

THE THORN TREE PROJECT

The Thorn Tree Project is the early education component of the Sereolipi Nomadic Education Trust (SENET). It is comprised of fourteen preschools. Five of these preschools are nomadic and move with families as they migrate through the more remote parts of Samburu. The remaining nine schools are located in central areas of the Samburu province, where families tend to congregate for months at a time.



Students from one of the fourteen preschools supported by the Thorn Tree Project. Their teacher stands in the back, holding a future Ndonyo Wasin student.

The preschools are managed by a small committee of women and men elected by the families in their community. They work with SENET and Ndonyo Wasin Primary School's head teacher, Paul Lepartingat, to insure the children are being well taught and are receiving a full meal at lunch each day. Each preschool has one teacher whose job it is to oversee the instruction of the 25-35 children who go to school. The students are generally between the ages of 4 and 10. The age often varies, as some children may enroll later due to the needs of individual families.



A preschool teacher leads a lesson on addition under the shade of acacia branches.

Each member of a Samburu community has an important role to play—be it the *morani*, warriors who protect the people and livestock from wild animals and poachers, to small children who help look after goats or help with household chores. Thus, a family’s choice to have one or more of their children attend preschool, and then eventually primary school, indicates a sacrifice in the short run, in service of the long term success, stability and health of the greater Samburu community for generations to come.

At first, parents were skeptical of the idea of preschool for their children, because of their own inexperience with schools, and the need for their children’s help at home and with the cattle. In an effort to incentivize preschool attendance, Samburu elders and SENET decided to give free lunches to children who went to preschool. As a result, families were more amenable to the idea, seeing this preschool initiative as grounded in helping the Samburu community. Food is limited in the Samburu region, so when SENET provides lunch for students, it is, in effect, a very clear sign of

SENET's goal to nurture both the minds and bodies of its students. Samburu mothers prepare these meals for preschool students and their teacher. (They also receive a small stipend for this effort). Over time, parents' receptiveness towards the preschools has grown and blossomed into respect and the abiding belief in their ability to ensure the survival of the Samburu in the future. Parents have observed their children's growing academic abilities as tools to actualize this goal of long-term communal sustainability.



Lunch for students is prepared in this *manyatta* each by Samburu mothers whose children attend preschool under the shade of acacia trees and branches.

Teachers in the preschools are appointed by SENET and are Samburu. They usually have had education up to Standard 8, but due to economic and educational constraints have not had the opportunity to receive secondary education. They work in conjunction with Mr. Lepartingat to make sure the children are being taught the basics they will need in order to begin Standard 1 at Ndonyo Wasin.



Preschool students sit patiently and are extremely attentive to their teacher's instruction.

Instruction is in Samburu and English. Children in preschool learn the English alphabet and the basics of addition and subtraction. While the children do not speak English yet, the introduction to the alphabet and the sounds the letters make lays the groundwork for later academic learning. Paul Lepartingat oversees the instruction of nine of the fourteen preschools. As Head Teacher of Ndonyo Wasin Primary School, he provides support and guidance to the teachers and gets a sense of the developing preschoolers who will one day attend his school. Once a month Paul Lepartingat visits each of the nine preschools to observe the teachers and students in action and make sure everything is going well.



Mr. Lepartingat observes a preschool teacher in action.



Visiting with the young children, "Mr. Paul" gets to know his future students.