



**A business strategy contribution to poverty alleviation and sustainable
development: the
Base-of-the-Pyramid theory's validity and inadequacies**

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the concepts of partnership, innovation and poverty alleviation in the Base-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) theory and its intersection with the literature on International Development. It contributes to the understanding of sustainability and development by pointing out the complementarities and limitations for each concept. We conclude the paper pointing out the potential contribution of BoP strategies for achieving eradicating poverty and reaching sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Sustainability, first defined in the Brundtland report 1997, proposes a development strategy that satisfies the needs of the present generation without limiting the possibilities of future generations to satisfy their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987; Marrewijk, 2003). Its ethical content derives from the idea that companies may work in non-sustainable ways, despite not hurting any law. Therefore, scholars, policy makers and activists argue for a voluntary commitment to follow a sustainable development (Garriga & Melé, 2004). Base-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) approaches provides a way to contribute to sustainable development approach and should be take into consideration more often by the academic and policy world, because its projects may have higher scale effect than projects that are not formulated within its framework.

While a large part of the literature focuses on the establishment of business strategies in recent years, concentrating on questions such as how to set up distributive strategies, what is needed to operate successfully at the BoP level, and the effect of BoP products on development, the BoP theory has been rather ignored. Businesses seem to be only interested in the BoP as a market arena, and yet, only a few corporations have successfully managed to link their business activities with social and sustainable development in the market. Even though it is not the role of the corporation alone to manage and support development at the BoP market, new products that have been created in a responsible and creative way can set up new standards in sustainable development. Especially multinational companies (MNCs) have shown that they have the ability to support the development at the BoP level, particularly If they use their strong know-how in specific areas that can lead to innovative product development. Also, small enterprises and social business can contribute with new products to sustainable development at the BoP level. For example, the Austrian company Helioz, a small firm, has developed a measurement device that traces the progress of solar water disinfection in a PET-bottle, called WADI. The product is based on the Solar Water Disinfection (SODIS) method, developed by scientists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich and the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG). SODIS currently counts as the most sustainable way of water disinfection.

Most publication in the context of corporations operating at the BoP since the emerging of the topic that took place a decade ago, have treated three core topics along BoP approaches:

- *partnerships*, by questioning with whom and for what should business strategies be built up in collaboration with partners at the BoP (i.a.: Webb, Kistruck, Ireland & Ketchen, 2010; London & Anupindi, 2011; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Prahalad, 2005).
- *innovation*, by questioning what kind of products have the potential for being a long-term business case (i.a.: Prahalad, 2005; London, 2009; Blowfield, Visser & Livesey, 2007; Simanis, Hart & Duke, 2008) poverty alleviation, by asking how these strategies and products can help to reach the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and contribute to reduce the overall poverty level (i.a.: London, 2008; London & Hart, 2011; Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007; Acosta, Kim, Melzer, Mendoza & Thelen, 2011)
- *poverty alleviation*, by asking how these strategies and products can help to reach the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and contribute to reduce the overall poverty level (i.a.: London, 2008; London & Hart, 2011; Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007; Acosta, Kim, Melzer, Mendoza & Thelen, 2011).

We believe that the BoP approaches can contribute to sustainable development. Still, the current discussion in BoP misses the limitations that have been pointed out in other fields of studies concerning its core topics. To take into account the BoP's limitations we compare with the literature on international development.

Therefore, the primary goal of this paper is to present the concept of partnerships, innovation and poverty alleviation in BoP literature and point out the limitations for each concept, within the framework of the international development literature.

