# POSITION PAPER
# Scaling Without Stripping

How sanloop Navigates the Tension Between Institutional Legibility and Feminist Practice

sanloop
Swiss nonprofit association (Verein)
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# The Problem We Name

sanloop develops, promotes, distributes, and implements dignity-centered sanitation—in particular the Mobile Dry Diversion Toilet (MDDT)—in sub-Saharan Africa. Where the network stops, women are the infrastructure. Since 2024, every household MDDT has gone to a woman, with her name printed on it. The inscription makes her a member of the Women for MDDT Network, and the income from the fertilizer is hers. Our campaign in Nigeria, A Toilet of Her Own, operates through three strands: Neighborhoods and Women, Local Government, and General Awareness. Heinrich Böll Foundation Abuja funds the campaign; sanloop's fundraising runs in parallel.

This paper names a dilemma at the center of our work: the institutional channels sanloop needs in order to scale—memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with local governments, donor metrics and 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 read that scholarship as a description of forces acting on our organization now.

This paper acknowledges the dilemma publicly and commits sanloop to working within it.

# 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 the logic of legibility itself; it requires no conspiracy or bad faith.

### 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 practice shapes the policy narratives needed to maintain institutional coherence.

The implication for sanloop is direct: our quarterly dashboard 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. She traces this logic to colonial plantation economies, where profits required standardizing social relations into self-contained, interchangeable units. When a 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," "MDDT Ambassador"—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 three strands of A Toilet of Her Own are specific sites where depoliticization pressure operates:

### Strand 1: Neighborhoods and Women

In our model, ownership is the threshold: a woman's name printed on her MDDT is her act of membership in the Women for MDDT Network. The Dignity Circles, open to current and prospective owners, and the MDDT Ambassadors are where members organize. Together they form feminist organizing infrastructure, where women develop collective voice. The political content lives in the relationships: peer education, consciousness-raising, and collective decision-making about sanitation as a site of gendered power. The depoliticization risk is that institutional reporting reduces this to throughput metrics—MDDT Ambassadors recruited, Dignity Circles formed, owners counted—and strips out the relational work that makes these spaces transformative.

### Strand 2: Local Government

Local Government Areas (LGAs) do not fund MDDTs; they lend legitimacy. Their endorsement and MOUs are the credentials sanloop pursues to unlock donations. This is a deliberate strategy, and an honest one. Securing an MOU translates a feminist sanitation project into a language local officials can absorb: unit counts, open-defecation-free (ODF)[1] targets, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)[2] alignment. The MDDT enters the LGA's frame as a sanitation technology, stripped of its place as a dignity technology embedded in a women's political network. That translation 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 (McCulloch and Piron, 2019), Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano's (2015) scaling framework, Venugopal's (2022) recent synthesis—argues that the tension between institutional legibility and political content has to be navigated continuously, because it cannot be solved. 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). sanloop pursues all three at once and treats them as deliberately distinct operations. MDDTs reach new owners through roll-outs, and every owner joins the Women for MDDT Network, through which the campaign A Toilet of Her Own spreads. The Dignity Circles and the 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. New owners are scaling out. We do not allow the metrics of scaling out to become the measure of scaling deep. A Dignity Circle succeeds when it transforms how women understand their political position, whatever number of new owners it produces.

### 2. Strategic decoupling

Ebrahim (2002) shows how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) resist funders' attempts to structure their behavior through the symbolic generation of information and its selective sharing. We separate reporting from core practice openly: an MOU and the quarterly dashboard tell one story to donors and LGAs—the story of units, reach, and ODF progress. The Women for MDDT Network operates according to its own political logic of consciousness-raising, collective voice, and feminist practice. The two stories differ, and we say so. 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 commit to making every reporting cycle an occasion to ask what political content is being stripped and how we restore it—a recurring organizational practice that 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 commit to building reporting relationships that run toward the MDDT Ambassadors and the Women for MDDT Network, 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 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 women own an MDDT.

## 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), and the sustained critique of Community-Led Total Sanitation (Engel and Susilo, 2014)—demonstrates that sanitation is a political battleground. Toilet technology choice is never neutral. In eThekwini, rural households served with urine-diversion toilets rejected them on grounds of equity and of living close to areas served with flush toilets, in a country where race groups were long served with different levels of amenities (Bazaanah, 2022). In Khayelitsha, residents rejected free container-based sanitation as reflecting assumptions about what is good enough for the poor (Dube, Anciano, and Mdee, 2023).

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 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.

This paper reflects sanloop's organizational position as of 2026. It is a living document—subject to revision as our practice develops and as the women we work with and the Women for MDDT Network hold us accountable to the commitments made here.

# Footnotes

[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 a 2025 target for nationwide ODF status and has since moved it to 2030 (Clean Nigeria Campaign, 2024). 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 United Nations (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 "sanitation ladder" of the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP), 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.

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