

## Paleng and the Pandemic

*It is late December 2019. We are returning from the last Book Festival of the year. It has been a long journey home from HaSekants'i, a remote village deep in the mountains east of Maseru where we spent two days working with one of our partners, Possible Dreams Foundation, holding a Book Festival for children who have never owned a book in their lives.*

*We are talking about the wonderfully busy two days we had all had, reading and receiving books, telling stories, drawing, playing games and snacking on treats. Days those children will never forget.*

*A week earlier we had been down south in Mohale's Hoek, working in St. Camillus orphanage, holding another small Book Festival. We had also been making home-made recycled instruments with the children, and helping the social worker and the Peace Corps volunteer set up an in-house library. What a busy, happy, noisy time that was!*

Little did we know that in the short space of three months, the world as we knew it would change forever, and in the case of rural Basotho children, most decidedly for the worse.

Little did we know that Paleng would have to do some smart thinking, and quick-stepping in order to continue our work.

And little did we know that we would be finding still more Paleng's Angels in the course of that work, a wonderful and unexpected silver lining to a very dark cloud.

## What has the pandemic meant for Paleng, our children and Lesotho?

Over the last two years, the impact of the pandemic on Lesotho has been devastating in every conceivable way, and the direct impact on children has been enormous. We are aware of two significant areas of children's lives in which the devastation wreaked by Covid-19 has become starkly obvious.

### **Hunger**

Poverty has significantly deepened across the country. Hunger lives in every home. Unemployment across the country is significantly high and rising, and important industries such as tourism and the textile industries have not yet even begun to recover. Money that would normally come to grandmothers and carers from parents, family members, relatives living and working across the border in South Africa (more Basotho live outside the country than in it) has also dwindled as people have lost jobs. 'Foreigners' such as Basotho, have been particularly hard hit.

Malnutrition is increasing, and this has had an impact on children's physical and cognitive growth, and educational lives. Learning becomes much harder when you are hungry, have no energy, cannot focus and may be worried about your family.

*'M'e MaTello is grandmother and carer of three of Paleng library's regular attenders. Her daughter died last December after contracting Covid. With her died this small family's main source of income, leaving 'M'e MaTello alone to provide for her young growing girls.*

This story has been repeated all over Lesotho. Lesotho's health care system is fragile to say the least. If you get sick in the rural areas, you are almost certainly on your own in terms of proper medical support and help. If you get very sick with Covid-19, you are very likely to die.

### **Schooling**

Matters in Lesotho's education system were dire before covid reared its ugly head. Since then, schooling in Lesotho has deteriorated beyond imagining. In 2018/19 the teacher's strike, which saw children in school for only one week out of every month, set children back years in their already far-behind schooling.

The closure of schools due to Covid-19 restrictions in early 2020, with short periods of reopening up until August 2021 when school reopened 'properly' again, has seen children effectively falling off the education page altogether. No rural child has had access to any kind of home-based or other out-of-school learning except for very limited programmes run by NGOs. Rural children at least, were simply left out of schooling altogether.

### **How has Paleng responded?**

We just kept going. We did not roll over and give up in the face of this pandemic.

We believe passionately in our mission, which is to support young children's literacy acquisition in whichever ways we can. As part of this, we want to help grow a culture of reading amongst children, particularly those in rural Lesotho, since these are the invisible, 'forgotten' children whose lives are impoverished in every way.

They live in a bleak and deserted literacy landscape.

At Paleng we don't have the capacity to feed bodies, but we do have the capacity to feed minds, and these children deserve the very best we can give them.

