

April 2016



NEWSLETTER

A Busy Start to the New Year

We noted some of the differences between the Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars in our last Newsletter, but the first quarter of *our* new year 2016 has seen much positive activity in SENTigray, our daughter NGO in Mekelle.

Masho Kidanemariam, SENTigray's director and his staff have pushed forward with the Talking Textbook project, and in the UK, Ian and Jan Draper have successfully negotiated for funds to provide long-needed qualified supervisory staff for the Blind School.

Ian has just returned from visiting Mekelle at Easter, helping to mentor and guide operations at SENTigray, and has provided copy for this Newsletter which is right up to date.

We hope you enjoy reading it - none of this could happen without you, our supporters.

TALKING TEXTBOOKS

Proceeding apace.....

Although SENEthiopia and SENTigray are committed to supporting children with all sorts of Special Needs, what we can actually achieve is limited by the resources we have, and currently most of these are focused on the project to provide Talking Textbooks. So we make no apology for devoting much of this Newsletter to a short history of the project, to give an idea of the effort that has gone into it so far. Gary's account starts [here](#) (click) or go to page 4. (Keep reading!)

BRIEFING: About us and our Mission

SENEthiopia is a registered charity created by concerned individuals with the aim of supporting children in northern Ethiopia who are classified as having special educational needs (SEN).

In Ethiopia, children with SEN do not have access to specialised education and are often disregarded by society. SENEthiopia seeks to change this mentality and advocate for these students who have little or no voice of their own, and who, without support, have little chance to show their ability.

This organization firmly believes that every child deserves to receive a primary and secondary education. It should be the inalienable right of every child to obtain an education to the maximum of his or her ability, despite any physical or mental handicap.

Ethiopiaid – a targeted donation

Ethiopiaid is a philanthropic arm of the Reed group, the UK employment agency and HR business. Ethiopiaid's aims almost exactly match those of SENEthiopia and we have been keen to develop links with them for some time.

Ethiopiaid encouraged us to become involved in the Big Give following meetings between the chair of Ethiopiaid, Alex Chapman, and Ian and Jan late in 2014. They were our sponsors in the Big Give providing match funding of £3000, bringing the final figure we raised in December 2015 to more than £15,000. This fantastic total was a direct result of the tremendous work of many of our supporters who dug deep in their pockets and encouraged friends, work colleagues and family to do likewise. Towards the end of last year Ian and Jan met again with Alex and Lisa Cousins (Executive Director) to discuss other potential funding possibilities aimed directly at the Blind School.

We are delighted to say that, as a result of that meeting and a subsequent application for funding, **SENTigray has been given £16,000 by Ethiopiaid to fund three new posts at the school.** These appointments were developed specifically to begin to challenge the inertia and resistance to change that has been a consistent feature throughout our long involvement with the school. The three post holders will be managed from outside the school by Masho and the other SENTigray staff. Each will be working in an area where we believe the need for change is urgent, namely Safeguarding, ICT and Resources.

We are thrilled to say that these three posts have now been filled, and Ian has just returned from a visit to Mekelle to see how they are getting on. Here he describes what he found:

Working for SENTigray to improve conditions at the Blind School are Eliita Alene, in charge of safeguarding, Abel Leake, in charge of IT, and Darge Abadi, in charge of resources for learning.

They seem to have made an excellent start.

Eliita is working with Solomon, the Principal, to ensure that the dormitories are segregated, (she has already managed to persuade Solomon to separate the youngest children into male and female dorms) and that each year, depending on how many girls and boys are enrolled, the requisite number of dormitories is available. At the moment, because there are more girls, their dorms are overcrowded, whilst there are empty spaces in the boys' dorms. Eliita has also, jointly with the head nurse, just completed training on personal hygiene with proctors and cleaners. After the training the children were examined and 27 children were found to have personal hygiene problems (head

lice, sores etc).

