



# 2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

## 2020: A CLIFFHANGER OF A YEAR

2020 was a time like no other. A year that we originally thought would be marked by celebrating 20 years of impact soon became a critical juncture in which the lessons we learned over the past two decades helped us respond to the greatest educational crisis in recent history.

Amid the chaos, you, our committed investors, stepped up to offer your support while navigating pandemic-related challenges of your own. Because of your generosity, we were able to keep students learning as the pandemic at its peak left 1.6 billion children out of school. Now, we must continue to support distance learning for millions of out-of-school children while also helping students who have been left behind catch up. This is no easy feat. As the pandemic spreads, families who were financially struggling even before the pandemic are increasingly faced with tough decisions. We know from experience that these tough decisions often result in students, particularly girls, dropping out of school. And disrupted education for students in Grades 1 through 3 means they may never develop the skills they need to learn how to read.

If 2020 were a book, it would have ended with a cliffhanger: ***Will the hopes and dreams of an entire generation of children fade away, along with the opportunity for them to catch up on their studies and master the ability to read?***

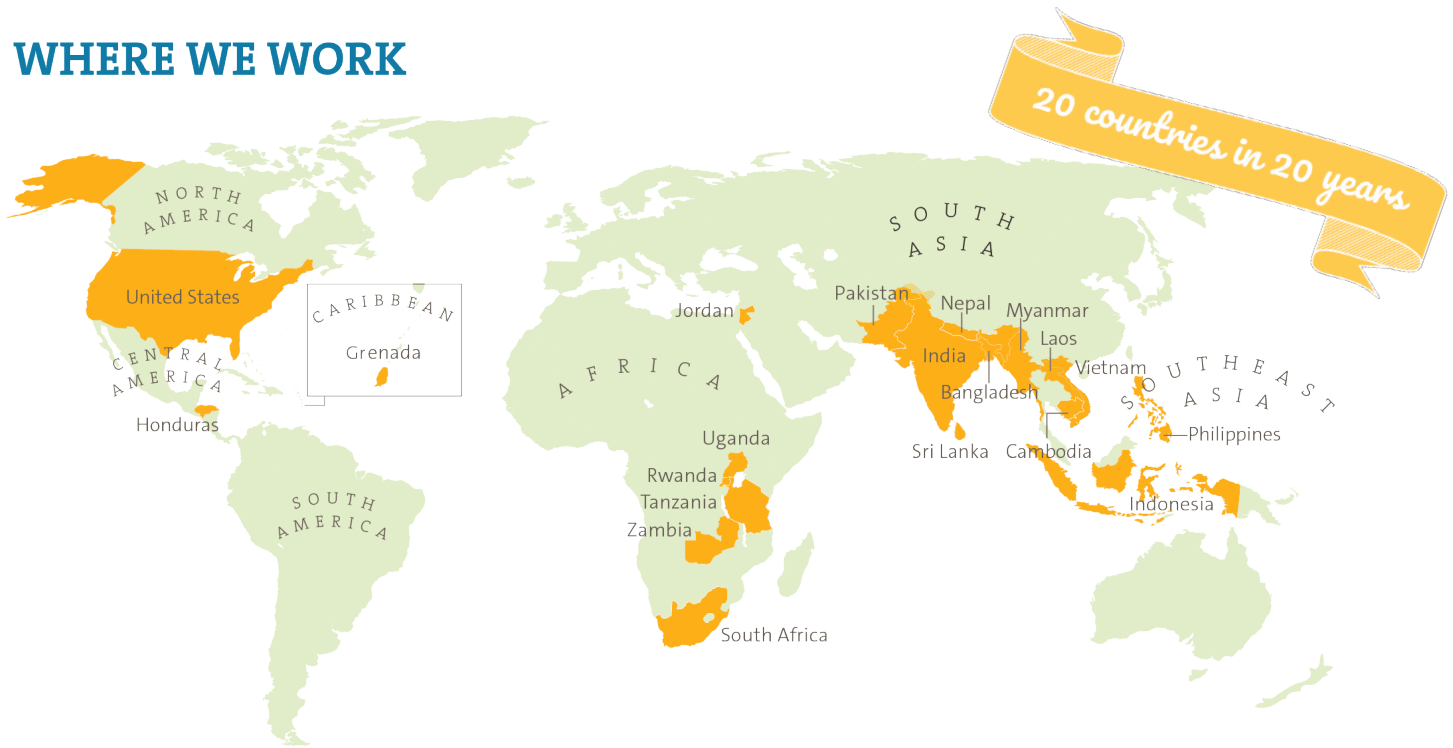
Together, we will change the story for millions of children in the most vulnerable communities. By doubling down on our key strategies and learnings from the past year, we will move toward our goal of benefiting 40 million children by 2025. This report highlights some of the most significant and promising achievements that will serve as building blocks for our future success, including:

