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# Problem

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Despite the enormous progress humanity has achieved in overcoming illiteracy during the last century, the love of reading with all of its potential gifts remains strikingly underdeveloped. Throughout most of both the industrialized and developing world, the pastime of reading is marginal in popular culture and shows few signs of expanding. Reading for pleasure becomes an alien concept beginning in childhood. Why is it so important? Reading allows children and young adults to transcend their own circumstances and learn about the time and space of other human beings in different epochs and places. In literature, children draw the courage and confidence to be the heroes they read about, laying the foundation for children to respond to challenges creatively, expand their imagination, and think outside the box. Children build up their vocabulary and grammar, endowing them with the tools they need to express themselves both in speech and in writing. Reading encourages respect for others, even if we disagree. This is the single most important requirement for communication and peace building and becoming more empathetic as people and less violent. When societies build a persistent culture of reading, their individual members find a new appreciation of their own literary and cultural heritage. The process of building a culture of reading for pleasure among children has three main steps: 1. Children must learn to read. This objective is termed literacy, and it is the most commonly understood and celebrated of the three steps. 2. Children must learn to love to read. This objective is the most overlooked part of the process, and the main focus of the program 3. Children must be provided with interesting and stimulating reading material. The dominant trend in global reading initiatives is to dedicate the large bulk of our resources to steps one and three. But passing over that critical second step puts the entire journey in peril. In most cases, governments and program designers do not pay attention to this issue simply because there is a lack of general awareness and knowledge about how essential the love of reading is to human development. This is where the model of WLR comes in. We aim to close that divide by promoting and harboring a love of reading that goes beyond the sphere of formal education and into the everyday psychology and experience of children. The approach of WLR centers on building capacity in a sustainable fashion, not on the provision of materials. The key is to foster a deep love of reading through the practice of reading aloud to children. Children in the developing world have fewer opportunities and spaces in which to interact with books and literature. By making reading an enjoyable experience rather than a chore associated with schoolwork, we are better positioned to train children to become lifelong readers. And if we are successful, these children will grow up and pass on the love of reading to the generation after them.

## Program Summary

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We Love Reading is an innovative model that provides a practical, cost efficient, sustainable, grassroots approach empowering communities from low and mid income communities around the world to create changemakers through reading. WLR supports the activism of local volunteers to increase reading levels among children 2-10 by focusing on the readaloud experience to instill the love of reading for pleasure

among children to become lifelong learners. “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Reading to children from an early age not only has an important impact on their reading achievement, it also impacts intrinsic reading motivation and educational attainment throughout their academic lifespan (Gottfried, Schlackman, Gottfried, & Boutin-Martinez, 2015). Reading for pleasure, also known as intrinsic reading motivation, has been found to be a more significant factor for the cognitive development of children than parent’s educational level, this transcends a child’s socio-economic background and is the reason why fostering literate environments for children is essential (Sullivan & Brown, 2013).

The program constitutes training local volunteer women, men and youth to hold readaloud sessions in public spaces in their neighborhoods where books are routinely read aloud to children. WLR chooses books that are age-appropriate, attractive, neutral in content, in the native language of the child. In addition to promoting the experience of reading, WLR empowers women, men and youth readers to become leaders in their communities, builds ownership in the children and community members and serves as a platform for raising awareness on issues such as health and environment through reading books on themes. The program impacts emotional regulation, executive function, literacy skills and psychosocial status. The WLR model is formulated in such way that each person can tailor it to fit their culture and their needs, all of which contributes toward building ownership. The model can be replicated anywhere using an existing common public space. An innovative model of support for those using the program was developed to create a supportive network for the volunteers and their work. WLR is not delivering services which need support systems, it is creating capabilities in hundreds of local women enabling them to be creative for themselves. Since its founding in 2006, WLR has become a social movement, reaching more than 400,000 people in 55 countries across the Middle East, Far East, Near East, Europe, North America, South America and Africa. The program is human-centered, evidence-based and built on scientific research; rigorous, independent evaluations have been conducted by researchers at Brown and Yale Universities. The program is led by local scientists, practitioners and business experts who strive to reach every child by empowering and engaging the workforce, creating partnerships with key stakeholders, optimizing process and adapting excellence model, utilizing technology, and continues improvement methodology based on research and scientific approach. WLR was founded by higher education reform expert, Dr. Rana Dajani, professor at Hashemite University and Radcliffe Institute Fellow at Harvard University. Dr. Dajani has earned international recognition for WLR’s groundbreaking systems change model: In 2017, she was among seven Fulbright alumni to receive the inaugural IIE Global Changemaker Award. She has earned the Library of Congress Literacy Award Best Practices, a Stars Impact Award, the Synergos Arab World Social Innovator award, a WISE Award, and recognition from IDEO.org. A native of Jordan, Dr. Dajani is on the Arabian Business list “The World’s 100 Most Powerful Arab Women.”

