

# LESEDI SCHOOLS & CLINIC

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Our last trip in March seemed a long time ago as we touched down in Victoria Falls. The views out of the window were surprisingly green from early rains. We waited impatiently in the snail-paced visa queue before finally emerging into bright sunshine, with traditional musicians jumping up from their mobile phones to put on an energetic welcome dance. Benson was waiting with big smiles and hugs – in an instant the weeks of preparation and the long journey were forgotten.

We loaded ourselves and all our bags into Benson's truck for the short journey to Lesedi. Not so long ago, Benson's Toyota Hilux was his pride and joy – shipped from the UK to replace a previous Hilux wrecked by construction of Lesedi Primary and Clinic. Now this one is also in a sorry state, the result of too many bags of sand and cement, baobab trees and other key ingredients for construction of the secondary.

After the previous craziness of Covid lockdowns and initial construction of the secondary school this was hopefully going to be a gentle catch up. Ha! We ended up spending eight long, thrilling, tiring, talkative days at Lesedi, with a few days "break" of a short safari in Hwange National Park (which ended up being full of Lesedi discussions!). After 25 years of safaris, we still enjoyed unique sightings of lions fishing for catfish, tree climbing cheetah brothers and flocks of 200+ eagles and falcons enjoying the termite mound eruptions following the rains – nature is truly amazing.

Anyway, back at Lesedi the initial overwhelming impression was how beautiful it looks. Even at the end of the dry season the schools and clinic look amazing with loads of trees, colourful flowers, and alien-looking bugs everywhere. A few days into our trip, I was showing some of the youngsters' photos we took of the school back in 2018 and it was incredibly sandy and dry. Such a remarkable transformation in a few short years. Needless to say, I eventually ended up under a mountain of squirming kids trying to see the photos!



*Lesedi Primary hidden in the trees*



*Graeme's photos proving popular!*

Then there are the sounds. My favourite spot to hang out at the primary school is a concrete bench just outside the Head's office. I often sit there with my laptop updating the Lesedi finance spreadsheet (which is now a monster). However stressful the numbers are, it is impossible not to smile hearing the sounds of Lesedi – chanting from one classroom, shrieks of laughter from another (usually Mr Ndlovu's), singing from another, a few marimbas being practiced on, the occasional

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shouted instruction from a teacher to get a child to run/don't run/clean your face/tuck your shirt in, excited screams from the playground, birds chirping... if I could bottle what Lesedi is to me, this is it.

Those of you who follow our Facebook page may have seen our exciting news on the 2022 Grade 7 exam results. After sitting their exams in November, our grade 7s were waiting for the results in excited anticipation – and they certainly did us proud! The Lesedi Primary School pass rate was 91% (versus 61% last year). This compares with a National pass rate of 40%! Absolutely outstanding. Also worth noting that the other rural schools in our catchment area achieved a range of 16%-59% pass rates.

We are also thrilled to note that our individual point scores improved significantly year-on-year. A lower score is best, from a range of 1-6 points in each of six subjects. Last year our minimum total score was 15 points, while this year Praise Mpala achieved a remarkable 8 points, with six other students not far behind with 10-14 points.

There was also a big improvement in Maths over last year which was great to see. This was a weak subject in 2021 and Fiona and I had some concerns about what action was being taken to improve the situation, but as usual Mrs Mutori, Cathy and the teachers just quietly got on with making things better. Huge congratulations to all the students and teachers for these incredible results. And a special thank you to Mr Simtenda who took the grade 7 class this year and really got the best out of them.

We mentioned last time that although the primary school would never be “done”, at the end of last year with a full nine years of teaching and the first grade 7 exams completed it felt a huge milestone in the Lesedi journey. It was great to see this year that the primary is continuing to evolve and mature.

We should take a moment to consider that none of this would have been possible without Benson, who is known locally by his totem name, Mr Mpofu (Mr Eland). Benson had the vision and drive to start the primary school, along with the energy and dedication to continue with the clinic and secondary school. He has had to fight hard with officials to get each project off the ground and has endured frequent battles throughout eight years of fairly constant construction. He has somehow managed to juggle a demanding safari schedule, with growing demands from Lesedi. During construction the pressure is relentless, with lorries often arriving at 11pm at night with 10,000 bricks to be offloaded or supplies from Harare needing to be collected at dawn off the overnight bus. As we mentioned earlier, Benson's two Hilux trucks have suffered greatly from their use as construction transport, and he continues to shoulder the stress of delivering on time and to tight budgets.

