

Bullish about books: Social entrepreneur John Wood

by [Katie Redding](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

In 1998, John Wood was a rising executive at Microsoft when a vacation in Nepal changed his life. By 2000 he had quit his job and started the nonprofit Room to Read organization, which has since grown with astonishing speed. In partnership with local communities, Room to Read has established more than 7,000 bilingual libraries and 700 schools in developing countries—and funded the education of nearly 7,000 girls.

Wood has received Time magazine's Asia's Heroes Award and was designated a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. His 2006 memoir, Leaving Microsoft to Change the World, has been translated into 185 languages.

What led you to start Room to Read?

I was trekking in Nepal. I met the headmaster of a rural school two days' walk from the nearest road, up in the mountains. Seeing that school really struck me. It has 500 kids, and it didn't have a chalkboard, desks or books. Nepal has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world, north of 60 percent. The headmaster said to me, "You know we are too poor to afford education, but until we have education we will always be poor." That statement resonated with me as a businessman. I thought, "It doesn't take a lot of money to change this." And education produces incredibly long-term change, because an educated child has educated children and grandchildren. You break the cycle of poverty permanently by educating one child.

My father grew up in a very poor family. He was the only one of seven kids to go to a university—through the G.I. Bill. This one scholarship resulted in his three kids getting educated and being middle class. My town offered a school library, a Carnegie library and a well-run public school. I went to a very well run public university. I am a product of all of these investments by my parents, by my government and by a bunch of smart people who realized that education is a good investment.

You returned to that school in Nepal with 3,000 books. But you later realized that carrying donated books in on donkeys was not workable. How did your business background influence the development of Room to Read?

In capitalism there are founders who grow massive organizations. They get big quickly, and they keep growing—growth is part of their DNA. I don't really see this pattern in the social sector. Groups just get by, and do what they can.

But look at the scope of problems in the world. From day one my goal was to reach 10 million children with new libraries by the year 2020. I was told that this was crazy, and sure enough, it took a while to get things moving. But we've already reached 3 million kids by our ninth year, and we'll reach 5 million by the end of 2010.

In many countries, Room to Read has struggled to find children's books in native languages. What has been your solution?

In 2003 we did a survey and found that 52 percent of the kids in Nepal said they would use the library more often if there were more books in the Nepali language. Parents can't afford books, so publishers don't see a business reason to publish. This is a problem throughout the developing world. Our local teams in Nepal and Cambodia went out and tried to find local authors and artists and give them some economic incentives. We've published more than 310 original titles and printed more than 3 million copies. We'll do another 100 titles this year alone. We won the Academy for Educational Development's Break through Ideas in Education Award for this. It's kind of ironic that publishing local-language books using local artists and authors is considered a breakthrough. Nonetheless, we're very proud of the award.

You've cut fund-raising costs via a worldwide volunteer fund-raising network. How does it work?

The network of Room to Read chapters around the world started with me asking friends in five cities to throw cocktail parties. We've built this activity into a global movement. We have groups in 41 cities with more than 3,000 people involved. Collectively, in the last five years they have raised more than \$25 million. It's not that any one person raised a huge sum. A really big number of people each did a small part. The fund-raising chapters are self-made and self-managed—we just connect them with the projects. A chapter might say it wants to fund a school in Nepal. We tell them that costs \$30,000. They say, "Great, we'll raise \$30,000."

**You also have a program that encourages students to raise money:
Students Helping Students. Why?**

When kids learn that 300 million children in the developing world don't go to school, they say, "Let's do something." My sister is a librarian at a school where 69 percent of the kids take part in the school lunch program. She said to them, "Even if you're poor, you can still help other people." So they did a penny drive and collected 100,000 pennies—\$1,000, enough to help Room to Read print 1,000 copies of a local-language children's book.

**You've said that your greatest challenge is the work you're not able to do.
Can you describe the need that still exists?**

We have established about 150 libraries in southern Africa. But across sub-Saharan Africa, at a minimum we probably need 100,000 libraries. I get e-mails from mothers in Cameroon—I don't know how they find my address or how they find a cybercafé. They ask, "When can you bring Room to Read to our village? Our children need books, too." That's what keeps me up at night—all the kids we're not reaching. With education there is an urgency, because every day we lose is a day we don't get back. I don't know how you tell a five-year-old, "Hey, we'll have a school built for you in ten years." She'll be 15 then. She'll probably still be stuck in poverty, and we'll have wasted an opportunity.