John Wood It Is Not What Is Achieved But What Needs To Be Achieved



He believes that education is the only way a person can release oneself from the grip of poverty. He has dedicated his life to providing books, schools and libraries to communities in nine countries spanning Africa and Asia. Having held numerous

positions including Director of Marketing for the Asia-Pacific Division during his illustrious career at Microsoft, he has used his experiences and business acumen to ensure efficiency, transparency and accountability in the not for profit sector. John Wood, the founder and Executive Chairman of Room to Read – a non profit organisation dedicated to alleviating poverty through the power of education was in Sri Lanka to release the Sinhala and Tamil translation of his book 'Leaving Microsoft to Change the World', to announce the commitment and plans of Room to Read in contributing to the rebuilding of the North and East of Sri Lanka and finally to encourage the Business community of Sri Lanka to partner with Room to Read in their rebuilding effort. John sat down with Business Today to discuss his passion and dedication to providing education to the many communities around the world and reiterated his commitment to Sri Lanka.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Who is John Wood?

John Wood is a guy who grew up in a household that stressed the importance of reading. I'm a guy who loves books to this day. I read about 40 to 50 books a year. I would read more books if I had more time. I want to share that same gift with the world. John Wood is a guy who looks at the fact that 800 million people in the world are illiterate. That would be one in every seven human beings in this world who cannot read or write. I feel that that is a tragedy but it is also an opportunity to go out there and do something to give kids the joy of reading.

You had an illustrious career at Microsoft; can you tell us about your experiences there?

I feel that I joined Microsoft at the right time, which was in 1991. At that time the company had only 5000 employees. Therefore it was a good time to join the company because it was growing. Every year I was given more responsibilities as the company grew. I developed my speciality in International Markets at Microsoft and I was very lucky to be based in Asia as I had the opportunity to travel around Asia and Africa. The most important thing I noticed during my travels was that there

are many places in the world where a computer was not the least bit relevant because there was no electricity, high illiteracy, no schools and children were not asking for computers. Children were asking for pencils and pens, teachers were asking for books and the more I travelled the more I realised that for a certain group of people that is among the top wealthiest billion, the computer is a great device but for the poorest two million it is not fundamental or relevant.

It was during your time at Microsoft that you took time off to travel and it is what you saw in Nepal that changed your life. Can you tell us a little bit about this?

I'm very big on pattern matching and what happened was that in places like Cambodia there were schools that have been burnt down by the Khmer Rouge and no one has started rebuilding those. We saw libraries that had been burnt down and no one had either rebuilt or put books in those libraries. In Nepal I met a headmaster who had about 500 students attending his school. The library was completely devoid of books and it didn't have any children's books. I will never forget what the headmaster told me 'we are too poor for education, but till we have education we will always be poor'. That to me summarises the plight of the world. I have travelled in Ethiopia, Zambia, Burma, Nepal, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and I have seen the same pattern everywhere – too poor to afford education but without education will always be poor.
The thing is, during a certain point in the world every single society was living in poverty no matter who you were or where you lived. Then certain countries reached a tipping point and America is one of them where many people were able to gain an education and were eventually able to work their way out of poverty. I don't think any country is better than any other; it's only that some countries were lucky because they came to that point sooner than any other country did.

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Room to Read started its operations in 2000, can you tell us what you feel about the progress that has been made since then?

Room to Read has grown bigger much more quickly than I would have ever

expected. Ten years ago my goal was to open one library and by the end of last year we had opened 7,048 libraries. By the end of this year we would have opened over 9,000 libraries and by the end of 2010 we aim to complete 11,000 libraries. My first delivery was 3,000 books in Nepal. By the end of this year we would have placed seven million books in the hands of children across Asia and Africa. If we take the seven million books and place them one on top of the other it would be 14 times the Burj Dubai, the tallest building in the world. We have provided such a quantity of books. There are now over three million children across Asia and Africa accessing our networks of books and libraries.
One thing we are trying to do with Room to Read is to make it a worldwide movement and just as there were worldwide movements against slavery and against malaria. There should be a worldwide movement around the idea that if every child in the developing world acquired an education, they would be able solve their problems and that is ultimately the ticket out of poverty. No society has gotten out of poverty by relying on foreign aid. Foreign aid is a short term band aid. We were lucky we got educated. For me I did not feel that I was better than anyone else, I just won the lottery of life because I was born into a family that valued education and a society that was able to provide that.

