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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What Works

**Books to Grow On: How Room to Read created more than 5,000
libraries in less than eight years**

By Aaron Dalton

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments

Books to Grow On

How Room to Read created more than 5,000 libraries in less than eight years *by Aaron Dalton*

On a trek through Nepal in 1998, John Wood was dismayed to discover a school library bereft of books. And so Wood—who was then Microsoft’s director of business development for China—gave up his lucrative job to found the nonprofit Books for Nepal. By 2000, the organization had opened 26 libraries in Nepal and built two schools. Less than eight years later, the organization—now known as Room to Read—celebrated the opening of its 5,000th library.

In the meantime, Room to Read grew far beyond Nepal’s borders: first to Vietnam, and then to Cambodia, India, Laos, and Sri Lanka. More recently, Room to Read began working on the African continent, launching South African programs in 2007 and beginning work in Zambia this year.

How did Room to Read grow so fast? The media have largely focused on Wood as the catalytic figure in the organization’s success story. Of equal importance, however, is Room to Read’s solid and replicable operational choices. The organization relies on committed local employees, rather than on expensive expatriates. It partners with other education-focused NGOs. It adopts a social entrepreneurial mindset that encourages risk taking through pilot projects. And rather than simply rolling out one-size-fits-all initiatives across entire regions, it takes the time to research each country’s needs and to find out how best to encourage literacy and promote education.

Local Wisdom

Erin Ganju, the organization’s chief operating officer, joined Room to Read with a passion for improving Vietnam’s economy. She had spent years living and working there as a director of operations for consumer goods giant Unilever, where her role included coordinating the company’s community outreach efforts. When Ganju met Wood in San Francisco and heard of his early accomplishments in Nepal, she offered to help him set up something similar in Vietnam.

But a funny thing happened on the way to replication: It turned out that Vietnam didn’t need libraries as much as it needed language labs. So rather than force a square peg into a round hole by establishing Vietnamese libraries, Room to Read decided to focus on creating computer and language labs. This experience set a pattern that Room to Read would repeat whenever it expanded into a new country. “Our core operating philosophy is to focus on finding key local staff in-



Children in Wangdi, Bhutan, discover that John Wood is not only a social entrepreneur, but also a juggler. Wood’s nonprofit, Room to Read, creates libraries throughout Asia and Africa.

country and then allowing them to tell us about the greatest needs,” says Ganju.

Local staff members not only identify the most pressing issues, but also serve as the backbone of Room to Read’s operations. “The importance of our country teams has been underrated,” says Ganju. “They’ve been incredibly important from the very beginning in helping us scale up quickly.”

Take Dinesh Shrestha, country director for Nepal. Shrestha has been with the organization since before it was formally founded, when he organized book deliveries to rural schools as a volunteer back in 1998. He now oversees a staff of more than 20 Nepalis in implementing Room to Read’s programs. Shrestha and his team work closely with local communities, identifying needs and ensuring that aid recipients take ownership of library projects and accept accountability for their success. For example, before Room to Read establishes a library, the community must commit to providing space or teachers who will be trained to help students get the most out of the books and other educational resources.

Room to Read not only fosters its homegrown staff, it also partners with organizations that are already doing good work in places like Cambodia, India, and Sri Lanka. In South Asia, for example, Room to Read works with youth-focused NGOs to take advantage of their preexisting relationships



within communities. NGOs that are already visiting the schools to lead activities such as drama classes can expand their visits to train school librarians. The NGOs can also monitor the success of school libraries or computer rooms, making sure that the schools are making good use of the books, computers, and other materials that Room to Read provides.

Ganju also notes that Room to Read uses local physical spaces. The organization builds libraries, but it rarely builds library *buildings*. Indeed, of the 5,000 libraries that Room to Read has established, more than 4,900 were developed inside of existing spaces. Here again, Ganju emphasizes Room to Read's flexible operating model. "One of the strengths of our program is the variety of the libraries that we create," she says. "The libraries look different in each country. Sometimes [schools] have a dedicated library room. In other schools where space is scarce, there may be a library corner or even a mobile cart filled with books that is pushed from one room to another."

This Is a Test

Room to Read not only deftly uses existing local resources, it also cleverly pursues new ideas. First, the organization tries new ideas on a small scale to see if they work. If a project shows potential, the organization then scales it up.

That's the approach Room to Read took with its local publishing program. The program started with a simple insight: Children like to read children's books. A literacy program that relied on black-and-white textbooks might teach the technical fundamentals, but it could never inspire a love of reading in the same way that colorful and imaginative books written just for children do.

Naysayers said that a local publishing program would be difficult to pull off. They pointed out that neither Ganju nor Wood had any expertise in running a publishing business. But Room to Read's leaders saw huge needs for local language children's books in Nepal and were determined to meet those needs. They wrote a grant proposal in 2002, obtained funding from the Skoll Foundation to create an experimental pilot program, and started printing in 2003.

Five years later, the program has printed more than 2 million books in 11 local languages. In 2007, the Academy for Educational Development gave Room to Read's publishing program an award for innovation. "We went against all the expert advice and created a local language publishing program that is now one of our largest, most aggressively scaled programs," says Ganju.

Other programs have started small and expanded rapidly as they proved their worthiness. In 2000, Room to Read funded 10 long-term, need-based scholarships for girls. Today, that scholarship program enrolls more than 4,000 girls. Supplementing the scholarships with mentoring, tutoring, and life skills workshops, Room to Read has thus far achieved a 98.5 percent retention rate. "To understand the significance of that statistic, you have to look at the girls behind that data and understand the difficult, unstable, and transient conditions in which they live," says Ganju. "One of the girls not counted in the retention rate passed away last year. She was 11 years old."

Aim High

In the classic children's book *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the protagonist, Milo, is able to accomplish his quest only because he doesn't know that his tasks are supposedly impossible. Similarly, Ganju says that inexperience can actually be an asset. She and Wood had ample operations, sales, and marketing experience when they started Room to Read. Yet neither had direct experience in the nonprofit world. "We didn't have the constraints of trying to do things the way they were typically done," explains Ganju.

Perhaps that is why Room to Read keeps raising the bar. By 2010, the organization will expand to Bangladesh and additional countries in Africa and Latin America. Conservative estimates predict that Room to Read will open its 10,000th library the same year, although that milestone could come as early as late 2009.

India in particular will be a major target because of its large population and its illiteracy problem. Worldwide, nearly 100 million children are not enrolled in primary school and more than 780 million people lack even basic literacy skills.

Big problems need many funders. Much of the financial support for Room to Read's programs comes from individual donors and family and corporate foundations. The effect of these donations can already be measured in libraries opened or scholarships funded, but there may be other long-term benefits that will take years to appear. "Education is a critical building block," says Ganju. "[It] is the key to building a civil society that can solve its own problems." □

SPREAD THE WORDS

- Rely on local personnel and resources
- Join forces with like-minded NGOs
- Test first, and then expand
- Don't fear what you don't know