



ROOM TO READ

SCALING UP LITERACY
THROUGH LOCALIZED
SOLUTIONS ACROSS ASIA
AND AFRICA

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Room to Read at a glance

EDUCATION LEVEL:

Primary



LOCATION:

Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Vietnam, and Zambia

FOCUS OF INTERVENTION:

Early-grade literacy program for primary school children

INTERVENTION OVERVIEW:

Room to Read (2000–present) is an education-focused nongovernmental organization that works in collaboration with local communities, partner organizations, and governments to improve children’s learning across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It does so through literacy and girls’ education programming that focuses on systemic changes within schools during two periods that are particularly critical in a child’s schooling: early primary school for literacy acquisition and secondary school for girls’ education. Room to Read’s Literacy Program, the focus of this case study, is an intervention based in primary school that ensures that schools have a structured library with books in the children’s local languages; trains teachers and librarians in scientifically based instructional methods in reading and writing; and engages families, communities, and government leaders in the school’s reform efforts. Room to Read’s Literacy Program works in conjunction with its countries’ existing language curricula and includes detailed lesson plans, classroom materials, and comprehensive professional development resources for teachers. Literacy coaches are placed in classrooms alongside teachers to provide instructional support throughout the intervention, and library activities are integrated to create environments that promote reading. Through structured monitoring processes, literacy coaches provide teachers with actionable feedback to improve their teaching methods and assess their students’ reading improvement over time, while library management facilitators provide similar feedback to librarians. Together, these efforts seek to develop children’s reading skills and their habit of reading so that they become lifelong, independent readers.

TYPE OF LEARNING MEASURED:

Literacy, including reading skills (through a reading and writing assessment, similar to the Early Grade Reading Assessment, that measures decoding, fluency, and reading comprehension) and reading habits

COST:

Room to Read’s 2014 annual budget was \$52.8 million. Total expenditures for its Literacy Program in 2014 were 81 percent of programmatic expenses (including Literacy and School Infrastructure program areas). A total of \$42.9 million of its budget made up of cash donations (64 percent from individuals, 26 percent from corporations, 6 percent from foundations, 2 percent from bilateral grants and contracts, and 2 percent from schools or other investors) and \$9.9 million was from in-kind donations.

SIZE:

Direct reach—Approximately 1 million new children were affected by Room to Read’s Literacy Program each year. Since 2000, more than 10 million children have benefited from all Room to Read programs in 17,500 communities across 10 countries. *Indirect reach*—To date, more than 18,000 teachers and librarians have received professional development in literacy instruction.

IMPACT:

Core literacy skills—In Laos, grade 1 students experienced one-year gains in reading fluency 12 times greater than in comparison schools; and in Zambia, grade 2 children experienced two-year gains in reading fluency that were two and a half times greater than children in comparison schools. *Reading habits*—The proportion of children in India, Laos, Nepal, and Sri Lanka who enjoy reading for pleasure at home and in school increased by 51 percent, compared with 31 percent for children in comparison schools. *National policy-level influence*—Individual country programs have engaged to varying degrees with their respective governments in revising national literacy textbooks (Cambodia and Laos), developing early grade reading and instruction materials (Nepal and Tanzania), and shaping national library policies and practices that have a direct impact on the reading activities and time devoted to reading of children and youth (Cambodia, Vietnam, and Zambia).

Background

During the last decade and a half, the number of out-of-school children has fallen by almost half, and a record number of girls and boys are now enrolled in school. Despite this progress in access, approximately 250 million children still fail to read and comprehend a simple text or perform basic mathematical calculations, despite the fact that 130 million of these children are in school for four years (UNESCO 2014). The gap in access and learning is even starker at the local level. For example, in rural India, although 95 percent of children are enrolled in school, fewer than half of fifth-grade students can read at the second-grade level (ASER Centre 2015). Research suggests that once children miss out on learning basic skills such as reading and writing in the early grades, they are unlikely to ever catch up (Pritchett 2014). The implications of this “learning crisis” are bleak, not just in terms of the status of national education systems, but also in terms of the addition of millions of more adults who cannot understand, for example, instructions on a medicine bottle’s label, an employment ad, or an election ballot because they lack the foundational skills needed to participate in modern society (Room to Read 2013; Sperling, Winthrop, and Kwauk 2015).

The reasons why schools are not delivering on their promise to develop the most basic skills in children are multifaceted and complex. But one underlying cause, especially in rural areas, is that some governments face a desperate lack of resources, which prevents them from providing children with access to a physical school or to books and other quality reading

materials, or from providing their teachers with instructional materials and training in literacy instruction and the use of storybooks, nonfiction, and other supplementary reading materials in local languages. In these contexts, the road to literacy is a hard one. Without a learning environment that includes books or promotes reading and without teachers who know how to engage their students in effective reading activities, it is hard to expect children to develop the habit of reading, let alone acquire lifelong literacy skills.