What is the impact of the work done by Room to Read?

The impact we see is really with the number of communities that we work with, the number of children that we have made a difference to. By the end of this year we would have worked with a total of 10,000 communities across nine countries in Asia and Africa. We will have opened over 1,050 schools and 9,000 libraries by the end of this year and reached four million students through their access to our schools and libraries.
I am proud of these results but I also think these results are the tip of the iceberg because there is so much that needs to be done. There are thousands of communities and dozens of countries who are asking us to bring Room to Read to their community. What motivates me is not what we have accomplished but all that is left to be accomplished.

How does Room to Read work and how do you ensure transparency and accountability to both your beneficiaries and donors?

The most important thing on how we work is that we employ very strong local

teams and the Country Director is in charge of everything. The Country Director acts like the CEO. In the case of Sri Lanka, that man is Glenfrey De Mel. I tell Glen that he does not work for me but that I work for him. My job is to get him the resources he needs so that we can work with more communities across the world including the North and East of Sri Lanka. Then it's his job to work for the children. He is accountable to all the children who need our help.
In terms of how we ensure accountability, we have a heavy audit layer. We have no tolerance level for corruption; if we do find corruption we fire people. We have the former CFO of Microsoft Craig Bruya on our board of Directors and he also heads our audit committee. We basically have a world class team that makes sure that the money goes where it needs to go. We keep our overhead expenses below 15%, our donations are half that of a usual charity.
The transparency comes when a donor gives money. We tell them where we are going to build the library or school or publish a local language book. There is total transparency because they can visit the school or library. We will give them photographs of the school or library and they know that we have done what we have said that we are going to do.
One of the reasons that so many companies support Room to Read and why I'm asking the Sri Lankan companies to step up their support for Room to Read is because we can offer them that level of transparency. If they want to fund five schools in a certain district, we can deliver exactly that and tell them what it will cost, they can see it, be there and know where their money is going. I think the charity world needs more of that transparency.

What does it mean to you to meet your beneficiaries?

It's the happiest time of my life. I visited Sri Lanka one year after the tsunami when we were opening schools and libraries that we had built. I saw the devastation along the coast and the people living in tent camps. It was just so sad. Then I went to a village where Room to Read was opening a school and the atmosphere was that of total happiness. It was a return to the belief that the future was going to be better. I experience that everywhere we work. I was in Laos and Nepal this year where we opened schools and to see the pride in the parent's faces because they too had been part of the process. We require parents to provide labour to build the school or library therefore, when the construction is completed it is an achievement for them as well. To see their pride and joy is probably the best part of my job.

You are also a speaker at many fora, example, Clinton Global initiative.

What is it that you wish to achieve through these talks and what has been the response so far?

What I'm trying to achieve is a worldwide movement around this idea of education for everyone. Even in United Nations Millennium Development Goals, the second goal is around universal primary education. However though it is an easy thing to say, it is a harder thing to implement. For me it is not about the esoteric idea, it's about the implementation, its about how many schools we can build. We are only four years old in Sri Lanka but we have already opened more than 200 schools. We have already opened 655 libraries and have 1,200 girls in our scholarship programme. What I try to accomplish may it be at the Clinton Global Initiative or the World Economic Forum or the Oprah Winfrey show is to say is that every one of us should be doing something to reach these children and it is not just wealthy Brits or Americans but also wealthy Sri Lankan companies that should be investing in this movement to get more children educated. All of us who have done well in our lives have done it because of our education. My message is, it is time to take it forward, there are places in this world where children don't have a school, library or books. Now it is time to change all of that. So my hope is to catalyse this whole movement around education. But this should be done not just by words, but by actions.

Room to Read is operating in both Asian and African countries, can you tell us what are the cross cutting lessons that can be learnt?

