Educating the world

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John Wood gave up his career at Microsoft to develop Room to Read, a programme that seeks to offer every child an equal opportunity in education. He is opening libraries and schools where they are needed.

John Wood
Author of Leaving Microsoft to Change the World

Wood's latest book has been hailed as 'a blueprint for transforming lives... and eventually the world'.
to be warm and friendly people. "The people in Nepal are so hospitable, so I thought that was a nice way to pay them back for their hospitality," he said.

Wood kept his promise and, a year later, he arrived with 3,000 books on six rented donkeys with his 73-year-old father as my un-paid right-hand man. "Wood's face lights up as he recalls that day. "It was one of the greatest moments of my life. I was excited, but the kids were even more excited than I was. They wait-ed for days because they heard about this man coming back with books for their library. These kids had never seen brightly coloured children's books before." "For me, it was the beginning of my game-over moment. I kind of edged myself closer to the door at Microsoft. For me, it was a happy moment. But the entrepreneur in me said one library is not going to be enough. Ten is not going to be enough, 100 is not going to be enough, 1,000 is not going to be enough. In a world where nearly 800 million people are still illiterate." "At the end of last year, the United Nations announced that there is a million young people and adults living in rural Nepal, who still could not read or write. Of that figure, 122 million children of primary and lower secondary school age remain out of school, and millions more graduate with inadequate literacy skills. Women account for two-thirds of the world's illiterate population."

**Education the key to the future**

In 2000, Wood left his lucrative career at Microsoft and concentrated all his efforts into building and growing Room to Read. The early days proved to be the most challenging. Fortunately for him, friends and family stood up to the plate and helped in whatever way they could.

He recalls, "I think 2000 was a really difficult time to launch a new charity because the Internet泡沫 burst and stock markets fell by 50%. For me, the biggest challenge was that I assumed, perhaps naively, that all these people I used to work with would be as excited as I was, and they were supportive and want to help the project of this scale and duration, success stories are many; in his book, Wood lists some that will move you to tears. For example, Wood tells about a Cambodian girl who benefited from Room to Read and was in Singapore too. Like a proud father, Wood exclaims, "She is 21 years old and had never been outside Cambodia before; never had a passport; never been on an airplane. And yet she had the self-confidence to go into our board meeting and talk to our board members in English. "She has been raising cows for the last seven years, and when those cows were selling at lunchtime in school, she would be cutting grass to feed her cows. Just before leaving Cambodia, she sold a cow so that she could buy herself a laptop in Singapore. I call her the cow entrepreneur." "Building together" To find out whether a community needs a library or school, Wood, together with someone from the ministry of the country and a non-governmental organisation will visit a village. From there, they assess what is needed. "We ask: 'Is the school large enough? Are there children learning outside under a tree with a chalkboard propped against the wall?'" if the answer is yes, then the village needs a school. At that point, the negotiations start. We have a model called a 'challenege plan'. The idea behind it is that we don't build the school or the library for the local people; we build it with them."

Wood stresses that Room to Read has a unique set-up in that it includes the locals. "The decisions are made by the local people in the local context. Because, sometimes, in the charity world, you get across Americans driving around in Land Rovers boosting the local people around saying, 'let's do this and let's do that.' "I very much try to stress that strong Bangladeshis in Bangladesh, strong Vietnamese in Vietnam run the programmes. We don't send in well-meaning groups from overseas to kind of push the local people aside and say, 'we are going to build the school for you. It is a self-help model.' "In this way, the community feels a sense of ownership and take part in everything, from digging the foundation to hauling bags of cement, to sawing and pounding nails to building a shelf and painting the library. When all that is done, the Ministry of Education then does its part by provid-ing the teachers or librarians and pay them a salary."

Wood's aim is for the community to ultimately run the school and library. It is a way to in-activate the community. But the project is not forced on the community. He says, "If the communities are not motivated and if the parents don't want to work for it, we can't want it more than they want it. We believe we can help people only if they want to help themselves."

**Books as a constant companion**

With Room to Read in its 12th year, Wood is still surprised and humbled at the same time at its suc cess and the number of awards it has won, not to mention an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show. "When I accept an award, I always say that I am accepting this award on behalf of the Room to Read family. I think that once you get too egotistical is when you get turned to stone."

One of the things that keep him going is how had only studied his childhood. In Coming Room to Read, Wood offers many in-sights into his childhood years as he pays tribute to his family. His grandmother, mother and sister, who is a librarian, were great influences during his growing-up years in a small town in Pennsylvania. His grandmother was a voracious reader and his mother was an only child. When she complained that other children had siblings to play with and she had none, his grandmother would say, "If you have a book, you will never be lonely." Wood holds this statement close to his heart. "It was a philosophy that was implanted in me from a very young age. I still remember my grandmother would be on a chair and I would be on the couch, and we would both be reading. "Part of the reason I do what I do is that I grew up knowing education for boys as well as for girls, because I grew up in a house-hold with three educated women who looked after me and brought me up. They gave me grades and got good grades. I wouldn't have got to a place like Micro-soft, I wouldn't have got to a good MIBA school, if it weren't for them. Memories of my childhood include going to the library and coming out books and bringing books home. I would read to my dog if he would listen,' he quips.

With a schedule that is jam-packed with activities, Wood still makes time to read and stays fit by running marathons. He says getting his energy from the satisfac-tion he gets from Room to Read. "What keeps me going is that I have met so many children who have benefited from Room to Read. I have met parents who say this is the happiest day of their lives because their kids can now go to school. I have had grandmothers hold my hand with tears in their eyes and tell me that they can now die happy because their granddaughter is going to school. I know that she will be okay."