

**Why has John been nominated?**

Child Rights Hero Nominee • Pages 48–67

# John Wood

**John Wood has been nominated for the 2014 World's Children's Prize for his 15-year fight for children's right to education.**

John quit his job as a manager at the Microsoft company to fulfil his dream: to fight poverty by giving children all over the world the chance to go to school. John believes that when children can read and write, they are better equipped to demand their rights and to defend themselves against abuse, trafficking and slavery. John and his organisation, Room to Read, have built almost 1,700 schools and over 15,000 school libraries in some of the world's poorest countries. They have published 874 children's books in local languages and given over ten million books to poor children who have never before had access to books. John and Room to Read have a special focus on girls' education and have helped over 20,000 girls to finish their education and have a better life. Room to Read works in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Zambia and Tanzania, and has reached 7.8 million children!



**John Wood quit his career to fight for all children's right to education. His organisation, Room to Read, builds schools and libraries for the very poorest children in ten countries, publishes children's books and fights for girls' rights and education. John says that education is the best way to tackle poverty.**

**I**t all started in Hong Kong 15 years ago. John is an important manager at Microsoft. He travels all over Asia, going to hundreds of meetings and working long hours. His career is going well, but after seven years John is exhausted. He goes on holiday to fulfil a long-held dream: to go hiking in the Himalayan mountains in Nepal, far from computers and ringing telephones.

#### **At the summit**

A few weeks later, John is sitting at a small tea stall on a Himalayan mountain top. He has been hiking for hours and orders a drink from the young boy who is serving the customers. The boy returns quickly with a bottle. John has learned a few words of Nepali, and he says:

“It's tato (hot). Do you have chiso (cold)?”

The boy shakes his head regretfully. There are no

refrigerators in the mountains. But suddenly an idea strikes him. The boy dashes down the steep slope towards the river, and puts the bottle in the ice-cold glacial meltwater. John laughs and gives the boy a thumbs up, and a man at the next table laughs too.

“Are all Nepali children as clever?” asks John.

“Here we have to improvise, as we have very little,” says the man. His name is Pasuphati and he works for the local education department. Right now he is visiting the mountain schools to find out what they need.

“They lack almost everything,” he explains to John.

“Come with me tomorrow and you will see.”

### 50 children in each class

The next morning, John heaves his lead-heavy rucksack onto his back, laden with expensive camping equipment. Pasuphati only carries a small briefcase, and walks up the mountain with quick strides. John struggles to keep up, despite being at least 20 years younger. As they climb and the air becomes thinner, Pasuphati tells John that Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world.

“At the school... you will see that in Nepal we are too poor to afford education. But until we have education, we will always be poor.”

John has prepared himself, but he still gets a shock when he is shown around the ramshackle school building. The recent rains have turned the earthen floors of the rooms to a sea of mud. The temperature is 40 degrees under the tin roof, which has been heated by the sun. Around 50 stu-



When Room to Read printed their ten millionth children's book, in Vietnam, John and the children held a ceremony together in their school!

dents are packed into every classroom. The children don't have desks, but squeeze onto long benches with jotters on their laps.

### Library without books

The headteacher suggests that they finish their tour

with a visit to the school library, and John is filled with excitement. He has loved libraries for as long as he can remember. John's mother used to tell him, “If you have a good book in your hands, you will never be lonely.”

At the library in his small

town, you were only allowed to borrow eight books per week. But John had a secret agreement with the librarian. He was allowed to borrow twelve books a week, as long as he didn't tell anyone!

While hiking in Nepal, John Wood visited a poor school that didn't have any books in its library. Six months later, he returned to the Himalayas with thousands of books that were transported up to the mountain top by yaks and donkeys.



## John and Room to Read:

- Work with education departments to develop school books and better teaching methods.
- Build school libraries and fill them with books, jigsaws, games, colourful furniture and cushions that turn the libraries into the children's favourite place.
- Get local authors and artists to write and illustrate new children's books in local languages, so that the children can read good books that they can identify with. In many of the languages, they have never had children's books before.
- Build or renovate so that the children have safe, bright classrooms where it is easy to learn.
- Give scholarships and support to girls who would otherwise have to quit school to work or get married.





The headteacher opens the door marked 'Library'. But the room is empty. No shelves, chairs, desks or reading lights. And no books. There is a small cupboard in one corner.

"The books, they are so precious and so few. We must protect them," explains the headteacher as he unlocks the padlocks on the cupboard doors. John hopes that the cupboard is going to be crammed full of books. But inside there is only a handful of old paperbacks left behind by tourists. Books for adults, in English and Italian. This is the instant when John's life turns upside down. As he is leaving the village, the headteacher says:

"Perhaps, sir, you will someday come back with books?"



John likes travelling and meeting the children that Room to Read helps, as he is doing here in Asia.

### A heavily-laden yak

John returns to work in Hong Kong and begins to call and write to everyone he knows at home in the USA. He asks them to send all the children's books they can spare to his parents. Soon, their garage is crammed with boxes of books. John's eight-year-old niece does a book drive at her school. Everyone gets involved, and six months later John and his father return to Nepal – with thousands of books.

The books are loaded onto donkeys and yaks to begin the hike up the mountain-side. As they approach the summit where the school is, John sees a huge crowd of people. Children, parents and teachers are waiting to welcome the book delivery. The students greet them with flower garlands and when it's time to unpack, chaos breaks out! Soon the children are spread right across the

mountainside, each one leafing through a colourful book.

Later, as they eat dinner, John's father asks him:

"Okay, what's next?"

