



POSITION PAPER

Scaling Without Stripping

How sanloop Navigates the Tension Between
Institutional Legibility and Feminist Practice

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The Problem We Name

sanloop exists to develop, promote, and implement dignity-centered sanitation—in particular the Mobile Dry Diversion Toilet (MDDT)—in sub-Saharan Africa. Our flagship campaign in Nigeria operates through three strands: community organizing with women, local-government partnerships, and public-awareness work. Heinrich Böll Foundation Abuja funds the campaign; sanloop's Swiss fundraising runs in parallel.

This paper addresses a structural tension we refuse to ignore: the very institutional channels through which we scale—MOUs, donor metrics, quarterly dashboards—risk transforming the political character of the work they are meant to support. Critical development scholarship has documented this dynamic for decades. We take that scholarship seriously—not as abstract theory but as a description of forces acting on our organization right now.

This is not an academic exercise. It is a public commitment to holding the tension between institutional legibility and feminist practice rather than pretending it does not exist.

What the Literature Tells Us

Three decades of critical development scholarship converge on an uncomfortable conclusion: when community-based projects enter institutional scaling channels, their political content is structurally at risk. The mechanism is not conspiracy or bad faith—it is the logic of legibility itself.

[The depoliticization critique](#)

Ferguson's (1990) foundational work showed how development interventions perform what he called "instrument effects": regardless of whether projects succeed on their own terms, they depoliticize poverty by recoding political struggles as technical problems amenable to bureaucratic management. Li (2007) refined this through the concept of "rendering technical"—the construction of problems in a manner amenable to professional diagnosis while silencing dimensions that fall outside institutional expertise. Mosse (2005), embedded for eleven years in a bilateral aid project, demonstrated that policy narratives do not shape practice—practice shapes the narratives needed to maintain institutional coherence.

The implication for sanloop is direct: our quarterly dashboard does not neutrally reflect what happened—it reflects what must be reported to have happened within the grammar of institutional accountability.

[The scalability critique](#)

Tsing (2012) defines scalability as the ability to expand without rethinking basic elements—possible only if project components do not form transformative relationships that might change the project as elements are added. Her genealogical insight is sharp: she traces this logic to colonial plantation economies, where profits required standardizing social relations into self-contained, interchangeable units. The World Bank's requirement that village projects be "already scalable"—replicable without adaptation—reproduces this logic. When a Swiss donor asks whether the MDDT model "works elsewhere," the question itself contains assumptions about what scaling means.

[The feminist co-optation critique](#)

Cornwall (2007) has documented how radical concepts—empowerment, participation, ownership—get reconfigured into depoliticized forms that institutional actors can absorb without changing practice. Batliwala (2007) identifies four mechanisms: consciousness-raising replaced by microcredit, donors demanding quantifiable metrics, rights-based approaches requiring professionals, and empowerment stripped of its collective dimension. Her warning is direct: the subversion of transformative political techniques begins with the co-optation of their language.

This applies to us. "Dignity technology," "woman-owned," "ambassador model"—each of these terms carries political content that institutional adoption can hollow out. A dignity circle that appears on a donor dashboard as "number of women reached" has already undergone the transformation Batliwala (2007) describes.

Where the Tension Lives in Our Work

The MDDT campaign's three-strand architecture creates specific sites where depoliticization pressure operates:

Strand 1: Communities and Women

The ambassador model, dignity circles, and Women for MDDT network are designed as feminist organizing infrastructure—spaces where women develop collective voice, not just individual toilet access. The political content lives in the relationships: peer education, consciousness-raising, collective decision-making about sanitation as a site of gendered power. The depoliticization risk is that institutional reporting reduces this to throughput metrics—ambassadors recruited, circles formed, units distributed—stripping the relational work that makes these spaces transformative.

Strand 2: Local Government

Local Government Areas (LGAs) do not fund MDDTs. They legitimize. Their MOUs and political backing are the credentials that unlock Swiss donor funding. This is a deliberate strategy—and an honest one. But the very act of securing an MOU translates a feminist sanitation project into a language local officials can absorb: unit counts, ODF¹ targets, SDG² alignment. The MDDT enters the LGA's frame as a sanitation technology, not as a dignity technology embedded in a women's political network. This is not deception—it is the structural grammar of institutional engagement.

Strand 3: General Awareness

The #FlushTheOldThinking campaign reframes sanitation discourse from shame to future. But public-awareness work faces its own depoliticization risk: the narrative shifts from “women organizing collectively for dignified sanitation” to “innovative technology solves sanitation crisis.” The technology becomes the protagonist; the women's political network becomes the backdrop.

