

# WORLD AFFAIRS COMMENTARY

*by Rahim Kanani*

[An In-depth Interview with John Wood, Founder and Board Chair of Global Non-profit Room to Read](#) Recently, I interviewed John Wood, Founder and Board Chair of [Room to Read](#), an international non-profit organization which seeks to transform the lives of millions of children in developing countries by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education.

Mr. Wood started Room to Read after a fast-paced and distinguished career with Microsoft from 1991 to 1999. He was in charge of marketing and business development teams throughout Asia, including serving as Director of Business Development for the Greater China region and as Director of Marketing for the Asia-Pacific region. John brings to Room to Read a vision for a scalable solution to developing global educational problems, an intense focus on results, and an ability to attract a world-class group of employees, volunteers, and funders.

**Rahim Kanani: Describe a little bit about the inspiration and motivation behind the founding of Room to Read.**

**John Wood:** It all started a little over 10 years ago with a humble plea by a school headmaster I met in Nepal: “Perhaps, sir, you will someday come back with books.” At the time, I was on a much-needed vacation from Microsoft and trekking in the Himalayas. On the second day, I was invited to visit a rural school in Bahundanda, and when I arrived, the headmaster offered to show me the “library.” Having spent countless hours in my local library and immersed in books as a kid, I foolishly expected to see a similar setting. Imagine my shock when I found there were no desks, no chairs, no shelves and, most importantly, no books for the 450+ students. I couldn’t believe it, and it was at that moment when the schoolmaster spoke his fateful words to me about returning with books. Little did he know that I would consider it a personal challenge; here were hundreds of students who wanted to read, but simply didn’t have any books. That just seemed wholly unfair to me and I vowed to help.

With an email to friends and family, I started a book drive and a year later in 1999, I returned to Bahundanda to deliver on my promise, bringing with me 3,000 books via a convoy of yaks. I’ll never forget the wide-eyed looks and bright smiles of the kids when they opened up their new colorful storybooks—the first time many of them had ever seen or held one. It was a life-changing experience. It ignited in me the desire to do more, and that’s when a one-time act of kindness turned into my life’s calling. So I took a leap of faith, quit Microsoft, cashed in my stocks and launched in 2000 what would later become Room to Read. It wasn’t an easy decision, but I have never looked back.

I think the wise headmaster put it best, and spoke for many people in developing nations, when he said, “We are too poor to afford education, but until we have education we will always be poor.”

Education is a hand up not a hand out, and with it, children and families can improve the socioeconomic conditions for themselves, their communities, countries, and future generations. That is why Room to Read exists.

**Rahim Kanani: Fast-forwarding to the present day, how has Room to Read evolved since its' founding in terms of resources, reach, and results?**

**John Wood:** In my wildest dreams I could not have predicted that we would be at the point where we are today—a global organization made up of 400+ passionate and driven employees working with tens of thousands of communities worldwide and impacting the lives of millions of children by giving them the chance to fulfill their right to an education.

We now have our first decade under our belt, and we've moved beyond just donating books to Nepal, to improving literacy and education for girls in nine countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Zambia—where we will launch operations later this year. Through our worldwide network of over 11,000 libraries and 1,400 schools filled with nine million books in English and 25 indigenous languages, as well as scholarship support and life skills training for over 10,000 girls, Room to Read has served as a catalyst for systemic change and influenced the educational journey of five million children so far. That certainly makes me proud, but our work is far from done. Our goal is to bring literacy tools and high quality education to 10 million by 2015 and we plan to reach that milestone by continuing to engage teachers, administrators, parents and governments and broader communities as co-investors in our work, and the future of their children.

**Rahim Kanani: As a many-time recipient of the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, how would you characterize Room to Read in the context of the social enterprise sector?**

**John Wood:** We have a story that people want to hear: changing the world in a positive way. And the fact that we're focusing our work on children and developing programs that are sustainable and effective gives our investors something to point to. They can see our results, and they know that their support will directly affect the lives of children.

From the beginning, we started with some important basic business principles—that we would be efficient, accountable and results-driven. I strongly believe it's necessary to take the best of the business world and combine it with the best of the NGO world—in fact, I tell our team that we want to run Room to Read with the compassion of Mother Teresa but with the focus and tenacity of a blue-chip company.

There are many small steps that together add up to create a very efficient organization—whether for profit or nonprofit. Our clients are the children we serve as well as our supporters. We believe they all deserve the best. In the case of the children, this means the highest quality education we can provide. For our investors, it means coming up with programs that are cost-efficient and sustainable. We tell donors exactly how much it costs to build a school, publish children's book, establish a library or to support a year of a girls' education. So, what you get when you make a donation to Room to Read is a very direct, very tangible result.

**Rahim Kanani: What is the relationship between the localities in which Room to Read operates, and that of local government?**

**John Wood:** Our partnerships with in-country governments are key. Because we work mainly in government-run schools, our success depends highly on the buy-in and participation of all levels of government. It's a co-investment, and the key to long-term sustainability of the projects.

Take for example our partnership with the Ministry of Education in India. Room to Read is working towards strengthening the government's efforts to meet its goal of universalizing quality elementary education for all children. In a just eight years of working in collaboration with the government public schools and local NGO partners, Room to Read has impacted the lives of over one million children of India.