John hasn't thought that far, but now his head is spinning. In the past his focus has been on revenue and sales growth – things that were ultimately going to make rich people richer and give himself a raise, a new car and a bigger house. But all of that

seems unimportant now.

John makes a decision. He's going to quit his top job and put all his time and savings into giving children all over the world access to books.

### Thousands of new libraries

Lots of people think John has gone crazy when he quits his job and starts his organisation, Room to Read. But his parents support him. Soon, he finds more people who

## My favorite book



**Prakash, 11**  
(name means the light)  
"My favourite book is called Tricky Jackie. If I was to write a book it would be about children with disabilities, because I have a friend who has a disability."



50



**Dipa, 9**  
(Flame)  
"I like a book called Tempo because the illustrations are so good. My own book would be about me and my sister."



**Sirjana, 14**  
(Creation)  
"I like stories where the characters are animals. But if I was to write a book it would be realistic, and it would be about my village. It could be called 'The history of my village' or maybe 'Sami and the goats', because I take care of our goats."



Room to Read often uses games to make education more fun. Here, John is trying out a spelling game with a girl in Zambia.

want to work with him. John tells anyone who will listen all about his idea. Some of the listeners are rich people who he got to know during his time as an important manager. Many people want to make a contribution to help children learn to read and write. They send books, but they also donate money, so John is able to employ more staff and build more libraries.

Room to Read grows

quickly. Soon school libraries are being built not only in Nepal but also in Cambodia, Vietnam, South Africa, India and Bangladesh. But after a while John and his colleagues realise that they have missed a vital piece of the jigsaw. They have opened thousands of school libraries, but filled them with children's books in English! The children have to have the opportunity to read in their own languages. But

there are hardly any children's books available in Nepali, for example, or in Khmer, the language in Cambodia.

"We have to find great writers and artists, and publish books in the children's own mother tongues," says John.

### Towards 100 million children

Today, Room to Read has grown into a global organisa-



### No cars for the bosses!

In many poor countries, the streets are swarming with expensive jeeps. John was furious when he realised that most of them belonged to the bosses of organisations that are there to help poor people. A jeep could cost around USD 75,000. That amount of money could pay for schooling for 300 children for a year. So Room to Read decided that their bosses would travel by local transport instead of having their own chauffeur-driven jeeps!



### Krishna, 9

(name of a Hindu god)

"The Mouse House is my favourite book. It's about mice who work. I would like to write a book that supports farmers. There are lots of farmers where I live, and they have a tough life."

### Nirjala, 9:

"I must have read Chandramukhi ten times. It's a historical fable. I've thought about writing a book, but I've forgotten what it was going to be about!"



### Binod, 10

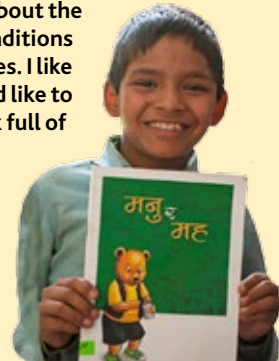
(New)

"I like a book called My garden, about how to grow plants, remove weeds, water plants, and so on. If I was to write a book it would be about our cow, who is called Eyeliner."

### Dipak, 12

(Light)

"My favourite book is Man and honey. It's about the different traditions in our villages. I like riddles, so I'd like to write a book full of riddles."





# The library is the heart of the school!

Sudip, 13, and his schoolmates have started their own club. They meet in the library, which Room to Read built together with the school and the parents in a poor village in the Himalayas. The children's club helps to look after the library, and organises lots of activities in the school.

"For example, we have quizzes every day. We ask a question at assembly in the morning, and then everyone rushes to the library to find the answer in the books there. The library has become a meeting place, and has made it easier for us children to get to know each other at school."

### Having an influence

Sudip and the children's club also help to keep the schoolyard clean, and organise poetry and short story competitions. They even make a school

magazine and organise debates on important issues.

"The debates are the best," says Sudip. "For example, we have discussed fast food, and our conclusion was that it is expensive and unhealthy. Now hardly any students eat fast food any more."

The children's club also gets to vote along with the adults in the School Council.

"That's good. It's democratic," says Sudip. "I like having an influence at school."

## The children's club wish list:

- Computers
- Even more interesting books
- Bigger classrooms
- A fan in the library
- A real lab



The children's club holds meetings in the library or under a tree in the schoolyard.



Gokul, 13, wants a fan in the library so that it's possible to spend time there even during the hottest part of the day.



Manju, 13, wishes for bigger classrooms at his school.

tion working in ten countries. Over six million children now have access to a school library, and over 20,000 girls have received support for their education. But John still isn't satisfied.

"We've still only reached 1 percent of the children who need us," he says. "We have to get back to work so we can one day reach 100 million

children! Our motto is that 'world change starts with educated children'. We will never accept the notion that any child can be told that he or she was 'born in the wrong place, at the wrong time, to the wrong parents' and hence will not be educated. That idea belongs on the scrap heap of human history!"



Room to Read has been working in Cambodia for more than ten years. So far over 2,500 girls have received help to continue their education instead of being forced to work. The girls at this school in Khampung Plok are proud of their new school, which the inhabitants of their village built together with Room to Read.

Cambodia, one of the poorest nations in the world, has a dark history. Almost 30 years ago, the country was taken over by a violent group called the Khmer Rouge and their leader, Pol Pot.



# The country where every school

was closed

The Khmer Rouge wanted to create a new, perfect country, and destroy everything they thought was bad. They closed all schools and banned education. Almost all educated adult Cambodians were killed. Children were separated from their parents and taught that the Khmer Rouge were their real family. They lost all their rights and were forced to work as soldiers, prison guards, farmers and spies – spying on adults.

