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Libraries for the poor make Room To Read founder feel rich

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Room to Read founder John Wood taking books to children in Pokhara, Nepal, in 2000. In 14 years, American activist John Wood has helped seed 15,000 libraries in the developing world, bringing books to millions of underprivileged children. -- FILE PHOTO: ROOM TO READ

By Akshita Nanda

In 14 years, American activist John Wood has helped seed 15,000 libraries in the developing world, bringing books to millions of underprivileged children. The secret, he says, lies treating his not-for-profit organisation like any big business.

Room To Read's projects with poor communities in countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam and Tanzania are followed up with some rigour: independent evaluators are hired to do spot-checks on schools and libraries, with reports and audited financial reports appearing on the official website.

"We've always believed in transparency, efficiency, being buttoned up," says Wood, 49, adding that this helped donors remain confident in their activities even during last year's media blitz about alleged financial wrong-doing on the part of Three Cups Of Tea author Greg Mortenson and the charity he set up to start schools in Afghanistan.

Wood gave up a half-million annual salary as Microsoft's director of business development for the Greater China region in 1999 to start Room To Read. Today he just about makes ends meet, but says: "If I went back to work in tech I'd make more money but I don't think I'd be as happy."

Room To Read started with one village school in Nepal and today has grown to 1,600 schools and 15,000 libraries in countries from Asia to Africa. This story of growth is told in Wood's new book, *Creating Room To Read*. Released last month by Penguin, it is a sequel to his 2006 memoir *Leaving Microsoft To Change The World*, published by Harper Collins.

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