have collaborated to produce a wonderful piece of cinema designed to inform as many people as possible of the plight of these children and of the benefits of getting an education.



Find out more at
www.childrenofthemekong.org

Credits:

A film by Jill Coulon

Produced by François-Hugues de Vaumas and Xavier de Lauzanne

Director: Jill Coulon

Assistant Director: Antoine Besson

Editing: Daniel Darmon

Audio mixing: Eric Rey

Colour grading: Jean-Maxime Besset

Music : Yaël Naïm and David Donatien

Subtitles: Raphaële Sambardier

Translation: Garvin Lambert

Graphic design: Dare Pixel

Executive Production Company: Aloest films

Associate Production Company: Children of the Mekong



INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR JILL COULON



A professional film director with a passion for all things Asia, Jill Coulon put her talent at the disposal of the six narrators of **WHEN I GROW UP** so they could tell their stories to an international audience. Fading into the background, she strived patiently to develop an understanding of the inner workings of Children of the Mekong and to make a film which truly reflects the realities that these children face.

Can you tell us how the project came about?

When Aloest approached me I was very interested straight away. Knowing nothing at all about Children of the Mekong, I immersed myself in its world, reading all I could, and watching all its videos. I quickly realised that what moved me most was hearing children tell stories in their own words. I wanted to see things from their point of view, to give them a platform to tell it as they see it. Children of the Mekong supported me in this, for which I am very grateful, and I immediately got very excited by the whole project.

Why did you want to make this film?

For lots of reasons - which all fit neatly together! First, to continue my work about Asia (of my ten previous films nine were shot in Asia). Next, to do something more meaningful and make a "worthwhile" film. While I was working in television for many years, I frequently asked myself the question "should I not be doing something different?".

Also, to take advantage of a unique opportunity to meet these children and the people who support them.

Finally, to share the reality of their everyday life with as wide an audience as possible, and, above all, to ensure that more children can benefit from sponsorship in the future.

Why this title?

The aim with this film was to choose children of different ages and to show them growing up, as one. But even more than that it was to demonstrate that in enabling children to get an education Children of the Mekong and its supporters help them above all else to know themselves, to assert themselves, to develop themselves and to better themselves - in a nutshell, to grow up. In settling upon the title **WHEN I GROW UP**, I wanted to show that there is more to growing up than just getting an education; sponsorship touches every part of a child's life.

What sets this documentary apart? Why do you think it is necessary?

Yes, the children are poor. Yes, they lead very difficult lives. But that is not what comes out when they tell their stories! On the contrary, what they say is full of resilience and the hope of a better future. They may live on the other side of the world in Asia, but the message which comes through is a universal one: in education lies strength and power. If this film can help show children in the West how lucky they are simply to go to school, if it can convince adults in the West to take an interest in the plight of all the children like these in Asia, then I think I will have succeeded!

This film is both a voyage of discovery into other cultures, and an encounter with six adult human beings in the making. It is intended to help us put our own lives into perspective, and, even more importantly, to change the way we look at others. The next time they visit Angkor Wat in Cambodia or travel down the Mekong, people who have watched the film will perhaps see the children who beg from tourists through different eyes.

Maybe they will realise that they need help to get an education and to carve out a future for themselves.

What is your message to those who want to bring about change?

I can only encourage them to keep up the good work! In today's society, it often feels as if we are caught up in a storm of events over which we have no control. But in fact, there are things that all of us can do! Out in the field I saw how any action, however small, can have an effect – and that effect can sometimes be very big. That much was clear when the children we met told us, with stars in their eyes, of the strength of the bond they have with their sponsors – people far away in a distant land who they have never met but who support them financially and, most important of all, give them moral support. I found that extraordinary. I imagine from time to time, a map of the world showing all the links between supporters of Children of the Mekong and the children they sponsor in Southeast Asia – bringing this to reality would be wonderful!



BIOGRAPHY: JILL COULON

Passionate about photography and travel, Jill Coulon cut her teeth in film working as an assistant to the director Thomas Balmès on "Babies". In 2008 she set off alone with her camera to immerse herself in a sumo stable in Tokyo. Out of this came the first film of her own, co-produced with NHK Japan, called "A Normal Life: Chronicle of a Sumo Wrestler". The film won numerous awards at international festivals before being released in cinemas by Aloest Distribution under the title "Tu seras sumo" (Becoming a Sumo). It got rapturous reviews.

