

A critical discourse analysis to explain the failure of BoP strategies

Nancy E. Landrum

IES and QSB, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to highlight differences between business and non-business literature regarding base of the pyramid (BoP) and subsistence contexts and reveal discourse's powerful role in influencing goals, solutions and outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses critical discourse analysis to review a convenience sample of business versus non-business literature on the BoP and subsistence contexts.

Findings – Discourse used in business literature on the BoP is oriented toward hegemonic Western capitalist approaches that result in the depletion of resources, resource inequalities, poverty and increased consumption, dependence and environmental degradation and, therefore, cannot alleviate poverty.

Research limitations/implications – There are two primary limitations: the study relied on a convenience sample that was not random and comparatively, the business BoP literature is not as mature as the non-business subsistence literature and, therefore, the BoP field of study is not yet fully developed.

Practical implications – Discourse has a powerful role in revealing assumptions and guiding actions. A change in BoP discourse toward a strength-based approach can serve as a model of sustainability and can help powerful entities enact structural and systemic change.

Originality/value – This paper reveals the role of discourse in business BoP literature and how it perpetuates and even exacerbates the problems they were designed to alleviate: depletion of resources, resource inequalities, poverty and increased consumption, dependence and environmental degradation. The paper challenges researchers, economists and powerful guiding entities to reorient their discourse of the BoP to be more aligned with those of non-business researchers of subsistence markets.

Keywords Bottom of the pyramid, Critical discourse analysis, Poverty, Base of the pyramid

Paper type General review

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.

– Nelson Mandela (2005, February 3)

Introduction

Sustainable business literature has taken an interest in the alleviation of poverty and reduction of economic inequality in the base of the pyramid (BoP) markets and BoP strategies have been hailed as the solution. However, in pondering the corporation's role in addressing poverty and inequalities, Husted (2013, p. 196) notes that "[...] what is good enough for the firm in terms of creating competitive advantages and profits may quite possibly not be good enough for either the planet or society".

Numerous critiques and ethical considerations have been offered on the BoP literature (Karnani, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Landrum, 2007; Landrum, 2012). Among the critiques, it has



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been noted that the Western orientation of BoP strategies promote past economic policy approaches that have been used for decades with mixed results (a “business-as-usual” approach), the literature is profit-driven for the benefit of corporations, and there is no data to support that BoP strategies eliminate poverty in BoP markets (Karnani, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Landrum, 2007). In addition, research has shown additional unintended consequences of BoP strategies, such as the promotion of stereotypes, an anticipated increase in e-waste under already hazardous recycling conditions in India and Africa, a loss of social capital, and worsened economic conditions primarily because strategies continue to be profit-oriented and overlook social and economic sustainability (Landrum, 2012).

Perhaps most importantly, BoP strategies have been criticized for failing to deliver on its promises to help alleviate poverty and economic inequalities through market-based solutions (Cañeque and Hart, 2015; Dembek *et al.*, 2019; Hart, 2015; Karnani, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009; Landrum, 2007, 2012, 2014; Simanis, 2012; Simanis *et al.*, 2008). Simultaneous corporate profit and subsistence poverty alleviation were the rationale of BoP strategies (Prahalad, 2005; Prahalad and Hart, 2002). Yet, limited research exists on BoP-poverty outcomes (Dembek *et al.*, 2019; Kolk *et al.*, 2014) and the scant research that exists does not provide evidence that BoP strategies alleviate poverty (Dembek *et al.*, 2019; Simanis, 2012; Simanis *et al.*, 2008; Simanis and Milstein, 2012).

Current research on the impacts of BoP strategies stand by market-based solutions and how to better capture the value-added. This study contends that the assumptions behind the discourse can illuminate the role of discourse in contributing to the failure of BoP strategies. While prior studies have critically evaluated the BoP discourse (Faria and Hemais, 2017; Montgomery *et al.*, 2012), none has considered the important role of discourse in contributing to the failure of BoP strategies to alleviate poverty.

Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this research continues the critical view on ethical issues related to practice, literature and research in BoP and subsistence contexts. This research begins by discussing business and non-business mindsets regarding subsistence markets to build the argument that current mindsets in the business BoP literature are hegemonic and Western-oriented. It will be shown that solutions proposed in the BoP literature also promote Western-oriented solutions that reflect a bias toward capitalism and industrialized societies. Finally, this research reviews the outcomes of the Western-oriented mindsets that generated the Western-oriented solutions and shows that they have created the very problems they seek to solve, specifically the depletion of resources, the creation of resource inequalities, an imbalance in supply and demand, the persistence of poverty and economic inequalities, increased consumption and increased dependence. The contribution of this study is to show how current discourse influences solutions and outcomes. Current discourse leads to the continuation of subsistence challenges and, as a result, cannot alleviate poverty. This study proposes structural and systemic change to alleviate poverty.