- Adapting our literacy and gender equality programs for remote learning
- Significantly expanding our book publishing portfolio to include new languages and themes
- Researching ways our gender equality work can serve boys and continue to scale
- Engaging with leaders and advocates across the globe to promote our mission

We are so grateful for your commitment to keeping children learning. Our collective belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children® unites us and makes us stronger. Together — letter by letter, word by word, and line by line — we are creating a new chapter for young learners in which they are equipped to reach for their dreams and become tomorrow's teachers, health care workers, climate scientists and community leaders.



## WHERE WE WORK



## OUR REACH

**20 Million+**  
children benefited  
to date

**40,700+**  
Partner communities  
to date

**20**  
Countries benefited  
to date

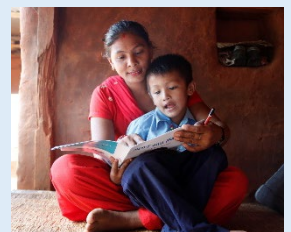
*These figures are estimates as of the end of 2020 and have yet to be audited. They are therefore subject to change as we gather more data.*


### EDUCATION ENDURES: OUR COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

As an organization that works directly in government schools, primarily engaging with teachers and students to provide our learning interventions, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures around the world posed a major challenge for Room to Read in 2020. We reacted swiftly and creatively, pivoting our programs to be delivered remotely. We remained committed to students in need during a time when they were at great risk of falling behind in their education or dropping out entirely.

In recognition of our efforts, Room to Read was one of three recipients awarded the *2020 David M. Rubenstein Special Response Award* of the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program. This award recognizes Room to Read as a best-practice model for other organizations for our responsiveness and outstanding work addressing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent social unrest.

The ways that we adapted both of our programs are detailed in the following sections.





# GIRLS' EDUCATION HIGHLIGHTS

## ADAPTING LIFE SKILLS CURRICULUM FOR RADIO

As we continue reaching secondary school girls in the coming years, we are expanding our capabilities in remote learning methods, including radio. We conducted a landscape analysis of key actors and best practices in radio programs for girls' education and social norms change. The landscape analysis provided approaches for delivering radio programs in remote, low-income settings, and recommendations for developing radio programming for secondary school girls. We also partnered with Population Media Center (PMC), a non-governmental organization that specializes in developing educational entertainment through serialized radio programming to integrate the use of radio into the delivery of our life skills education curriculum.

## INCREASING OUR GENDER AWARENESS AND SENSITIVITY

One of the organizational priorities in our 2020-2024 strategic plan, [Vision 2025: Ending the Impossible](#), is to strengthen our commitment to creating an ever more gender-sensitive organization. Last year, we drafted a gender equality policy, created trainings and webinars for staff, and developed a global framework for considering gender in all areas of our operations. Our policy implementation will allow us to share baseline report results as well as progress with external stakeholders.

## ADAPTING THE LIFE SKILLS ASSESSMENT FOR BOYS

In 2019, Room to Read launched a formative research study in **Cambodia** to help inform our strategy to engage boys and create greater gender equality, through education. In 2020, we undertook a study in collaboration with *Promundo* and *Gender and Development for Cambodia* (GADC).