# Activities

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## Training of the Trainers

TOT is WLR's program which trains future Reading Ambassador Trainers. WLR provides this training for schools interested in training a large number of staff and/or family members. The four-day workshop provides the key background needed to train people to become a Reading Ambassador. It will include all that is outlined in the Reading Ambassador Training plus:

- How to convey the philosophy of the WLR program.
- Hands-on, scenario-based practice exercises.
- Building skills around training a group of people, implementing the WLR methodology and research.
- Leverage GAN to manage trainings and organize trainers.

As part of WLR's grassroots approach, WLR partners with NGOs seeking to implement the reading method with their own programmatic activities. Our partners send a group of qualified staff interested in receiving the skills to train future ambassadors in the communities in which they live and work. This training is conducted as a project in partnership with an NGO. To date, we have:

- Trained about 100 staff members from the NRC, IRD, and Plan International.
- Enhanced these NGOs' capacity to meet the needs of their target beneficiaries and widen their reach at a significantly lower cost.
- Provided the resources and materials to conduct their own trainings without needing to produce them separately.

During a four-day training and a subsequent one-month practicum, participants learn the skills required to be a Reading Ambassadors and how to impart these skills to their own future trainees.

## Reading Ambassadors Training

People who volunteer to become Reading Ambassadors undergo a two-day in-person training that prepares them to build a successful reading circle in their community. This training provides a deep-dive into developing the skills needed to read aloud to children, the capacity to manage their library, and the knowledge and confidence to engage the community and gain support, as well as into the science and research behind the program. Trainees come out of the workshop not only understanding how to be effective Reading Ambassadors but with insight into the longer term impact that their actions will have for themselves and the children they read to.

The majority of volunteers are women, many of whom are mothers themselves, wishing to provide the children around them with a positive connection to books and a form of entertainment in a place where often there is nothing to do. These trainings create a space where they feel emboldened to share their

own ideas and form new bonds. While RAs are not paid for their work, they receive ongoing support from WLR as well as the WLR community through the Global Ambassadors Network (GAN), an online and mobile application that connects the RAs to one another and allows them to input data related to their reading sessions in order to track their progress.

WLR invites anybody interested in becoming a volunteer. We have found that people exhibiting the following criteria enjoy the greatest level of success and continue their reading circles for longer periods of time:

1. Literate (can read and write)
2. Loves children
3. Enjoys reading
4. Desire to serve their community
5. Dedicated to the WLR mission

### WLR Online Training

WLR has developed an online training for individuals unable to attend an Ambassador Training in person. This is mainly available for people living outside of Jordan and is offered year-round, on a rolling basis. It is free for individuals.

The online training attempts to prepare Reading Ambassadors with the same skill level as if they had taken the training in person. Sections involve videos, exercises, and texts. At the conclusion, participants send a video of themselves reading as a final assessment, after which they will receive a certificate of attendance.

## Global Ambassador Network and Ambassadors' Follow up

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WLR created the Global Ambassador Network (GAN) to facilitate support between the Reading Ambassadors and the organization. Reading Ambassadors access the network through a mobile application, which allows them to connect with one another as well as receive ongoing support from WLR. They access GAN after conducting a reading session, inputting data from the date and time of the session to the number and gender of attendees. They also can post questions and share success stories. The application allows them and WLR to track performance so they can see the impact they are having on their community and WLR can identify successes and obstacles to overcome.

This virtual community facilitates capacity building, data collection, and documentation in addition to sharing best practices. This network works to inspire RAs to get to know and learn from each other. As WLR Ambassador Asma from Za'atari Camp in Jordan said, "I can talk to a WLR ambassador in Argentina!"

In sum, GAN is a means to:

- Offer ongoing support, providing the RA with the ability to contact WLR at any time.
- Collect data on the RAs, reading sessions, and participants.
- Build a community and a movement by connecting trained RAs from around the world who are passionate about raising reading levels in their communities.
- Disseminate additional resources on new literacy studies, best practices, etc.

To create an element of fun and motivation for the RAs, we have created a ranking system. Newly-initiated RAs begin at the first rank as Initiator. The more reading sessions conducted, the higher in the ranks they go.

On the back-end of GAN is the GAN Management System, the platform that administrators use to manage reading activities. Through it, you will be able to:

- View in one place all your trained teachers and other Reading Ambassadors.
- Leverage data analysis tools to generate reports.
- Measure the impact reading sessions make on your students.
- Share success stories posted by Read Ambassadors from your network.