Numerous television documentaries followed: "Les Nouveaux Explorateurs" (The New Explorers) for Canal+, "Voyage en Occident" (Journey to the West) for Planète+ and "Au fil du monde", five documentaries for Arte about artisan spinners, embroiderers, weavers and dyers in Asia, co-directed with Isabelle Dupuy Chavanat. All of Jill's films have a strong human interest, and all focus on Asia, the continent for which she has so much affection.

THE FILM MUSIC YAËL NAIM AND DAVID DONATIEN



Generous and supportive, singer-songwriter Yaël Naïm and musician David Donatien, who regularly work together, agreed to compose the music for WHEN I GROW UP. Here they tell us why they chose to support this project.

Why did you choose to get involved and compose the music for the film?

Yaël Naïm (YN): We were attracted by two things – by what we could see, when we were approached, of the work of Children of the Mekong, and by Jill Coulon’s film itself. The combination of a worthy cause and a profoundly artistic piece of cinema made us want to make our own contribution.

David Donatien (DD): Generally speaking there are endless causes worthy of support. Yaël and I have the good fortune to make music, which is something we love doing but which can also serve a purpose. Whenever we find an efficient organisation promoting a worthwhile cause we do not hesitate to get involved. That Children of the Mekong really makes a difference, with projects in the field that transform children’s lives, was an important factor for us. Supporting children is preparing the world for tomorrow.

Why do you say that?

DD: In today’s world it is no longer the norm to show humanity, to display empathy or to help one’s neighbour. In my mind it is obvious that supporting children is investing in the future. To provide emergency help to children who are refugees or affected by famine is essential but not enough. We need to do more than relieve suffering; we also need to instill in children the values that enable men and women to be responsible adults. To rebuild a country, it is first necessary to rebuild its youth.

Did one of the stories in the film move you more than the others?

YN: Each of the stories moved me in a different way. But I have a particularly soft spot for Prin, in Vietnam. You cannot fail to be moved by all she has had to put up with, and she is only six. So young!

DD: For my part, I was particularly moved by the story of Phout, the young Hmong girl who is deaf and does not speak. Her disabilities bring added

difficulties to a background which was already very problematic. But she still manages to find the positives in her situation. Her facial expression is one of great tenderness. I am deeply moved by the way in which she radiates so much positive energy.

Did putting your music to the film cause you to see it differently?

YN: Jill used pieces of music that I had composed at different times over a period of 10 years. Each piece reflects the life I was living at the time, expressing a particular emotion which is now appropriate to the story of the child in question. It is funny how well the music matches the stories of the

film: six lives showcased using 10 years of my life and music. It all fits.

DD: What is amazing about a piece of music is the emotion that it engenders. But if you change the setting in which it is heard then you sometimes change the emotion. It is great when that happens. At the end of the day, what you get out of our music – written at different times over a period of 10 years, as Yaël was saying – in the way it is used in the film, is a feeling, a special feeling. Our music appeals to the emotions, and sometimes also invites one to reflect on life. It is part of who we are. So to see it helping these marvellous children to tell their stories is of course very moving for us. It strengthens its humanity.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Yaël Naïm and David Donatien have enjoyed great international success with songs like New Soul, Too Long, Come Home, Go to the River and a new version of Britney Spears' Toxic.

Yaël Naïm has won three major awards: World Music Album of the Year in 2008 and Best Female Singer of the Year in 2011 and 2016.

The power and clarity of her voice is in itself music to the ears. Her songs transcend languages and geography, from Israel to Paris. Classical piano, pop, jazz, folk.....all leave their soft, shining mark on her limpid ballads, and in the understated aesthetic of David Donatien's arrangements.



CHILDREN OF THE MEKONG

GUILLAUME MARIAU



To mark the sixtieth anniversary of the organisation, Children of the Mekong decided to commission a film to give six children a platform to share their hopes and dreams.

Guillaume Mariau, Communications Director at Children of the Mekong, explains the rationale for WHEN I GROW UP.

Why make a film to mark the 60th anniversary?

The vast majority of our sponsors cannot just jump on a plane to Southeast Asia in order to visit the children they are sponsoring. A film is a fantastic way of allowing them to do so from the comfort of an armchair at home, enabling them to see, feel and understand the daily lives of the children that we are helping. Thanks to the magic of cinema we can really get under their skin, and experience the emotions that they are feeling.