We administered our current life skills assessment to 90 Grade 7 boys to identify how we need to adapt our existing instruments to be relevant and reliable for boys and to understand how boys' life skills compared to those of girls in the same context (referencing an earlier survey of 1,199 Cambodian girls in the same grade). We also included new measures specifically for boys, including attitudes toward violence, masculinity and toughness, self-sufficiency, as well as questions to understand the relationship and family dynamics for boys. We developed these items in collaboration with *Promundo*, building on their extensive programmatic and measurement experience in male attitudes toward gender, and then we translated and adapted them for the Cambodian context. The data reveal that boys and girls both hold gender-inequitable attitudes, albeit with different emphases across domains.

In addition to the survey, we also piloted focus group discussions with boys, girls, and male and female caregivers. Based on the initial round of piloting, we refined key questions to strengthen the focus group discussion. The second round of field testing provided us with a deeper understanding of the gender dynamics in play to inform our program and measurement designs. Findings from the focus group discussions revealed that in the abstract, males and females support concepts of gender equality; however, when probed about specific issues, respondents of all groups viewed gendered roles to be natural and desirable. **For additional information on this work and other 2020 RME Activities, please see the full report [here](#).**

## COVID-19 RESPONSE INITIATIVES

Distance Mentoring: Even while students are out of school, Room to Read staff are continuing to provide group and individual mentoring by phone to girls. They are using these mentoring sessions to support girls through the crisis and provide encouragement for continuing their academic study at home.

- *Throughout 2020, our staff provided more than 265,400 individual remote mentoring sessions to our program participants.*

Life Skills Videos: Video has played an essential role in creatively teaching life skills to girls, as videos can be shared via phone and potentially via TV.

- *In Bangladesh, Cambodia and Vietnam, each country has a series of videos based on sessions from our life skills curriculum. Topics covered include self-confidence, perseverance, empathy, communication, relationship building, financial education and more.*

Identifying and Supporting Girls Most at Risk: Room to Read staff are including a brief risk survey into individual remote mentoring sessions to assess the risks girls are facing during school closures. We focus on three risk factors: whether girls were keeping up with their studies during school closures, whether anyone in their household had lost a job or income because of the pandemic, and whether they were concerned about their ability to return to school once open again.

- *At the end of 2020 we assessed the percentage of GEP participants that had returned to school in countries where schools had reopened and remained open at the end of 2020. We saw high return rates including 91.5% in Cambodia, 93.7% in Vietnam, 95.7% in Sri Lanka, 96.5% in Laos and 98.9% in Tanzania.*

### COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE BY THE NUMBERS - GIRLS' EDUCATION

**265,400+**  
REMOTE INDIVIDUAL  
MENTORING  
SESSIONS

**34,400+**  
UNIQUE GIRLS  
RECEIVING INDIVIDUAL  
REMOTE MENTORING

**133**  
ROOM TO READ  
PROGRAMS  
BROADCAST VIA RADIO

**10,600+**  
GIRLS RECEIVING NON-  
DIGITAL MATERIALS

**26**  
ROOM TO READ  
PROGRAMS  
BROADCAST VIA TV



## IMPROVED READING SKILLS FOR CHILDREN IN OUR LITERACY PROGRAM

Room to Read's Literacy Program intervention consistently shows a large and positive impact on students' reading skills in a variety of contexts. Our most recent two-year impact evaluations showed strong results, with students' reading skills in Room to Read schools outpacing their peers in comparison schools by two to three times after two years of intervention.

Because of these results, our Literacy Program was recognized as "effective at scale" by the Center for Global Development's "Learning @ Scale" research initiative. Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this research initiative identified early grade reading programs operating at scale in developing countries with meaningful improvements in learning. The research team's worldwide search resulted in the selection of eight programs, including Room to Read's Literacy Program as implemented in India. More information about the Learning @ Scale initiative and the selection process can be found [here](#).

