

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Known Quantity

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VIEWPOINT

Known Quantity

To be effective, the work of philanthropy should be not just innovative but also cumulative.

BY ACHILLES KALLERGIS & ALEXANDRE LAMBELET

Sanitation is one of the most critical issues that developing countries face. Worldwide, about 2.5 billion people lack adequate sanitation facilities, and each year about 700,000 children die from diarrhea. One noteworthy effort to solve this problem is the Reinvent the Toilet Challenge, which the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched in 2011. According to the foundation's website, the initiative aims to promote the creation of "a truly aspirational next-generation product that everyone will want to use." To date, the website reports, the foundation has funded 16 research groups that are "using innovative approaches—based on fundamental engineering processes—for the safe and sustainable management of human waste."

In focusing on sanitation, the Gates Foundation has made a welcome move to raise awareness of a significant public health issue. But let's look carefully at the underlying logic of its proposed intervention. That logic relies on two basic assumptions: first, that the sanitation problem in developing countries requires a technological solution; and second, that the problem stems largely from a lack of demand. The intervention rests, in other words, on the idea that those without access to adequate sanitation are unable or unwilling to use the sanitation technology that currently exists.

Social science field research on this topic calls those assumptions into question. An ethnographic study sponsored by the UK Department for International Development, for example, concludes that "lagging sanitation targets are not a simple case of technical failures or lack of demand by users." For the study, researchers interviewed and observed

members of the urban poor in Bangladesh, India, and Kenya over a three-year period that started in 2003. Within that population, they found, the understanding of issues related to hygiene and sanitation is quite high. "In the absence of inclusive urban policies," the authors of the study write, "the proposed approach to 'promoting a demand for toilets' grossly simplifies [a] complex social-environmental issue." Broadly speaking, the literature on sanitation in developing countries indicates that most problems in that field relate to the complex realities of poverty.

Did the Gates Foundation incorporate research findings of this kind into the framing of its sanitation initiative? To what extent, that is, does the Reinvent the Toilet Challenge build on what scholars have previously discovered about sanitation in developing countries? In posing such questions, we don't

mean to suggest that the foundation neglected to conduct due diligence before it rolled out this initiative. Our purpose, rather, is to highlight the importance of basing philanthropic programs on a body of shared knowledge.

Social science operates under the principle of cumulative knowledge—the principle of expanding our understanding of a subject by building on earlier work about that subject. Increasingly, philanthropy seems to lack this cumulative aspect. It wasn't always that way. A century ago, philanthropists contributed significantly to the development of the social sciences. They also applied a scientific model to their own work. In that sense, social science and philanthropy evolved side by side. Today, however, foundations routinely develop projects without conducting a thorough survey of existing, relevant research.

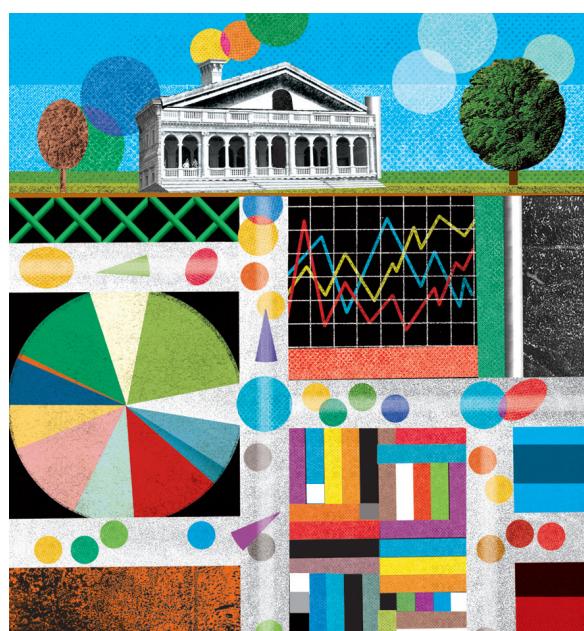
Philanthropy, we believe, should return to its roots as a cumulative endeavor. By funding projects that involve shared knowledge, foundations can increase both the value of their initiatives and their ability to offer innovative solutions.

BUILDING ON THE PAST

The field of philanthropy emerged in the 19th century partly in opposition to the tra-

ditional practice of charity. Philanthropists were arguing that their work was radically different from the work of churches and other charitable organizations. Charity, in their view, was merely an effort to ameliorate the lives of less-fortunate people—a matter of giving them a bowl of soup or shelter.