Base of the pyramid

BoP strategies were popularized in the business literature by Prahalad and Hart (2002) as a new way to view emerging markets and their economic potential while simultaneously alleviating poverty. The “base of the pyramid” or the “bottom of the pyramid” (BoP) market refers to approximately 4 billion individuals living on approximately \$2 per day, referencing the base of the economic pyramid. In business literature, this group of individuals is viewed as a current or potential consumer market. Individuals living in BoP markets are generally engaged in the informal economy and the current business literature seeks ways to

transition these individuals into the formal economy, a global exchange economy using cash or credit.

A “base of the pyramid strategy” refers to a business-level strategy to penetrate the base of the economic pyramid consumer market and engage the residents in transactions with businesses inside the boundaries of the formal economy. BoP literature postulates that businesses can develop strategies to serve and engage the poorest residents living in emerging economies (those at the base of the economic pyramid) who are not active in the formal economy while simultaneously alleviating poverty and improving quality of life for those residents. BoP strategies often entail revised business models, cost structures, distribution systems, co-creation of solutions and an inclusion of environmental and social sustainability (Prahalad and Hart, 2002; Hart, 2005; Landrum, 2014). The BoP literature has evolved through three distinct phases: BoP 1.0 focused on transforming the poor into consumers, BoP 2.0 focused on business co-creation with the poor and BoP 3.0 seeks to broaden the focus toward sustainable development (Dembeket *et al.*, 2019).

“Subsistence markets” are those in which residents produce and sell or buy only what is needed by her/himself, her/his family or her/his community for survival (primarily food, shelter and clothing). In subsistence markets, products may be exchanged or sold outside the community, but the purpose is to acquire locally unavailable goods to satisfy self, family and community needs and not for the accumulation of wealth.

Some authors use the terms “base (or bottom) of the pyramid market” and “subsistence market” interchangeably (Elaydi, 2010). In this literature stream, there is no distinction between BoP markets and subsistence markets; they are different terms for the same consumer market. By contrast, some authors refer to “subsistence markets” as a segment within the BoP market. For example, Rangan *et al.* (2011) suggest that the base of the economic pyramid can be further segmented by living standard: the low-income segment lives on \$3-\$5 per day, the subsistence segment lives on \$1-\$3 per day and the extreme poverty segment lives on less than \$1 per day. For the purposes of our discussion, the terms *base of the pyramid (BoP) markets/contexts* and *subsistence markets/contexts* will be used interchangeably.

In Prahalad and Hart’s (2002) vision, BoP strategies seek to penetrate the base of the economic pyramid consumer market and engage the residents in transactions with businesses inside the boundaries of the formal economy, all with the noble goal of providing an economic profit for the company while simultaneously alleviating poverty and improving the standard of living for BoP residents. However, to achieve this goal, BoP strategies force the hegemony of Western capitalism as a system in which “industrialized free enterprise in a free trade global economy [...] will produce growth and well-being” (Werhane, 2000, p. 353).

To date, there is little empirical support that BoP strategies achieve the intended outcome of poverty alleviation. The empirical studies on the BoP proposition primarily focus on outcomes for the business while few studies focus on poverty alleviation (Dembeket *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, few studies adopted quantitative methods to measure BoP strategy impacts and instead relied on case studies, interviews and anecdotes, many of which did not endure in the years following the studies (Dembeket *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, most studies continue to focus on BoP citizens as consumers rather than adopting a broader view as advocated in more recent BoP literature (Dembeket *et al.*, 2019).

There have been attempts to explain why BoP strategies have failed to achieve their goal of poverty alleviation. London (2009) suggests there are no robust systems to measure impact and we should focus on a more holistic measure of outcomes that include the well-being of subsistence residents. Simanis (2012) and Simanis and Milstein (2012) suggest a

return to business fundamentals by focusing on investment metrics. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, current research approaches examining the lack of results of BoP strategies continue the line of thinking that BoP strategies do indeed alleviate poverty but we are inadequately capturing that value through our approaches to measuring outcomes. [Dembeket et al. \(2019, p. 16\)](#) concluded that “[. . .] expanding the breadth and scope of the BoP framework without evidence from rigorous longitudinal, empirical studies may result in disillusionment with the framework itself”.