## BOOK PUBLISHING INITIATIVES

Last year, we applied our expertise in children's book publishing to several new and innovative projects. Our [Peace and Equality book series](#) brought together diverse writers and illustrators from the United States for a "book sprint" to create 10 book titles in just 4 weeks based on themes around creating a more peaceful and just world. Each book was made by teams of four creators, and the series covers a range of engaging stories, from highlighting the contributions of Black inventors to the importance of the U.S. census to the experience of a Palestinian refugee in the U.S.

We also developed a global series of expository nonfiction books for young readers that highlight different **climate-related issues** around the world. We plan to adapt the books across geographic contexts, so children can learn how climate change affects different parts of the world.

In 2019, Room to Read began publishing [Filipino language titles](#) for the first time, creating 20 beautiful books. In 2020, we introduced these titles to more readers in two ways: 1. by printing and distributing 20,000 copies of the books to children in the Philippines and; 2. by creating 15-minute radio adaptations of the 20 Filipino titles to serve children in communities without (or with limited) access to the internet.

Recognizing that children could benefit from books that reflect their experiences during these unusual times, Room to Read also created a **COVID-19 book series**. We organized a global workshop with book creators from 10 countries (spanning 12 languages and 11 time zones) to develop 20 book titles with themes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is experienced by children.

## INCREASED U.S. DOMESTIC PRESENCE

In 2020, Room to Read further explored opportunities for impact within the United States. We continued our successful partnership with Kappa Alpha Psi, the second oldest collegiate historically Black fraternity, who is helping to broaden children’s exposure to diverse books in the U.S. Through our Hands-on-Books program, student volunteers from Kappa Alpha Psi, trained by Room to Read, are sharing our books from Africa with children in under-resourced schools across North America. This partnership was featured on [the TODAY Show](#) last year.

To build on the success of this collaboration in the U.S., we established partnerships with organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area that support the educational needs of immigrant and low-income communities. We provided Room to Read-published Arabic and Spanish books to Refugee and Immigrant Transitions (RIT), and we distributed Spanish books to five elementary schools and the Latino Task Force hub through the Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA). We expect to serve 1,550 children through this initiative.

Additionally, our long-term partner, Tatcha, has generously invested in a comprehensive educational landscape analysis in the U.S. to identify the geographies and populations who could most benefit from our work. Through this partnership, we will be creating, publishing and distributing books in under-served communities, working with community-based partners.

## COVID-19 RESPONSE INITIATIVES

Radio programming: Without internet connectivity, radio is still the most commonly available and accessed technology across the globe; therefore, we have introduced literacy-themed radio programming.

- *In Sri Lanka, we are partnering with regional broadcast services to provide content in both Tamil and Sinhala. The radio programs focus on storytelling for children and literacy tips for parents on how best to support their children’s reading development at home.*

Engagement via texting: Room to Read is using texting to support students’ families while they continue learning at home.

- *In Cambodia, the literacy team is developing text and video guidance for parents. The content focuses on highlighting the most important literacy skills and providing advice and encouragement for parents.*

Using Worksheets to Develop Skills: Hard copy resources, like worksheets and books, are also essential components to keep children learning during this time.

- *Our team in India created an offline literacy package comprised of 60 worksheets for children in grades one and two who do not have access to digital platforms. These involve writing opportunities for children (both skill-based and creative writing).*

Access to Digital Books: [Literacy Cloud](#), Room to Read’s digital children’s book library and platform for teachers that we created thanks to the support of Google.org, played a key role in our success in 2020. Room to Read expanded the library significantly, in part to address the needs of children learning remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Literacy Cloud now holds nearly 1,600 book titles in 24 different languages. The website itself also operates in 15 different languages and has been accessed by users from 143 countries.