2. Concepts in BoP literature and their limitations

2.1. The concept of partnerships in BoP literature

The BoP literature discusses partnerships on several grounds. One important argument is Prahalad's discussed *partnership with the poor*. Based on his critique of a one-dimensional picture of poverty, he argues for an approach that focuses on partnerships with the poor in order to promote innovation and a permanent "win-win situation." A "win-win" situation for the poor means, for example, to create affordable products that contribute with a real-life-problem-solution and are easily distributed. For example, products that create an income for some people and at the same time are strategic for companies because of the profit they make by selling their products. Thus, Prahalad argues for a way out of poverty in which the poor

take action and companies profitably sell their products and services to them at the same time (2005). Simanis et al. (2008) extend this idea and develop a model of 'second generation BoP strategies', in which people at the BoP level join the business co-ventures. By reaching this step, people at the BoP become not only consumers but business partners. The involvement of the local community is crucial for the success of this business models. As such, the BoP approach mixes businesses and social anthropological models to create new business ventures in collaboration with the people at the BoP (Hart & Sharma, 2004; London, 2008).

Brugmann and Prahalad (2007) also argue that the liberalization of markets is forcing executives and NGOs to work together for setting up businesses successfully at the BoP. Only with joint efforts, they will be able to develop business models that will transform organizations and the lives of the people at the BoP. *Partnerships between Companies and NGOs* have the aim to bring together their distinct capabilities: NGOs have local knowledge and receive trust from society; companies have specific product and project know-how. Brugmann and Prahalad (2007) discuss three areas of convergence in which Companies and NGOs find common ground:

1. The first area is to pool knowledge, competencies, and relationships to build new operating standards and co-regulatory schemes. NGOs are often very good socially embedded, due to their longstanding assistance and relief efforts (Salamon, 1994).
2. The second area is to leverage each other's credibility and social networks to create access to markets and brand value. Rondinelli and London (2003) discuss the wide ranging rural networks that NGOs have.
3. The third area is to create professional development norms and management roles to facilitate coordination between the two sectors.

The different areas in which companies and NGOs come together indicates let us a high complexity and variation across private firms and NGOs' alliances. The challenges which each party must master in order to achieve innovative responses to the market obstacles are nonetheless difficult to realize and deal with. Both parties have to review their positions and be willing to truly interact and to understand each other – this may be also in relation to the stakeholders related to each party difficult (Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007). NGOs may, for instance, be able to define standards through negotiation with companies, but a negotiation is never a winner-takes-it-all game. That means that NGOs' donors might not understand why it is necessary to compromise. Indeed, scholars are still trying to understand the normative

standards of how to organize successful alliances across public-private sectors. For example, the Groupe Danone and the Grameen Bank is a successful partnership. The world largest supplier of fresh dairy products and the large Bangladeshi NGO turned into a joint venture to produce and sell vitamin enriched yogurt products in regions in Bangladesh, that suffer of strong children malnutrition (Webb et al., 2010).

Not only, we refer to partnerships between private sector firms, NGOs and the people at the BoP level, but also discuss partnerships with government agencies and other companies. London and Hart (2004) find out that collaboration among non-traditional partners was a crucial factor for success by analyzing 24 case studies of companies using a BoP strategy. The authors emphasize that particularly companies who work together with non-corporate partners for expertise on social infrastructure and local legitimacy were more successful in establishing businesses. Compounding evidence was found when that companies that failed at the BoP market level, had nearly no contact with NGOs and government agencies. That makes partnerships in the BoP market segment necessary for survival.

Yet, partnerships with governments, domestic corporations, and business groups are nothing new and have been discussed extensively in the internationalization literature as a way to reduce the risk of entering a new and foreign market (Khanna & Rivkin, 2001; Ricart, Enright, Ghemawat, Hart & Khanna, 2004; Webb et al., 2009). However, the partnership with NGOs, as proposed in the BoP literature, is less prevalent, as well as the formation of various alliances in order to design a promising entry mode into BoP markets (Webb et al., 2009). The overall business model in the BoP literature becomes thus understood as a co-creation among a diversity of partners (Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007). Indeed, the idea of a BoP venture implies a mutually beneficial partnership established among the entrepreneurs operating at the BoP and the local organizations, the NGOs, and the local people.