Sadly, Benson still gets very little appreciation from the community and from some people who should know better – even more sadly, people often assume that he has an ulterior motive, or that he is somehow making money on the side (he is not). Benson has a total heart of gold – he does what he does just because he believes it is the right thing to do. But it means he is now the lightning rod for all the woes at Lesedi and in the wider community, a role that he deals with brilliantly but it is very hard on him. It can become overwhelming, and I know sometimes he would love to just disappear off to do some farming, dropping all the stress. Please keep sending Benson messages of support to keep him going as I know he really appreciates them.

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As many of you are well aware (as we've been harping on about it for years), special needs education is very close to our hearts. The pandemic and school closures delayed our appointment of a special needs teacher, but we are delighted to have recently welcomed Ms Mhlanga to Lesedi Primary. She is currently teaching a special needs class comprising learners from grades 4-6 but will be assisting with individual education plans for learners in other grades at the primary and secondary schools. We provided some specialist teaching resources for special needs education, and it was great to see the learners enthusiastically playing the phonetic card games. An assessment pack also enabled Ms Mhlanga to test the children for visual stress. Many of the learners currently in the special needs class are making rapid progress in reading and are expected to re-join their mainstream classes in due course. What a fabulous – and much needed – resource to now have at Lesedi.



*Testing for visual stress with coloured overlays*



*Phonetic card games*

It was a relief that after 2½ years, face masks no longer need to be worn at the school. There was still an amazing amount of cleaning, disinfecting and washing going on – I suspect Lesedi is the only school in Zimbabwe still following official covid rules from Harare. But sports are back on again and it was great to see the kids enjoying tanking around in the heat, burning off excess energy.

Our awesome playground of swings, slides, roundabouts, tyre motorbikes and brightly painted cars is also in use again and being loved by the ECD children. I enjoyed a few moments sitting with the ECD A teacher, Patience Mpofu, while her learners played energetically. At one point we were distracted by a kerfuffle on the swings, resulting in a young girl bawling her heart out. The offending boy was summoned over by Ms Mpofu and instructed to apologise, prompting an Oscar worthy “sorry” to the girl. Tears were immediately forgotten, and they both rushed back to do it all again. If only all global disputes could be solved in this way...

Post exams, the grade 7 learners were chilling out playing chess, thanks to a recent donation of chess sets from Jafuta Foundation. In addition to chess, the primary school learners can choose from a range of extra-curricular clubs. The eco-club is very popular and there are also clubs for quizzing, choir, marimba, traditional dance and crafts like beading and knitting. The quiz club recently did very well in an inter-school competition.

The secondary school has also introduced after-school clubs, including drama, choir/music, quizzes and wildlife conservation. The marimbas that were made locally and delivered only a few weeks earlier have proved a huge hit with some of the kids. Marimbas became the sound of the trip for us,

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especially after classes finished for the day as the children would practice on the marimbas for as long as possible until they were finally sent home.



*Playtime for the ECD children*



*Time for chess*

Spending time at the secondary school, we continue to be somewhat awe-struck that we have a living, breathing, working secondary school that didn't exist 12 months ago. Quite incredible. The landscaping is already shaping up, with many flowers and trees planted, interspersed by bird baths and interesting rocks and wooden sculptures. Plentiful benches and tables are positioned in shady areas and are well-used by teachers and learners. Benson has built an open-air kitchen for our Food Tech class, as outdoor cooking is part of the syllabus. In typical Benson-style, this is not just a place to cook over an open fire, but instead is an amazing, shaded cooking area with pizza oven! An upper deck may eventually become a Lesedi restaurant, with meals cooked and served by the Food Tech students. Michelin star anyone?



*Lesedi Secondary*



*Outdoor kitchen / Lesedi restaurant*

The secondary feels very different to the neighbouring primary school. The primary school is a place of learning but also rightly a rowdy rabble of children being children. The secondary feels more measured. Children are still being children, but you can also sense the bigger desire to learn and be curious, as well as a bit of that teenage self-consciousness coming through for some.

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A highlight of our trip was a re-run by both schools of the demonstrations they had done for a World Bank visit two weeks previously. Then Lesedi hosted 26 dignitaries from all over Africa under the umbrella of the World Bank, with the purpose of showcasing education in Zimbabwe. That Lesedi was chosen to be one of the schools visited is a testament to the herculean efforts of the whole Lesedi family since we started the project in 2014. Having experienced first-hand the hosting done at Lesedi, we know that the teachers and students should be very proud of their achievements that day!