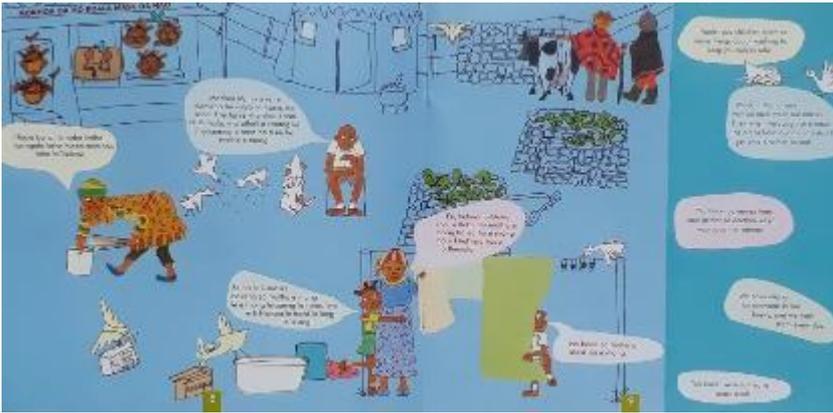
**So ...**

### **2020: Year One of the pandemic**

After the initial lockdown, and as the year wore on in its tortuous, challenging, unpredictable way, along with the rest of the world we came to understand that this was not going to be a short-term event that would be quickly resolved and over with. It was clear that the impact on children was going to be extended, and profound.

What did we do?





In July/August of 2020 we set about getting hundreds of posters and 10,000 Covid-19 comic books distributed as widely as possible.

And this is where Paleng's Angels come in ...

Up and down the country there were people who helped us get these posters and books to where they needed to be.

**Sister Theresa George from the Stephen Ferrando Centre and Special School,** helped us distribute posters in her local community of **Maputsoe** where she put posters up in the shops, businesses and factories. She distributed the comic book in her own school and local schools, and sent the books out into many schools of the surrounding areas. She brought the comic book to the attention of the Bishop of her diocese, who helped her get the books distributed through his network of priests throughout the District of Leribe.



*Women working in a shoe factory in Maputsoe*

*A feeding scheme run by Sister George in Maputsoe*



**'M'e Rethabile Lipholoana the social worker from St. Camillus orphanage and OVC Centre in Mohale's Hoek** held many book distribution sessions over a period of months for children in her local area, assisted by her team at the orphanage and

local out-of-school teachers. They put posters up wherever they could find a place, and so schools, clinics, the Chief's Office, shops and government buildings were all graced with the presence of our Covid-19 posters.



**Meri Hyoky and her team at The Hub in Morija** used their network and programmes to get these posters in places where adults could read them, and the Covid-19 books to children. They did this through their Covid-19 awareness programme for adults and elders in the community, and their Kid's 'Soup and Skills' programmes run every week. (Please visit their beautiful website to find out more about their important work <https://thehubatmorija.co.ls/>)



*An information session with local elders in Morija*



*Exploring the book in detail with a teacher at 'Soup and Skills'*

**Ntate Gerard Mathot** distributed books in local schools (pre- and primary) just outside **Maseru**, in local clinics and in the Pabalong Day-Care Centre, as well as in the Family Art and Literacy Centre with the help of Ntate Octavius Pheku. He also put posters up at key points in his local community.



**Ivan Yaholnitsky and his team** in at the **Bethel Business and Community Development Centre in Mount Morosi** distributed posters in and around Mount Morosi.

**Thato Pheelo** took books up to HaSekants'i village and surrounds, to the children there.

**Pieter Mierke and his team from Africa4Jesus in Thoteng village, Malealea** distributed the posters as far as Ribaneng, calling together chiefs from the villages in the surrounding areas. He distributed Covid-19 comic books through a Book Festival at his church which always attracts a large number of children from 6 or 7 local villages.



*Explaining the poster content to groups of chiefs in and around Ribaneng*





*The church at the Africa4Jesus mission base in Thoteng village not only distributed books, posters, masks and soap, but was a place where people could come to learn about the pandemic and safety measures, as well as to talk about the ways in which the pandemic was affecting their lives.*



Our very own **Ntate Khothatso from Paleng** put posters up in a number of local villages, in 'mokukhu' shops, shebeens, clinics and schools as far as he could get them, both in and outside our valley, and along the main road between Maseru and Mafeteng (one of Lesotho's larger towns).

*Ntate Mabele, head of the local clinic putting up posters*



*A shebeen is a useful place for a poster this important. Customers were permitted to come and buy, and take their liquor home.*



*'M'e MaPalesa's general store*



*A roadside 'mokhukhu'*



*Ntate Mutaoana's shop*



**Ntate Khothatso** also ran Book Festivals at Paleng library, Sebelekoane Primary School, Bots'oele Primary School and two other Primary schools outside our valley. Working alone he did all the work of organisation, preparation and facilitation that would normally have been shared with Marion. Wherever he goes his reputation amongst children grows, they cannot get enough of him! Teachers too, are always impressed with his

skill in working with children. One teacher even asked him to come and join their staff!