Six children cannot of course tell the complete story of all of the work done by Children of the Mekong. But by focusing on six individuals, of different ages and from different countries, we have been able to tell a variety of stories which combine to give an insight into the wealth of opportunity that sponsorship brings. We have also gone out of our way to ensure that the film shows clearly just how vulnerable these children of Southeast Asia are.

So is the film about Children of the Mekong or about the children?

It is a film about children, and we took the decision to let the children speak for themselves. Ambitious, because the children we meet are often shy. We were nonetheless keen that they should speak directly to the camera, in the first person, and using their mother tongue. For the first time it is not Children of the Mekong talking about the children that we support, but the children themselves who tell how, thanks to our support, they are able to fulfil their dreams by going to school and carving out a future for themselves despite the difficult circumstances of their lives.

Is there not a risk of simplification in a film which sees through the eyes of children?

I do not think that the stories the children tell are simplifications of reality. Children often tell simple truths. They have their own way of looking at the world, which is why childhood is so

special. So I say again: WHEN I GROW UP is not about Children of the Mekong; it is a film which tells the stories of six young people. We believe that viewers who hear these stories, will better appreciate the difficulties that these young people face. We hope that viewers will understand a little better, the countries in which these children live and what they can do to support them. This is the way, the only way, in which the film approaches sponsorship.

Is it a campaigning film?

It is a film which campaigns for education, a film which shows just how much education can transform lives. One of its strongest messages comes in the words of Juliet, a young Filipina who has lived all her life in a Cebu shantytown: "Growing up is about turning hardships into triumphs".

It is not something you can do on your own if you have to do backbreaking work in the fields when you are six, or if you have to walk for hours to get to school, or if you lose both your parents before the age of 12 and have to look after your little brothers and sisters, or if your house has been destroyed in fighting between the army and ethnic militias or if you have a disability that your neighbours attribute to some evil cosmic curse. Education changes lives, but only if you have access to it. That is the message of the film: it is only by being sponsored that these children can turn their dreams into reality. As a result, the film is also a useful tool for schoolchildren in other

parts of the world. The children that we meet in WHEN I GROW UP love school. They appreciate that they are lucky to be going to school and that it is only by getting an education that they will develop as individuals and get on in life. It is a strong message of hope that is relevant to all schoolchildren, worldwide.

Making a film is a great adventure, but you need money. How did you fund WHEN I GROW UP?

We were determined from the outset that making the film should have no impact on the resources – financial, time or people – dedicated to field work. So we raised money by online crowd-funding.

We put forward a proposal in which we described our plan for a documentary about education and introduced the young people we were intending to go and film, and hundreds of individuals responded. Without their generous donations the project would never have gone ahead.

We have also received corporate donations and grants from charitable foundations, with the result that 60% of the budget has already been raised. With sales of the DVD still to come, we are confident that the film will be wholly self-financing.



CHILDREN OF THE MEKONG

For 60 years (1958 - 2018), Children of the Mekong has been supporting and helping children in 7 countries in Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, the Philippines, Cambodia, Burma and China.

Our mission is to help and enable these forgotten children (often due to extreme poverty, disability, illness) to learn, train professionally and build a future as models of responsibility and freedom for their country of tomorrow.

In 2018, nearly 22,000 sponsored children and 60,000 supported children will have access to education. The association supports the construction of around 100 development projects per year (schools, wells, etc.) and manages 10 centres and 78 households.

It also sends 60 international solidarity volunteers, the Bamboos, to the field for missions lasting at least one year.

www.childrenofthemekong.org

60  **Children of
the Mekong**
YEARS 1958-2018

PORTRAITS

PRIN
MYU LAT AWNG
PHOUT
PAGNA
THOOKOLO
JULIET



Phout, aged 14



Prin, aged 6



Myu Lat Awng, aged 10



Thookolo, aged 21



Pagna, aged 17



Juliet, aged 34



PRIN

Aged 6, Vietnam



Prin is six years old. She is one of the Jarai people who live in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where the language spoken is not Vietnamese; it is Jarai. To enable Prin to go to school her mother decided that she should go and board at a centre several hours' walk away where she could learn Vietnamese. Without it she could not be educated beyond primary level. But living away from home can be difficult. In her village Prin has a little brother who she does not see very often, and grandparents who she loves dearly. Her mother, Siu Hoan, lives in a small house made of beaten earth, bits of wood, and corrugated iron. She looks after