Having been welcomed at the secondary school by some skilled marimba playing, we were initially shown around all the classrooms. In each class we were hosted by students who explained what they were doing while others performed demonstrations. In the vocational blocks, we saw learners designing and making metal hangers, which they hope to sell (yes, we bought a couple) and we had demonstrations of how to make wooden tool racks and pot stands. In Food Tech, the students had already made some delicious looking savoury dishes and had progressed to baking cakes, enthusiastically showing us different creaming methods. The Lesedi scientists demonstrated how to use filtration to separate water and sand (bravely drinking the end result!). Finally, we were treated to an impressive PowerPoint presentation in ITC before heading over to the primary school...



*Woodwork demonstration*



*Filtering sand and water in Science*



*Preparing for planting in Agriculture*



*Lifestyle presentation in ITC*

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... to be met by more marimba playing, followed by a wonderful carol from the choir and some energetic traditional dancing - which was then beautifully counterpointed by a rousing rendition of who stole the cookies from the cookie jar!! Oh and the biggest news of this trip report - it was Mrs Mutori all along who had stolen the cookies from the cookie jar. "I ate all the cookies from the cookie jar. And they were lovely!" she announced to stunned silence. We then had a beading demonstration, where we bought a few hand-crafted necklaces, bracelets and earrings, before visiting the computer lab where the learners were practising their programming skills – which amusingly resulted in somersaulting lions!



*Marimba band at Secondary*



*Percussion and marimba at Primary*



*Table tennis*



*Computer programming with jumping lions*

Finally, we headed to the sports fields to watch football, netball, basketball, tag-rugby and other games be very competitively played under the blazing African sun.

Wow. To see all of that in a whirlwind two hours was a real privilege and an experience that Fiona and I will remember for the rest of our lives. The teachers and students can take huge pride in what they have created at Lesedi. Lesedi Primary and Secondary have evolved into excellent schools but they are also so much more. There is a special Lesedi magic that makes what we have truly unique.

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*Basketball*



*Tag-rugby*

A major drawback of spending our time at Lesedi discussing plans and looking at spreadsheets and receipts is that we generally don't spend enough time with the children or teachers. Covid hasn't helped over the past couple of years, as it really limited genuine interactions. So we actively engaged more this time which still wasn't enough but three reflections really stand out for me:

- Just how easy it now is to converse with all the children in English, even the tiny tots. The standard of English at all levels has improved massively thanks to a focussed effort from the teachers. It was lovely chatting to the kids – and once we'd got past the formal exchange, “how are you”, “I am fine thank you, how are you” we had some really great conversations. By the way “I am fine” is a big bug bear of mine and I'm writing to Oxford to get “fine” struck from the English language. Failing that, we have a cunning plan! One of the new enrolments into ECD next year lives on the homestead we stay at while visiting Lesedi, and Fiona has enjoyed teaching her to respond instead with “I am absolutely wonderful, thank you”. She says this in a most dramatic fashion whilst doing a big twirl, so I am hoping she may start the school on a new linguistic adventure of feeling wonderful rather than fine!
- How the kids look out for each other across the ages and are always bubbling under the surface to sing, play and generally do fun stuff. I was having a particularly heavy finance doom moment as school was finishing for the day, only to find myself physically covered under numerous ECD youngsters. Then loads more older children appeared and they all started singing rousing renditions of “if you're happy and you know it” (with a nodding head chorus with quite extreme noddy noddys which was new to me). This led straight into another song which prompted those with birthdays in each month to stand up and dance – resulting in some amazing dancing and thrusting that would give John Travolta a run for his money. Finally, a few rousing carols (a Christmas album needed for next year?) and basically an hour of complete mayhem and joy. Wow. Tik Tok to me is the sound a clock makes but apparently it also now means something else - we need to work on some videos as Lesedi could go viral....
- Fiona and I had sessions with each of the Form 1 classes in the dappled shade of the secondary school to chat about who we are, the Lesedi story, how Lesedi is financed, the importance of sponsorships etc. It wasn't rocket science and the kids knew some of it but by the look of amazement on most of the faces there was a lot they didn't know and hopefully it gave them a

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bit more perspective on Lesedi and the vision behind it. The biggest moment of shock was when we asked how much they thought Benson, Fiona and I earn from our Lesedi endeavours. The guesstimates started at \$20k each a year and rose to \$50k before we explained that none of us earn anything from Lesedi. We give our time freely as we want to make a difference to their education. In the stunned silence we explained how we hope they will also give back in some way when they are older. This is a theme we will continue to work on going forwards.

