Of a Holiday, a Mission and a Vision

Reena Mathai Luke*

“Success doesn’t ‘happen’. It is organized, preempted, captured, by consecrated common sense.” (F.E. Willard) Room to Read (RtR) corroborates this, for it is one of the most effective, fastest growing, and award-winning non-profits of the last decade. Started by John Wood in the late nineties as an effort to help the developing world break the cycle of poverty through the lifelong gift of education; Reena Mathai Luke narrates how it has mushroomed across Asia and Africa and explains why John Wood has been recognized in the worldwide media as a “21st century Andrew Carnegie.”

R.M.L.

Author

Most trekkers land in Nepal with only one obsession - the Himalayas. They have little interest in the social topography of the country except maybe, to find out where one can buy a bottle of cold beer! In any case, Nepal’s lack of educational amenities would certainly be the last thing on the mind of the average young American raring to make the most of a short holiday in the mountains. But then, John Wood is not the average American.
In the late nineties, John Wood was Director of Microsoft’s marketing for the Asia-Pacific Division. A bright specialist in international markets, John in his own words was “a corporate warrior” jetting across half-the-globe on most week days selling *Microsoft* to the world. It was tough and demanding but it was evident, he thrived in the fast lane.

**A change in the itinerary**

So in 1998, when John signed up for the *Annapurna Circuit*, it was intended as a breather from the 24X7 sales pitch and endless cups of coffee. But apparently, his alert mind refused to switch to ‘hibernate’ mode even at 12,000 ft above sea level.

A casual conversation with a friendly Nepali named Pasupathi at a mountain side lodge on his very first night fired John’s interest. Pasupathi was weighed down with the responsibility of providing resources for 17 schools in that mountain area. Even in the fading twilight, his face reflected the pain and frustration of having to watch bright children crammed in small spaces and eager students falling over each other to share a book. Pasupathi had John’s full attention and soon it was evident that the savvy Microsoft executive and the district resource person for Lamjung Province, despite the twenty-year age gap, had a thing or two in common. They both valued good education and believed that education was a child’s fundamental right.

*A means to an end - John Wood on his first mission taking books to Nepal’s school children on a yak.*
That night John’s trekking itinerary was modified to include a visit to the local school at Bahundanda. The next morning, John enjoyed the small guided tour of the school meeting teachers and interacting with the children, but it was the headmaster’s parting line – “Perhaps, sir, you will someday come back with books” that actually galvanized John into action and changed forever the course of his life.

Room to Read

The Bahundanda visit got John to think about how good education had helped him to shape his own destiny and he became more receptive towards school education in developing countries. That night he wrote in his journal ‘It does not matter if we have material wealth, what really matters is - what we do with it.’ Profound thoughts, but what made the difference was that he backed these thoughts with action. The very next morning, he emailed his friends across the world requesting them to donate books for children and added “stick $5 or $100 in an envelope and send it along!” - A testimony to John’s innate fundraising skills, which he later elaborated in his book as ‘one of the most important skills that any young charity must have is the ability to sell its vision...’
Within six weeks John and his father had managed to collect 3000 books and within a year, the school children at Bahundanda got 37 big boxes of books - thus paving the way for the Books for Nepal project later renamed *Room to Read*.

By the end of July the same year, John said goodbye to Microsoft and his close friends and flew back to San Francisco to give his undivided attention to the school children in Nepal as he was convinced “In education lies the key to self sufficiency—and the best long term ticket out of poverty.”

He teamed up with Dinesh Shrestha (co-founder, and presently Director, Human Resource and Administration, *Room to Read*, Asia Regional Office) and by December 1999, the first two schools were under construction. Today a decade later, the Room to Read score card reads - more than three million children accessing 765 schools, 7048 bilingual libraries, 132 computer labs, 5.6 million books and 6817 girls receive scholarships. These figures are changing each year as they inch towards the goal to open 10,000 libraries and reach more than five million children by 2010. And there is no stopping because John Wood and his
team are firmly convinced that ‘World Change Starts with Educated Children.’