In 2000, this was just the space into which stepped John Wood, a former Microsoft executive, and his cofounders Erin Ganju and Dinesh Shrestha, when they created Room to Read and started working with rural communities—first in Nepal, and then throughout Asia and Africa—to build schools, establish libraries, and enhance literacy instruction (for more on the story of Room to Read’s genesis, see Wood 2007, 2014). Wood and his colleagues believed that a solution to the resource problem noted above could be found in the philanthropic mobilization of global resources for education, supported by a passionate network of international donors and channeled through local governments to individual communities on the ground. Although Room to Read began largely by providing book donations to local schools—an endeavor that grew exponentially within a few years—its later work supporting educators to teach children so that they could become readers provides the backdrop for this case study.

Creating room to read—and more

Between 2001 and 2008, each year Room to Read expanded its Literacy Program to one new country in Asia or Africa. To date, Room to Read’s Literacy Program has reached nearly 10 million children in 2,167 schools in 10 countries. The organization has established nearly 18,500 libraries, constructed over 1,900 schools, donated over 1 million books, and published over 1,000 book titles in 29 languages from its program countries (Room to Read 2014). Room to Read achieved its goal of supporting 10 million children by 2020 five years earlier than planned. And with its programs being implemented in 17,500 communities in 10 countries, its impact is also felt worldwide across its 1,000 staff (87 percent of whom come from the communities where they work; Room to Read 2014); over 18,000 teachers, librarians, and other school staff; and over 1,286 local authors and illustrators.

To pave the road to literacy, and to achieve such wide reach, Room to Read’s leaders focused the organization on interventions early in children’s lives in order to enable them to develop literacy skills and reading habits at a young age. The program began with key, quick-win activities that demonstrated to early donors the beneficial effect of moving resources to where they were needed the most. Such quick wins included building and repairing schools, thereby improving the quality of learning spaces and creating more room where children could read; and establishing dedicated library spaces and filling them with donated books, to provide children with more reading opportunities. These initial

Room to Read activities took off quickly, as more and more communities made requests for support and more and more donors wanted to contribute books and funds to the cause.

As Room to Read rapidly grew to other countries, however, its internal assessments and early cross-national evaluations of its library establishment program demonstrated that children were still unable to read at grade level and were not reading for pleasure. Attributing this finding to the lack of culturally relevant reading materials, in 2003, Room to Read evolved from English-language book donations and began publishing quality, age-appropriate books written in local languages. Because many of Room to Read’s participating countries lacked such local-language reading materials from the outset, the organization began to identify and train local authors and illustrators to produce local-language reading materials.

Starting in 2008, Room to Read’s Literacy Program began to expand its scope of activities from creating literate environments (i.e., building libraries, donating books, and publishing local-language reading material) to enhancing literacy instruction in ways that would help grade 1 and 2 children “crack the code” and gain the foundational reading skills on which to build their literacy (Room to Read 2012). By 2009, beginning in India, and then in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the organization piloted adding a reading and writing instruction component to its work, with a phonics emphasis that combined frequent and

timely school-based support to teachers from literacy coaches with access to local-language reading content in school libraries. The success of these pilots led to further pilots in Laos and Zambia in 2010, and eventually to a much-larger-scale literacy intervention, which by 2011 was incorporated into Room to Read's Literacy Program across nine countries.

Specifically, the program's reading-and-writing instruction component, in partnership with ministries of education, works to supplement gaps in early grade reading and writing curriculum, teacher training, and instruction with evidence-based guidelines in literacy instruction, detailed lesson plans customized to the local context, and print teaching

and learning materials, such as letter cards for phonics practice or word cards for print recognition. Literacy coaches provide on-site classroom enhancement through regular in-service teacher training and reading instruction support.¹ According to Room to Read's staff, deploying literacy coaches has been the most effective and efficient way to support a large number of teachers over time for reading skills instruction. This approach has also minimized the amount of time needed for in-service professional workshops and has allowed teachers, as well as librarians, to practice specific skills, routines, and activities that encourage students to read with success in their own classrooms.

Impact and evidence of success

Room to Read's impact on literacy during the past 15 years has been impressive. Compared with an evaluation of 70 educational interventions in low- to upper-middle-income countries (of which Room to Read was not a part), Room to Read's effect size on young readers was nearly 10 times greater than the average impact of the other interventions evaluated (McEwan 2015). Program evaluations, commissioned by Room to Read, found similarly large effects on reading fluency. Tracking children for two years with literacy assessments before and after the intervention, evaluations in India found that children could read 13 more words per minute than children in comparison schools by the end of grade 1, and 29 more words per minute by the end of grade 2. In Laos, grade 1 children improved at rates 12 times those of children in comparison schools (Room to

Read 2015a). The evaluations also showed that this impact was sustained over the course of the two-year intervention: In Sri Lanka, children experienced two-year gains that were twice as large as children in comparison schools. In Cambodia and Zambia, children progressed at a rate two and a half times greater than their counterparts (Room to Read 2015a).