But these were Book Festivals with a difference!

- children were gathered together in safe spaces, outside, with sanitation and with as much social distancing as could be mustered, given that in African culture, personal distances are small, and close physical proximity to people is important.
- A mask and a large bar of soap were given out with every book. We commissioned **the making of over 500 hundred masks for children from the Women's Sewing group at Africa4Jesus**. We have 'M'e Keila to thank for her tireless efforts in supporting this group in this activity. **Ntate Bernhard Lang**, a long-standing friend of Paleng in Austria donated the funds for this.



- The book was explored in detail in order to ensure that important messages and pages with specific information were highlighted and explained to the children.

*Sometimes the only way of getting books to children was by wheelbarrow!*



The distribution of these comic books has continued throughout



2020 and into 2021 as new places to distribute have been explored. Thousands of children now have information in their homes that is directly useful to them and their families.

## 2021: Year Two of the pandemic

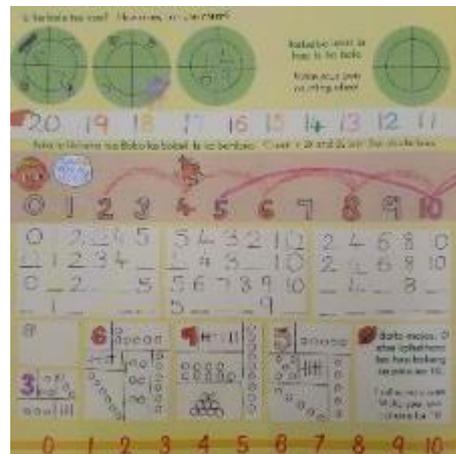
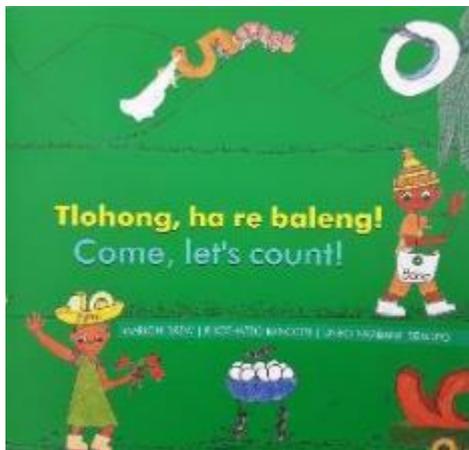
And then, in 2021, when everyone thought that this might prove to be a brighter, happier, more productive year in which economies would recover, people would slowly stop getting sick and dying, and children could go back to school properly, things if anything got worse for rural children.

So again, we set to work ...

- ✓ **'Tlohong, ha re baleng!' (Come, let's count)** Paleng's counting book came into being. This was an attempt to give children a book to have at home that will relate to something from school, and to give teachers a book that may be useful in their classrooms.

This book is aimed, as are all Paleng's books, at young children, this one targeting Grade R/Grade 1 children. It tells the wordless story of how two children come into possession of 10 eggs in strange and funny ways.

At the back is a section for older children which gives them little numeracy challenges in the basic operations. The book was translated by 'M'e Lineo, and was again distributed throughout Lesotho by our team of Paleng's angels who sent this little book far and wide!



Children received books at **The Hub in Morija** at the Kid's Soup and Skills sessions; they received books through **Sister Theresa Geroge's** network; through events held by **'M'e Rethabile Pholoane** and her team from St. Camillus in Mohale's Hoek; through **Ntate Gerard Mathot's** network of pre-schools and the Day Care Centre he supports; at Ha Sekants'i through the **Thato Pheelo's Possible Dreams Foundation**; through Ntate Pieter's team and their work through the Africa4Jesus mission; and through events organised and run by **Ntate Khothatso**, working with people in villages on the ground.

Added to the flock of Paleng's Angels this time around were three new very helpful people:

**Ntate Ts'epo Mohapi from Ha Machesetsa pre-school**, which is supported by Ntate Bernhard Lang.

**Ntate Thejane from Tholoane Primary School in Matsieng** who works with The Hub and took the books to two schools in Matsieng. The Hub also took more to very rural schools on top of the plateau.