The definition of partnerships by McQuaid (2000) includes for example the idea of cooperation and mutual trust between the different actors, who may contribute with different resources to a joint project. Trust is equally important for all kinds of partnerships at the BoP. Often trust can be understood as an outcome of a long-term relationship and as a prolonged process (Lewis, 1998). This long-term relationship is generally not available for companies that are operating at the BoP, thus NGOs have to make up for the lack of trust in BoP partnerships with the poor. Considering the diverse factors influencing partnership building at the BoP, partnerships at the BoP seem to be even more difficult to set up than in other market segments.

2.2.Limitations to partnerships between NGOs, governments, and private sector

As mentioned earlier on, partnerships with governments, domestic corporations, and business groups are nothing new and have been discussed extensively in the internationalization literature as a way to reduce the risk of entering a new and foreign market (Khanna & Rivkin, 2001; Ricart et al. 2004; Webb et al. 2009).

Carroll (1992), in his work about the role of intermediary NGOs in promoting and co-sponsoring development, points out the NGOs and government agencies and private corporations are not always in good terms, and frequently compete for resources and allegiances. Also, most NGOs lack the management skills to pursue private sector's best practices in terms of market efficiency and are highly dependent on outside resources, physical, technical, and financial.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the lack of expertise and general resources, usually the greatest obstacles to overcome in partnership with NGOs are the political ideologies and untrustworthiness among different groups and lack of institutional capabilities.

Also, Carroll actually argues that effectiveness depends on the evaluation and consideration of the socioeconomic status of the population being assisted, the outreach of each partner at the local level, and the group capacity, and the organizational attributes developed existing at the local level.

Despite the optimistic approach of the BoP literature, it seems to overlook previously studied deficiencies, inequalities, and limitations of partnerships among

2.3. The concept of innovation in BoP literature

Innovation plays an important role for the discussion by the BoP approach. First of all, the BoP market offers new growth and innovation potentials. Scholars also discuss the necessity of innovations in order to a firm operate successfully at the BoP. Prahalad points out that the problems and circumstances at the BoP require companies to change their vision and to recognize a more adaptive approach to the needs of the people at the BoP (Prahalad, 2005). Based on this argument, London and Hart emphasize that in order to manage a product innovation that fits the needs of the people at the BoP properly; companies have to develop a global capability in social embeddedness. This social embeddedness is necessary to 'leverage learning from the bottom-up'. This underlines the idea that knowledge is not expected to be

available already to address the BoP with a business strategy appropriately but has to be built up (London & Hart, 2004).

Examples of firms, such as HP, which started operating at the BoP, have shown that this vision change, but is often difficult to reach (Prahalad 2004). Schwittay (2011) points out that the vision change depends a lot on the corporate culture and the company's performance in change management. To set up successful strategies at the BoP, a company must incorporate a certain culture for change management. This is necessary to adapt to the BoP reality: first values have to be changed in order to create a proper corporate understanding for the creation of innovation capabilities inside the firm that address the BoP. As such, change management and proper value creation become an essential requirement for the innovative capacity of companies.

In addition, sustainable innovation makes part of the discussion about new business solutions for the BoP. The question is not only what products exist and are adequate for being a successful business case but also which ones are adequate for sustainable development and long-term growth at the BoP. Sustainability innovation in its various forms comprises value propositions that can especially target the people at the BoP (Blowfield et al., 2007).

2.4.Limitations of the concept of Innovation

There are good reasons for arguing for social embeddedness in order to be able to create new knowledge at the BoP that can lead to appropriate innovations for the BoP (London & Hart, 2004) and Prahalad assumes that companies need a vision change in order to be able to successfully operate in the innovation process for the BoP. Still, the knowledge-creation process is more complex than the literature in the area of BoP assumes and has not yet been taken sufficiently into consideration. So what leads to knowledge acquisition and to innovative capability building and what can be derived from it for the discussion of innovation in BoP?