As another aside, we've had a few requests from supporters to explain how Lesedi started. There is background information on the Lesedi website but here is a quick summary... Fiona & I did an overland trip Cape Town to north Namibia in a VW Golf 21 years ago, ending with a fly-in to Kings Pool camp in Botswana. This is where we met Benson who had just moved to Botswana and was doing some guide training before taking over management of Savuti Camp. Benson was training our guide, who happened to be called Lesedi. We had a fabulous experience, stayed in touch and had a few adventurous overland camping trips together. In 2005 Fiona and Benson decided to start Ngoko Safaris. Then in 2014 Benson built a homestead not far from where Lesedi Primary is now located. He realised that some children were not attending school and decided to do something about it, starting by building the basic pre-school structure. Fiona registered a UK charity, Ngoko Charitable Trust, the following year to support Lesedi. At this stage I still had a demanding corporate career, so my role was initially restricted to making financial donations to support this rather whacky idea. However from 2017 I became far more involved. In 2020 the clinic was built and in 2022 the secondary school started, et voila / Bob's your uncle (who said English was unsophisticated vs French!) here we are today.

Where we are includes the amazing Lesedi Clinic. Patient numbers are continuing to increase and Sister Irene and team are doing a brilliant job on vaccinations and wider community outreach. Thankfully there have been very few reported covid cases in the community over the last 6 months with most of the population now having had 3 vaccine shots.

The big project during our most recent visit was a Polio campaign. There had apparently been two polio cases in Malawi and Mozambique earlier this year which has resulted in the whole of Southern Africa rushing to immunise. It's a horrible disease with no cure. Most countries were immunising all children under 15 but Zimbabwe with its lack of funds is doing under 5s. The clinic team had already completed the first round of vaccinations. According to census records, there should have been 158 children under 5 in their catchment area, but they actually vaccinated over 300 under 5s. This demonstrates the number of families moving out of town into the cheaper rural communities. Benson's truck was being used for the teams to access the very remote areas.

I watched some youngsters receive the treatment at the clinic. The mothers receive full information from the community nurse Ms Sibanda and then each child is given a few drops of vaccination – which is a blessed relief to the big needles for the normal vaccinations. Although in the UK I remember long ago having this on a sugar cube.



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*Polio campaign*



*Childhood immunisations*

In other clinic news, Sister Monica is leaving Lesedi to move back to her husband in Harare – we are grateful that she remained with us for three years and wish her well for the future. Sister Nhondova, a very experienced nurse we have used in the past for locum cover, will soon be joining us as a replacement.

After that quick whistle-stop around Lesedi, let's take a look at some of the main discussion points during our visit.

## **What does success look like?**

We've always had a clear vision of what we want to achieve with the Lesedi schools. However, on this trip we were hit by the reality that in three years' time some of our pioneer learners will potentially finish their education and have to fend for themselves.

So how will we know we have done all that was possible to equip these young adults for the future challenges life will throw at them? What key skills do we want them to have? Fiona and I are no educational experts (Benson was actually a teacher for many months in a former life) but from our many conversations the following feels like a good summary of what we are aiming to achieve:

- **Good behaviours.** Respect. Curiosity. Supportive of others.
- **Strong English and IT skills.** It is embarrassing that most English-speakers (including us) are so bad at learning other languages, but the reality in Zimbabwe is that you need fluent English to get good jobs (especially in tourism and all the supporting sectors around Vic Falls). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, IT is similarly required.
- **Academically stretched and wanting more.** We want to give every child the best, most interesting academic education possible. For those wanting to continue on to 'A' levels and university we need to equip them with the right qualifications, knowledge and skills to achieve their future academic and career aspirations. But our focus as a school must be far broader, so that every learner expands their abilities. We want to set the bar high for those who are able, whilst avoiding alienating those less academically minded, ensuring they still are interested, stretched and curious.

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- **Practical vocational skills.** We want every child to have at least one vocational skill that they can potentially use to earn a living. Zimbabwe has many unemployed graduates, so having a practical skill is essential for everyone.
- **Widened horizons.** The world the children are exposed to is in many cases limited to their home and school, so broadening their horizons allows their dreams and ambitions to grow. Sponsorship and tourist visits are really valuable in exposing the children to different career and lifestyle aspirations.
- **Confidence and self-belief.** We hope that each child passing through Lesedi will find something they are good at, or passionate about. That their experiences at Lesedi will give them the confidence to be the best version of themselves they can be.
- **Inclusivity and fun.** We want every child to enjoy their time at school so they value and cherish their experience and look forward to the proud first day at school for their own children. It is important to us that all children feel included, and that those children who struggle be given extra help so that they don't feel left behind.