**'M'e Shoeshoe, country Director NECDOL (Network of Early Child Development of Lesotho)**. She distributed them through her network of pre-schools across the country. 'M'e Shoeshoe gave a copy of the book to the CEO of Primary Education within the Lesotho Ministry. Through 'M'e Shoeshoe we made contact with her Zimbabwean counterpart, Naison Bhunhu from Zimbabwe Network of Early Childhood Development Actors (ZINECDA). He is having the book translated into both Shona and Ndebele.

**Ntate Khothatso** from Paleng worked with **Ntate Pieter Mierke and his Africa4Jesus team** of visitors to hold a Book Festival at a remote village, HaJobo, where a new pre-school was established this year. It was for this Festival and for another (see below) that **Jon Mierke**, from Photography and Video Services (Lesotho) joined the Paleng team in order to help us document the Book Festival activities and process. This will be invaluable in terms of helping potential funders to understand our work.





- ✓ Ntate Khothatso and Jon together ran a Book Festival at **Kokobe Primary School**, where Khothatso combined it with a session showing teachers there how to set up a little in-house school library. This will become a community library in the same way that the one at St. Camillus has. We worked on this project with Kathy Plath from **Laptops to Lesotho**, an organisation based in the US who so kindly funded all the activities there.



- ✓ Lastly, almost two years to the day since the last Book Festival of 2019, **Ntate Khothatso** ran a series of four village-based Book Festivals in villages throughout our valley, targeting the more remote villages whose children we may not have managed to reach before now. These Festivals which turned out to be ‘not-so-mini’, with up to 80 children gathering at each event in great excitement 😊 Altogether children from 20 villages received their books.

He used the opportunity these created to re-emphasise and model the important messages that were set out in the Covid-19 comic book.

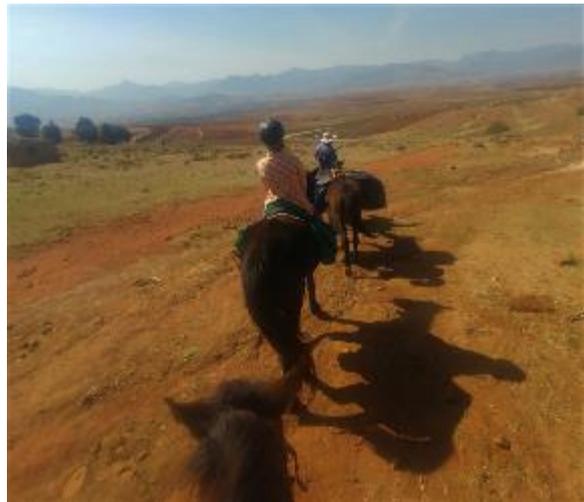
For these Festivals we chose as well, to offer a little support to local businesses in Malea-lea.

So once again we asked the Africa4Jesus sewing group to make more masks for those children who may have missed out the first time around. Through Paleng, Solon also supported these women in having both seshoeshoe dress-making, and

school uniform-making workshops. The hope is that the women can begin to sell their clothing locally, and to build their small business to the point of self-sufficiency.

We asked two women who run local shops in the village of Makhomalong to source and buy the food for the Festivals.

We asked local horse owners to provide a team of between 3 and 5 horses to transport the food, stationery, books and Khothatso and his assistant to these villages. It became evident that through this involvement these local people gained a greater insight into what we do in the valley, which will have positive spin-offs for future work in the valley.



*Ntate Molopo helped with the loading and off-loading of the horses, and Ntate Bokang from the **Malealea Lodge** kindly lent us saddles, bridles and saddle bags, kea leboha Ntate!*



*Ausi Kananelo, Ntate Khothatso's assistant Who is a regular library attender, had never ridden a horse before, she loved it!*



*Hundreds of books went up into the mountains on horseback*



*'Palone' is a favourite treat for children in our valley, it tastes even better with a book!*



- ✓ We translated some of the **African Storybook Project's** books into Sesotho for use in the 'KnowHow' Programme funded by the Roger Federer Foundation through SAIDE (South African Institute for Distance Education). This programme is aimed at supporting teachers to help young children make the transition from Grade R to Grade 1. Khothatso, Lineo and Marion worked as a team on this translation work. (You can download the English app 'KnowHow' to have a closer look at the whole project, it is an open education resource.)