a few thin cows in the dried-up paddy fields. When Prin goes home to this arid landscape, it brings a smile to Siu Hoan's face to see her daughter having fun with her little brother. Siu Hoan lost her husband to cancer of the liver when Prin was two. She could not afford to pay for any treatment for him. With no land or paddy fields of her own Siu Hoan became a day labourer: "We have no land of our own, so we have to work for others in order to be able to eat. That's what I had to explain to my daughter. Handouts are all we have." Siu Hoan did not wait for Prin to be old enough to understand before making her aware of the difficulties they face. But

despite her family's great poverty, Prin is a happy child, who loves school, likes to wear jeans and has a favourite colour - pink. Surrounded by her friends she likes drawing and is learning to write. When she grows up she would like to go back home to teach Vietnamese to her fellow Jaraï so they can get an education too. Her dream is to help

them go to school, like her, but without having to leave home. "Prin can't stay at home with me because I can't teach her anything. I only went to school for two years; I know nothing" says Siu Hoan in support of her decision to send Prin away to school. Could Prin perhaps help her mother to learn to read one day?

"Educated people look down on us! I want my daughter to get an education so she can teach Vietnamese to other Jaraï"
Siu Hoan

THE JARAI PEOPLE

The Jaraï are an ethnic group living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Numbering around 400,000 they have their own culture, their own religion and their own language. Getting an education costs so much that it is almost impossible for the Jaraï. What is more, teaching in public school is in Vietnamese, which most of the Jaraï children do not know.

The Jaraï have a reputation for being musical, with a large number of traditional dances and songs, often featuring instruments like gongs, xylophones made of bamboo or zithers. The presence of Children of the Mekong in the region is thus absolutely essential, but there is a real challenge to overcome: the local representatives have to stress over and over again that it is important to get an education, and have to battle every day to ensure that children continue to study despite the difficulties they face.



MYU LAT AWNG

Aged 10, Myanmar



When he was four, Myu Lat Awng had to flee his village, Kawapang, when it was destroyed by heavy weapons in a battle between the Myanmar army and the Kachin militia. He has never been back. To start with, his family hid in the jungle. His little brother was only two months old. They were then given shelter by relatives 10 miles away before finding sanctuary, on 19 May 2018, in the Palana camp for internally displaced persons, near the town of Myitkyina. It took 5 years to finally get a home of their own – but on a plot of land which they share with 80 other refugees. “I can’t remember my village at all, so I make drawings.”

Myu Lat Awng often loses himself in drawings. In the little hut where he and his family live, he rests on the bamboo floor to draw. In pride of place above the family’s few possessions (some blankets, a mosquito net, a piece of UNESCO tarpaulin) hangs a medal; last week Myu Lat Awng won first prize in a drawing competition which was held at the camp. Next to it are portraits of the scholars of the family - Myu Lat Awng and his two brothers. At school too Myu Lat Awng remains calm and serious. A serious look sits permanently on his furrowed brow. From time to time, a discrete tear rolls down his good-looking face, to which

Thanaka (a yellowish - white cosmetic paste made from ground bark) has been applied. Amidst the hubbub of pupils reciting their lessons, Myu Lat Awng is a bit lost. In Mynamar, lessons have to be learnt by heart and he has fallen behind. In the evening, by the light of a torch given to them by the Red Cross, his mother reminds him "Work hard or you will get nowhere".

Myu Lat Awng works hard. He could be angry. He could dream of vengeance like so many of his friends who want to be soldiers when they grow up. But instead Myu Lat Awng prefers to play outside with his new friends, in the alleyways that run between the camp's huts. "I like it here because I've got lots of friends" he says, with a smile at last.



**"A house is important. It's where
the whole family can rest."
Myu Lat Awng**

THE KACHIN WAR

In 2011, at a time when the government of Myanmar was proudly promoting greater democracy, turning its back on years of military dictatorship, hostilities resumed in the north between the all-powerful Tatmadaw (the armed forces of Myanmar) and the various ethnic militias operating in Kachin state.

With a rich culture and a strong common identity, the Kachin ethnic groups are demanding the independence which they were promised under the terms of the Panglong Agreement of 1947, which was negotiated by General Ang San, the father of Ang San Suu Kyi.