Darge has reorganised the resources room with equipment and supplies set out on shelves and a section of the room for music resources specifically. He has laid out tables and chairs in the centre for teachers to come and plan. He has also met with teachers to discuss the use of the teaching aids in support of their lesson plans. There are 13 Perkins brailers which, according to Darge, are functioning. They all have dustcovers. However, he cannot use a Perkins and he cannot write Braille. He is asking for training in both. We talked about asking teachers to submit their lesson plans to Darge so he can discuss with them the resources available and the resources needed.

There is also the issue of resources for the mainstream schools for grades 5 - 8. Ian suggested that Darge (and later the whole team) accompany one student to school for a day to experience the learning from the child's perspective. They thought it would be very useful for them to develop their roles.

There are now seven computers set out in what was once the TV room, very organised and tidy. Abel is currently running JAWS training for grades 7 and 8 students (JAWS is an audible screen reader for the visually impaired). There are plans for broadband to be paid for, we think, by the school budget, but there is a problem at the moment with capacity and demand. Ian suggested it would be good if students in the earlier grades could learn the keyboard. Darge agreed to mock up a keyboard on cardboard and get the teachers to provide Braille letters so the children can practise. If we can get old keyboards and put Braille letters on them they could be useful for familiarisation.

Darge and Abel have also created a database of all the children at the school with photos and relevant information. That's Abel (left); Elilta and Darge (right) below.



Talking Textbooks – the full story

Gary Knamiller, project leader, writes:

It is a bit of a mystery how the idea of audio textbooks got started. My first recollection is of Ian showing me a beat up, black and white, basically trial copy of Biology: Student Textbook Grade 9. I think that was soon after his annual Easter trip to Mekelle in 2014.

A bit of history: a friend at Christchurch in Ilkley, Steve Amos, revealed that he was a 30 year long volunteer sound engineer for Ilkley Talking Newspapers, every week producing some 100 CDs of edited copies of the Ilkley Gazette for the visually impaired. He got the association to let us use its studio for free, and we began very experimentally in August and September 2014 to do our first recordings; Helen Papworth, a former Ethiopian VSO, reading Grade 9 Civics, and me on Grade 9 Biology.

Civics could be read without much editing, but Biology was a nightmare. All those diagrams, illustrations and activities such as crossword puzzles and long columns of matching word exercises. Most of Unit 2 on cell biology, for example, was about the structure and use of the microscope. This issue of editing is ongoing now as Masho and Aklilu, the new Talking Textbook Coordinator, struggle to decide what to leave out of every one of the 50 plus primary textbooks they are recording.



We uploaded our grade 9 Biology and Civics onto CDs. Biology alone took some 11 CDs and Civics took eight. We 'housed' them in CD sleeve wallets, having asked Lucy, one of our Trustees who is a VI specialist, to print us out braille labels chapter by chapter to stick on the CDs. We took these to Mekelle in November 2014. The sound was good, the kids thought they were super, but access to chapters and sections within chapters was very difficult, and the braille labels were falling off. Clearly CDs wouldn't work.

This led Ian and I to trawl every electrical/electronic shop in Mekelle looking for a suitable audio player. We came up with a smallish radio that took a memory stick, but not an earplug for individual use, and although cheap it was very bulky. Then we found headphones that took a small memory card. Although bulky and a bit pricey, you could listen in private, so to speak, but they lacked the facility to share listening in a small group.

Subsequently Sarah and Brian Connell on their visit in January 2015 bought one of each and brought them back to the UK, see the picture, right. We played around with them, but they were just too cumbersome, hard even for us to navigate, and memory sticks and cards are small and easy to lose. Frustrated, our search for an adequate MP3 audio player continued.



In September 2015 we recorded grade 10 Biology and Civics at the Ilkley Talking Newspaper studio, again with Steve Amos who spent hours on this, particularly in editing the sound files. Helen Papworth read Civics and Professor Mike Dixon (retired pathologist so he knew how to pronounce all those complex biological terms) and I shared the Biology, Mike doing the major part in his lovely English speaking voice.

In September I emailed Masho in despair about not being able to find an adequate audio player. He immediately got back to me saying, “Have you ever heard of these things called audio bibles?” He attached a couple of websites. Bingo! I immediately rang this Christian company in Georgia USA to be greeted with a, “Hi, bless you brother!” They rushed off a sample MP3 with the whole Bible uploaded, music and all, first in English and then in Amharic (the Ethiopian national language), all on the same audio player.