The program has also demonstrated improvements in children's reading habits, as measured by the number of books checked out of Room to Read libraries and the time spent reading for enjoyment at home or in school. For example, between 2009 and 2013, the average number of books that children checked out increased from 3.3 to 8.9 books per student annually. Furthermore, between 2009 and 2012, the proportion of children reading for

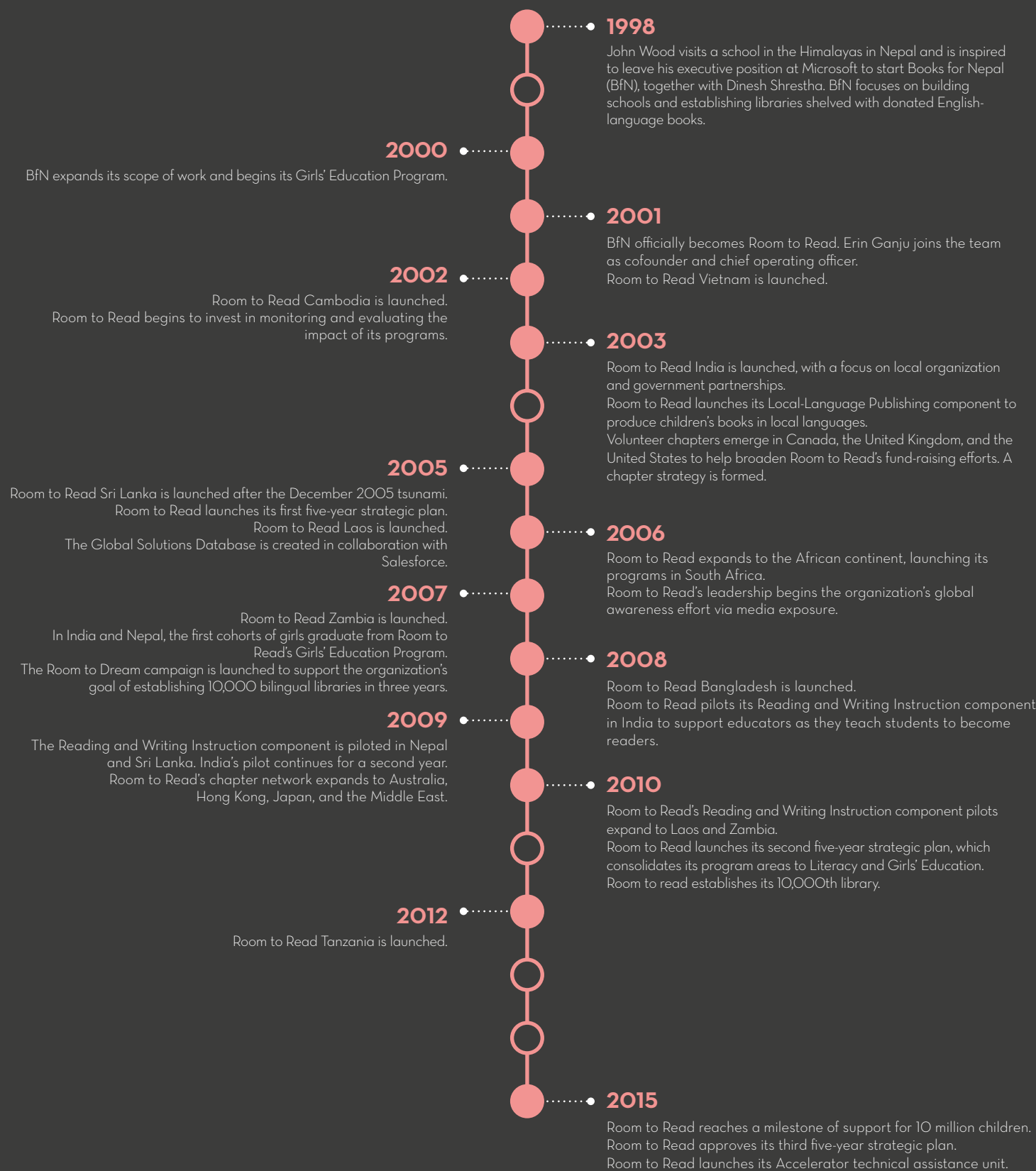
enjoyment at home and in school increased by about 51 percent in four of the countries, compared with an average increase of about 31 percent in comparison schools (Room to Read 2015c). However, though Room to Read's school libraries helped to create an environment that promoted reading, its impact on children's reading habits was not consistent among children of parents with less education or other disadvantages. As a result, between 2013 and 2015, Room to Read instituted a series of programmatic improvements, including the introduction of family and community engagement guidelines to help schools increase parental support and involvement in their children's reading; stronger coordination between the Literacy Program's reading instruction and school library components; and packages to promote more consistent implementation approaches (i.e., training to librarians) for all its libraries (Room to Read 2015c).