**Orphaned**  
Kall Kann, who heads up Room to Read's work in Cambodia, was only twelve when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge came to power. He was separated from his parents and sent to a rural area.

"I became an orphan and lived like a wild child," says Kall Kann. He never saw his mother or father again. They were educated, so the regime killed them.

During the four years that the Khmer Rouge were in

power, over 1.8 million Cambodians died as a result of torture, executions, disease, exhaustion and starvation. When the regime fell, there were hardly any educated survivors in the country – no teachers, scientists or doctors. That made it even harder for Cambodians to rebuild their country and lift themselves out of poverty.

**Never again**  
When Cambodia was liberated from the Khmer Rouge, Kall Kann was poor and alone in the world. He fought hard to gain an education, because he wanted to make sure that nothing like this could ever happen again.

"If we educate our children, they are strong. Then nobody

will be able to trick them and influence them like Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge did," he says.

Today, life is much better, but in rural areas there are still few jobs, and electricity and clean water are rare. It is true that almost 80 percent of children start school, but most quit their studies early in order to start working to support their families. More girls than boys quit school early. People don't believe that girls are worth investing in. Some parents also think it's harder to find a husband for an educated girl. That's why Room to Read in Cambodia puts a lot of focus on girls' education. 🌐



The Khmer Rouge abolished all ordinary schools. They organised simple outdoor lessons, which were mostly designed to teach children how to serve their leaders.

Photo: Arkiv/Dccam

TEXT: CARMILLA FLOYD & MARITA LINDQVIST PHOTOS: KIM NAVLOR

# Grandpa doesn't understand

Reaksa, 14, lives with her grandparents because her parents are divorced and can't take care of her. "Without Room to Read's help I could never have carried on attending school," she says. "My grandpa is always nagging me to quit school and start working. He grew up under Pol

Pot and the Khmer Rouge and in those days there were no schools. So he doesn't understand the point of education. But that just makes me want to study harder. My favourite subjects are Maths and Khmer. My dream is to become a teacher."



Lisa, Sopheak, Sokhit and Kunthi have just learned to write their names. They love their new school library and learning to read colourful, fun-filled books in their mother tongue, Khmer.



## Easier to read beautiful, funny books

"We have just learned to write our names," explains Lisa, who has just started Year 1 with her friends Sopheak, Sokhit and Kunthi. Their favourite room at school is the library, which was built by Room to Read with help from the local community. Everyone lent a hand. The library is now full of Room to Read's own children's books, in Khmer.

"It's much easier to learn to read with these beautiful, funny books," says Sopheak. "And both the librarian and my teacher are great at explaining things! They are teaching us the alphabet, and how to make sounds and put words together."

## Room to Read helps children 'crack the code'

Language surrounds us, on signs, screens, timetables and price tickets. If you can't read, lots of doors are closed to you in society. Reading is also the foundation for all learning. That's why Room to Read invests a lot in helping the youngest children to 'crack the code' of reading early on. That means that they should be able to read and write common words and simple sentences, and be able to express themselves clearly. These are skills that will help them throughout their time at school.



## Learn Khmer!

People speak Khmer in Cambodia. It's a language with a unique structure. Now Room to Read is working with the Cambodian Ministry of Education to change the way that teachers teach children how to read and write Khmer. The old lessons were based on European language learning methods. But Khmer has to be taught in a totally unique way. With these smart new methods, the children can learn to read and write much faster.

Hello:

ជំរំរាបសួរ

Goodbye:

លាសិនហើយ

Sorry:

សុំទោស

Thanks:

អរគុណ

How are you?

អ្នកស្រុះស្រួលយ៉ាងណា?

I am fine:

ខ្ញុំស្រុះស្រួលណាស់

What is your name?

អ្នកឈ្មោះអ្វី?

My name is:

ខ្ញុំឈ្មោះ...

I don't understand!:

មិនយល់ទេ

# Sacty

# thought her life was over

One day, the thing that Sacty had feared for so long finally happened. The sun is setting over the rooftops in the floating village, and the river is full of boats on their way home. Sacty's mother has a serious look on her face when she sits down on the floor beside Sacty, who has just turned twelve.

"You're going to have to stop going to school," she says.

"We have no choice. I can't afford the school fees, and we need your help to work and earn money," continues her mother.

Sacty wants to cry, but she swallows her tears. She doesn't want to make her mother even more sad by showing her feelings. On the inside, she is devastated, and doesn't know what to do. All she says to her mother is: "I understand."

## Father disappeared

Sacty lives in a small village that floats on water for six months of the year. The children travel to school by boat, and most families earn their living by fishing. Then, the water disappears and the lake around the houses shrinks and becomes a narrow river. Suddenly, the houses are far above the ground on rickety, six-metre-high stilts. The children run up and down to their houses on narrow ladders. The people here live simply, without electricity or running water. But Sacty's family is one of the poorest. Her father abandoned the family just before she was born and he never came back. Since then, Sacty's mother has had to fight hard for the



Almost everyone who lives in Kompong Phluk, the floating village, fishes.

family's survival.

"I had to start working again when you were only ten days old," Sacty's mother has told her many times.

When anyone asks about her father, Sacty usually says that he is dead. It feels as though he is. But she knows that he is alive, and has a new family. It hurts to think that he doesn't care about her. The worst thing is when the neighbouring children tease Sacty.

"You're a poor orphan, you've only got a mother," they say sometimes.

It makes Sacty sad, but it also makes her angry. She decided early to put all her efforts into her schooling, so

that nobody could look down on her. And she's never missed one piece of homework, although she does housework before and after school, and goes out on the boat with her mother to help with the fishing.