The resumption of hostilities was sparked by protests against plans for the construction in Myitsone, on behalf of the Chinese government, of a dam and hydroelectric power station - which would have resulted in the flooding of an entire valley. Since then the Tatmadaw has intensified its shelling of villages controlled by the KIA (Kachin Independence Army), there are sporadic skirmishes in the mountains, and the local population continues to be caught up in the fighting.

In May 2018, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that there were 140 camps in Kachin state, housing a total of 97,661 internally displaced persons (IDPs) like Myu Lat Awng and his family, some in areas under government control, and others not. But the numbers of camps and IDPs has further increased since the bombing campaigns of April and May 2018. The local authorities find it difficult to manage this fluctuation in numbers, and that is before any account is taken of the civilians trapped by the crossfire in the jungle - without any humanitarian aid and unable to reach the camps.

PHOUT

Aged 14, Laos



In a faded room two teenage girls are lying on couches with their heads positioned above buckets. Their scalps are being massaged by two other girls, their hands smothered in white foam. A religious silence prevails. In the large mirror hanging on the wall can be seen the reflection of an old hairdryer of the type which graced salons in the 1980s. Job done, the girls swap roles. One of them is Phout, aged 14. She is concentrating hard. In this improvised hair and beauty salon there is no chit-chat. All of the pupils are deaf, and cannot speak, but that does not stop them filling their heads with dreams. Phout comes from a Hmong village which

is several hours' drive from the nearest town. But for more than four years she has been living in Luang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of the Land of a Million Elephants, Laos. She only goes home for her summer holidays.

Full of mischief and with a ready smile, Phout expresses herself with rapid gestures. She has known Lao sign language for a long time. "In my village I couldn't go to school so I used to stay at home or go into the forest to look for bamboo shoots to be sold at the market. The others made fun of me. They always said that it was because I used to drink too much in a previous life that I was deaf."

Far from letting this get to her, Phout fought hard to silence her critics. Thanks to the efforts of her mother – a teacher convinced of the value of education – and of her father – who scoured the north of the country to find her a school – Phout is now flourishing.

Chattering away in sign language she explains “I like using makeup to look good. I also like helping others to look good. When I grow up I’m going to open a beauty salon in my village.” What about karma? That no longer worries Phout. “Karma? That’s a load of rubbish!” she says with a smile.

**“I want to help people to look good.
I’m growing up – and I’m happy.”
Phout**

KARMA

In Laos there are only two schools which teach sign language to deaf children. There is one in Vientiane which is run by the government, and another in Luang Prabang, in the north of the country, which was set up by a religious Community of Sisters. In Laos, people with disabilities are often thought to be accursed, and constitute a source of shame for their families.

The majority of the population is Buddhist, and there is widespread belief in karma and reincarnation – whereby what happens in life is thought to be determined by behaviour in a previous life. As a result many families seek to conceal disabled children. The burden is even greater for families too poor to pay for the extra care and attention that a disabled child needs. There is still a long way to go in the countries of Southeast Asia before there are enough centres to care for disabled children and before families can be persuaded that it is important for disabled children to get an education too.



PAGNA

Aged 17, Cambodia



Lamplight is reflected on the yellow walls of the room. In the inky blackness of the night in the Cambodian countryside, near Samrong, only one window is illuminated. It is half past four in the morning and Pagna has already started his workout. His only equipment, in one corner, is a metal bar with two enormous stone weights. Younger pupils in the dormitory are still sleeping. But not for much longer. In this centre run by Children of the Mekong individual tuition sessions start at six o'clock, so most of the pupils are to be found in the classrooms then. "To start with, I was worried about what it would be like to live with so many other

kids, like in one big family" confides Pagna. The son of a smallholder, Pagna moved into the centre when his parents decided to move to Thailand in search of work that could increase their income. The family home, made of wood and straw, had been hit by a storm and was no longer habitable.

Exercising a will of iron, Pagna has managed to overcome all of the obstacles which lay in his way, determined to forge a better future for himself, for his family, and – why not – for his country. Each day is a remorseless quest for the best possible marks, for knowledge and for a better life so that one day he will have a job, a

wife and a car. But far be it from Pagna to leave others struggling in his wake. Every weekend when the other pupils living at the centre are taking it easy, he goes off on his bicycle to the next village to tutor the local schoolchildren. "Because the village is poor, the families

have no money to pay for tutoring. So, we don't charge. If we didn't help in this way the kids would be trapped in poverty for ever more, as would their children and their grandchildren after them."