The organization has also influenced national-level policy through its engagement in curricular and/or textbook reforms, as well as school library reforms. For example, Room to Read Cambodia was invited by the Cambodian government to rewrite the country's literacy textbooks for grades 1, 2, and 3 after a successful literacy instruction pilot improved the way Khmer literacy skills were taught in early grade Cambodian classrooms. A similar process is currently under way in Laos, where Room to Read's textbooks for grades 1 and 2 are being piloted in place of the existing national Lao-language textbooks. In Nepal, Room to Read's literacy instruction materials served as the basis for the country's new national early grade reading curriculum for grades 1 and 2. Finally, in Vietnam, Room to Read's collaboration with the Vietnamese government led to a memorandum of

understanding that created weekly "reading periods" throughout all schools in Vinh Long Province—not just Room to Read schools—during which students could engage in a variety of shared and independent reading activities. Similarly, in India, Room to Read's leaders pushed policymakers to increase students' time in school to read and explore the library, influencing legislation in 2014 that mandated library time in every public school and for reading instruction to begin in a lower grade (Unmesh Brahme, interview by Jenny Alexander, May 5, 2015).

Finally, Room to Read has also received several accolades for its contributions to increasing literacy levels around the world. For example, in 2011, Room to Read was awarded the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy in recognition of its excellence and inspiring experiences in the field of literacy throughout the world. In 2014, Room to Read was recognized by the Library of Congress with the Rubenstein Prize, which goes to an organization that has demonstrated exceptional and sustained depth and breadth in its commitment to the advancement of literacy. Ganju, Room to Read's cofounder and chief executive, was recognized by the Schwab Foundation in 2014 as one of 37 Social Entrepreneurs of the Year for her innovative approaches and potential for global impact. Wood was recognized as the 2015 World Children's Prize Honorary Laureate. Finally, *Room to Read's Do Not Read This* video—a public service announcement that was produced in house for less than \$400 and was launched on International Literacy Day in 2014—was recognized by the In2 SABRE Awards for digital content and was featured on YouTube's Spotlight channel as one of the 12 most powerful public service announcements.

Timeline of key events



Key drivers behind scaling impact

Room to Read did not have a finalized approach for scaling up on day one. Instead, it evolved its plans as it developed and as its leadership learned more about the strength of its programming and the needs of the people whom it served. Indeed, the organization went through several phases of changes after it was launched in 2000, each of which had a different focus. Whereas early efforts focused substantially on establishing thousands of libraries, creating hundreds of children's story books, and funding a large number of girls' scholarships, the organization's current focus is achieving quality educational outcomes for children at scale, by focusing on the quality of implementation and the associated outcomes of its literacy and girls' education programs.

How, then, has Room to Read's model been replicated, localized, and sustained by governments across Asia and Africa? One key to its accelerated growth was its big-picture focus on the eventual goal of supporting 10 million children by 2020, a goal that was achieved five years earlier

than planned.² In addition to this ambitious vision for scaling up its efforts, another crucial element was identifying early on a theory of change about how scaling up the organization and its impact on literacy was supposed to take place. This helped Room to Read operationalize and test the viability of its assumptions, and at times use scaling up to drive larger impact.

As the remainder of this case study demonstrates, Room to Read's vision and theory of change for scaling up have together helped it to develop a number of strategies that have led to the successful scaling up of its literacy impact—defined as fluency, reading comprehension, decoding, and reading habits. These strategies include decentralizing ownership, co-investing for the long term with its government and community partners, ensuring that outcomes are measured and results are fed back into the development and refinement of program activities, and being honest about how best to strengthen program components—which sometimes has meant scaling back its programs.

Decentralizing ownership while maintaining program quality

Room to Read recognized early on that local adaptation and ownership would be critical for the success of its programs. This recognition has helped it build flexibility into its projects and has also helped it to establish strong relationships with local partners. In turn, this has helped Room to Read work within existing community networks and identify the context-specific issues that it must address to improve learning. Indeed, Room to Read

concentrated its initial expansion in Asia in countries where it already had established personal connections, an existing network of supporters, or a prior commitment.