It was small, the size of a mobile phone, and could be played for a group as well as accommodating an earplug. To top it off it was solar powered. Navigation through the Bible was a perfect match to navigation through different textbooks. Just upload on each audio player a Civics, Biology, Geography, History textbook etc. (up to 6 textbooks) in place of the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament, the chapters within a textbook in place of the books of the Bible, and then the sections within chapters in place of numbered verses within a book. Unbelievable: six textbooks on one audio player the size and weight of a mobile phone, and navigation with only 6 buttons!

Registering my delight back to Georgia, I got the response again: “Bless you brother. You can upload your textbooks, but we will need to have at least the New Testament on at the end of the recording.” Well, that was the end of Georgia.

Thank goodness, the other audio Bible company, Megavoice, with head office in Australia, sales office in Northern Ireland, uploading technicians in Israel, and production facility in Hong Kong, was not quite so evangelical. Even though they sign emails with “Blessings” they were willing to give us blank ‘Audio Players’ with no Bible passages. Navigation on 6 buttons, speaker for groups, individual earplug, solar panel, charging through mains were all there.

We bought 50 of these audio players called Envoy S from Megavoice, sent our grade 9 Biology and Civics recordings to Israel via Dropbox for formatting in preparation for

uploading. The formatted recordings were then Dropboxed back to Northern Ireland for uploading onto 25 of the Envoy S. This left 25 blank Envoy S for uploading Masho's grade 5 recordings when we got to Mekelle.

As all this was going on SENEthiopia trustees started to wrestle with the complications of The Big Give to raise money for the Talking Textbook project. Lucy and Jan, bless them, took it on against some scepticism, it must be said. They persevered and, with the generous donations of time and money by so many 'friends of SENE', miraculously came out the other end in January 2016 with over £15,000 or around half a million Ethiopian Birr. What an effort by all concerned. Bless all of you... hey I'm really getting into this 'blessing' thing!

In between all the hectic business of fund raising in the autumn of 2015, Peter Graham and I hoofed it off to Mekelle carrying the 50 Envoy S together with the cables and instructions for uploading recordings. Things happened rather quickly in Mekelle. By our second day with Masho we had interviewed and selected Aklilu Kiabrha for the post of Talking Textbook Technical Coordinator (an excellent choice), and Peter had mastered how to upload the grade 5 English textbook that Aklilu, in fact, as a volunteer had co-recorded. That was a great technological feat by Peter, and we celebrated accordingly. This technological breakthrough for us was to be matched only the next day by Peter teaching Aklilu and Hadush (Masho's sighted assistant) how to upload, and when they accomplished this on their own that was an even bigger cause for celebration - well, a modest coffee at Masho's local.



Hadush, Masho, Aklilu and Gary, October 2015

In the autumn before Pete and I arrived Masho and Hadush had wrangled permission from the Tigray Regional Education Bureau (TREB) to use its sound studio and the services of Ato Hagos, the sound engineer, and had recruited 26 volunteers to record an initial set of primary textbooks. When they ran into difficulties Masho called on his 'techy' friend in

Mekelle who runs a commercial sound studio to sort it out. Taking this initiative is so very encouraging.

It also has to be said that in concert with all this happening, Peter was helping the team to set up the new computer he had brought from England, and working with Masho on how to use the VI friendly smart phone he also bought and brought for Masho. Thank goodness for one retired, tenacious BBC engineer.

We trialled the Envoy S uploaded with biology and civics at Ayder High School. We had a training session with around 14 of the visually impaired students, some of the sighted staff and a representative from the local Woreda (district), and left the Envoys with the students for 6 days. On the 6th we returned for feedback. The first comment, as translated by Masho, was, "These (audio players) have restored our eyesight." How wonderful, how humbling, how worthwhile! They had easily mastered how to navigate between books and chapters etc. They also fed us some concerns they had about the recordings which we took on board for subsequent recordings.



