

mark Kuster, 38, has for the last ten years been full-time Managing Director of the children's aid organization Camaquito in Cuba. He has lived on the Caribbean island with wife and daughter since autumn 19th 2003. Before that he was Sales Manager in Finance and IT in Winterthur – and from 1997 to 2001 served as President of the Young SVP Switzerland, dubbed «Little Blocher» by comrades and opponents alike. At that time Kuster wanted to become SVP member of the Federal Council, to «emulate Christoph». Today he has the «vision of offering Cuban children and teenagers a better future».

The cornerstone for Camaquito was already laid in 1998: on a holiday trip that brought him more or less by chance to Cuba, he was at 25 «for the first time confronted by the needs of a developing country». He was soon collecting the first donations, found out what it takes to set up a relief organization, developed this in parallel to a 100 percent workload – before deciding ten years ago from then on «to live full-time for Camaquito».



Translation of interview between Mark Kuster and Matthias Wipf

Schaffhauser Nachrichten
27th January 2012

The Aid Organization Camaquito has now been in Cuba for 10 years. Its founder Mark Kuster (38), formerly a hopeful new-prospect politician in the Swiss People's Party (SVP), is now a committed campaigner for a better future for the children and teenagers in the socialist Caribbean state.

Mark Kuster, you have now worked 10 years full-time for Camaquito. What is your conclusion? Have the efforts been worth it?

Kuster: Yes, absolutely! To begin with Camaquito was just a vague idea – but in the last ten years we have succeeded in significantly improving the living conditions of many children and teenagers in Cuba. Efforts are always worth it when it's about children's well-being.

It all began more or less by chance, with a vacation in Cuba. At that time you were still President of the Young SVP Switzerland, not

especially known as being empathetic towards socialism, and you were also dubbed «Little Blocher» ...

Kuster: (grins) Indeed, it was a pure coincidence that took us for the first time – for a friend's birthday -- not to Ibiza, but to Cuba. The travel agent had given us a special offer. But perhaps it was fate too – and is today without doubt my vocation. My story shows in an exemplary way that politicians can achieve a lot and can act to solve problems, if only they had the courage to decide more with their hearts, instead of letting themselves be distracted by party conflicts. But I must also say, that I valued my time as active SVP politician very highly and have fond memories of those days. Apart from anything else, I was able to gather new important experiences that are today valuable for my activities in Cuba.

When we first visited you in Camagüey some years ago, you said that not you had "chosen" Cuba, but rather Cuba had chosen you. What kind of energy was it that you felt, that turned your life and existing system of values so

completely upside down?

Kuster: I don't have the feeling that I turned my system of values completely upside down. I just recognized that I could also use my energy for something else: for children and teenagers in Cuba, for example. And basically it was for me important, both then and now, to be involved in social issues – even though it's clear to me that my pointed manner as SVP politician in those days did not only attract friends.

How's your life today in Cuba?

Kuster: I feel fine here. And it's good to see in the day-to-day work just how much is possible, thanks to the donations from Switzerland!. We can offer many children and teenagers better perspectives for the future. Of course it is often tiring to coordinate all the projects. And frankly I too sometimes reach my limits.

With which projects are you busy today, and what are your visions for the future?

Kuster: The largest project currently is the complete renovation of the Maternity

Clinic in Camagüey. Between 6,000 and 7,000 babies are born there every year. In addition we are renovating more schools and kindergartens in the region, participate in drinking water projects and support cultural activities such as theatre and ballet performances. And finally we try – via football in the outer suburbs – to build up new structures in these regions. This is important for the children's development. My vision is still, in a few years, to be the most important children's aid organization in Cuba.

But negotiating with the authorities in socialist Cuba and getting the many approvals needed is surely often grueling.

Kuster: Yes, you are right: patience is an important asset you must bring with you to Cuba – (grins) And that is not one of my key characteristics. But it's a big advantage that I am permanently present, and can intervene whenever that seems to be necessary. It also helps that in the meantime I understand Cuban processes quite well and how Cubans tick. But of course one often

wishes things were a little easier and quicker.

To what extent do you work with the Swiss Embassy or other Swiss people in Cuba?