It's hard to compare because there are many differences, the two things that would come to the top of my mind would be, number one is that you need strong local teams and strong local ownership. You cannot impose a solution on South Africa from outside. We have strong South Africans in South Africa and Sri Lankans in Sri Lanka. That is the first thing. The second thing is the importance of local language in the instruction. I was naïve when I started Room to Read; I donated English books to the school in Nepal and expected that to make a difference. What I discovered early on is that there needs to be children's literature in local languages such as Sinhala, Tamil and Nepali etc. While achieving that we have become one of the biggest publishers in children's literature around the world. We are publishing children's books in languages that were never before in those languages because the parents could not afford the books therefore the publishers did not publish those books. In Sri Lanka we are publishing in Sinhala, Tamil and English. All books are by local authors, local editors and culturally relevant topics. South Africa is a

good example where there are 11 different languages, we have now published books in all 11 languages.

What are your thoughts on the progress of Room to Read work in Sri Lanka?

I'm very impressed with the work of our team here. They do not accept obstacles. We have something called GSD which means Get Stuff Done, our attitude is more about action – getting the work done more than rhetoric. It is good for me to get on a podium and talk about results than just talk about promises. Our numbers in Sri Lanka as I mentioned before 655 reading rooms, 202 schools opened, we have put 300,000 books in our library systems so far and we have published 47 titles in local languages. We will do even more in 2009 and then even more in 2010.
Let me give you an example of what we call our "Bias Towards Action". Glen and I were corresponding over email soon after the Government declared victory over the LTTE. I was watching the news on BBC at the Hong Kong Airport and I asked him what are we going to do? To go into the North and East where we had not previously worked and show the communities there that we are going to work with them. Give them a better life that hopefully with peace comes a peace dividend and we know from human history that when war ends what happens is people have children because there is hope for the future. But if those children don't have a place to go, they don't have a pre school or library there is not as much hope. What I realised when I spoke to the team here is how dedicated they are in helping Sri Lanka develop through the power of education. We work closely with the Government here. We are non partisan and unbiased. I will be speaking to the Prime minister but I will also speak to the Leader of the Opposition. When we publish we publish in both Sinhala and Tamil. Our employees represent all communities in Sri Lanka. I'm very impressed by the work done by Glen and his team.

What are the future plans for Sri Lanka?

We have both short term and medium term plans. In the short term our goal is to move quickly as we possibly can in to more communities in the North and the East. Right now we are working to implement three pre schools that would be close to the IDP camps and give the children a place to go. We are going to set up 50 mobile libraries which will be accessible to the 200 transitional learning centres when they are set up. Therefore, hopefully all of the 200 learning centres will have access to

books. Today we are announcing a commitment to provide 100,000 books to schools in the North and the East. Half of which will be in Tamil and English and we will also be announcing that we will be expanding into the Mannar district. Basically we are going to open fifty reading rooms in Mannar district starting from next year. This year we are working with the IDPs and then following the Government's resettlement process we will build the reading rooms. It is a sequential process. Ideally by 2011 and further on we will be able to open more. We move at a very fast speed at Room to Read, we are like a jaguar when we have to work, we do not sit around and talk but move very quickly. I hope from what we are announcing today people will see that Room to Read is committed to the North and East and the rebuilding process of the country.

What about the sustainability of the projects?

The sustainability is built in because we work with the communities and ask them to donate the labour. The parents have to contribute to the projects. They have to believe in the project to donate their resources. The resources can be labour, land or small amounts of money. There are a lot of commu-nities who each put in an equivalent of Rs 100 or 200. We believe very firmly in that model, we call it the challenge grant. The idea is that you can't help people if they are not going to help themselves. At Room to Read we believe in educating girls because we believe that when the mother is educated the next generation will be educated as well. It is not that we are anti-boy but we are pro-girl, we believe in education for everyone.

Final thoughts?

One of the things that I'll be doing while I'm here is to release my book 'Leaving Microsoft to Change the World' which is now in both Sinhala and Tamil. My final thought is actually a challenge to the business community, the business elite in Sri Lanka to say that I've been doing this during the past ten years of my life, I have made a lot of sacrifices to try and help parts of the world where children don't get education and I think the business community in Sri Lanka can do more to help the education process of the country. Glenfrey De Mel has set a goal that we will be announcing in an event with the Business Community, in that we need 10% of our support in Sri Lanka to come from within Sri Lanka; from the business elite and the business community itself. I am very happy to raise money to help Sri Lanka when I'm in Japan or Singapore, USA etc, but it will be a much stronger message if I could

say that the Sri Lankan business community is co-investing alongside those foreign donors. I would like to tell that story starting from tomorrow.