"If no-one helped these children they would stay poor, as would their children and their grandchildren after them. I'm delighted to be able to help them."

Pagna

KNOWLEDGE BLACKMAIL

Although the situation is improving, schools in Cambodia are still plagued by blackmail and racketeering, as they have been for many years. Because they are badly paid, teachers are in the habit of teaching their pupils part of the curriculum only. To cover the rest, pupils have to sign up for extra classes, which they have to pay for, and which are beyond the means of the children of rural rice farmers. This means that poor children are unable to pass the exams, and great inequality of opportunity results. But it can be overcome through sponsorship.

A sponsored child can afford the extra classes. Centres like the one where Pagna lives encourage their students to give extra classes in villages where they are needed. This is a way for children sponsored by Children of the Mekong to give something back and get involved in building a better future for their country.



THOOKOLO

Aged 21, Thailand



To get to university, Thookolo crosses from one side of Bangkok to the other, three times a week, dressed in her uniform. She catches two buses, rides in a songthaew (a kind of shared taxi) and crosses the Chao Phraya by ferry. Now, two hours after leaving her flat, she is walking up the road barefoot, polished shoes in hand. Approaching the university, she grimaces as she puts them on. "When I first walked around in Bangkok I couldn't believe my eyes. So many colours! Such a commotion!" says Thookolo. Born in the mountainous northern part of Thailand, she is one of the Karen people, nomads originally from Myanmar. For many years Thookolo got by on what she and her

family managed to hunt, fish or grow. Her house had no running water or electricity. When one day the opportunity arose to go and study in the capital whilst working for a local fast food chain, Thookolo did not hesitate, to embark on a journey which has taken her further than she could ever have imagined. But she still often thinks about going back home. Once she has qualified, Thookolo would like to return to her village to teach Thai to the local children. But for the time being, she lives life Bangkok-style, spending some of her time at work at a pretzel stall in one of the city's massive shopping malls, some at the university, and some with her boyfriend, Athit. As she does not have the right paperwork,

Thookolo regularly has to go back home, more than a day away by bus, to get permission to carry on working in the capital. At the university, other students make fun of her accent. But Thookolo remains happy and determined, whilst also looking to the future. She dreams of getting married and starting a family.

But this will only be possible if Athit agrees to go back to her village with her. Only then will Thookolo ask him to marry her. In Karen culture, it is the woman who asks for the hand of a man in marriage. Modern customs can sometimes be found where you least expect them!



**“You can’t choose where you are born but
you can choose to be a good person.”
Thookolo**

THE KAREN PEOPLE

The Karen people are nomads who migrated to Myanmar and Thailand from Mongolia and China thousands of years ago. Living in the mountains, they number between six and eight million. Some 300,000 Karens now have Thai citizenship but many others, like Thookolo, do not have a Thai identity card.

The largest ethnic minority in the country, the Karen people live in small mountain villages, often remote, in the northwest of Thailand. The majority of the villages are largely self-sufficient and difficult to get to, in the rainy season which lasts from June to October. The main obstacles to their development are corruption and the lack of road and electricity networks. Almost everyone lives below the Thai poverty threshold, with little variation in wealth between one family and the next.

As a result, many young people leave their villages to go to the city, sometimes to study, but more often to work. This rural flight can be dangerous for unaccompanied youngsters lacking family support. They often end up getting involved in drugs, corruption or prostitution.

Sponsorship is a way of supporting these young people, helping to keep them away from the temptations of easy money and out of the clutches of gangs. After a few years, weary of their experience of the city, and missing the traditional life, young people often go back to where they grew up to start a family.

JULIET

Aged 34, the Philippines



In Inayawan, on the island of Cebu in the Philippines, rubbish lies in massive piles, on which children play, and from which hundreds of families scratch a living as waste pickers. Juliet, aged 34, has spent her whole life in the area, and could never be persuaded to leave. Why leave the place where she has fought so hard to overcome adversity and to make for herself the life she leads today, surrounded by her family?