Kuster: Although we have excellent relations with the Swiss Embassy in Havana, and regularly exchange news, we generally operate very independently. For us it was a great honour that both the Swiss Ambassador in Cuba, and also the local Deza representative attended our 10th Anniversary Celebrations. We also have contact to the Swiss-Cuban Chamber of Commerce, which is incidentally one of our donors.

Cuba is still in the so-called «período especial», quasi in a State of Emergency, and in the medium term it is unclear what the future holds. How do you see the country's current status? And where do you wish for improvements?

Kuster: I am very confident about the future of Cuba even though great challenges still have to be met. I am fully convinced that Cuba can one day be the model for a new, modern type of society. Here I trust in the government and

the people. However it is important that additional economic reforms are tackled! In the end only a strong economy can strengthen too Cuba's social structure. Nevertheless such reforms must be implemented carefully – many people cannot unfortunately handle material wealth that comes too fast.

You return to Switzerland for a few weeks in the year, give lectures, organize sponsored runs etc., or give interviews. Are the Swiss good donors? And why should one support Camaquito as opposed to a different organization?

Kuster: Yes, the Swiss donate very generously and last year invested the most money in development and reconstruction projects since the Tsunami. I have great respect for this. It makes particular sense to donate to Camaquito because we are directly active on the ground and so can make a decisive contribution to the creation of a new form of society for Cuba built on young people.

You have very many voluntary helpers, and Camaquito has two prominent ambassadors

in the persons of ex Miss Switzerland Anita Buri and Jörg Stiel, the former goalie in the national football team ...

Kuster: It's wonderful to know that Camaquito is supported ideally by so many active volunteers. And the two ambassadors too do this out of conviction, and not as some kind of PR activity – all of these people have paid into the projects out of their own pockets and have already visited them too. Another reason why this voluntary support is important for us, is that it's the only way we can keep administrative costs below 15 percent, a level that is almost unique for a relief organization. So donors can be sure that a very large portion of their contributions flow directly into the projects, and do not 'vanish' into the administration.

When you are back home on your trips and you look at Swiss politics and society, what goes through your mind?

Kuster: (thoughtfully): It saddens me that people in Switzerland are often not sufficiently aware of how privileged they really are. For the kind of enjoyment of life

and contentedness that I encounter in Cuba, often despite difficult living conditions – one would think that in Switzerland there should be many more reasons for that.

Earlier it was your big dream to become SVP representative in the Bundesrat. If you had that opportunity today, what would you emphasize, and for what would you fight?

Kuster: I would still campaign for Swiss neutrality and independence, but also for better family politics, i.e. tax benefits for families. I would also introduce school uniforms, and see that the Swiss national anthem is sung in the morning.

As a matter of principle I would be keen to restore more honour, pride and respect to the brand Switzerland.

Where, Mark Kuster, do you see Camaquito in ten years? Will you still be Managing Director?

Kuster: Yes, I would be really delighted if I could still devote my full energy and conviction to Camaquito in ten years! That assumes that I am still

the right person for the job. Founders don't get a free ticket – I have to keep proving, that I am the best man for this important task.

What other task could fascinate the doer Mark Kuster, motivate him neck and crop like Camaquito does today?

Kuster: Basically I would assume that Camaquito and Cuba will remain with me for life, and I look forward to that. But apart from this I could also imagine fighting against human trafficking in the countries affected – or, something completely different: to serve as councillor for Winterthur, my home city.

Camaquito -- helping Cuban children and teenagers

www.camaquito.org

The Aid Organization **Camaquito**, politically and confessionally neutral, provides a broad base of support for Cuban children and teenagers, in, as the name already suggests, above all via projects in Camangüey Province in East Cuba. Using donations from Switzerland --

some 1.5 Swiss francs till now – Camaquito has built and renovated schools and kindergartens; connected remote *quartiers* to the drinking-water supply; is active in “grass-roots” sports with «Viva el fútbol»; undertakes cultural activities with «Vivan los barrios», as well as

specific projects in the fields of theatre, music and ballet.

In addition to Managing Director Mark Kuster, whose salary is financed by a separate supporting society, there are many voluntary helpers, so that a high proportion of donations (85%) flows directly into the projects.