Critical discourse analysis

CDA as theory studies text positioning to understand whose interests are being served, whose interests are negated and what power relationships are suggested ([Fairclough, 2010](#)). Words are not neutral but have meaning within social, political and historical conditions ([McGregor, 2003](#)). The powerful people put forth the dominant discourse in which words define the social reality ([McGregor, 2003](#)). Words are politicized to reflect the interests of those in power who are speaking to advance their agenda and motives while the discourse of those who are not in power is dismissed ([McGregor, 2003](#)). Finally, the powerful people use words to interpret information in their favor and present it as truth ([McGregor, 2003](#)). This interpretation thereby limits or dismisses other interpretations as irrelevant or unworthy ([Carlson, 2010](#)).

CDA as method looks for patterns or themes revealed through written text, spoken word and the influence of minds and thoughts ([Van Dijk, 1993](#)). The purpose of the CDA is to uncover the discourse of power and subjugation, look for multiple meanings and find the voice of the marginalized. It is a method to reveal social inequality and injustice ([Van Dijk, 1993](#)). The patterns or themes reflect power, dominance, inequality and bias within social, political and historical conditions ([Fairclough, 2010](#); [McGregor, 2003](#); [Carlson, 2010](#)).

CDA is one approach for studying BoP literature. As a methodology, CDA can bring to light power themes in the BoP literature that help reveal inequality and injustice. It has been argued that current BoP discourse “reinforces capitalist hegemony and marginalizes economic alternatives” ([Montgomery et al., 2012, p. 1](#)) in that it “makes certain things visible and obscures others” ([Montgomery et al., 2012, p. 2](#)). [Montgomery et al. \(2012\)](#) refer not only to text, “but also to the complex array of practices, strategies, and institutions that intermingle to produce certain perspectives, ideas, and problems” (p. 2). [Corry \(2016\)](#), in speaking of indigenous people, suggests our views “underpins how industrialized society treats those it sees as ‘backward.’ In reality though it’s nothing more than an old colonialist belief, masquerading once again as ‘science’”.

Discourse only makes sense within the context. In this case, BoP discourse is embedded in capitalist discourse, specifically global corporate capitalism ([Montgomery et al., 2012](#)). Adopting capitalist discourse, BoP discourse suggests that BoP individuals are homo economicus or motivated to acquire wealth and goods to maximize their own self-interest ([Montgomery et al., 2012](#)). The BoP discourse is not only intended to shape perceptions but also influence action ([Montgomery et al., 2012](#)). While the BoP discourse conceives the poor and wealthy as the same homo economicus, the markets are distinct: wealthy markets are saturated while poor markets are underserved ([Hart and Christensen, 2002](#); [Montgomery et al., 2012](#)). “The pathologization of BOP markets (are presented as) problematic and in need of formalization, competition, and engagement by MNCs” ([Montgomery et al., 2012, p. 4](#)). Non-capitalist economies are depicted as “dysfunctional, unjust, and deeply exploitative of poor people” that are inefficient, corrupt and in need of reform while capitalist economies are depicted as normative models providing “consumer choice, competition, and wealth creation” as well as “freedom, empowerment, and independence” ([Montgomery et al., 2012](#),

p. 4). [Montgomery *et al.* \(2012\)](#) argue that the BoP discourse not only seeks to commodify the markets but also BoP individuals' time and products.

[...] contemporary development approaches result in 'cultural captivity' by applying a Western, capitalist model of entrepreneurship to indigenous peoples and other targets of 'development.[...] ([Peredo and McLean \(2013\)](#)) expose the contingency of entrepreneurship's hegemonic articulation [...] and propose an alternative that values non-capitalist economic activities and creativity ([Montgomery *et al.*, 2012](#), p. 5).

Similarly, [Faria and Hemaïs \(2017\)](#) argue that the BoP literature is a rhetoric of salvation informed by modernity which advances neocolonialism. Thus, previous CDAs of the BoP literature conclude that it is situated in a context that advances neocolonialism ([Faria and Hemaïs, 2017](#)), applies a Western capitalist model ([Peredo and McLean, 2013](#)), marginalizes economic alternatives, suggests BoP individuals are motivated to maximize their own self-interest and presents BoP markets as problematic, dysfunctional, in need of formalization and reform and inefficient ([Montgomery *et al.*, 2012](#)). The current analysis extends this work by examining the discourse of representation, making a connection to the BoP goal of poverty eradication and suggesting that the counter-hegemonic approach toward sustainable development offers equally valid, if not better, solutions. The challenge is how to change the hegemonic discourse.

Methodology

This study began when the author was completing a literature review for an academic presentation on subsistence markets. The author sought to complement the business subsistence literature with non-business subsistence literature from anthropology, sociology, agriculture, biology and other fields. The author noticed a striking difference in the discourse of the two literature streams (business vs non-business) which prompted the current study. Using these publications resulted in a convenience sample (a nonrepresentative purposive sample of articles collected for the presentation) and the author sought to document observations of the literature.