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And so, as this long year draws to an end, we look back, and to our amazement and delight, in spite of all the destruction and mayhem this pandemic has wreaked, and in a strange way *because* of it all, Paleng is very much alive and kicking.

At the end of two very turbulent years, we are celebrating the fact that we are still doing the work which is so close to our hearts. Like you, we are not sure what lies ahead, but we have proven to ourselves that whatever happens, and with the faithful support of our funders, Paleng angels and of course our children, we can still do it. And so we shall.

Our plans for new books, reprints and more Book Festivals for 2022 are already in the pipeline, so please do watch this space

### **How can we ever thank you enough?**

- ❖ **Ntate Khothatso Ranoosi** a man in a million, who throughout these two difficult years, managed to hold Paleng together on the ground, organise meetings, Festivals, library set-up workshops and keep the many children who regularly visit both our library and his house interested in all things to do with books, rea leboha haholo-holo Ntate
- ❖ **our funders Solon** (Switzerland) for the funding of posters, new books, distribution, the sewing group, and Book Festivals; **Rahula** (England) for multiple Book Festivals, **Laptops 4 Lesotho** (US) for the work at Kokobe Primary School; **Bernhard Lang** (Austria) for soap and food for Festivals

- ❖ **Lydia Ovenden**, our book designer who turns texts and illustrations into magical things
- ❖ our **Paleng Angels** 'old' and new, long may you fly with us
- ❖ **'M'e Keila** and the Africa4Jesus sewing group
- ❖ **'M'e Lineo Nkabane-Sekopo** for her tireless and impeccably accurate and professional translation work
- ❖ **Jon Mierke** for taking photographs and crafting beautiful videos for us



- ❖ the **Paleng team** (Johannesburg) who work so hard behind the scenes.
  - ❖ The team at Jetline printers, **Thoko, Dineo and Africa** for always efficient and professional work.
  - ❖ **Kevin from Kayhil Freight**, without whose super-efficient freighting and couriering service Paleng books would still be sitting in Johannesburg, and we would still be mired in the depths of the Lesotho Revenue Service
- ❖ **Braam Naude** who **has** helped us to get 'Public Benefit Organisation' with the South African Revenue Service, thus making it easier for us to attract local funding, navigating us with skill through the bureaucratic minefield of SARS. We are in the final stages of this process.
- ❖ **Book Dash South Africa** provided us with hundreds of carefully chosen books, many of which were distributed along with our own Paleng books, thank you!
- ❖ We would like to pay a small tribute to **Tessa Welsh** who was our first contact at the African Storybook Project, and who set us on the path of producing our own Paleng bilingual picture storybooks. She tragically passed away in 2020, but will live long in our memories for her unwavering support, and for her contribution to the literacy lives of Basotho children.

**Our spirits are still high, our hearts still hopeful, our dreams still big, and although it is at the moment a very cloudy, murky one, the sky is still our limit 😊**

Should you wish to contribute to that dream, please help us with whatever you can. Every little counts. It really does. You can do this through our website, or by contacting me directly.

Salang ka khotso, keep safe and well!

Marion

Website: <https://palengplaceofstories.org>

Facebook: <https://web.facebook.com/PalengChildrensCentre>

Cell phones: Khothatso +266 5091 2123 Marion: +27 76 740 2374,

Statistics regarding infections, deaths, recoveries, vaccination rates in Lesotho are at best unreliable, given the fact that little regular widespread testing and monitoring has and is taking place. The numbers of people being tested and tracked are so low that there is no available true picture. The only source of updates is on this social media page:

<https://web.facebook.com/nacosec>

In our valley people have been falling ill and dying, but it is not certain that these can be attributed to covid-19.

Fortunately, our children, as is the world-wide trend, seem to have escaped the brunt of the pandemic in terms of infections, and we sincerely hope that this will continue to be the case going forward into whatever waves and variants may lie ahead.

The Lesotho vaccination programme has rolled out very slowly, and there is a great deal of misinformation. This has played into general ignorance and suspicion about vaccines and vaccination, and into subsequent resistance to being vaccinated. However, the opportunity to be vaccinated is there, and we are happy to report that everyone we know and work with has been vaccinated and is as safe as they can be.