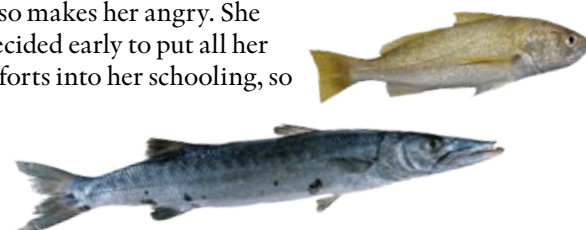
And now she has to quit school. Have all her efforts been in vain?

## First day at work

Sacty starts work a few weeks before her class do their exam to move up to the next year group. It hurts, but she doesn't complain. Her moth-

er has just been ill and had to borrow money for medicine, so now they have less money than ever. She wants to help out, and she knows that her family will be angry and disappointed if she doesn't.

Early in the morning, Sacty waits with her mother and big sister at the roadside near the river. A truck stops and they climb up onto the back. Many more children and adults from the village are crammed in, on their way to work in the fields. The truck skids around on the narrow dirt track, and Sacty realises that soon they're going to pass her school. She glances cautiously from under the brim of her hat and sees her





Sacty's house is raised on stilts that are almost six metres high.



friends, wearing their school uniforms. Sacty is sure they can see her too, but she doesn't dare wave. She's so ashamed. It feels like she has let them down, and her teachers too. What will they think of her now?

All day, Sacty harvests sweet potatoes and lays them out to dry. After many hours in the burning sun, she is exhausted on the journey home. Her back aches and her arms feel heavy as lead. Her hands are black with earth, and covered in blisters. Still, she can't get to sleep that night. She lies still as a statue on the floor, listening to her sister's breathing slowing down. Once Sacty is sure everyone is sleeping, she finally allows herself to cry, in silence, so she doesn't wake anyone.

#### Where is Sacty?

At first, the teachers think Sacty is ill. But after a few days without hearing anything from one of their most

gifted students, they ask her classmates.

"She has quit school," says one girl.

"She works with her mother and sister now," explains another.



#### Sacty, 14

**Likes:** Reading school books and stories.

**Sad when:** People tease me for not having a dad.

**Scared of:** Being forced to quit school. And crocodiles!

**Favourite food:** Sour soup with chilli.

**Wants:** To be able to use a computer.

**Wants to be:** A teacher or doctor.

One of the young teachers, Srey Leap, has another important job alongside her work as a teacher. She works for Room to Read as a social mobilizer for the poorest girls. Srey Leap knows that Sacty's family are struggling, and she suspects that Sacty

has been forced to quit school. She asks the head-teacher to arrange a meeting with the village leader from the floating village. They need everyone to get involved, to make sure Sacty can return to school before it's too late.

The village elder is an

## The floating villages

Almost everyone who lives in Kompong Phluk, the floating village, fishes. The village is on the edge of Tonle Sap Lake, one of the world's largest freshwater lakes. When the water is at its lowest point, in May, the lake shrinks to an area of 250,000 hectares. When the monsoon rains come in June, the water levels in the Mekong River rise, and the Tonle Sap River flows into the lake and widens it to cover over 1 million hectares.

Sometimes when the weather is rainy and stormy, the water level rises so high that the houses become flooded. The houses fill up with water and any villagers who can afford it raise the level of their floor. They move all their belongings up high, and sleep in hammocks near the ceiling. Others who own large boats move into their boats until the water levels recede. The poorest people, like Sacty's family, have neither big boats nor money to raise their floors. Their homes and everything they own gets destroyed and they have nowhere to live until they have managed to build a new house.



### Better by boat

During the low water season, Sacty walks to school. It takes over an hour, and the path is made slippery by mud. During the high water season, she travels by boat. It's much faster that way.



## Room to Read focuses on girls

In Kompong Phluk, girls sometimes have to quit school around the age of 12. Their parents can't afford the school fees, uniforms and materials. Instead, they want their daughters' help with housework, fishing and farming. Some girls are also sent to the big cities to work as maids or street sellers. Once they get there, some fall victim to traffickers.

So far, 80 girls in Kompong Phluk have received scholarships and support from Room to Read. In Cambodia as a whole, over 2,000 girls have been helped. This has meant a lot to them and their families. And what's more, they become role models for their friends, both girls and boys. The support exists for the poorest girls who are very motivated to study. Their parents have to sign a contract, promising to support their daughter in her studies.



Sacty's mother is proud of having such a clever daughter.

important source of support for the school and Room to Read. If he asks the family to reconsider their decision, there is a chance they will change their minds.

The village leader, the headteacher of the school and Srey Leap visit Sacty's mother when she's alone at home. They ask why Sacty isn't in school.

"It's too expensive to buy the uniform, materials, and pay school fees. I really want her to get an education, but it's impossible," her mother explains.

The village elder talks about how important education is. And Srey Leap says that Room to Read can help Sacty.

"She can get a scholarship to pay her school fees and

almost all her costs. But only if her family members will promise to support Sacty in her studies. And there's no time to lose. If she misses the exam, she'll have to repeat the year. In that case there is a major risk that she'll never come back.

Her mother promises to think it over. She doesn't tell Sacty that she's had visitors.

For the next few nights, it is Sacty's mother who has trouble sleeping.

### Exam day

One morning when Sacty boards the truck, she feels even sadder than usual. She knows that this afternoon, her friends are going to do the entry exam for Year 7. When they climb down at the field, Sacty's mother turns to her suddenly.

"Is it too late? Have you missed the exam?"