The current study seeks to extend the CDA work of [Montgomery *et al.* \(2012\)](#) and [Peredo and McLean \(2013\)](#) and others that are focused on BoP literature. This CDA began by "engagement without estrangement" ([Janks, 1997](#)). That is, in the initial reading of the BoP literature, the readings were accepted as presented and supported the status quo. It was not until the reading of the non-business literature that a more critical reading of the business BoP literature was conducted.

The second reading of the business BoP literature was "estrangement without engagement" ([Janks, 1997](#)) or critically assessing assumptions, truths, power, oppression and motives of the literature. In this critical read, patterns or themes of power and oppression, dominance and subjugation were identified. In these passages, the purpose was to identify whose interests were being served, to understand the meaning, also referred to as process analysis or interpretation, and to understand the context, also referred to as social analysis or explanation.

Findings: augmenting base of the pyramid critical discourse analysis

In this CDA, several observations were made between the representation of business BoP literature and the non-business subsistence literature and their subsequent effects, thus demonstrating both the powerful role of language in assigning meaning to groups and behaviors ([Fairclough, 2010](#)) and the politics of representation or the competition that can exist in assigning meaning ([Holquist, 1983](#)). First, a discrepancy was observed in how the

subsistence context was represented by business vs non-business literature. Second, due to differing representations of the subsistence context, there was a subsequent difference in the goals identified for working within the subsistence context. Third, because the two different sets of literature viewed the subsistence context differently and sought different goals, it became apparent that different solutions were offered. Finally, these discrepancies led to different outcomes.

Representation: defining subsistence markets

In reviewing the business literature, it was observed that business literature solutions to poverty and economic inequality are rooted in economic theory. The Merriam-Webster definition of subsistence is “the amount of food, money, etc. that is needed to stay alive.” The dictionary also uses the words *continuation* and *persistence* as synonyms to subsistence. Yet the discourse of Western business literature on subsistence contexts presents a very different representation. Western business literature’s connotation of subsistence generally involves sacrifice and shortage (Faria and Hemais, 2017; Montgomery *et al.*, 2012) as well as poverty and backwardness (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999) even though these terms are not part of the literary definition. Given that the focus of this literature stream is through the lens of the market economy, it is possible the literature is situated within *urban* subsistence contexts. Consider the following passage that demonstrates the business literature’s representation of subsistence contexts:

[...] by stimulating commerce and development at the bottom of the economic pyramid, MNCs could radically improve the lives of billions of people and help bring into being a more stable, less dangerous world (Pralhad and Hammond, 2002, p. 4).

Through this connotation, subsistence is generally viewed negatively, primarily because subsistence also implies a failure to contribute to the formal cash economy which is the very crux of business and economics (Faria and Hemais, 2017; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999; Montgomery *et al.*, 2012). While some BoP literature acknowledges the importance of the informal sector (London and Hart, 2004; Simanis and Hart, 2006), the emphasis in the BoP literature is on transitioning the BoP economy toward the formal economy which negates the importance of the informal economy. Laasch and Conaway (2015) note that the marginalization of informal economies can be traced back to the works of Adam Smith:

It reinforces the view that all the actions of meeting human needs should be based on the monetary economy and gives priority to the interests of the globalized sectors of the economy (Giddings *et al.*, 2002, p. 192).

We have historically viewed informal subsistence contexts as “[...] a shady underground, populated by substandard goods and uncompetitive practices” (Araujo, 2013, p. 386) or as “[...] problematic and in need of formalization, competition, and engagement by MNCs [...]” (Montgomery *et al.*, 2012, p. 4).

The formalization and exploitation of local markets is legitimized by articulating existing non-capitalist economies as dysfunctional, unjust, and deeply exploitative of poor people. Capitalist markets in the West are articulated as the normative model towards which BOP markets are progressing, insofar as these “well-developed” markets provide consumer choice, competition, and wealth creation. In contrast, BOP markets are often described as dominated by an informal economy, wrought with corruption, and inefficient (Montgomery *et al.*, 2012, p. 4).

By contrast, this review reveals that the representation from non-business literature (anthropology, sociology, agriculture, biology and other fields) views subsistence as the epitome of sustainability; as sustainability in practice (Holthaus, 2008); this view is rooted in

moral economic theory and perhaps refers to traditional subsistence contexts or those furthest removed from the impacts of globalization. Subsistence lifestyles produce and consume what is needed, there is limited excess and waste, and subsistence lifestyles flourish through maximizing efficiency; all of which adequately describe an ideal in a market economy. As one example observed in the text under study, anthropologists [Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies \(1999\)](#) define subsistence contexts as “[...] hard labour and living at the margins of existence but also joy in life, happiness and abundance” (p. 5). They suggest that subsistence lifestyles reflect the good life and true empowerment; empowerment which comes from within and in our relationship with nature not money, in mutuality not competition, in self-sufficiency not consumption, in generosity and cooperation not self-interest and jealousy and in recognizing that we are one with nature ([Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999](#)).