Philanthropy aimed to operate under a different rationale. Its purpose was not simply to aid individuals, but rather to solve social problems. It traced its origins to the Enlightenment, and its overarching objective was to promote



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social progress through the advancement of knowledge. Acting on this premise, the philanthropists of the 19th and early 20th centuries called for a “scientific philanthropy” and supported a wide range of scientific research. The Russell Sage Foundation, for instance, filled its staff with sociologists and social workers and published a series of well-documented reports (“Child Helping” and “Child Hygiene,” for example) that it distributed to policymakers and reformers throughout the United States. Similarly, the Carnegie Corporation played a significant role in funding such institutions as the National Research Council and the National Bureau of Economic Research.

But the practice of scientific philanthropy went beyond simply financing research. Philanthropists aspired to work as scientists. They promoted the rigorous and systematic exploration of questions related to public policy and social reform. They founded philanthropic societies whose purpose was to enable cooperation and knowledge sharing. They gathered at international congresses to compare their own programs with those initiated by other philanthropists. For these pioneers, the pursuit of cumulative knowledge was an essential part of the philanthropic mission.

A century later, a commitment to scientific knowledge is still evident in the world of philanthropy. Today, though, it manifests itself as an interest in the science of *management*. It focuses more on organizational questions and evaluation methods than it does on ways to create a shared body of knowledge about public and social concerns. The emergence within business schools of courses and entire curricula devoted to non-profit and foundation management marks a paradigm shift. Tellingly, we no longer speak of “scientific philanthropy.” Instead, we talk about “strategic philanthropy.”

Over the past several decades, efforts within the foundation world to document and share knowledge have grown more robust. Along with publications such as the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* and the *Philanthropy Journal*, there are an increasing number of

conferences that bring together people from foundations. Yet in too many cases, these information-sharing vehicles deal mainly with managerial issues—with fundraising in the wake of the recent financial crisis, for example, or with trends in planned giving. Individual foundations are also increasingly willing to share information about their work. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, for example, issued a document called “Evaluation Principles and Practices: an Internal Working Paper.” Documents of that type provide a welcome addition in our understanding of how foundations manage

review—with a survey of knowledge in a particular area that enables researchers to explain how their work will add to that body of knowledge. A project in the social sciences, in short, makes sense only in the context of a broad field of inquiry.

What would a truly cumulative approach to philanthropy look like? In fact, elements of that approach are already in place. There are conferences where people from foundations get together to discuss not only topics such as “governance” and “good practices,” but also specific projects that they have supported, the research and the theories

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their internal processes, but they do not shed much light on why a foundation might select one intervention or program over another.

REVIEWING THE FIELD

The notion of cumulative knowledge has not utterly disappeared from philanthropy. The Social Reporting Standard (SRS), for instance, has published a report titled “Guidelines for Impact-Oriented Reporting” that encourages the discussion of new projects in the context of previous approaches to solving a given problem. But only about one-tenth of one page in that 25-page report is dedicated to this point. If you delve into the annual reports of several foundations that use the SRS, moreover, you will find little if any discussion of how current projects relate to past.

In the social sciences, scholars treat the cumulative aspect of knowledge very differently. Each researcher attempts to make a contribution to solving a greater puzzle. To do so, the researcher begins by collecting information on experiments that other researchers have conducted about a specific issue. Any article or book in the social sciences starts with a state-of-the-field

of change on which they based those projects, and so on. The world of philanthropy needs to hold more such conferences—to create more venues where field experts and program officers can join to develop a base of knowledge about what works (and what doesn’t work) in solving a particular problem. More generally, it needs to shift away from evaluating each project independently, as a free-standing effort that bears little connection to other projects.

Look back at the Gates Foundation’s Reinvent the Toilet Challenge. Clearly, the core value of the initiative is that it provides a new framework for solving a very old problem. But wouldn’t that framework benefit from having a firm basis in the growing body of knowledge about sanitation delivery? Or would taking such knowledge into consideration somehow undermine the transformational capacity—the innovative potential—of the program? Again, with respect to the Gates Foundation project, we can’t speculate on the answers to these questions. But we would argue that cumulative knowledge is not antithetical to innovative thinking. On the contrary, cumulative knowledge is often the basis for arriving at effective solutions. ■