Figueiredo (2010) points out that knowledge acquisition gets properly managed when firms are capable of integrating external and internal learning. He could prove in his study of latecomer natural resource-processing firms in Brazil that the success in improvement in innovative performance was dependent on the ability of firms to use external and internal learning mechanisms in different frequency of use and quality. Those firms which constantly upgraded their learning mechanism achieved the highest level of performance. The results of Figueiredo (2010) confirm to Kim (1998). The author demonstrates the success of good

management knowledge acquisition in the case of Hyundai Motor in Korea. In addition to Figueiredo (2010) the author emphasizes on the importance of the intensity of effort and the prior knowledge base for a firm's absorptive capacity. As a core issue to build up successfully innovative capabilities, Kim (1998) identifies the creation of a relevant taskforce by using internal project managers and by recruiting engineers with relevant knowledge. In addition he sees an overseas agreement with Ford that made sure that Ford transferred essential knowledge to Hyundai as crucial. Thus, it can be argued that the integration of external and internal learning led to Hyundai's success.

What can be derived from the literature on knowledge acquisition is that companies which want to operate at the BoP need to integrate external and internal learning in their knowledge acquisition process. External knowledge can be embedded by working together with organizations that have a closer relationship to the BoP market itself, like NGOs or government agencies. Internal learning must be built up. A couple of companies, like SC Johnson with its BoP initiatives in Kenya or DuPont with its BoP initiative in Solae in India, have been sent their employees to the BoP where they lived with the people to understand their day-to-day life scheme as an internal learning mechanism (Johnson, 2007; Simanis & Hart, 2009). Finally, the internal and external learning processes have to be integrated. For this, adequate knowledge management is necessary.

In innovation literature the integration of internal and external learning processes are called dual embeddedness. Figueiredo (2010) explains dual embeddedness as knowledge-linkages with internal – in form of corporate – and external – in form of local – counterparts. Existing studies like Ariffin and Bell (1999) have been only looking at the knowledge linkages within a corporation. Figueiredo (2010) is extending this view by integrating the enormous potential of local sources like universities, consulting agencies and other organizations which can be used for knowledge-linkages. In the context of Figueiredo (2008) dual embeddedness can be understood as a method to facilitate intra-firm capability building efforts. As such it goes in line with his 2010 proposed concept that dual embeddedness is part of a subsidiaries' strategic asset-seeking strategy.

Companies that want to enter the BoP successfully need to build up these strategic assets at the BoP. Thus dual embeddedness must be seen as a crucial factor for success in order to create innovative capabilities. Edgard Barki, manager of the BoP Lab in Brazil, pointed in a personal interview on the 16th November 2011 out that most companies do not enter the BoP market with external partners in Brazil and thus fail. One reason may be that partners are

missing to build up successful distribution strategies. Another reason may be that partners are already missing in the knowledge creation and innovation process of products for the BoP and thus present a lack of understanding with what and how the BoP needs to be served.

To sum up, the combination of internal and external learning is a crucial factor for the building of innovative capabilities. BoP orientated companies have to build up these capabilities in order to operate successfully with new products at the BoP. Hereby it is important that they develop internal knowledge by setting up the right team and give them the right training and that they develop external knowledge linkages with potential partners at the BoP. For this purpose, good management skills are important like Kim (1998) demonstrated.

Another central aspect for innovations to succeed is based on the idea that the nexus for the learning process happens at the regional or local level and depends on national systems of innovation (Morgan and Cooke 1998). Countries with incomplete innovation system or a weak associational interaction at the local level may not be able to prompt effective and innovative projects or products at the BOP.

Also, weak, fragmented societies may not catalyze or provide the fertile ground for partnerships and innovations to flourish.

2.5. The concept of poverty alleviation in BoP literature

Prahalad (2005) argues that BoP strategies will expand poverty-alleviation concerns and projects to business developers, large scale manufacturers, and small, local companies. The unique insight that BoP can provide on poverty alleviation is many-folded. Due to the idea of partnerships and external participation by creating innovative business models at the BoP level, BoP approach does not rely on imported solutions from the developed world. The business model proposed here emphasizes the involvement of the local community. In the best case, business ventures are created with the poor (Hart & Sharma, 2004; London, 2007). This principle of co-creation leads to a deep understanding of the local context and distinguishes the BoP perspective from typical corporate and development strategies. Instead of using a unidirectional top-down approach, BoP strategies combine the bottom-up approach with the top-down approach in development. In this way, companies and people at the BoP meet each other on a par. (Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007; London, 2007). In former studies, scholars pointed out that with the business activities of MNCs at the BoP, the gap between rich and poor echelon of the society will decrease, due to the participation of the poor at the market economy and the elimination of the black market (Prahalad & Hart, 2002). Trade at