I'm sure the teachers amongst you could come up with some far better success factors (and we would genuinely love to hear your thoughts on this) but this thinking was important as we focussed on what we want our school to be, what subjects we should offer up to 'O' level etc.

Having started Lesedi after Benson discovered many children in the area weren't going to school, the type of school we want Lesedi to be has always been clear – it is a rural community school, providing all children in the local area with a school that gives them the best possible start in life, and keeps them engaged. This is different to most private schools in Zimbabwe, which are exclusive organisations focussed on high academic grades. Parents pay high fees and only the brightest students are accepted. Financially this model would be much better for us as the parents could help to pay a big chunk of the costs, but this isn't why we established Lesedi.

So when we were discussing what success looks like for us, it was clear that it shouldn't be purely based on academic achievement but has to be much broader on behaviours, life skills, a vocational skill etc. For a UK / US mindset focussed on school league tables this takes some getting used to but is the right vision for Lesedi.

We then got the mind-blowing 91% pass rate in the grade 7 exams which shows that with nine years at Lesedi we can help kids from even the most disadvantaged backgrounds attain good educational levels. Clearly this will not necessarily translate into high grades at 'O' and 'A' level but it demonstrates that we can aim high academically whilst still equipping our learners with the broader skills we want them to have.

All of this may sound a bit like philosophical mumbo jumbo but it really helped us with our thinking as the next big topic we spent a lot of time talking about was...

### Secondary school plans 2023-2026

When schools re-open after the Christmas break, we will have around 70 children moving up to Form 2 and a similar number of new students enrolling in Form 1, roughly half from Lesedi Primary and half

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from other local primary schools. Just 12 months later, our pioneer students will progress to Form 3, where they will select their options for their 'O' Level / Zimsec exams that they will complete in late 2025.

That sounds simple enough. But you then get into the practicalities of what subjects we offer, how many / what type of teachers, how to enable academic students to excel while ensuring other children remain engaged and leave with useful skills etc. With around 70 learners in each year, we will only have around 280 children at the secondary in Forms 1-4. As our funds are limited, we must make choices now which will define what path the students take and how much choice they can get within that.

We had a lot of debate on 'O' level subjects and were helped immensely by Mr Sibanda, the Head of Mosi-oa-Tunya High School in Vic Falls town. The final subjects we will offer fell out fairly easily in the end:

- All students sit 5 core 'O' levels in Ndebele, English, Mathematics, Combined Science and History;
- ICT (Information Communication and Technology) is a cross-cutting subject that should be studied by all learners, although we will also offer a Computer Sciences 'O' Level;
- In addition, we want to offer Geography, a commerce subject (likely Principles of Accounts) and Physical Education;
- Disappointingly, we can only offer one vocational Zimsec subject in Wood-, Metal- or Food-Tech and Design or Agriculture. This is due to time constraints, with each subject requiring a 200-hour project in the final year.

Our learners would sit a minimum of seven 'O' levels and a maximum of 10 (timetable permitting). We will most likely split Form 3 into a more academic stream (taking up to 10 subjects) and a more practical stream.

We are very keen that the less-academic children remain engaged with school and learn practical skills. So we will try to offer a second vocational subject for those students. Time constraints mean that it is not possible to sit a Zimsec exam in more than one vocational subject, but learners may still be able to study the subject and get the vast majority of knowledge / skills. We could possibly provide a competency certificate that would have value to a potential future employer.

This is our planned start. We would love to do more longer term eg splitting into the three main sciences (although they could be very small class sizes), offering music etc. But in the KISS approach to life (Keep it Simple, Stupid), being resourced and equipped to teach our core subjects well must be our initial aim then hopefully we can expand on this later.

Working backwards, our decision on subjects has implications today as we are recruiting four more secondary teachers now to cover the addition of Form 2, but as they will teach up to 'O' level we also need them to fit with our requirements from Form 3 onwards. Each 'O' level subject needs a lead teacher (who will also be able to minor in a second subject). With 13 subjects planned (and two streams of learners), we are likely to need 13 teachers plus a head teacher in a year's time and we currently have just three. Ouch.