For the additional countries in Asia and Africa where it began to operate, Room to Read's process of decentralizing ownership was successful. This process started with hiring a strong national country director, who in turn hired a solid local

team that developed a “proof of concept” for the country context. That is, an activity had to achieve a demonstrable level of success in a way that was manageable for the context in which it had been tested. The next step was to share this proof of concept with government officials and/or other organizational leaders in ways that inspired adoption and scaling up through larger systems. The originating organization then shared the details of the program model with representatives from the government and/or other organizations, and in some cases even trained them in methods. It was then up to the recipients to scale up the activities in ways that made the most sense for their constituents’ needs.

This approach to scaling up led to a trade-off between allowing for local ownership and adaptation while maintaining fidelity to the program model. As local engagement increased, additional components were often added to the programs, but others were not eliminated, which led to more complicated and complex programs at full scale. To respond to this growing complexity, in 2014 Room to Read began a process of program consolidation. And in 2015, Room to Read launched its technical assistance arm, known as the Accelerator, to further standardize its scaling approach.³ Specifically, Room to Read organized its 10 country teams’ most

Investing in a country for the long term

Closely related to Room to Read’s decentralized approach to ownership was the organization’s approach to taking the long view when investing in a new country. Early on in its organizational development, Room to Read’s leadership made the conscious decision to work almost exclusively with governments

effective content and training materials into worldwide implementation packages that were designed to be cost-effective, scalable, and sustainable, as well as easy for country teams to use and implement with local partners. Country teams recontextualized the materials into local languages and ensured that the content was culturally appropriate and responsive to countries’ administrative needs, while also making certain that it was as closely aligned as possible with Room to Read’s worldwide approach.

The development of these implementation packages helped Room to Read follow a more disciplined approach to scaling up its activities, in terms of both its direct programming and in areas where it did not have a direct presence in a country. By engaging in a process of reflection and revision, the organization was able to identify and refine its best practices and to standardize its approach to ensure that its core programming remained of high quality while expanding. At the same time that this approach assists Room to Read with balancing customization and standardization, it also ensures that the organization assists even more children in areas it would not otherwise have been able to reach through an exclusively direct implementation model.

instead of private sector educational providers through direct program implementation. This decision was rooted in a theory of change that presumed that governments’ predominance as the funder and facilitator of mass education in many countries made it a natural partner in working to scale up programs.

For example, in Sri Lanka, after the deadly 2004 tsunami, Room to Read worked closely with the Sri Lankan government to improve literacy education efforts in the country’s primary schools. As a result of this partnership, in 2011 Room to Read was invited to participate in a Ministry of Education’s steering committee to prepare policy guidelines on the types of reading materials that were being distributed to schools. According to Room to Read, this was the first time that an international nonprofit organization had been invited to sit on a ministry steering committee related to policy formation, and it ultimately provided Room to Read with an invaluable opportunity to positively influence literacy education nationwide (personal communication, Cory Heyman and Jenny Perlman Robinson, February 17, 2016). And there are a number of other stories of government partnerships leading to Room to Read’s participation in national-level education policymaking processes. In Bangladesh, the organization’s partnerships with government led to Room to Read’s participation two years later in a national committee tasked with overhauling the national educational curriculum. In Cambodia and Laos, Room to Read was invited to help rewrite the respective governments’ early grade literacy textbooks. And in Zambia, Room to Read’s focus on building strong relationships with the national government eventually led to an invitation to provide recommendations for the country’s national education policy.

It took Room to Read time and strategic planning to transform itself from its nascent phase of building libraries and implementing reading-and-writing instruction programs to its current role of serving as a trusted educational voice

for several national governments. To lay these foundations, when investing in a new country, especially one planning to implement a full program, Room to Read first raises a minimum of risk-tolerant funding that will last for three years. The philosophy underlying this is that an effective program requires building networks and establishing roots without fear of discontinuing the program mid-stride.

Additionally, investing in a country for the long term also means investing in communities as partners—whether by recruiting local country directors to lead local program staff; including in-country research, monitoring, and evaluation teams; or by leveraging local participation and expertise to ensure greater community ownership. Another key strategy for Room to Read has been to follow a “co-investment” model, whereby Room to Read and the local community are both invested in children’s literacy outcomes. For example, as part of any new library or school construction activity, Room to Read requires a community contribution to the overall effort of approximately 15 percent of total costs. This can be in the form of cash, labor, or in-kind donations (i.e., land use, construction materials, and books). This upfront commitment, or “challenge grant,” generates a different set of expectations for project outcomes, creates a stronger sense of partnership and community ownership, and increases the likelihood that not only will projects be implemented on time but also that communities will be more inclined to themselves sustain project activities over the longer term. This co-investment model opens the door for strong community interest in learning the details of program activities, providing input and feedback

about the efficacy of the overall program design and its alignment with community needs, and ensuring accountability for the use of resources. Room to Read's staff in Tanzania have even reported community leaders losing their jobs in

elections because they have not been accountable enough for the community's funds pledged toward building schools (personal communication, Cory Heyman and Jenny Perlman Robinson, February 17, 2016).