We also took the Envoy S to the Blind School and had a super morning with the older students. Typical of what happened: I put my finger on top of Hagos's (one of the students) finger on the Envoy S 'keyboard' to help him feel how to navigate. Within three minutes he gently lifted my finger off his and said, "I can do it now." He was much faster than me, not surprisingly, and immediately started to teach another student.

Hagos and Gary, listening to the Envoy

The current state of play: with the £15,000 plus, mostly generated through The Big Give, SENethiopia has purchased and received 400 Envoy S from Megavoice. Together with shipping costs and import taxes (manufactured in Hong Kong) each audio player cost just over £23. Friends Kathy and Robert Graham-Harrison took 50 of them to Mekelle in January. We are in the process of taking out the remainder to Mekelle and should manage it with Ian going out at Easter and others this summer.

Out of the £15,000 also comes the Technical Coordinator's salary for two years, the money for buying charging adapters for the Envoy S, little carrying bags designed specifically (by another small NGO in Mekelle) to hold the audio player, and fees for readers.

Masho reports that Aklilu and colleagues have recorded some twelve textbooks for grades 5 and 6. They have also set out a work schedule and budget, subject to alterations as realities arise, for getting all of the primary grades 5-8 textbooks recorded, uploaded and distributed to visually impaired students throughout Tigray by the beginning of next year.

Working closely with the TREB, they have held their first workshop for Woreda (district) staff in preparation for the official launching of the project. The central theme that Masho communicated to participants was how the audio textbooks open the curriculum to visually impaired students. How the audio players work and the responsibilities Woredas have for executing the distribution and management of the Envoy S was also a large part of the workshop program.

The project goal is to provide audio textbooks for all visually impaired students in grades 5 through to 12 within two years starting in January 2016. As there are over 2,000 visually impaired students in mainstream schools throughout Tigray at present, another 1600 Envoy S need to be purchased and shipped to Mekelle with all the potential bureaucracy, customs and import duties that that entails. Masho is negotiating with the TREB to provide the funding for these 1600 audio players.

In addition the project is committed to providing braille textbooks, at least one copy of each subject, in all schools, primary and secondary throughout Tigray. Everyone agrees that visually impaired students must keep practising their braille reading skills. Otherwise, there is a real danger that audio textbooks could diminish the enthusiasm of students and teachers for continuing with braille.

In conclusion I feel really positive about the project. The SENTigray team is young, dynamic and committed. They have a good working relationship with the special education needs staff in the TREB. They have many contacts within Mekelle for getting things done. They have identified potential donors outside of the TREB. Of course, we need to give them all the encouragement we can, and technical support too e.g. in the development of a monitoring and evaluation programme.

Thanks loads to all in the SENEthiopia community and beyond who have given money and time to this Talking Textbook Project. If successful, how far might this idea go?

Visiting Mekelle last week, Ian confirms that the project is indeed going well. He reports:

The REB will pay 2 million Ethiopian Birr (£70,000) for MP3 players,

The Grade 5 textbooks are complete and uploaded. Grade 6 are being finalised, all reading is complete. Recording of grades 7 and 8 is about to start. They will be paying the readers who are volunteers a per diem (daily rate).

The *Peace Corps* in Mekelle will provide twelve volunteers to read the grades 10 - 12 textbooks, with Gary as an email mentor for them. *The Peace Corps* are also offering a volunteer to work full time with SENTigray.

STOP PRESS – Current Visit

Our Chairman Ian Draper returned from Mekelle a week ago, and found much encouraging progress:

1. 3 new staff recruited and started work
2. A room at the Blind School dedicated to IT, and equipped with donated computers, being managed by the new IT supervisor
3. Resources supervisor planning with teachers and helping provide resources
4. Safeguarding supervisor working with proctors and cleaners
5. All with approval and co-operation of Blind School Principal Solomon and TREB
6. New larger offices for Masho and his staff provided by TREB within their building
7. Progress with acquiring a further tranche of Envoys (Talking Textbook players)
8. Arrangements being negotiated with TREB for managing TT project in the field

All the above are reported more fully elsewhere in this Newsletter.