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We talk further about construction below, but we need to build at least one more classroom block early next year. The two extra classrooms we previously built to accommodate Form 2 have been re-purposed this year as a library and science lab (although the science lab has recently become a shared space with the marimba studio, much to Mr Dube's dismay!). All this must be packed away or re-homed until construction of a new classroom block is complete. Before schools resume on 9<sup>th</sup> January, we will also need to equip the Form 2 classes with tables, desks and textbooks. We have an urgent requirement for more vocational equipment, as currently learners are standing around for long periods waiting for their turn to use the tools. In addition, we still only have 20 computers, so learners are forced to share, which certainly isn't ideal. Although it is easy to argue that we already have much more equipment and resources than most rural schools, we want our benchmark to be much higher than this and for all the learners to have the facilities, books and equipment they deserve.

If anyone is at a loss what to buy at Christmas for a loved-one this year, how about donating for some vocational equipment or textbooks at Lesedi Secondary? We can provide a gift certificate showing your donation and what it will be used for. Fiona has already asked that I fund a few hacksaws and a vice or two for her Christmas gift!

The final big piece of the planning jigsaw concerns enrolment. The vast majority of Lesedi Primary Grade 7 learners will move across into Form 1 at Lesedi Secondary, leaving c35 spaces for other children to join from neighbouring schools. Needless to say, demand is vastly exceeding supply (the recent exam results haven't made this any easier!!). Sticking to our principles discussed above, we want to offer places to children from our rural catchment area first, but we will set some minimum grade 7 exam requirements. If we have any remaining space after the initial enrolment, then we will accept enrolments from Victoria Falls town but on the clear understanding that parents will have to pay full school fees with no sponsorship support available. Although many parents from town would like to send their children to Lesedi, they do have other options available to them.

Another slight aside to mention that our enrolment criteria are a bit more advanced than those Benson faced when he was enrolling at primary school. Without birth certificates, the only way to judge if a child was old enough to start school was to check that they could touch their opposite ear by stretching an arm over their head. Benson was a slow grower so he ended up starting school a year later than he should have done!

There is still a lot to be agreed and then delivered on but for the first time we have a clear plan on how we are going to support "our" kids up to the end of their 'O' level schooling. The final big question which we easily spent most of our time talking about was – how are we going to pay for all of this?!

### **The Finances**

Not very exciting I know but it's our biggest challenge and has given us a few sleepless nights. Fiona and I are both accountants so we know how money works, but two immovable issues became much more obvious this year.

**1. The scale of running a large operation.** Lower costs during covid lockdowns had masked the underlying growth in our spend which now means we need to raise \$15,000-\$20,000 per month to keep Lesedi open. That does seem a crazy amount but it's easy to get to:

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**Salaries: \$10k per month.** With four new secondary teachers in January, we will have over 40 staff working for us. 19 teachers, 4 nurses and assistants plus school secretary, cooks, security guards, gardeners and other helpers.

To employ over 40 people, mostly full time, for a \$10k monthly cost seems crazy to our western eyes, although some may argue that it is a lot cheaper to live in Zimbabwe. Well, not really. Petrol/gas is \$1.70 a litre or \$6.40/US Gall and a loaf of bread is at least US\$1. Victoria Falls town has two huge supermarkets, Pick 'n' Pay and OK Mart, but these are out of reach of most people as they are too expensive – a 300g block of cheddar cheese cost ZIM\$6500 during our last visit which at the best street exchange rate is still US\$10. People survive by not having any luxuries, eating very simple food like sadza (mealie meal). Those with a bit of land will grow their own food (rains permitting) and perhaps raise chickens. Everyone tries to supplement their income where possible. Zimbabwe is full of small-scale entrepreneurs.

As an employer, it is important to us that we pay fair wages. We ensure our teachers are paid a premium over government teachers, whilst also providing school meals and better accommodation options. We would love to pay more but we just can't afford this at the moment – hopefully we can be a little more generous once all the necessary construction has been completed. We've introduced employment contracts this year to formalise contractual benefits like maternity and sick pay. We know that it's tough for all staff and we hugely appreciate all the amazing things they do for Lesedi. Providing regular employment to over 40 people who then support their own families from the salaries is a big responsibility. It is extremely rare for us to receive a donation given with the express purpose of paying salaries. But without the teachers, nurses and support staff there would be no school or medical facility.

Economically, life in Zimbabwe is still incredibly tough. The country currently has the dubious record of the world's highest annual inflation rate. In October the inflation rate stood at 269%, surpassing Lebanon (162%), Venezuela (156%), Syria (139%) and Sudan (103%). This impacts everyone, including the charity, as we try to fund ever increasing costs. Fortunately for the Victoria Falls area, tourism is slowly recovering but it is still nowhere near pre-Covid levels.