Following a businesslike approach to fund-raising

Although the co-investment model has been vital to generating commitment and support among individual communities and governments, Room to Read's "unapologetic," businesslike approach to fund-raising—an approach perhaps inspired by the fact that two of Room to Read's three founders emerged from the corporate sector (Knowledge@Wharton 2008)—has also been instrumental for the success of the organization's scaling-up process. With its gala-style fund-raising model, its low-overhead, three-year in-country startup fund, its committed network of corporate and foundation partners, and its community challenge grants, until recently Room to Read did not focus on bilateral and multilateral grant-writing—itsself a labor-intensive endeavor.

Approximately 60 percent of Room to Read's budget comes from individuals who are committed to and passionate about the organization's mission. In addition to their own contributions, they have put together a chapter network of more than 14,000 volunteers around the world that hosts events and fund-raises for the organization in more than 40 cities on an annual basis. Together, with donations from corporations and foundations, these funding sources have helped Room to Read become only one of 201 U.S.-based nonprofits that surpassed the \$50 million annual revenue level between 1975

and 2008—and it has done so without substantial bilateral funding (Room to Read 2015b).⁴

Like any successful business, transparency has been central to Room to Read's success in rallying and sustaining global financial support. According to one Room to Read board member, "Most nonprofits are mismanaged by well-meaning people who don't have the skill set to achieve their dreams. What was unique about Room to Read and John [Wood] and Erin [Ganju] was that we had these people who were not only good people, but who also had the skill set and talent to create a lot of growth in a highly efficient manner" (Darwall and Dorage 2010, 3). In particular, Room to Read's businesslike approach calls for scalable, measurable, and sustainable results. According to Wood, "You have to show results to attract capital. . . . If you achieve results, you attract capital, which allows you to achieve even more results" (Darwall and Dorage 2010, 3). To this end, Room to Read made a conscious effort to use data to demonstrate a program's impact and or to drive a program improvement if it was not achieving results. The tangible visibility of many of Room to Read's activities (i.e., the number of schools built, school libraries established, books published) made this process easier among its network of individual donors. Room to Read was able to effectively

leverage volunteers to make substantial contributions to their fund-raising efforts, which is something similar organizations

admire and seek to replicate (personal communication, Tim Carlberg and Jenny Perlman Robinson, March 31, 2016).

Leveraging data to refine the approach

In 2008, during a discussion between Wood and his former supervisor at Microsoft, Melinda Gates, about the best way that Gates could support Room to Read, the two agreed that it would be through a grant for large-scale research and evaluation. The resources would provide opportunity to study and document the successes of Room to Read programming in a way that could provide proofs of concept and achieve credibility with other funders. The ensuing grant funded external evaluations and internal research of Room to Read's library and book-publishing activities.

To this day, the organization has consistently invested in local research, monitoring, and evaluation officers in every country where it implements its direct services. These staff members develop tools and assessments targeted for Room to Read's literacy outcomes so they are closely aligned with the tools of the Early Grade Reading Assessment and are also contextualized for each country. They train school-level implementers to collect strategic information about program implementation and outcomes in ways in which implementers can work immediately and directly with schools on program improvement. Together, in collaboration with Salesforce, Room to Read's Global Solutions Database provides a robust global monitoring system and online platform to process cross-nationally consistent monitoring data on an annual basis from more than 4,000 project sites.

Detailed results from over 30 indicators are not only shared publicly in an annual report, as discussed earlier in this case study, but are also shared regularly with country teams, becoming the starting point for annual program improvement planning sessions.

What is important here is that research, monitoring, and evaluation have been integral components of Room to Read's program design and implementation strategy. That is, action-oriented data are linked purposefully to program decisions by staff at all levels, from schools to districts, from country offices to the global office. In doing so, information is fed up into the larger country-level monitoring system to explain trends and modify program content or implementation strategies as needed.