And just recently we received exciting news from our team in Cambodia, that following a year-long effort, Room to Read along with other local NGOs moved mountains to get the Minister of Education to approve minimum standards for school libraries throughout the country, as well as double the salary for librarians, who are now paid for two shifts to support a full day's work, nationwide. Without the government, these successes wouldn't be possible.

Even in Vietnam, our staff worked closely with the government to establish 30 minutes of "reading period" with the goal of improving the reading skills of primary school children. These periods initially started in a dozen Room to Read libraries and we know that schools in other districts and provinces are now eager to sign onto the program.

We have been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and ingenuity by which community members participate in achieving the project goals—in fact in 2010, 100% of our school projects were constructed with community engagement—and we will continue to work closely with governments and local communities to ensure our programming remains culturally and contextually relevant and that our programs are sustainable.

**Rahim Kanani: From a leadership perspective, what have been some of the critical challenges you have overcome or key opportunities you have seized, which significantly contributed to the success of Room to Read?**

**John Wood:** I think the biggest obstacle was convincing people to care about these issues. Education for the children of the developing world is a very over-looked issue. 773 million people around the globe (!) are illiterate. But since 98 percent of them are in the developing world, this is a problem that is somewhat easy to overlook. My job, from day one, was to convince people that this is a relevant and critical global issue. After all, problems cross borders like never before and education is the best-proven long-term ticket out of poverty.

Fortunately, a lot of people listened. We now have one of the widest and most-effective fund-raising networks in the world, with over 10,000 volunteers in 56 cities running Room to Read fund-raising chapters. Together, they collectively raise over US\$12 million per year. That is a lot of money in the developed world, but it's a hell of a lot when you take it into places like Cambodia or Nepal or Laos where for every \$12 we deploy, we can bring access to a library to one additional child. Also, about half our funds are raised from outside the US, so this movement has become quite global. That was not without a lot of hard work on the part of our team—we

are constantly on airplanes, in a jet-lagged haze, but we turn on our “A” game when it’s time to ask people and companies for support.

**Rahim Kanani: What makes the education sector in developing countries different from other sectors?**

**John Wood:** Let me paint a picture for you: this morning, 300 million children across the developing world woke up and didn’t have the privilege of going to school—and at least twice that number do not have access to a library. That statistic saddens me every time I share it with people, but I do so in the hopes of angering them into action to correct this moral failure.

Unlike the West, many developing nations simply don’t have the resources or systems in place to educate students; yet, education in the developing world has been proven to be the best ticket out of poverty, so an investment in this area yields amazing long-term benefits. And numerous studies have proven that when children are educated it causes a positive ripple effect of informed decision-making around health, career and family for generations to come. Education simply changes everything.

Children’s education is an issue that crosses borders and resonates with people in every corner of the world—and it’s incredible that Room to Read is the convergence point as we lead a global movement to provide every child with the ability to attend school and learn to read.

**Rahim Kanani: Separate from more capital and manpower, or other tangible assets, what are some intangible assets you need in order to be successful on the ground?**

**John Wood:** Community engagement is key. Even with the support of governments and school administrators, it’s really the communities that contribute to the success of the projects. The support of one village elder or the word of mouth from one community to the other, can have an immediate impact

For example, in Rajasthan, India we faced some resistance in a Muslim community to educating girls in the village. Over the course of many visits and conversations with the village elders and fathers, we were able to turn the tide toward support for the girls. Now, more than half of the students enrolled in school are girls, and the community even built a secondary school so students could continue their learning! The first girl ever in this community to complete 8th grade back in 2009 is now being treated as the local celebrity. She told us, “When I graduate, I hope to become a teacher and give back to my community who has provided me this opportunity.”

You can’t buy or force that kind of support. It has to come from within. It has to be driven by the community, not imposed.

**Rahim Kanani: As Room to Read continues to expand, paint for a moment a portrait of the organization’s position—as you wish it would be—five years down the road.**

**John Wood:** Simple: every child, regardless of gender or where they were born, receives a quality education and become a literate adult. There are 796 million illiterate people in this world—two thirds of whom are women and girls. That means there are millions of kids who have been failed by this modern world, and every day we miss in educating them, is a day we can't get back.

As we enter our second decade, I can say that I've never been more excited about Room to Read than I am now. We've got an incredible team of leaders and staff that will take the organization to a new level of success. Most recently we welcomed Tim Koogle, founding CEO of Yahoo! to our board of directors and we continue to build our staff of experts. I'm confident that we will reach millions more children with our projects and raise awareness of the critical issue of literacy and gender equality in education to people around the globe.

I'm really looking forward to taking our work to the next level and making sure millions of children become fully literate and independent readers, and to closing the gender gap in education so that more girls have the opportunity to learn and thrive as educated women. We're leading a movement—a movement that is certain to make a dramatic change in the world. Our goal is to reach 10 million children with quality educational opportunities by 2015.

**Rahim Kanani: And lastly, how has your own inspiration and motivation evolved since the founding of Room to Read?**

**John Wood:** I am more optimistic than ever, but also more impatient. Optimistic because, while we started with nothing and had to boot strap the organization into being, we have now reached over five million children in nine countries across the developing world; but impatient because there are hundreds of millions of children who need us and communities that have never heard of Room to Read. The fact that hundreds of millions of children don't have books at their disposal is ridiculous. That can change, that must change, and we will be one of the major players who do indeed change that reality. I now know that we are playing for higher stakes than ever. And that every day we lose is a day we don't get back.

So with that, thank you for the interview, and now, back to work!

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