**Food \$5k per month.** Our primary school learners are given porridge for breakfast and both primary and secondary learners receive lunch, which includes some protein of beans, vegetables or meat. The average cost is 50 cents a day per child which is very good value. But then you multiply this amount by 480 kids/staff and 20 days a month, and the total cost is \$4,800 per month on food. Big numbers. At home most families will generally just eat sadza with some relish if they can afford it. No other schools - especially rural ones - provide free food for students and staff. Providing nutritious food to growing children is important to us and we will continue to do so as long as we can afford it. But at the end of the day we have to pay salaries and other base costs of keeping the school going first, so we might have to cut back on free food provision if funds run low.

**Other \$2-5k per month.** Then there are all the other things – electricity, internet, airtime for phones, transport, welfare/medicines for those in need, washing materials, repairs etc etc. Mrs Mutori, Sister Irene and team do a great job keeping these costs to a minimum but to function this money needs to be spent.

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**2. Construction and equipment “hump”.** It never felt it at the time, but the primary construction costs were “easy”. One double classroom block plus a teachers cottage every couple of years as we added around 35 students per year all the way up to Grade 7. The clinic was a bit of a financial monster, but we managed to fund that primarily with a few very large specific one-off donations.

Then came the secondary school. Thank you again to everyone who helped cover the initial costs to build two double classroom blocks, two double vocational blocks, ablution blocks and four teachers cottages, along with new borehole, electricity connections and general infrastructure.

The challenge now is that an accelerated program of annual construction is needed to ensure the facilities keep up with the new secondary grades as they get added. Ignoring ‘A’ level requirements we have to build at least two further double classroom blocks (\$35k each), at least two more double teachers cottages (\$30k each) and an admin block / store rooms (at least \$40k). Each year we need to spend around \$10k on furniture for each classroom block and then another \$10k for all the text books and other equipment for each class.

So in addition to covering \$15-20k monthly operating costs we are aiming to raise \$100k-\$150k+ per annum over the next 3 years to have the base facilities we need to get to the end of ‘O’ levels in Form 4. (We don’t have the headspace to think of ‘A’ level requirements yet!!). These costs ignore two other key buildings. Firstly, a separate library, which will be needed once our classrooms are fully utilised. Secondly, a dedicated science lab – a dream that we are putting on hold while we complete the basics but will return to when we are able (or earlier if we get interest from a donor!).

The financial requirements are huge but if we can complete construction it will be an incredible achievement, enabling Lesedi Primary and Secondary schools to teach around 600 students from pre-school through to ‘O’ levels. We can then make a decision on further construction for ‘A’ levels if we decide this is feasible. Going forwards from this point we will always need some extra funds for construction / expansion but at a much lower level, and the spending will be far more discretionary than essential. The challenge remains to fund this final construction hump whilst also covering the operational monthly costs, but if we can keep the sponsorship income in line with the school growth we can potentially get to a place where we are financially self-sustainable – and we can sleep again!!

### **So what are we asking of you?**

We know we have already asked (repeatedly), and you have so generously helped us get to the amazing position we are in today. And we know things are tough for many of our supporters, with the cost-of-living crisis and stock markets falling. However if you are in a position to help us further, we are looking for help in the following areas.

**Sponsorships:** When we set up the sponsorship programme in 2017, we hadn’t fully appreciated how this would become the financial life blood to keep Lesedi alive. We now have over 350 children sponsored and have recently taken the difficult decision to increase our sponsorship costs for the first time in five years from \$300 annually to \$360 (or £240 plus gift aid in the UK). The total cost of educating/feeding/emergency welfare per child is closer to \$600 per annum but that is too much to ask – at \$360 we are covering 60% of our day to day costs. At the new sponsorship rate we will generate \$11k per month from sponsorship to put towards the \$15-20k per month operating costs.

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This in itself will be a massive relief, and a foundation for keeping Lesedi operating. If we can find sponsors for the 2023 intake of circa 70 new kids that will be another \$2k per month.

Adding 70 new sponsorships annually for at least the next 3 years is a huge challenge. A lot of you have so generously added to your initial one sponsor child with some of you incredibly up to a dozen (with one baker's dozen planned for next year). And I know you have all mentioned sponsorship to family, friends, neighbours, and anyone else who would listen. We are so grateful for what you have already done and ask you to please keep spreading the work personally and through your networks. We would be very happy to send information to anyone remotely interested ([fiona@ngoko.com](mailto:fiona@ngoko.com)).