Think Big

“Big problems cannot be solved with small solutions - we must think BIG!” is one of John’s favorite opening lines. And it is evident that bold goals attract bold people for John Wood loves a challenge and is “not risk-averse” as he believes in focusing on the solution rather than the problem. “There are nearly 1 billion illiterate people in the world, and my goal is to help 10 million children achieve literacy by 2010,” says Wood.

Still, 10 million children? John is unfazed and counters “Why is that not possible?” he asks. “Microsoft doubled every year in its early days. Cisco more than doubled every year. I worked with a lot of different organizations at Microsoft that doubled year to year, and none of us thought it was incredible.”
True to form, *Room to Read* quickly moved from Nepal to Vietnam (2001) and then to Cambodia in 2002. Before starting out in Cambodia, a team from Room to Read did an exhaustive study and explored the ground realities. The Khmer Rouge era resulted in education taking a back seat and as a result there was a real need to start schools and to build reading rooms to give young children an opportunity to learn. Room to Read started out in Cambodia by opening, one Reading Room and one Computer Room. Today there are more than 189 libraries and six computer labs. More than 300 girls from poor families receive scholarships, books, uniforms and school bags.

From Cambodia, *Room to Read* zoomed into India (2003), then SriLanka (2004) and Laos (2005). Soon in 2006, Room to Read, took up the challenge of providing Reading Rooms for the children in South Africa and in the very next year in 2007 included Zambia to the list of places. And if this was not enough, the *Room to Read* opened its Bangladesh office in 2009 - a year earlier than scheduled! It is a heady pace and a record that is enviable. But it is also extremely demanding and keeps the program staff on their toes.
Room to Read started its operations in India in 2003 and the India program aims to complement the Government of India’s effort to universalize elementary education by supporting schools with libraries and age-appropriate books in local languages, providing computer literacy and addressing issues of access to education for the girl child.

Room to Read is a partner in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and works in eight states across the country. These include Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi.

In the last six years, it has provided opportunities for more than 3,00,000 children to have access to about two million books of which about 45 titles were published by Room to Read’s Local Language Publishing program to keep pace with the specific needs and interests of the children. Room to Read has also made schooling possible for more than 2000 young girls from marginalized communities. In addition, the organization has set up more than 1,500 libraries and 16 computer labs which help more than 2000 children to bridge the digital divide.

Room to Read also partners with more than 50 local NGOs who help to contextualize the program and help with piloting new programs which focus on reading enhancement skills for early school grades, training adolescent girls with ‘life skills’ and publishing books in various formats.

‘Growth with Quality’ is Room to Read’s guiding motto and the focus is on providing opportunities for children in educationally-deprived areas by supporting learning and strengthening partnerships to make these programs sustainable.

Obviously this kind of large scale operations cannot be managed by one person. John is supported by a core team of very passionate but practical professionals and leading this group is Erin Keown Ganju (CEO, Room to Read) who joined on an impulse and was the person responsible to take Room to Read to Vietnam. Ganju spent years as Director Operations, Unilever, where her role included coordinating the community outreach efforts. When she joined Room to Read, she brought with her the wisdom of rejecting the “top down” theory and instead stressed on “allowing the community to tell us their greatest needs.”

What makes Room to Read different from the many other INGOs? Without doubt, Room to Read’s growth graph has a lot to do with John Wood’s vision, tenacity, entrepreneur skills and ‘hyper kinetic’ energy. His zeal to make it global and the courage to go full throttle from day one, has been pivotal in taking Room to Read across seven countries in Asia and two in Africa.
But perhaps what helped most was that both John and Erin with their corporate background unwittingly broke all the rules of the non-profit sector by being “target driven”. Admits Erin “We didn’t have the constraints of trying to do things the way they were typically done.”

But there are other equally important components to this success story. *Room to Read* is supported by a dedicated team of staff and a large group of well wishers - which include individuals, foundations and corporates - who share the same core values and donate generously to translate these dreams into reality. But more importantly, it is the community that is the backbone of the *Room to Read* work.