For example, Room to Read has identified, with each evaluation, what was missing in its approach and implementation and has made adjustments along the way. Starting with the observation in Nepal that low-income children lacked books and that books are a predictor of later academic success, Room to Read's cofounders began establishing libraries and moving great quantities of book donations to rural communities in Nepal and then to other countries in Asia. Once the organization recognized that it needed more books in local languages, it launched its publication initiative to train local authors and illustrators and to

publish quality children's books in local languages to distribute to its network of libraries. The organization then realized that learning levels were still low because children could not read the books provided to their schools. As such, Room to Read crafted its literacy instruction component to ensure that reading and writing were taught more effectively

Being willing to scale back

By continuously and honestly reevaluating how best to strengthen its programming, Room to Read has demonstrated a strong commitment to learning from evidence, even if the evidence is not positive. For example, poor outcomes from one of its early programs that focused on computer education within school settings led Room to Read to halt the program in 2009, on the grounds that its relative benefits were not sufficient to justify the expenditures. In Vietnam, Room to Read closed the instructional component of its Literacy Program based on findings that many children in the country were already achieving foundational reading skills through the national reading approach. Rather than duplicating what was already working, Room to Read's leadership determined that the organization's scarce financial and staff resources would be better targeted to other program activities,

Taking sustainability into account from the start

Room to Read has attempted to build sustainability into its programs from the establishment of each new country program. For starters, the three-year

in grades 1 and 2. In this way, Room to Read has been a "learning organization," constantly cycling through an attempt to assess and correct its philosophy, similar to that of a Silicon Valley start-up. The monitoring of data as well as the collecting and reporting of that evidence have thus been key factors in Room to Read's success from the start.

such as growing its network of learning environments and publishing quality reading materials.

Thus far, Room to Read has never left a country. But it has scaled back or paused its intervention, depending on the local needs and context. In general, two reasons explain why some Room to Read programs, at times, did not work: (1) the right program but the wrong implementation, as in Cambodia, which saw rapid expansion but low marginal impact, so the organization slowed down and improved quality before scaling up again; and (2) poor program fit, as in Vietnam with the reading-and-writing instruction component (Matthew Jukes, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson, February 27, 2015). Room to Read's culture of learning and its openness to adapt based on mistakes, however, have helped it learn from and build on these negative experiences rather than be discouraged by them.

funding requirement adds a layer of security to ensure the country program's sustainability. Additionally, the local leadership and nearly 100 percent local

staff in each country program ensure that Room to Read is rooted in the community and its needs. Indeed, the importance placed on the local makeup of its human resources has dramatically improved the contextualization of its programs and the potential for policy impact.

For its U.S.-based team, the organization has often hired from within so as to continue promoting and cultivating institutional knowledge, which also contributes to its ability to grow. However, the trade-off here is that Room to Read has functioned with a very lean team, leaving little room for cuts or changes. According to Tim Carlberg of Dalberg Global Development Advisors, Room to Read "grew through the efforts of highly motivated individuals," and it has used that to maintain and sustain its strong organizational culture throughout its phases of growth and expansion (Tim Calberg, interview by Jenny Alexander and Jenny Perlman, March 20, 2015). Continuing to aspire to keep its overhead low in its early days, however, meant that it risked overstressing employees as it continued to scale up. In the last five years, it has hired more staff more rapidly than it did in its first decade.

Taking sustainability into account from the start has also meant that Room to Read has made difficult decisions regarding its design features. To illustrate, in 2014, it went through a controversial change in its approach to literacy instruction. Previously, it had used a large number of "manipulatives" in its classroom activities, including flash cards, literacy wheels, dice with words on them, a small series of decodable texts, and individual student writing books. Though teachers enjoyed these resources, the diversity of

materials was too expensive to produce, and preparing and transitioning between activities was time-consuming. Therefore, Room to Read consolidated its classroom materials into a single, nondisposable student book per grade per country that included the same engaging activities but was less costly to produce on a per-child basis. These books also could be used for multiple years, helping to bring the books down to a price point that could be absorbed by ministry budgets over time.

A focus on sustainability has also meant making tough calls to scale back, as mentioned above. But in some cases, given Room to Read's popularity in some communities, the prospects of scaling back have led local partners to step up (personal communication, Cory Heyman and Jenny Perlman, February 17, 2016). For example, in India, which has Room to Read's largest country program, the organization began to have difficult discussions with state education officials in 2013 about phasing out its work in certain states over time in order to consolidate its national programming to achieve greater economies of scale. Officials countered that their states would increase funding if Room to Read would continue its work, which had already helped many children develop stronger reading skills (personal communication, Cory Heyman and Jenny Perlman Robinson, February 17, 2016).⁵ Collaboratively, Room to Read and state officials petitioned the U.S. Agency for International Development for more transformative financial support. The result was a five-year cooperative agreement, whereby Room to Read would support 100 new model schools and then train state officials in the implementation of literacy and library programming so that effective activities could be increased

to 1,000 schools during the project's five-year period, with an ultimate goal of adoption at the state level.