# We take care of our school and our village!

Sacty and the other students help to support the school, for example by:



↑ Weeding and planting vegetables and spices like chilli, pumpkin and mint. They then sell the vegetables at the market.

→ Gathering wood

← Digging pools to collect rainwater. It is used in lots of ways, for example, to water the school vegetable patch.



→ “No, there’s still time, a few hours,” says Sacty, surprised.

“I’ve decided,” says her mother. “You’re going back to school!”

Before Sacty has a chance to grasp what’s going on, her mother has run out onto the road and hailed a motorcycle taxi. She shouts to the driver to get Sacty to school as fast as he can.

Sacty arrives at the last minute and everyone is astonished and delighted to see her. She feels nervous when the exam paper is laid on the desk in front of her. Will she be able to pass the test after missing so many lessons?

Two days later she finds out the answer. Sacty has answered every question correctly, and she can start Year 7! The minute she gets home she shares her good news. Her mother is pleased and proud.



Sacty does her homework in the only room in the house.

“That’s wonderful,” she says. “Don’t be ignorant like me. I want you to learn things.”

### Sacty’s speech

International Women’s Day is celebrated on the 8th of March every year, all over the world. Sacty’s school is organising a big party for

girls’ rights, together with Room to Read. The whole village is invited, as well as journalists and guests of honour from the city.

The headteacher has asked Sacty to share her story. When the day arrives, she is standing beside the stage, clutching the paper her

speech is written on tightly. She’s shaking and feels sick. Her heart feels like it’s going to jump out of her chest, and when she hears her name it feels impossible to climb the few steps onto the stage. But all of a sudden there she is, standing with a microphone in her hand.

When Sacty begins to speak the room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The tears begin to roll down her cheeks, but she carries on.

“I have never met my own father. I often feel alone and abandoned and my family struggle to survive. That’s why I had to give up my education. But thanks to my teachers and Room to Read, I have been given the chance to continue my schooling. Education is the most important thing of all. When I was forced to quit school and work in the fields, I missed



↑ Pumping water from the river for dishes, cleaning and laundry.



school so much. I thought my life was over.”

### A better future

As Sacty comes to the end of her speech, almost everyone in the audience is crying too. The other students, her friends, and their parents. Even the headteacher, the village leader, the journalists and the important politicians from the city are drying their eyes.

“If I manage to complete my education and become a teacher, I plan to return to the village where I was born and pass on my knowledge to other children,” concludes Sacty. The applause is loud and long, and everyone is smiling. Her mother runs up and hugs her.

“I had no idea you could speak so beautifully, and in front of so many strangers,” she says. “I am so happy to

have such a clever child!”

Many other parents come forward too, to thank her and praise her.

“You really are brave,” says one mother.

Sacty hopes that she has inspired many other parents to allow their daughters to complete their schooling. With support from Room to Read, Sacty hopes to be able to graduate from Year 12, and then study to become a teacher. But she is always afraid of being forced to quit school.

“My grandfather keeps nagging me, saying that I should quit school and start working again, but my mother refuses. I don’t have a father, but my mother is strong and takes care of me so that I can get an education. I’m going to build a better future for me and my whole family!”



# Life skills for the future

Sacty and the other girls go home early in the afternoon to make lunch and take care of their younger siblings. A couple of afternoons a week they return to school in their ordinary clothes, to get help with their homework and learn life skills!

Life skills is about everything from how to cope with stress and everyday worries, to how to look after your health and your money, to how to think critically, make decisions and plan for the future.

“We learn lots of useful things that help me every day,” says Sacty. “I am much more confident now and I can express my opinion. We learn about our rights and how to protect ourselves from danger. My mother and other adults in the village smoke a lot. At life skills classes we’ve learned how dangerous that is. I’m afraid that my mother is going to die from one of those dangerous diseases that are caused by smoking. That’s why I’m trying to get her to quit smoking!”

### Classes with singing and music

There is a lot of singing, music and games at life skills classes. Porath, 15, loves singing.

“My favourite song is a sad one,” she says. “It’s all about how we who live in Kompong Phluk are poor, and how we suffer when there is a forest fire. We use camping stoves and open fires, so fires do start easily. Whole villages can be destroyed, because there are no roads for fire engines to reach us. I remember a fire once. We threw together all the belongings we could carry and gathered by the river. Everyone was prepared to jump into the boats and flee if the fire came too close. We could smell the smoke and feel the heat, but we were OK in the end.

The girls in the class often ask Porath to sing the sad song.

“They clap and cheer when I sing. It feels so nice!”



Porath

# Srey Leap is girls' advocate

"I know what the girls in Kompong Phluk need, because I am one of them myself," says Srey Leap. She grew up in the floating village and dreamed of becoming a teacher. But when she turned twelve, Srey Leap's mother told her she had to quit school.

**M**y mother saw how other children worked and gave their parents money. She saw other girls get married, and she wanted me to find a husband too. My father understood that I could have a better life if I got an education. But they couldn't afford it."

At the last minute, when it was almost too late, Srey Leap got help. She became one of the first girls in the floating village to get a Room to Read scholarship.

"Room to Read helped us pay for school fees and materials so that I could finish secondary school. They also helped my mother realise that education is important.

Now Srey Leap works for Room to Read as a social mobilizer for girls in the floating village.

"They are shy at first, but then their confidence grows. The more life skills they learn, the more they are able to stand up for themselves and their friends. Sometimes the parents chase me away at first. But things get better. One mother recently told me: "My daughter is Room to Read's daughter too now, because you take such good care of her."

## Wants to be the village teacher

Srey Leap has filled in as a teacher in the village school, although she has only just finished high school. But soon she's going to start her teacher training degree in the city.