Our Counter-Practices

The constructive development literature—Hickey and Mohan (2004), the Thinking and Working Politically community, Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano's (2015) scaling framework, Venugopal's (2022) recent synthesis—argues that the tension between institutional legibility and political content is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be navigated continuously. We adopt four deliberate counter-practices:

1. Scaling deep alongside scaling out

Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano (2015) distinguish three types of scaling: “scaling out” (reaching more people), “scaling up” (changing institutional rules), and “scaling deep” (changing relationships, values, and narratives). The MDDT campaign pursues all three simultaneously—but we treat them as deliberately distinct operations. The dignity circles and Women for MDDT network are scaling deep: they change how women relate to sanitation, to each other, and to political authority. The LGA pathway is scaling up. Unit deployment is scaling out. We do not allow the metrics of scaling out to become the measure of scaling deep. A dignity circle is not successful because it produces MDDT adopters—it is successful because it transforms how women understand their political position.

¹ ODF (Open Defecation Free) is a status designation used in global sanitation policy to certify that a community or local government area has eliminated the practice of open defecation. Originally developed as a target within Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) programming, ODF status has become a dominant metric in national sanitation campaigns, including Nigeria's „Clean Nigeria: Use the Toilet“ initiative, which set—and subsequently missed—a 2025 target for nationwide ODF status (UNICEF and WHO, 2023). Critics note that ODF certification measures the absence of a behavior rather than the presence of dignified sanitation infrastructure, incentivizing minimal-cost interventions over sustained service provision (Bartram and Cairncross, 2010).

² SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) commits UN member states to ensuring „availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all“ by 2030. Target 6.2 specifically calls for „adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all,“ with a focus on ending open defecation and attending to the needs of women and girls. In practice, SDG reporting relies on the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme's (JMP) „sanitation ladder,“ which classifies services from „open defecation“ through „unimproved,“ „limited,“ „basic,“ to „safely managed“ (WHO and UNICEF, 2017). This ladder measures technical service levels rather than the social relations infrastructure creates—a classification system that, in Scott's (1998) terms, makes sanitation legible to global governance while rendering its political dimensions invisible.

2. Strategic decoupling

Organizational theory describes how hybrid organizations maintain distinct institutional logics by deliberately separating reporting structures from core practices. We practice this openly: the MOU and the quarterly dashboard tell one story to donors and LGAs—the story of units, reach, and ODF progress. The community network operates according to its own political logic—consciousness-raising, collective voice, feminist practice. These are not the same story, and we do not pretend they are. The dashboard and the dignity circle serve deliberately different purposes.

3. Embedding political reflexivity

Venugopal (2022) argues that the anti-politics machine perpetually regenerates—every attempt to re-politicize development creates new instruments of legibility that absorb the political content they were meant to preserve. We take this seriously. Every reporting cycle is an occasion to ask: what political content is being stripped, and how do we restore it? This is not a one-time design decision but a recurring organizational practice—what recent scholarship calls “political mētis” (Yanguas, 2024), a situated, relational, emergent form of political awareness.

4. Building alternative accountability

If the only accountability structures run toward donors and government partners, depoliticization is structurally guaranteed. We build reporting relationships that run toward the women ambassadors and community networks—so that the project’s political constituency can hold it accountable for its feminist commitments independently of institutional requirements. The Women for MDDT network is not a delivery mechanism—it is a political constituency with voice.

What We Are Not Claiming

We do not claim to have solved the depoliticization problem. The literature is clear that this cannot be solved—only navigated. Nor do we claim that naming the tension inoculates us against it. Cornwall’s (2007) work shows that reflexive language can itself become a new form of co-optation—“depoliticization awareness” absorbed into the institutional grammar as yet another metric of organizational quality.

What we claim is more modest and more demanding: we commit to treating depoliticization as a permanent organizational condition requiring continuous counter-practice, not a risk to be managed once and filed away. When the tension between the dashboard and the dignity circle becomes invisible—when we stop noticing the gap between what we report and what we do—we will have failed, regardless of how many units we deploy.

A Note on the MDDT as Technical Fix

Critical sanitation scholarship—McFarlane and Silver’s (2017) concept of the “poolitical,” research on container-based sanitation in South Africa (Dube, Anciano, and Mdee, 2023), the sustained critique of Community-Led Total Sanitation (Engel and Susilo, 2014)—demonstrates that sanitation is a political battleground, not a technical problem. Toilet technology choice is never neutral: in eThekweni, urine-diversion dry toilets distributed to predominantly Black communities were perceived as reproducing apartheid-era hierarchies. In Khayelitsha, residents rejected free container-based sanitation as reflecting assumptions about what is good enough for the poor.

The MDDT exists in this political field. Built from just \$250 in locally sourced materials per unit—a figure that covers neither the interface, nor the labor, nor the research and development, nor the transportation—waterless, circular, and woman-owned, it is designed as an alternative to the flush toilet—which remains the aspirational benchmark precisely because of its association with modernity, class position, and racial equality. Our campaign deliberately frames the MDDT not as a stopgap but as a leap past the flush toilet. Whether that framing holds depends entirely on whether the women who own MDDTs experience them as dignified—and whether the political network around them gives those women the collective power to define dignity on their own terms, not ours.

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