Although Room to Read has been highly successful in leveraging data to scale up literacy efforts across Asia and Africa, since 2010, the organization has slowed down its expansion in order to ensure that it is thoughtful about the countries it enters, is assured that the right environment is in place, has assessed the local community's needs, and has secured adequate financial resources for further expansion. Meanwhile, Room to Read has begun to focus more on increasing the sustainability

of its internal organization—particularly its people, internal systems, and processes—in an attempt to build a more robust platform for scaling up its impact (Room to Read 2014). Recognizing that its internal system has not grown at the same pace as its programmatic impact, it has identified as one of its next challenges improving the efficiency of its staff and reducing redundant or misaligned processes. Through increased capacity building for its staff members, improvements to its technology infrastructure, and expansion of its internal communication, Room to Read has set its course toward the next goal of organizational sustainability.

Lessons learned

- The key to accelerated growth during each phase of Room to Read's organizational development was a combination of *an ambitious vision for scaling up from the outset and a detailed plan* that was continuously refined at each phase. Together, these anchored the organization's work over time.
- Expanding into countries where leadership had a personal connection, an established network, or a prior commitment enabled Room to Read to take a *decentralized approach* to expansion. This allowed its programs to be adopted by local organizations and refined to respond to local communities' specific needs. As such, programs were manageable for the context in which they had been tested.
- However, decentralized ownership also created some challenges, because the nature of decentralization meant that local country offices could be customized to a point where they became difficult to scale up. It also meant that *maintaining fidelity* to the original program model was more difficult. In order to know which components were effective and to sustain a set of core, defining program components, Room to Read has been working to *strike a balance between customization and standardization*.
- A *co-investment model* helped to ensure that communities and governments were committed to Room to Read's project design, implementation, and outcomes, creating a real sense of partnership, ownership, and increased accountability in the process.
- A *business-like approach* to fund-raising was key to building financial support for Room to Read's expansion. Combined with its honest and transparent use of research findings to demonstrate impact, donors could see tangible evidence that their contributions were used effectively, spurring on greater commitment to and trust of the organization.
- As the predominant funder and facilitator of mass education in countries, Room to Read *works with governments*, which could make for a natural partnership and strategic route to address scale. However, to date, bilateral and multilateral funding have constituted no more than 4 percent of Room to Read's budget.

Recognizing the important role that these donors could play in bridging stronger relationships with program country governments, Room to Read has included a proposal to increase its engagement among bilateral and multilateral donors in its current five-year strategic plan.

- Room to Read's *willingness to scale back* when necessary has helped keep organizational resources focused on high-impact activities.
- Room to Read *built sustainability* into its programs during the establishment of each new country program. The three-year funding requirement helped add a layer of security, while community financial and labor donations allowed funding to be channeled into high-impact activities that could stretch the impact of every dollar raised a little further. Also, employing local staff members in country program offices ensured that programs were rooted in the community's needs. The organization's next challenge is to strengthen its organizational sustainability.

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Endnotes

1. Ideally, literacy coaches are college graduates and/or graduates of teacher-training programs, teachers, or former teachers. They are recruited locally, are trained by Room to Read's staff, and are responsible for working with approximately 5 to 10 schools, with monthly visits to targeted grade 1 and 2 teachers.
2. Room to Read's goal, as of 2014, is to reach 15 million children by 2020—by partnering with 25,000 schools through its Literacy Program and by supporting more than 66,000 girls in its Girls' Education Program.
3. The Room to Read Accelerator was established to disseminate the organization's knowledge to a wider constituency, thereby maximizing its impact. The Accelerator model seeks to offer technical assistance and share Room to Read's expertise and resources with partner organizations by providing training materials, workshops, periodic support, and monitoring—all in efforts to maximize the quality of implementation and, in turn, replicate its work. The Accelerator trains staff members from government ministries and other organizations to enable them to effectively implement literacy and girls' education programming.
4. Bilateral funding has never exceeded 4 percent of Room to Read's total revenue. As a result, it would be interesting to note if this has had an impact on Room to Read's ability to work with governments, which often prefer to work with recipients of sizable bilateral and multilateral funding. In the future, bilateral and multilateral donors may become more prominent sources of funding for the organization, because Room to Read's leaders have begun to recognize the opportunities for growth in cooperation with government partners by pursuing this kind of funding, especially vis-à-vis policy engagement and systems reform. The organization's strategy for 2015 to 2019 aims to increase bilateral and multilateral revenue to 5 to 6 percent of its annual budget.
5. According to internal evaluations, results from India in 2012 demonstrated that students participating in the Literacy Program were reading at a fluency level far below the minimum expected rate of 45 words per minute. Room to Read responded by supporting teachers in increasing their activities to promote more student engagement with texts. One year later, fluency among grade 2 students had more than doubled, to 41 words per minute.

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