the BoP level often takes place in accordance to specific rules set up by local leaders. When free and transparent trade increase, the people at the BoP will benefit with an inclusive capitalism (Prahalad & Hart, 2002).

London (2009) emphasizes the idea that someone has to look at the complete picture of a venture's local impact at the BoP in the short term and over time, in order to determine its effect on poverty alleviation. He argues that ventures at the BoP can affect the buyer of the products, the community itself, and the sellers, if the distribution chain is built with people from the BoP.

The effect can then take place in three distinct venues. First, the venture can influence the economical situation at the BoP, increase the income and the welfare level of the people at the BoP, by offering cheaper products, access to procured services and job opportunities. Second, the venture can affect building of local capabilities like health, education and self-esteem. BoP ventures can affect the knowledge level by training and education for example and can increase the health level of people by offering a certain product or service to health related issues. The example of the BoP venture by BASF, which produces and sells encapsulated Vitamin A to local companies in order to enrich daily products like oil to fight against malnutrition in developing regions, can be seen in this light (Blüthner & Vierck, 2009). Third, the venture can have an impact on the relationships between the people at the BoP, by helping individuals and communities to develop new partnerships and access to new networks in order to resolve social exclusion and geographic isolation. Ventures can as well change the relationship by changing people views about gender, ethnicity, and culture (London, 2009). In London's (2009) framework there can be major and minor effects in each field. It is important to note that the effects of BoP ventures can also be negative ones.

Even though BoP contributes to poverty alleviation, the effectiveness of the BOP perspective varies across different socio-economic, cultural and political realities not only across countries but as well within countries. That is why London (2007) argues that the BoP approach should not be seen as a substitution for other poverty alleviation approaches, but as a complementary one.

2.6.Limitations of the concept of poverty alleviation

Even though BoP contributes to poverty alleviation thinking, the effectiveness of the BOP perspective is insufficient to the extent that it has overlooked a full body of literature on poverty alleviation schemes, successes and failures.

One of the most revisited problems in the literature on poverty alleviation and development is the extensive and overwhelming body of recommendations and best practices touted as the panacea for poor and bad performance. Tendler (1997) points out that these perspectives usually led to incorrect interpretations of why such schemes work in some places and not in others.

Also, the mainstream development practitioners believe that the market mechanism is superior to solve problems such as economic stagnation and poverty. Yet, public policies and government interventions have been crucial to catalyze allegiances at the local level and create a fertile ground for distributive economic and businesses' practices.

The BoP literature is also flawed in that it does not delve into the local communities' practices and diverse groups that have not only economic goals, but also political, cultural, and social constraint interested and arrangements.

3. Conclusion

The literature on poverty alleviation and development has already pointed out many of the flaws in the BoP's theory's assumptions. As Bendel argues, the BoP literature does not differentiate among the different income groups at the BoP level. Nor does it deal with the fact that successful business corporations often ignore low income markets and only engage with those above a certain level of poverty.

The so called "trickle-down" effect, much desired, but long criticized in the literature of economic development as a market flaw, has proved to be inefficient or insufficient to cope with poverty realities.

Furthermore, the development pattern implied in the BoP theory is a plain extension of market system and does not propose a structural change. It only minimizes poverty to some extension. It does not completely defeat it. Yet, it yields to the market logic of development and of the developer. As such, it is insufficient to take advantage of local solutions and strategies for inclusion.

Yet, there is much to be said about the catalyzing effect it might have within the universe of private companies, the more business-friendly approach and language to poverty alleviation practices, the inclusionary effort.

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