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE BY THE NUMBERS - LITERACY

387

ROOM TO READ  
PROGRAMS  
BROADCAST VIA TV

1,178

ROOM TO READ  
PROGRAMS  
BROADCAST VIA RADIO

615,400+

CHILDREN  
RECEIVING NON-  
DIGITAL MATERIALS

25,900+

HRS OF VIRTUAL  
TRAINING TEACHERS,  
AUTHORS, ILLUSTRATORS

18.4 M+

DIRECT MESSAGES  
SENT TO STUDENTS  
AND PARENTS



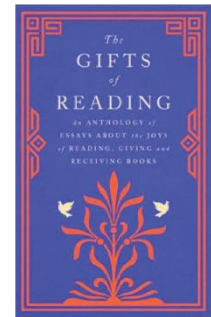
**BOOK CLUB**

In 2020, we launched our [Room to Read Book Club](#). This community of readers, doers, and global citizens of all ages learns something new each month and delights in the magic of books – from the surprising titles that social good CEOs swear by, to beautiful storybooks from around the world that you won’t find anywhere else.



**THE GIFTS OF READING ANTHOLOGY**

[The Gifts of Reading](#) is a collection of deeply personal essays about the transformative power of giving, reading and receiving books, written by our Founder John Wood, Robert Macfarlane, Philip Pullman, Roddy Doyle, Michael Ondaatje, Jan Morris, and 17 other well-known authors to raise money for Room to Read. This book was curated by long-time supporter Jennie Orchard and is currently available in the UK, Australia and other global markets.



**PERSONALIZED CHILDREN’S BOOK, BE BRAVE**

In 2020, we launched a personalized children’s book, [Be Brave](#), in partnership with Libro. *Be Brave* includes beautiful hand drawings from six artists around the world, helping to shine a light on stories from communities spanning Africa, Asia and Latin America. Sales from the book support Room to Read, and the book is available to ship worldwide.



**AUTHOR ADVOCATES**

Room to Read’s [Author and Illustrator Advocates](#) are a network of book creators around the world who have a shared passion for the power of storytelling to bring diverse experiences to life.

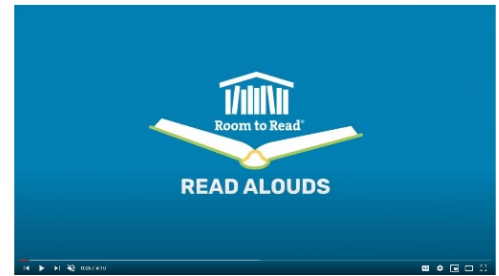
In honor of International Literacy Day, Room to Read launched this initiative with two inaugural advocates — bestselling novelists Alka Joshi and Christina Baker Kline — who have committed to awareness-raising and fundraising initiatives for the organization. We are honored to partner with these bestselling and world-renowned changemakers to build a more inclusive and just world.



## VIRTUAL READ-ALOUDS FROM BY NOTABLE CELEBRITIES AND BUSINESS LEADERS

Through the Peace Studio's [100 Offerings of Peace Campaign](#), we created a read-aloud of Maya Soetoro-Ng, co-founder of The Peace Studio, narrating the book. Maya is President Obama's half-sister, a children's book author, and an advisor to the Obama Foundation. The video is available [here](#).

We were also featured in [The Call to Unite](#), a 24-hour global broadcast event hosted by Tim Shriver and Oprah Winfrey that celebrated acts of humanity during this time of isolation. During the event, Julia Roberts led a read aloud of [Rescue the Princess](#), a Room to Read title from Vietnam, and [Prajakta Koli](#) read [The Village of Five Poles](#), a Room to Read title from India.



## VIRTUAL GALAS

Room to Read's 2020 virtual gala series, IMAGINE, united our supporters across North America, UK, Europe, the Middle East, India, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and Australia to make education for all a reality.

The live-streamed events included inspirational messages and performances by business leaders, entertainers, authors, influencers and Room to Read beneficiaries who shared how they continue to pursue their education – and their dreams – despite the global pandemic.

Highlights from the event series can be viewed [on our website](#).



## THANK YOU

for supporting Room to Read in our efforts to create world change through education.

Your partnership has allowed us to improve the lives of more than 20 million children around the world!