Early on, Dinesh had envisioned a partnership deal with the community; which is now referred to as the “Challenge grant model” in the *Room to Read* vocabulary. The “Challenge grant” a euphuism, for communities to co-invest and take participatory responsibility for the schools or libraries in their area, ensures the community gets the sanctions for the land as well provides voluntary labor. “It is intended to challenge the community to match the grant provided in cash by donating in kind and thereby take ownership of the project,” says Dinesh.

Interestingly, the decision of where to build each school or library is also taken at the grassroot level. “We believe very much in a model of local empowerment so we hire strong entrepreneurial local people and then they look at the conditions. We want to do things in partnership with them. We really respect the fact that they have great work ethic and are willing to do whatever it takes to get their kids educated,” says John.

Among the organization’s several “non-negotiable” principles is one that insists all country offices to be staffed by local employees; this not only supports participatory ethics but also helps the organization to respect local cultures and work within the local ethos. “Our core operating philosophy is to focus on finding key local staff in the country. Local staff members not only identify the most pressing issues but also serve as the backbone of *Room to Read’s* operations,” says Ganju and explains “the importance of our country teams has been underrated. They’ve been incredibly important from the very beginning in helping us scale up quickly.”

**Future Plans**

While the growth rate of *Room to Read* can match many of the best corporate giants, those at the helm of *Room to Read’s* programs are quick to admit that there is still a long way to go. To quote Ganju, “*Room to Read* needs to keep raising the bar. Worldwide, nearly 100 million children are not enrolled in primary school, more than 780 million
people lack even basic literacy skills and India in particular will be a major target because of its large population and its illiteracy problem.”

Impressive as the *Room to Read* growth graph is, it is not just about number crunching. Says Dinesh Shrestha, “Indeed, it would be too simplistic to think that we have reached our goal once we provide the community with infrastructural support. We are conscious of the need to do some hand-holding and that is why we ‘invest’ in people and train them to take this vision forward.”

Dhir Jhingran, *Room to Read’s* Asia Regional Director recognizes that, “Education is not just about the number of schools or libraries opened; our prime objective is to ensure that the quality of education in our schools is not compromised even as we maintain the same tempo of growth; and this is not an easy task.”

Elaborating on some of these challenges, *Room to Read’s* Asia Regional Program Director, Sunisha Ahuja adds “During our monitoring visits when we meet children who are unable to read or comprehend correctly, it alerts us and makes us acutely conscious of what we are pitched against. If we are to achieve ‘World Change’ as envisioned, then we need to bridge this gap.”

Of course there are other real concerns, especially at a time when the global economy is dismal. But there is no mountain that is too high for John Wood to climb. “What I learned from that is to have faith in yourself, to focus on your true north. My true north has always been that I want to help 10 million kids in the poorest parts of the world to get educated. In the early years, it didn’t look like we’d even come close to that and now actually, I can see the day. I’ve got it on a spreadsheet. We will hit that number somewhere around 2018,” says the man with a mission.

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**BOX 1:**
Where we work:

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<th>Room to Read works in:</th>
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<td>Bangladesh</td>
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Box 2: Our Programs:

Room to Read’s Programs include:

- building schools
- building bi-lingual libraries
- creating and publishing local language children’s books
- building computer labs
- funding long-term scholarships for girls

BOX 3:
Since its inception in 2000, Room to Read has established over 7,000 libraries in the developing world:

![Bar chart showing growth of libraries from 2001 to 2009]

Box 4: John Wood’s List of Honors:

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<td>- Three-time speaker at the Clinton Global Initiative.</td>
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<td>- Five-time winner of the Fast Company Magazine and Monitor Group Social Capitalist Award</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Time Magazine’s “Asian Heroes” Award, recognizing “20 People under 40 who have done something brave, bold, or remarkable” (the only non-Asian ever chosen for this honor)</td>
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<td>- Selected as a “Young Global Leader” by the World Economic Forum (attendee of the WEF in Davos for the last four years)</td>
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<td>- Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute.</td>
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<td>- Two-time winner of the Skoll Foundation Award for Social Innovation (grants of $200,000 and $1.2 million)</td>
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<td>- Second recipient of the Draper Richards Fellowship (America’s largest fellowship for early stage social entrepreneurs)</td>
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<td>- Profiled by the Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS) as one of “America’s Great Leaders”</td>
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