Juliet lost both her parents when she was still young – her mother when she was five, and her father when she was twelve. Becoming responsible overnight for her brother and sisters, she started doing housework and taking in washing

to put some food into their hungry stomachs. But Juliet was determined not to give up school. She realised at an early age that only education would give her a way out. When a classmate, Maria-Bélen, explained to her one day that she was being sponsored to stay on at school Juliet did not hesitate. She immediately approached the young French volunteer from Children of the Mekong and asked to be included in the sponsorship programme being developed in Inayawan. It took just a few weeks to find her a sponsor. And she has never looked back. No longer was Juliet torn between her studies and the need to make money to feed

her brothers and sisters. Life was not so very much easier but Juliet now felt she had support whereas before her uncles and aunts were more inclined to try and persuade her to leave school and get a job. "Growing up is about turning hardships into triumphs" declares Juliet, whose personal triumph is her family. At the age of 34, Juliet is the happy mother of four wonderful children who all go to school. She and her husband have even managed to buy their own house, which they are doing up by degrees. She still lives just a few yards away from her childhood home, surrounded by the families of her brothers and sisters. That is the main reason why she has no desire to

move away from the shantytown where she grew up. But Juliet's wider family is even larger: she teaches the Reception Class at Inayawan Primary School, responsible for around 100 children, to whom she is devoted. "Being a teacher is like being a mother. It's not just about teaching the children their three Rs. It's taking responsibility for helping them to grow up."

"Getting a sponsor transformed my life" says Juliet, without prompting, and with a tear in her eye. Now it is Juliet who is transforming lives in her native Inayawan.

"Growing up is about turning hardships into triumphs."
Juliet

THE PHILIPPINES: UNBELIEVABLY YOUTHFUL

In the Philippines, 54% of the population is under 25. In the public school where Juliet teaches there are more than 750 pupils in Grade 4 (Reception), so the school runs a shift system: some children have classes only in the morning, others only in the afternoon. For the rest of the day, the kids are left to their own devices. So, many end up playing amongst the rubbish. To ensure that waste pickers are not forced by a lack of childcare provision to take their children with them to work, Children of the Mekong has set up free day care centres, known as Battang Mekong. Some of them even provide meals.



THE FILM IN CONTEXT

Thousands of children around the world suffer from discrimination, are the victims of war, or cannot afford to go to school.

“Some 67 million children of primary school age receive no schooling, of whom 53% are girls. The vast majority of children deprived of their rights in this way live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Getting an education in these countries is a real challenge.” UNICEF 2008

67 million was the population of France in 2017. An entire nation of children deprived of the basic skills that could help them improve their quality of life.

Most of these children live in Southeast Asia. The heroes of the film come from six ethnic groups which are particularly affected. In WHEN I GROW UP Prin, Myu Lat Awng, Phout, Pagna, Thookolo and Juliet act as their ambassadors.





ETHNIC MINORITIES

Like Prin (one of the Jaraï people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam), Myu Lat Awng (a Jingpo from Kachin State in Myanmar), Phout (a Hmong from Laos) or Thookolo (one of the Karen people of Thailand), many of the young people sponsored by Children of the Mekong come from the ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia.

These minorities are often discriminated against, or not recognised at all, by the ethnic majorities in their countries, either for historical or political reasons, or as a result of linguistic or cultural barriers. Sometimes, families are even forbidden to own land in their own country. In Myanmar, Karen people cannot move freely within their own country without official authorisation as they do not have ID cards. In Vietnam, Jaraï children cannot go to school because they do not speak the language of the majority.

Children of the Mekong has been working with these minorities for decades to find local solutions which improve quality of life and break the cycle of poverty, helping motivated children to get an education and find employment.

- In Myanmar only 22 ethnic groups out of 100 are officially recognised. There is currently armed conflict between the government and three of the ethnic groups.
- In Laos, only 49 ethnic groups out of 240 are officially recognised.
- In Thailand, 30% of the ethnic minority population does not yet have Thai nationality.
- In Vietnam 54 ethnic groups are officially recognised, comprising 14% of the population.

DISABILITY AND CHRONIC ILLNESS

- In Nepal 40% of the population lives below the poverty level; disability is considered to be a social evil.
- Worldwide 37 million people suffer from AIDS. Only 53% of them have access to tritherapy
- In Myanmar, there is a strong link between AIDS and drug addiction. One addict in four has the disease, which results in 8,000 deaths each year. In Kachin State, some children as young as 12 take drugs.