One month after trainees go off to build their own neighborhood libraries, a Training Officer follows up with them by phone to ensure implementation is going smoothly and to address any initial concerns or questions. A second follow-up phone call occurs two months later. Six months after the training, all the trainees come together for a focus group to discuss their experiences thus far. Reading Ambassadors also have the opportunity for an in-person visit by the Training Officer if they so choose.

## Research

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WLR partners with leading research institutions to conduct scientific research on our read-aloud program to assess its effectiveness and to continuously improve our approach. Ongoing research projects include:



**Assess the influence of the WLR program on children's cognitive development during the critical preschool years, Brown University**



**Assess the impact of WLR on the parent-child relationship, NYUAD University**



**Evaluate the changes in children’s attitudes towards reading and evaluate the willingness of children and their parents to attend school, UNICEF**



**Changes in children’s behavior around social inclusion and empathy, University of Chicago and UNICEF**

We have completed a number of research projects as well, most notably:



**Exploring a newly developed measure to assess children’s interest in school in Jordan (2019), New York University Abu Dhabi and UNICEF**



This study revealed a strong association between age and school interest in Jordan, confirming the hypothesis that older children report lower levels of interest. In addition, gender was significantly associated with school interest, with boys exhibiting lower levels of interest in school than girls.



**BROWN**

**Improvement in children’s executive function and emotional regulation through the We Love Reading Program (2018), Brown University**

A three-month study in Salt, Jordan studying children aged 6–8 found that children exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and depression showed improvements in executive functions, emotional regulation, and preliteracy function after engaging in the WLR read-aloud program.





**Evaluation of the effectiveness of implementing the We Love Reading program on children’s reading attitude and practices (2018), Hashemite University, Qatar University, and UNICEF**



Children aged 4–12 participating in the WLR read-aloud program were found to read by an average of 34% more after concluding the intervention, regardless of gender or geographic location.



**Reading social stories in the community: a promising intervention for promoting children’s environmental knowledge and behavior in Jordan (2017), Qatar University**

WLR’s approach was found to be more effective in communicating information about environmental issues to children than through television or billboards.



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

**We Love Reading—A women’s literacy program in the Arab world (2017), University of Cambridge**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of empowering women through a literacy program and found that a program like WLR leaves a lasting impact including a greater likelihood to continue involvement in their community and an increased willingness to become advocates and leaders.



**Reading about people’s feelings increases empathic concern and generosity in children (2014), University of Chicago**

Integrating values of empathy into children’s stories was found to increase children’s generosity by nearly 100%. Their interest in and concern for others also grew, while children not participating did not exhibit such changes.



**Yale The impact of the We Love Reading pilot program on the psychosocial health of participating children in Zaatari refugee camp (2014), Yale University**

After participating in this pilot program, children exhibited lower stress levels, a better ability to recover from trauma, and a greater likelihood of avoiding violence as a response to conflict.

# Book Development

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We Love Reading has a specialized department for book development. WLR aims to develop books that are fun, creative, and unleash the children's imaginations. Books are developed according to set criteria and methodology, taking into account factors such as theme, relevancy to the children's culture and background, language, and age-appropriateness.

In creating the books, WLR collaborates with local writers, illustrators, designers, and publishers. All content is reviewed by education consultants as well as consultants within the respective content themes. Thus far, WLR has created 32 children's books covering a variety of themes, including environmental awareness, empathy, gender, non-violence, disabilities, and refugees. As of 2017, WLR has distributed more than 230,000 books all over Jordan.

The books developed by WLR have already had a big impact on readers around the world. Hanan Oriqat writes, "I have four beautiful girls, three of whom are deaf and use sign language. The youngest has no speech problems, but she always communicated in sign language and refused to talk... [But] after I held a few sessions, she no longer refused to talk. She expresses herself clearly and sometimes creates her own stories. [My] becoming a WLR ambassador changed my daughter's life!"

## Services

1. book development
2. selling books
3. book distribution

## Materials for sale

### **Manuals (in Arabic):**

How to write a children book  
How to conduct RCT in social enterprises

### **Children Stories Themes (in Arabic for two age groups (4-6) and (7-10)):**

Environment  
Disabilities  
Refugees  
Non violence  
Social inclusion  
Gender

# Awards

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WLR has received several awards, prizes, and recognitions from institutions within and beyond Jordan. These have provided funding and technical support for our programs in addition to spreading our message and raising awareness. The list includes:

1. **STI Forum Call for Innovations, 2019**—awarded for realizing the potential of science, technology, and innovation to achieve the sustainable development goals by 2030.
2. **Klaus Jacobs Award for Social Engagement, 2018**—for exceptional achievements in research and practice in the field of child and youth development.
3. **World Literacy Council Award, Oxford, 2018**—received the “Significant Contribution to Literacy by an NGO or Charity” Award.
4. **UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize, 2017**—celebrated 5 programs’ excellence and innovation in leveraging digital technologies to promote literacy, including WLR. WLR was also one of the 3 programs featured as a case study on UNESCO’s Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database (LitBase).
5. **OpenIDEO ‘Top Idea’ for Refugee Education, 2015**—OpenIDEO hosts challenges to develop solutions to a specific issue. WLR’s idea for improving education opportunities for refugees around the world won \$190,000 to implement its program in Za’atari Refugee Camp as well as design support from IDEO.
6. **Stars Impact Award, 2014**—awarded to organizations working to improve the lives of disadvantaged children, youth, and their communities.
7. **World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) Award, 2014**—presented to six innovative projects addressing educational challenges around the world.
8. **King Hussein Medal of Honor, 2014**—received Order of Al Hussein for Distinguished Contributions of the Second Class for efforts in promoting literacy in Jordan.
9. **Library of Congress Literacy Awards Best Practices Honoree, 2013**—honors organizations that have made exceptional contributions to boost literacy in the US and abroad, and promote the wide dissemination of effective practices.
10. **Case study in *Innovation in Education: Lessons from Pioneers around the World* by Charles Leadbeater, 2012**—commissioned by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) and the Qatar Foundation, this publication observed 16 education initiatives around the world to create a reference guide for innovation in education.
11. **Membership to the Clinton Global Initiative, 2010**—offered membership where we committed to opening 100 libraries within the next 5 years. By the end of 2013, WLR exceeded its commitment and had established 300 libraries throughout Jordan.
12. **Synergos Arab World Social Innovator Award, 2009**—awarded for providing solutions to issues of poverty and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa.

**13. Ahel al Himmeh Award Finalist, 2009**—Jordanian initiative launched by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah to recognize the outstanding and diligent efforts of “unsung Jordanian heroes” who create positive and lasting change in their communities.

WLR has been written about in the New York Times, Stanford social review, the Fletcher forum, PBS, Harvard education review and Promising practices UN, WLR has been included in the book Innovation in education alongside MIT open course ware and is being taught as a case study in the Wollgnein university.

## Taghyeer Organization Infrastructure

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We Love Reading operates under the auspices of Taghyeer organization, a not-for-profit entity based in the Middle East, focused on humanitarian aid and development for refugees and communities in developing countries.

The Founding Director of We Love Reading is Dr. Rana Dajani. She is a professor at the Hashemite University, with 25 years of leadership in the education sector, as a teacher and expert in higher education reform. Along with being named one of the 100 most influential women and Arabs in the world, she has received numerous honors, including a Fulbright Fellowship (2000), the Eisenhower fellowship (2014), the UNESCO International Literacy Prize (2017), the Jacobs Social Entrepreneurship Award (2018), and an Ashoka Fellowship (2019).

Dr. Dajani serves as the President of the Board for Taghyeer organization. The other board members are Yahia Ishan, Vice President; Mahmoud Aeshan, Treasurer; Kelly Taha, Secretary; and Mohammad Awad, Member. Taghyeer achieves exponential impact with its staff 27 full-time employees who are responsible for the organization’s effective management, program development, training, technological platforms, and other core activities.

We Love Reading is supported by a dedicated international Advisory Board, including Arne Duncan, former U.S. Secretary of Education; Her Royal Highness, Princess Sumaya bint Alhassan; Shauna Carey, Managing Director of IDEO.org (NYC); and HE Hamdi Tabba, business leader (Jordan).

Our organization is committed to a professional, rigorous infrastructure, including human resources, fiscal management systems, governance, communications, and other areas. We are in the process of implementing a strategic plan that will take our organization to the next level in an intentional, sustainable way. The strategic plan is focused on finance, customer relations, organizational learning, and planned growth, among other areas.

We use an organization-wide Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP) that provides a single, cohesive information system to efficiently coordinate all our key processes. The ERP collects data from our global partners, up-to-date and comprehensive information that allows us to coordinate WLR’s operations and the various processes and informational flows between our organization and our partners in the field. Since 2015, we have implemented a Quality Management System (ISO 9001 standards) and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), which facilitate internal audits, third-

party audits, compliance with international standards, and information-gathering that contributes to ongoing learning, self-assessment, and improvement across numerous areas, from policies/procedures to program planning.

## Partners

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We have developed a sustainable business model that doesn't depend on grants but on creating partnerships with NGOs. We are scaling by empowering partners and depending on networks of women who already resemble a movement to bring about social change through reading.

As noted above, WLR is implemented in communities that are at peace and in conflict. We Love Reading is being implemented by Plan international in Ethiopia, NRC in Azraq camp in Jordan, ACEV in Turkey, UNHCR in Jordan, IRD in Zaatri camp in Jordan, UNICEF in Makani center USAID in Jordan and in private school in Jordan such as the International baccalaureate school.