Future Planning – Ian and the SENT team discussed the following proposals for future projects:

Firstly, the deaf students. Ian agreed to visit the school for the deaf in Derby with an introductory letter from Masho to get some ideas for a project that could enable deaf students to progress beyond grade 8; currently, few go further than this.

Secondly, Braille literacy and Braille textbooks. SENEthiopia and SENTigray aim to get one Braille copy of each textbook in each subject and at each grade in every (mainstream) school.

Thirdly, promotion of the full curriculum entitlement for all students. (To be clear: currently blind students at mainstream schools are almost all barred from classes teaching maths, science and physical education, on the grounds that it is too difficult for them to understand.) Masho will start a campaign at the REB to get the government to legislate for this, then identify the problems that must be solved and seek appropriate support to ensure this is delivered within five years.

Other news from the Blind School:

A number of different groups have contributed to the improved conditions at the Blind School during the time we have been involved there. Engineers without Borders from Washington University, St Louis, USA have undertaken several engineering projects, but are now moving on. We'll be sorry to see them go.

However, students from an Israeli chapter of EwB are continuing to manage garden and produce development.

Supporting a programme to test all children for visual impairment

SENethiopia, SENTigray and the REB are facilitating a new research programme to be run by Dr Usha Dhanesha as part of her Master's thesis at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Usha is an eye specialist, formerly working for the NHS in Coventry.

SENTigray has discovered that Visual Impairment and uncorrected refractive error (ie correctable with spectacles) are not being identified by any screening programme in Tigray region, and there are no consistent or clear strategies to treat children who have visually disabling eyesight. We believe impaired vision and hearing is leading to many students dropping out from school.

Usha is planning to go Mekelle to test 1000 grade 7 students in 7 different schools. SENTigray will facilitate and coordinate this project in Mekelle.

Lee Whitworth and Melanie Williams, SENethiopia trustees, will shortly be leaving for Mekelle to help Masho and his staff to set up and organise the testing programme.

The project aims to estimate prevalence and causes of visual impairment in school children and to train teachers to screen for visual impairment using a smart phone based system called PEEK Acuity.

Objectives

- *To measure the prevalence of visual impairment in school children in a primary and secondary school using PEEK*
- *To understand the causes of visual impairment*
- *To train teachers in screening for visual impairment*
- *To provide spectacles for children who require them following an eye examination by an Optometrist*
- *To understand how many children need support due to low vision*

More about this in our next Newsletter

From the streets of Mekelle.....



Camels are commonly used as beasts of burden, on farms, and for transporting salt slabs cut from the Afar desert region north east of Mekelle.

OUR THANKS, as always, to all our valued donors and supporters without whom we wouldn't be able to continue this work. Lots of you have contributed not only to the textbook project but others we've completed; and, as hinted elsewhere in this newsletter, there are other SEN fields in Tigray we need to get into if all children in Ethiopia are to have equal access to education.



Gift Aid declaration

Name of charity or CASC: **SENEthiopia**

Please treat

- The enclosed gift of £ ----- as a Gift Aid donation; **OR**
- All gifts of money that I make today and in the future as Gift Aid donations; **OR**
- All gifts of money that I have made in the past 4 years and all future gifts of money that I make from the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations.

Please tick the appropriate box

You must pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6 April one year to 5 April the next) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that the charity or Community Amateur Sports Club will reclaim on your gifts for that tax year.

Donor's details

Title ----- Initial(s) ----- Surname -----

Home address -----

Postcode ----- Date -----

Signature -----

Please notify the charity or CASC if you:

- Want to cancel this declaration
- Change your name or home address
- No longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains.

Tax claimed by the charity or CASC

- The charity or CASC will reclaim 28p of tax on every £1 you gave up to 5 April 2008.
- The charity or CASC will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 you give on or after 6 April 2008.
- The Government will pay to the charity or CASC an additional 3p on every £1 you give between 6 April 2008 and 5 April 2011. This transitional relief for the charity or CASC does not affect your personal tax position.

If you pay Income Tax at the higher rate, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self Assessment tax return if you want to receive the additional tax relief due to you.