Many authors have advocated the rejection of consumption- and growth-oriented economic development and have encouraged a commitment to traditional lifestyles similar to subsistence living to achieve sustainability ([Alexander et al., 2012](#); [Schor, 2010](#); [Trainer, 2010](#)). For example, a de-urbanization movement and subsequent return to subsistence lifestyles in Malaysia have been noted as successful progress toward increased sustainability within the country ([Hussain and Byrd, 2013](#)). In Mexico and Latin America, [Esteva \(2010, 2012\)](#) describes bottom-up social movements in which peasants and indigenous people are reclaiming communal lifestyles and creating their own model of development in rebellion against impoverishment. Furthermore, the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia notes that “[...] subsistence farming of Africa is now the most intact of all agricultural systems precisely because industrial agriculture has bypassed it” ([Egziabher, 2009](#)). These are examples of subsistence markets that reject the Western ideals of development and which oppose the business literature’s representation of the market.

Thus, the politics of representation ([Holquist, 1983](#)) are in play within business vs non-business literature and each seeks to define a segment of our population. Ideology ([Fairclough, 2010](#)) and mental models ([Senge et al., 2008](#)) influence how we think and act. As [Senge et al. \(2008\)](#) point out, differences in mental models will lead to system structures to reinforce the mental model and there will be patterns or trends in thoughts and actions. Thus, the different representations of subsistence contexts between business vs non-business literature have a direct impact on the proposed goals and solutions generated by each literature stream and they ultimately lead to different outcomes; the assumptions behind the discourse will influence actions and outcomes.

Identifying goals

This review reveals several themes in the Western BoP business literature which are consistent with prior CDAs. First, the business literature, rooted in economics, seeks to work within the BoP formal and informal market economy to lift them out of poverty ([Hart, 2005](#); [Hart and Christensen, 2002](#); [Prahalad, 2005](#); [Prahalad and Hart, 2002](#)) through the accumulation of wealth, profit, and capital; that is, the business literature’s goal is to increase consumption and to enmesh the BoP market in the formal economy. Second, the Western BoP business literature defines success and happiness by wealth and consumption. For example, [London \(2009, p. 107\)](#) notes:

[...] it obviously makes sense to focus on an individual or a community’s economic well-being (gains or losses in income, assets and liabilities, and so on) when evaluating the effects of a venture.

In non-business literature on subsistence, it is not assumed that the hegemonic Western approaches are superior. For example, there has been much written on the subsistence ethic (Bista, 1974; Scott, 1977; Waters, 2006, 2010). This stream of literature informs us that individuals living within subsistence contexts have different values and goals than our Western economists and development specialists, becoming players in the global economy is not part of the subsistence ethic. It is noted that subsistence contexts define success and happiness through traditional lifestyles, social capital and connections/relationships. In a rare diversion from other business BoP literature, Farzad and Mendoza (2017) found that BoP vendors in their study preferred the informal market over the formal market.

Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) present the “perspective from below” of Bangladeshi women. The women show they have different concepts of wealth and poverty and how absurd they believe the Western concepts of wealth, poverty and the good life are. The authors proclaim that:

[...] we do not support this model of wealth any more. We do not accept it not only because it cannot be generalised for the rest of the world, but more because of the destruction the pursuance of the concept of ‘the good life’ leaves behind: destruction of nature, of foreign peoples, of people’s self-reliance and dignity, of children’s future, of anything we call humanity. We know that the perspective ‘from above’, aiming a permanent growth of goods, services and money, cannot lead us out of the impasses this system has created. A radical break with the dominant paradigm and the search for a new perspective, a new vision, are necessary (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999, p. 3).

Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) advocate that subsistence *is* the alternative to the dominant paradigm.

Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) also point to the fact that those in subsistence contexts do not desire Western lifestyles. Rather than supporting the belief that what is good in industrialized nations is good for everyone, the subjects of the study helped Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies’ (1999) to understand the “perspective from below” that “a socialist, non-sexist, non-colonial, ecological, just, good society cannot be modelled on the lifestyle of the ruling classes [...] rather, it must be based on subsistence security for everybody” (p. 4).