"It is really hard to get teachers for the floating village school. Most teachers come from the big cities, and don't like being in a rural area. They're afraid of everything – the water, the rats, and the insects. They think it's too hot and dirty, and they can't swim or row a boat. The school board can force teachers to work here for a whole year, but after that almost all of them quit. If more of us who already live in the village train as teachers, things will be much better for the students."

Srey Leap is the person who has studied the longest in her extended family.

"I fulfilled my dream! Now I want to give other girls the same chance and be a role model for them. My mother is really proud of me. The only thing she regrets is that my older siblings didn't get the chance to continue their education." 🌍



Srey Leap helping teach Sacty's class.



This is what the school in the floating village used to look like. It didn't have space for many students, and it got destroyed by flooding every time the water levels rose.

The new school in the floating village was built by the village inhabitants and the school management, together with Room to Read. It is built on stilts to make sure it doesn't get flooded when the high water levels come.

## Room to learn!

In many poor countries, there is a major lack of child-friendly classrooms and school buildings, especially in rural areas. Room to Read works with local people to build or renovate school buildings, giving them light, airy classrooms. In Asia and Africa, Room to Read has helped to build over 1400 new schools with over 5500 classrooms, school libraries and teachers' rooms. The local people share the cost of the materials and the labour. When the school building is finished, it is owned by the village and the country's educational authorities.





◀ Rattana helps to dry the fish her family has caught every day after school. Her name means 'jewel'.



School uniform and footwear for wet and dry conditions.

Pencils, rubbers, ruler, scissors, and other stationery.

# Equipped for education!

**Rattana, 15, has received a scholarship from Room to Read which means that she can continue her education, even though her family is extremely poor.**

"I used to struggle to keep up in lessons. I often had to skip school to help my family with the household and the fishing. Now I get everything I need from Room to Read,

and I even get extra lessons. I am finally getting on well at school and my favourite subject is maths!"

Rattana's parents and older siblings earn their living by fishing. She wants to become a nurse, but her parents would prefer that she quit school after Year 9.

"I hope they change their minds," she says. "I help out at home as much as I can, although I have lots of homework. Sometimes I go fishing

with them, or take on extra work harvesting beans. I give the money to my mother. It makes her happy, and being able to help makes me happy too. But my older sister is never satisfied. She finds fault with everything I do, and she gets really angry when I have long days at school. It makes me really sad when she complains about me." ☹



Money for school fees and extra tuition.



**This is what Rattana and her girl friends get from Room to Read:**

A bike to help them get to school.



Toothbrush, soap and other essential items for staying clean and healthy.



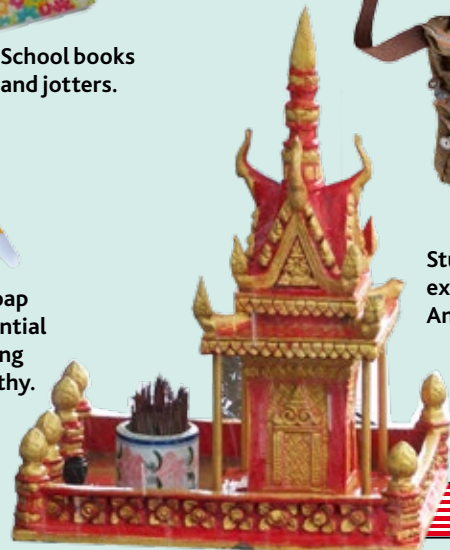
School books and jotters.



Schoolbag.



Study trips to exciting places like Angkor Wat.



Health checks.

# Sony is leader of Friend-to-Friend Club



Sony, 13, has been elected by her friends to be one of the leaders of the school's Friend-to-Friend Club. There are clubs like this in all the Room to Read schools in Cambodia that focus on girls' education.

**W**e fight for each other and support the other girls so that they don't quit school," explains Sony, who has received a scholarship from Room to Read. "We help the others with their homework, give them good advice, and keep an eye on everyone. If someone doesn't turn up at school, we try to find out why. Sometimes we visit their home and then tell our social mobilizer from Room to Read what has happened. The Friend-to-Friend club has helped me to become more confident. In Cambodia,

fathers and sons have much more power than girls and women. I think we should have just as much influence."

### Dream office job

Sony dreams of working in an office with computers and air conditioning.

"I have never used a computer, but I have seen one at school. Computers seem to make everything easy. I came across air conditioning when I was on an outing with Room to Read and we met at a hotel. The temperature was roasting hot outside but inside it was cool. Incredible!



Sony does her homework in the light from the window, as they don't have electricity.

My home is always warm. We fan ourselves with pieces of cardboard but it doesn't help. We get so hot and really tired. In the middle of the day we lie down in hammocks in the shade under our house. Sometimes I pour a bucket of water over myself. The heat makes me feel feverish sometimes, and that means I can't go to school. It seems unfair that rich people can have cool, comfortable homes but we can't.

### Great to be able to read and write

"My parents work hard in the rice fields and my mother really wants me to go to

school so that I can have a better life," says Sony. "My parents can't read or write – they can't even write their names. People can easily trick you and take advantage of you if you can't read, write and count. If you're selling things at the market, people might give you the wrong change or trick you into selling something at the wrong price. You could lose your home if you can't read the contract. And you can't vote if you can't find out which political party is the best. If I get an education, I'll be able to help my parents more." 🌐



The Friend-to-Friend Club looks after a small garden at the school, where they have flowers and other plants.

"We grow vegetables, mangoes and cabbage too. We have fun here," says Keo, who leads the club along with Sony. Here she is in the garden with a friend from the club, Reaksa.