There are big inequalities around the world in the degree to which those who are disabled or suffering from illness can get access to the care they need. The damage wrought by AIDS on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society was quickly brought to the attention of Children of the Mekong by many workers in the field.

In the 1990s, the charity began to support centres caring for sick and disabled children and their families. Today the emphasis is on enabling children who are ill, or who have disabilities which cause them to suffer discrimination from their family or other villagers, to go to school, and to get a job which will enable them to meet their needs and the needs of their family.



REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

Currently a red-hot topic worldwide. In Southeast Asia, political crises and wars have produced a stream of refugees and migrants looking for a safe haven, in Thailand in particular. It was in refugee camps there that the first sponsorships were set up.

It was out of this adversity that the unbreakable bond between Children of the Mekong and the peoples of Southeast Asia was forged. Children of the Mekong fights to ensure that children in exile can still go to school, and that families in exile can return home as soon as circumstances permit.

Lots of camps have closed since the 1975 Boat People crisis, but others are now opening, particularly in Myanmar.

- There are 68.5 million displaced persons worldwide, of whom 40 million have been displaced internally, and 24.5 million are refugees.
- Three major crises in Myanmar (involving the Karen, Kachin and Rohingya peoples respectively) have led to armed conflict, and the creation of camps in Myanmar for internally displaced persons, and in Thailand of camps for refugees.
- The camps in Thailand are already 30 years old but continue to grow. The amount of aid provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is diminishing, and donations from the EU fell from €2.1 million in 2015 to €1.3 million in 2016. But there is no reduction in demand. On the contrary:
 - 100,000 people are living in nine camps on the border between Myanmar and Thailand
 - A tenth camp is going to open in the north of the country to accommodate Shan people.

SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF SMALLHOLDERS



The average monthly income of a smallholder in Thailand is about €150. This is €100 less than the average monthly wage nationally (which is €250 outside Bangkok).

Like Pagna in Cambodia, many children in Southeast Asia are born to parents in rural areas, where life is extremely hard. The children have to start working in the fields at a very young age, as it is often the only way in which parents can put food in their mouths. Young people who do have the good fortune to go to school often drop out, exhausted by their labours. Families cannot afford secondary education for their children. When a child is sponsored, their school fees are paid for them, and their family is compensated (often in the form of a donation of bags of rice) in order to ensure that the child does not feel bad about not working in the fields. This ensures that sponsored children are highly motivated in their studies.



CHILDREN AT RISK IN SHANTYTOWNS

All around the world people are moving from the countryside to the city.

This results in unstructured and often rapid growth of cities, and the creation of shantytowns, concentrations of poverty and violence on their peripheries.

In the Philippines, where Juliet lives, gangs rule the roost, creating areas where the law does not apply, in which children get drawn into a culture of drugs, fall victim to abuse, and end up joining gangs themselves – to become the scourge of a new generation of innocents. In all the countries where it works, Children of the Mekong strives, through an ambitious programme of support for a rounded education and preparation for employment, to provide young people with an alternative.

- By 2025 half of the world's population of 8 billion will live in cities, and two-thirds will live in Asia. The shantytown population will double in size to 1.5 billion.

- In Vietnam, 4,000 violent crimes were recorded in shantytowns in 2017, including the murder of 100 children and 1,000 cases of sexual abuse. According to the NGO World Vision, 74% of children aged 2 to 14 living in the north of the country suffer violence at the hands of their families.

EDUCATING GIRLS

In Southeast Asia, as in many other parts of the world, educating girls needs to be given priority. Often vulnerable, and subject to discrimination, women are statistically less likely than men to be educated, despite the fact that matriarchy has often been a feature of ethnic minority society in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Women continue to play a vital role in family life today. An educated woman will always fight harder to ensure that her children go to school. Ensuring that children get an education and find employment is key to the development of these countries. That is why, in Cambodia for example, 62% of sponsored children are girls, of whom two-thirds come from the three poorest provinces in the north of the country. If family circumstances permit, girls are given priority when places at Children of the Mekong residential centres are being allocated.

Worldwide, only 30% of all children who go to school are girls. Of 900 million illiterates in the world, two-thirds are female.



In Cambodia 30% of women do not know how to read or write, compared to 15% of men. More than 65% of women living in rural areas work on the land but are not paid for their work. 40% of women have inadequate access to medical care.





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