Identifying solutions

In this review of the Western- and capitalist-oriented BoP business literature, themes observed in proposing solutions to achieve the goals are to turn BoP residents into either consumers (Prahalad, 2005) or producers (Karnani, 2007). The business literature assumes that BoP residents’ goals are to aspire to Western lifestyles and ideals of consumption and technology. Therefore, the proposed solutions toward subsistence contexts seek to overcome the implied sacrifice and shortage by working toward achieving the opposite, which is the advancement of the interests of an industrialized society built upon acquisition, consumption and abundance (Faria and Hemais, 2017; Mincyte, 2011a, 2011b; Montgomery *et al.*, 2012; Peredo *et al.*, 2014). These solutions are often guided through government policy, thus subscribing to the structural theory of poverty. Because the BoP discourse is embedded within the capitalist discourse (Montgomery *et al.*, 2012; Peredo *et al.*, 2014), “modernization” and “development” assume that we must replace subsistence economies with formal cash economies. This “opportunity” for major corporations is noted by Hart and Christensen (2002, p. 52) when they tell companies to pursue the BoP because “the base of the pyramid is, so to speak, completely unsaturated”.

Our progressive imperialism attempts to convert indigenous cultures into formal economies that emulate modern, capitalist and Western lifestyles (Faria and Hemais, 2017;

Peredo *et al.*, 2014). Peredo and McLean (2013) argue that the Western development notion of entrepreneurship (as a pathway out of poverty) forces capitalist practices on indigenous peoples. Thus, as hegemonic Western modern development approaches are advanced, it is a demonstration of neocolonialism that uses multinational corporations and the developed countries' agenda for globalization as a means of dominance and influence over developing countries and their social, economic and cultural systems (Escobar, 2011; Faria and Hemais, 2017).

In addition, BoP solutions often seek "scale." For example, Hammond (2011, p. 193) notes "Social enterprises do good works. But unless they achieve a significant scale, they aren't in a position to serve millions of BoP customers, or to help reshape economies." By seeking "scale" we are following a WalMart approach of commodification and efficiency which could put the independent entrepreneur or craftsman out of business. Scale is an industrial revolution concept and this solution is an effort to industrialize the entire world. Prior to the industrial revolution, there was no "scale"; everything was localized.

Thus, this research proposes that Western approaches to economic development will perpetuate and even exacerbate poverty and economic inequalities by further embedding or ingrain Western systems, structures, policies and practices. The Western and European influence has permanently damaged and corrupted cultures worldwide. As proof, consider the case example of historical Native American subsistence contexts that are now managed by the US Government and traps them in poverty, creating some of the poorest communities in the USA (Regan, 2014).

[...] the hegemonic capitalistic perspective frequently creates poverty by articulation, and addresses that 'poverty' in ways that are actually destructive of genuine well-being. That perspective masks the diversity of ways there are of understanding livelihood and producing it, and in so doing invites interventions that undermine provisioning (Peredo *et al.*, 2014, p. 34).

In the non-business literature, there is a different perspective on "solutions" within subsistence contexts. Rather than Western ideals, the goals of the non-business literature are to continue traditional ways of life and preserve cultural practices; this is the subsistence ethic. Indigenous cultures often desire to continue traditional subsistence lifestyles of hunting, fishing, herding and agriculture as a means of cultural preservation (Kassamk, 2005; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999; Poppel, 2006; Wolfe and Walker, 1987). Take, for example, this passage from Waters (2010) who points to the example of subsistence peasantry in Africa and notes that economists, government and aid organizations fail to view subsistence contexts for what they are:

[...] a conservative, well-tested, and secure way of life. Rather they see it in terms of its incapacity to produce for a global marketplace in which land and labor are capital.

Identifying outcomes

Finally, in summarizing these observations of the literature, this research contends that the linguistic ethnocentrism demonstrated in the Western business literature's representation and connotation toward subsistence is the root problem that will perpetuate the subsistence context's current challenges. The hegemonic stance of the business literature has set the stage for solutions which ultimately lead to the following outcomes:

- the depletion of resources and the creation of resource inequalities which subsequently leads to an imbalance in supply and demand;
- the introduction and persistence of poverty and economic inequalities in subsistence markets;

- increased consumption;
- increased dependence; and
- environmental degradation.

Depletion of resources and resource inequalities. Capitalist economic theories believe that “the market” will balance supply and demand; this is the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith’s economic theory. The reality is that supply and demand is much more evenly distributed in subsistence contexts (Bista, 1974). That is, research that models future sustainability of subsistence hunting and agricultural lifestyles do not show an unsustainable depletion of resources or an imbalance producing resource inequalities (Alvard *et al.*, 2003; Hussain and Byrd, 2013; Mockrin, 2008; Wilkie *et al.*, 1998). Rather it is the formal market economy that has produced resource inequalities through forcing a cash system to track and control the supply and demand of resources. This uneven distribution of resources brought about by a transition to a capitalist economy has led to the creation of poverty.