**Visits by tour groups:** One of our main challenges is that due to Covid and other factors Lesedi is no longer visited by any regular tour groups. Previously we had visits from Road Scholar groups and Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT), which translated into a steady flow of new sponsors and supporters. Over 320 individuals / families have supported Lesedi so far and the majority of these started their support after visiting Lesedi as part of their safari itinerary. We would love for Lesedi to get back on some itineraries for small group tours. Many of you travel with Road Scholar and OAT so please keep mentioning that you would like to visit Lesedi during your trip.

**Investment funding:** As discussed above, we need to raise \$100k-\$150k+ each year for the next three years to complete basic construction and equip the school. It is a huge amount of money but will provide the facilities to run a high-quality educational establishment in an area that desperately needs it for many years to come. We know we have already asked a lot of all our supporters but any donations of extra funds would help to complete this amazing project. If you have a particular area that interests you (computing, vocational skills, music, special needs, science, anything!!) we can tailor your donation so that your money is spent on something close to your heart.

**Legacy funding:** We are gratefully aware that a few supporters have added Lesedi into their wills for legacy donations in the future. This is also something that we have done personally. Hopefully we are all going to live very long lives so any money is years away but just knowing that Lesedi could have a future windfall, however big or small, is wonderful to know. A legacy donation could provide emergency funds for medical treatment, sponsor a Lesedi student through university, improve IT equipment, add a new teaching facility or even help with the much dreamt of science block.

We know there are a myriad of other amazing organisations to support, we just hope that Lesedi could be in the mix as a possible beneficiary. And just to confirm that Fiona, Benson and I are locked into this for as long as we are practically able to do so, and all being in our early-mid 50s we hopefully have plenty of fuel in the tank yet. We are very aware of succession planning to ensure that the leadership and governance remains the best it can be into the distant future.

I know we keep saying this but just to reconfirm that every \$/£/€ you give us after bank and fundraising platform (PVF/CAF) fees goes in full to Lesedi. We have no costs for the UK charity with all our time freely given, and we cover all UK charity admin costs personally. For the avoidance of doubt, we also personally cover all our travel and other costs when we do our regular trips to Lesedi.

**Other income sources:** Currently 100% of Lesedi funding comes from private donations, for which we are immensely grateful. However we are aware of charitable trusts and foundations which provide ongoing support to education and health projects. If you know of or are involved in any

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organisation that could provide support to Lesedi we would appreciate any contact info or further details ([graeme@ngoko.com](mailto:graeme@ngoko.com)).

Apologies if all the finance is a bit heavy but the cute photos and stories of the kids go hand-in-hand with pressure to fund Lesedi into the longer term, and the next few years are critical to the long-term success of Lesedi. If we can get over this three-year construction hump then we are definitely into the sunny uplands and can deliver a long-term financially sustainable model. And it has been very cathartic writing this down – thank you!

Near the end now. After eight days of Lesedi and a few days safari in the middle - having the roller coaster of emotion, energy and reaffirmation we were on our final day. Birthday cake day. Yay. As everyone had been busy with exams the cakes had been bought-in this term rather than being baked in-house, but a sneak peak into the IT lab revealed 20 gorgeous cakes ready for serving up. Zimbabwe certainly doesn't do subtle when it comes to birthday cakes! The whole school gathered in the main hall to enjoy marimba playing, dancing and lots of happy birthday singing and clapping. Finally the cakes were carefully handed to a couple of children from each class and very cautiously taken back to individual classrooms.



*Birthday celebrations*



*Cake cutting*

The cake-cutting resulted in the most serious faces I've ever seen at Lesedi as intense scrutiny was given to the portion sizes. I think in future we should order cake-cutting lasers with <math><1\text{mm}</math> tolerance to ensure equal sizes! Each child then wolfed down their portion, with many somehow getting icing liberally splattered over their faces. We then enjoyed a final hour of sugar-filled hyperactive Lesedi overload before the children finally started to leave for home (by this stage most were being encouraged off the premises by exhausted teachers). We remained seated in the shady oasis of the Lesedi gardens, feeling a deep contentment for all that Lesedi already is...and anticipation for the journey that lies ahead.

Thank you for reading. Thank for your continued support, both financial and emotional, to Lesedi and to us all personally. To quote a phrase used regularly by Mrs Mutori, "We are together".

Have a wonderful holiday season,

Graeme & Fiona x



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After the heavy finances, we should finish with some uplifting photos...we have uploaded video clips from our visit to <https://www.facebook.com/lesedizim.org>, and these can also be viewed on the News page of our website <http://lesedizim.org/news/>.



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*Wishing you a happy and healthy holiday season  
with love and gratitude  
from the Lesedi Team*