Firing a catapult might be fun, but it's no game. Sony fires at the birds to scare them off, so that they don't eat fruit from the family's tree.



## Keo's wardrobe

Keo, 14, has also been elected as a leader of the Friend-to-Friend club.

"I received help myself when I wanted to run away from school," says Keo. "My father had borrowed money for a kidney operation and he couldn't repay it. I could earn 2 dollars a day picking sweet potatoes, and I wanted to take the job to help my father. But my friends and Room to Read persuaded me not to give up."



Peng believes girls and boys should be treated equally.

# Peng plays mud football

In the floating village of Kampong Phluk, you can only play football when the water subsides. During the dry season, areas emerge that are usually covered by water. When heavy rains fall in the afternoon, the ground turns into a quagmire, but that doesn't stop Peng, 14, and his friends from playing football after school.

**T**he mud is sticky and slippery. It sticks to your feet and gives you 'elephant feet' in a matter of seconds.

"The mud can be annoying, but it can also be fun if you're in the right mood," says Peng, laughing. Today it happens to be all boys who are playing, but Peng thinks it's completely normal for girls to play too.

"Of course there are some differences between girls and boys," he says. "Like boys are often stronger, and girls have babies when they grow up. But that doesn't mean that there should be any differences in girls' and boys' rights. For example, it's important that girls have the same right as boys to go to school."

Sometimes the boys in the school think it's a shame that they can't get a scholarship from Room to Read. They too come from

poor families that find it hard to make ends meet if they have to pay all the school costs.

"But we know that it's a lot harder for girls to get an education in Cambodia, so we understand," says Peng.

### Important for all

Having an education is particularly important when you settle down and have children, Peng believes.

"After all, both parents have to be able to take care of the family. When I get married I want my wife to have a good education so that we can share the responsibility

fairly. We need to be able to make important decisions together. I also plan to make sure my children understand how important it is to go to school. It's important for them, and for the whole country. That way our society can make progress and develop in a good way.

Peng has three older sisters who have already moved out of the family home.

"I know that they had to help out at home much more when they were my age. I have to help out a bit, but I've probably had more time to play than they ever had!" 🌐



After school, Peng and his friends play football. There's no point in even trying to avoid getting wet and muddy. Soon the whole team look like clay figures.



## School uniform

"I got it this from Room to Read. It looks good, but it's hard to keep the shirt clean and white in all the mud."

## Sleepwear

"I sleep in a t-shirt and a cotton sarong. The best sarongs are made of silk, but I can't afford that."

## Casual clothes

"My most comfortable clothes. They're practical for work and household chores."





### 05:30 Mosquito-free dreams

The sisters sleep together under a pink net. The nights are hot and humid, and those are the perfect conditions for mosquitoes.



# Home



**6:00**  
Channy fetches water for the girls to wash and make breakfast. Any that is left over is used to water the vegetable patch.



Channys mum and dad.

Channy, 12, and her two sisters live in a small, square, one-roomed house with a tin roof. Their parents have gone to the neighbouring country of Thailand to find work. There are no jobs in Channy's small village.

"They are going to be away for at least a year, and will send money home. I miss them so much," says Channy. "The evenings are the worst time of day, because that's when they used to sing for us, and that made it easier to fall asleep."

### 11:00 Queue for the library

As she walks into the library, Channy picks up a red straw and puts it in a bowl. The boy behind her takes a green one. Room to Read want to make sure that girls and boys are able to spend equal amounts of time in the library. Every day the librarian counts the straws and writes down the result.



### 7:00 Hurrying to school

Her big sister has gone to work, and Channy is giving her little sister a lift to school on the back of the bike.



### 11:15 Finding the right book

"I look at the front covers, read the back, and borrow books that seem funny and exciting. One day I want to write a book of my own. It's going to be about my family."

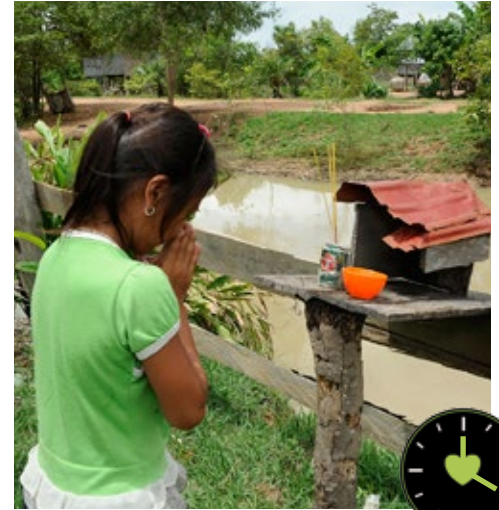


# alone



## 2:30 Hungry!

Channy cooks a meal for herself and her little sister.



## 4:00 Water for the ancestors

Almost everyone in Cambodia has a small 'spirit shrine' in the garden. Channy lights an incense stick and fills a bowl with water for her ancestors, who protect the family.



## 5:00 Battery-powered TV

Several of the neighbouring children usually pop in to watch TV at Channy's house. The picture is fuzzy and keeps freezing, but the programme is exciting nonetheless. The TV is powered by a car battery. Every week, the sisters lug the heavy battery into the village to charge it.



## 7:00 Swinging homework

Channy does her homework in the hammock. Sometimes she reads aloud from a library book for her little sister before bedtime.



## 9:00 Missing her parents

Channy misses her mother and father the most at bedtime, when it's dark.

# Thim wants to be a librarian

THIM, 12, lives with his grandmother. His mother has a mental illness and can't take care of him. The other children used to tease him, and Thim struggled to concentrate in school. But thanks to the librarian, who encouraged him to read books, Thim is now one of the top students in the school. He is confident, and can defend himself against other children's taunts.