Poverty and economic inequality. Traditional aboriginal economies and subsistence communities promoted collectivism and equality. When the hunting, fishing or other survival activity went well, the group benefitted. However, in seasons of scarcity, all group members experienced shortage equally. In a capitalist economy, benefits accrue to certain individuals or groups, thus creating imbalance. Poverty is a man-made creation advocated by capitalist economies that is a consequence of the pursuit of wealth, power and control. The capitalist “distribution and exchange” economies have effectively created poverty and inequality (Escobar, 2011; Shiva, 2010) and this has been exacerbated by globalization (Wooden and Lucas, 2004).

Consumption. Subsistence communities emphasize reuse, thriftiness and efficiency. Companies pursuing BoP strategies generally offer aspirational products or services that have the potential to improve quality of life for BoP residents. By transitioning from a subsistence market to a formal market, capitalism promotes increased consumption and waste. “Indeed, companies seeking to ‘target’ the poor with affordable products, while well intentioned, may inadvertently be engaging in the latest form of corporate imperialism” (Simanis and Hart, 2008, p. 2).

Dependence. In a subsistence context, individuals possess highly specialized skills or abilities which results in self-sufficiency and independence. To maximize efficiency, the formal economy requires deskilled labor and mass production (which will further reduce self-sufficiency and increase dependency). There is an ethical dilemma inherent in the BoP business literature which seeks to move subsistence residents into a formal economy which requires consumers to have reduced self-sufficiency and increased dependency. Ironically, as industrialized nations pursue sustainability, a return to self-sufficiency and independence is often heralded as the desired state. Rather than the Western view that markets must be transitioned into a formal economy, Western markets and formal economies could learn from informal economies how to operate more sustainably and efficiently to enhance self-sufficiency, independence and resilience. Subsistence communities have exhibited resiliency throughout history.

Environmental degradation. Wooden and Lucas (2004) argue that globalization increases poverty and destroys the environment. Environmental degradation is a direct result of human lifestyles, including consumption. By advocating for increased production, consumption, wealth and profit in the business BoP literature, the outcomes will continue to promulgate the depletion of resources which will result in further environmental degradation.

Outcomes observed in subsistence contexts from a non-capitalist viewpoint reveal a moral economy. In this strength-based view of the BoP and subsistence communities, it is noted that there are often sufficiently shared resources, little poverty and strong social equity, a balance in consumption and production, independence and self-sufficiency, a strong relationship with land and nature and the preservation of tradition. These findings can be summarized in [Table I](#).

Analysis to explain the failure of BoP strategies

Discussion

The failure of BoP strategies to alleviate poverty ([Dembeket *al.*, 2019](#); [Cañeque and Hart, 2015](#); [Karnani, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009](#); [Landrum, 2007, 2012, 2014](#); [Simanis *et al.*, 2008](#)) can be traced back to the representations that underlie the business BoP literature. In the business literature, BoP and subsistence communities have been framed as problematic, the literature has created capitalist-oriented solutions, and it has simply reproduced problems of industrialized countries in subsistence markets. BoP strategies often follow the same path as international strategies in emerging economies ([Landrum, 2014](#)), that is, Western strategies from international markets are reproduced in BoP markets. Despite the rhetoric that BoP strategies are sympathetic toward the challenges of living in BoP contexts and the BoP strategy goal is to improve the context with regard to poverty alleviation, in reality, what this CDA reveals is that BoP strategies continue the hegemony of Western-oriented business-as-usual with the goal to transition informal BoP markets into formal consumer

	Business	Non-business
Discourse used to define BoP context	Sacrifice, shortage, poverty, backwardness, viewed negatively due to failure to contribute to the formal cash economy, shady, substandard, uncompetitive, problematic, broken, needs fixed and corrupt	Epitome of sustainability, sustainability in practice, limited excess and waste, flourish through maximizing efficiency, true empowerment, self-sufficiency, generosity, cooperation, one with nature, resilient, efficient, the good life, empowerment, hard labor, living at the margins, joy in life, happiness and abundance
Systemic goals	Lift them out of poverty, accumulate wealth, profit and capital, increase consumption and enmesh the market into the formal economy	Success and happiness through traditional lifestyles, social capital and connections/relationships
Systemic solutions	Convert them into consumers or producers, replace subsistence economy with a formal cash economy and scale-up solutions	Preserve traditional ways of life and cultural practices (hunting, fishing, herding, agriculture), globally adopt subsistence ethic and lifestyle and operate in informal markets
Systemic outcomes	Depletion of resources, creation of resource inequalities, imbalance in supply and demand, persistence of poverty and economic inequalities, increased consumption, increased dependence, environmental degradation, capitalist political economy, loss of social equity, deskilled labor and destruction of tradition	Sufficiently shared resources, limited poverty, strong social equity, balance in consumption and production, independence, self-sufficiency, strong relationship with land and nature, preservation of tradition and moral economy

