The Quest for Scale
By Louis C. Boorstin
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An effort to improve sanitation in developing countries yields lessons in how to achieve enduring, broad-based social impact. BY LOUIS C. BOORSTIN

In December 2006, I flew into Aurangabad, a city in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Before the trip, when I mentioned my destination to an Indian friend, she asked, “Are you going to visit the caves?” She was referring to the main attraction in the area—a series of Buddhist shrines carved centuries ago out of the nearby hills. No, I replied. I wasn’t planning to visit the caves. I was planning to visit some toilets.

In fact, what I’d typically seen when I visited India was the absence of toilets. More than 600 million Indians practice what is politely called “open defecation.” But in the Jalna district, which is near Aurangabad, officials had made real progress in persuading large numbers of rural households to install and actually use toilets. The key to success in Jalna, I learned, involved a community-based program that spurred demand for toilets and rewarded the desired outcome—villages free of open defecation—instead of simply paying to install toilets that few people used.

That trip was part of a quest for durable and scalable ways to improve sanitation. A year and a half earlier, I had joined a small team from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that had a mandate to develop new program areas. My focus was on the field of water, sanitation, and hygiene.

For decades, that field had stymied government officials and international development experts. When I joined the Gates Foundation, the situation that we faced was daunting. More than 1 billion people lacked access to drinking water, and more than 2.5 billion people—half the population of the developing world—either relied on unsafe sanitation facilities or had no sanitation facilities at all. The consequences of these problems were profound: Each year, 1.5 million children under the age of five were dying from water-related diseases. The economic and social costs of days lost from work and schooling were significant, too. In addition, there was the simple indignity faced by billions of people who have nowhere “to go.”

The Gates Foundation brought to this challenge not only a considerable array of resources, but also a very ambitious goal: to make a real difference in the lives of the poor on a large scale. Between 2005 and 2012, the foundation funded more than 150 water, sanitation, and hygiene grants, at a total cost of more than $400 million. From the experience of helping to make and administer many of those grants, I gleaned several lessons in how to pursue social innovation in a scalable way.

Test at scale | Most international donors and implementers embrace a pilot-to-scale paradigm. They support innovative pilots and then just assume that the most promising pilots will be adopted at scale. But, as I came to realize, very few pilots are actually scale-ready. Too often, something is missing between the pilot stage and the stage of widespread adoption. What’s needed is a stage in which worthy programs are tested at scale. “Scale” here means the minimum level (district-wide, for example) at which a government or another large implementer would operate a program. Such an approach is consistent with the production of commercial goods: No manufacturer would assume that what works in a small job shop would translate readily into production on an assembly line. Instead, a company will typically develop and test manufacturing processes that will allow it to achieve economies of scale.

Several Gates Foundation grantees tried this test-at-scale approach in different settings. One grantees achieved mixed success by taking a community-led rural sanitation model—the model used in Jalna, India,
I have one last thought to share about the quest for scalable innovation: The common thread that united our most effective grantees was an ability not only to focus on systems, but also to **listen**—to listen very carefully to the poor. In other words, they were able to observe the choices being made by the poor and to understand the motivations behind those choices. That combination generates approaches that have the potential to achieve large scale and sustainability.