Thim is the youngest of five sib-

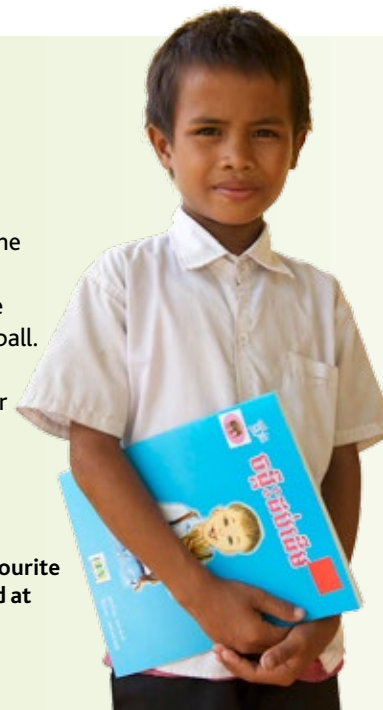
lings. Sometimes the others think Thim should quit school and start working.

"I explain that it's important to be able to read and write. Otherwise you can easily be tricked, in shops or by bad people. People who can't read and write are trapped in poverty, they can't do anything with their lives. It makes me sad when I can't afford to eat, or when I don't have time to play because I have to work."

When Thim gets home from school, he cooks rice, washes the dishes and chops wood.

"If I have any spare time I like playing shuttlecock and volleyball. I want to become a doctor, and help people like my mother to get better. Or even better, I could be a librarian! Reading books makes me happy."

"Reading is my favourite thing, and I'm good at it," says Thim, 12.





# Play good for the brain!

John Wood and Room to Read believe that children who are well and have fun learn better. Playing games is good for the brain, and laughing is never a bad thing. Here are a few of the games that the children in Cambodia play at break times.



## The rubber band game

Split up into two teams. Everyone gets a straw or a paper tube and each team stands in a line. Each team gets a rubber band, and the idea is to pass the rubber band from one team member to another without using your hands. The winning team is first to get the rubber band from the first team member's tube to the last!



## Monster, lady or monk?

Two people or two teams can do several rounds, for example, best of five. This is how to play if there are two of you: Secretly choose to be one of three characters: a monster, a lady or a monk. The monster should look scary, with hands like claws and a terrible grimace. The lady should be beautiful, with an elegant pointing finger. The monk should make a Buddhist pose. On the signal, you make your face and gesture. The monster beats the lady, the lady beats the monk and the monk beats the monster. If you both choose the same character then that round is a draw!



Lady and monk.



Monster and lady.



Lady



Monster

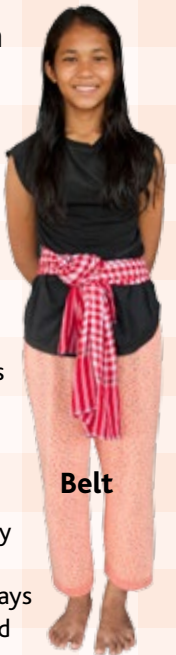


Monk

# Pochey uses h



The krama, a woven length of cotton or silk, has been used in Cambodia for hundreds of years. Pochey, 16, can use hers for everything from carrying schoolbooks to swatting flies. There are actually at least 60 uses for a krama!



Belt

Pochey is the only member of her family who goes to school.

"They think education is pointless. My big sister told me: 'the more you learn, the crazier you get'. She might be right. But I still dream of becoming a teacher or a nurse. If I manage, I can help my family more."

Pochey lives with her grandmother. She has always encouraged Pochey to go to school, and has helped her pay the school fees.

"My grandmother is a medium. People pay her to contact the spirit world and to tell their fortunes. Without her help I would have had to quit a long time ago," says Pochey.



## Headress

Pochey can wind the krama round her head in many different ways to make a beautiful head covering.



## Cooling down

Put a soaking wet krama on your head when the weather's hot, and it'll cool you right down.



## Fly swatter

Pochey lives near the river. During the rainy season, the water rises right to her door, and the mosquitoes and flies love the water. Kramas are useful for swatting flies.

# er 'krama' for everything



Kramas come in all sizes and patterns. The red and white checked cotton krama is a classic.



## Doll

If you can't afford ordinary toys it's easy to make a krama doll.



## Head support

The krama helps you to balance things on your head.



## Towel

Pochey goes to the river to wash herself and the family's clothes. She likes swimming and playing hide-and-seek in the river too.



## Oven glove, apron and dishtowel

Pochey helps her grandmother to cook in the kitchen under the house. She cooks over an open fire, so it gets pretty hot and sweaty. Pochey is using the krama to wipe her face.

Right now her grandmother is in hospital. Pochey's parents have gone to Thailand to work and earn money to cover the hospital bills and the cost of an operation. Pochey is even more worried about the future now.

"Often I don't eat all day, because I can't afford food."

Now, a scholarship from Room to Read covers some of Pochey's expenses.

"My parents are happy about that, but they still think I should leave school soon. They want to buy me a little cart so that I can sell bread and biscuits at the roadside. That makes me so sad. I hope Room to Read can persuade my parents to change their minds."



## Dress or skirt

## Bag

It's easy to make a bag for carrying books or food. Here, Pochey has wound her krama around a tray of fruit and biscuits, which she is giving to the monks in the Buddhist temple as an offering.



## Rest

A krama can become a hammock for young children, or a blanket or pillow for older ones.



## Protection

A krama protects you from the baking hot sun, but also from dust, wind, cold and rain.