Table I.
Literature themes on the BoP and subsistence markets

markets that contribute to the global economy. This supports research findings that show little to no support for the claim that BoP strategies reduce poverty (Dembek *et al.*, 2019; Kolk *et al.*, 2014). In fact, in a review of the body of BoP research, it is of interest to note there was no initial research to suggest that BoP strategies could alleviate poverty (Landrum, 2007) and there continues to be a lack of existing research measuring poverty alleviation outcomes (Dembek *et al.*, 2019; Kolk *et al.*, 2014). The scant few research studies that have sought to measure poverty alleviation as a result of BoP strategies have not produced conclusive results (Dembek *et al.*, 2019).

We are left to question why the BoP promise has not materialized. Simanis and Milstein (2012) suggest there is a misalignment between market-based solutions and investment opportunities. Their solution is that “poverty-alleviation must be subordinated to business goals” (para. 37) by returning to business fundamentals in selecting and evaluating investments. London (2009) suggests there is a lack of robust systems to measure outcomes. He recommends holistic, learning-oriented approaches to measuring outcomes. These authors imply that the lack of proof that BoP strategies alleviate poverty is a result of wrong or insufficient metrics to capture the impact of business activities in subsistence contexts. Finally, Dembek *et al.* (2019) find that studies continue to focus on making BoP residents consumers rather than responding to the call to broaden the approach beyond the use of consumption-based strategies (Hart, 2015).

Rather than offering a market-oriented explanation for BoP strategies’ failure, this study offers a discourse explanation for why BoP strategies have fallen short in alleviating poverty. Throughout the BoP discourse (Table I), it is noted that the business literature is rooted in Western capitalist hegemonic views that create systemic structures of reinforcement and lead to consistent patterns in solutions and outcomes. This viewpoint represents BoP and subsistence communities as broken, corrupt and in need of repair which leads to the creation of systemic structures to encourage the pursuit of goals related to wealth, profit and capital accumulation as well as increased production and consumption. This approach results in outcomes that perpetuate the very problems they were designed to alleviate: depletion of resources, resource inequalities, poverty and increased consumption, dependence and environmental degradation.

By contrast, the non-business literature on subsistence communities (Table I) represents a view of a resilient, sustainable, efficient market defined by empowerment, hard labor, living at the margins, joy, happiness, abundance and a good life. This representation is dominated by the subsistence ethic in which the goals and solutions are preserving traditional lifestyles, increasing social capital, maintaining connections and relationships and operating in informal markets. The outcomes of this representation result in a moral economy, sufficiently shared resources, reduced poverty and increased social equity, a balance in consumption and production, independence, self-sufficiency, a close relationship with the land and nature and preservation of traditions.

The politics of representation between business vs non-business literature reveals the competition to exert each group’s definition of subsistence markets and subsequently, each group’s goals and solutions. Because of these differences in representation, this study argues that BoP strategies cannot eradicate poverty and economic inequality. Due to the hegemonic Western connotation of subsistence and the resultant solutions advocated in literature, research and economic development policy, it is further argued that it is the capitalist market economy that has generated unsustainable outcomes and which is in need of change. That is, rather than the West bringing solutions to BoP markets, it is traditional BoP markets that should bring solutions to the West. To be clear, subsistence contexts should be viewed as sources of sustainable innovation rather than something to be fixed.

Globalization increases poverty and destroys the environment (Wooden and Lucas, 2004). The solution is to develop localized (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999; Wooden and Lucas, 2004), needs-based, environmentally sustainable and cooperative economies (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999). This is the opposite of our capitalist tendency for globalization and scale. The current capitalist system is inherently unstable and is dependent on the exploitation of the environment and various marginalized groups, particularly women (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999). Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) call instead for a new politics and economics based on subsistence. This is echoed in Cairns (2014) call for changes in socioeconomic and political structures within the BoP.

Similar to historical attempts to “civilize” or “colonize” native peoples by the dominant culture, this is the same neocolonial and imperial mindset that has historically dismissed indigenous knowledge and practices as inferior to Western knowledge and practices. It is the Western industrial hegemonic, neocolonialist and imperialist market that is unsustainable not the subsistence market. Until the business literature BoP discourse is changed, BoP strategies, in their current form, can never be expected to eradicate poverty.

Furthermore, the Western views are codified in professional practices and global initiatives which further solidify the Western hegemonic stance. For example, in analyzing the UK economic crisis, Sikka (2015, p. 46) concludes that accounting practices “prioritize the interests of capital over labour” and give preference to shareholder wealth maximization. In much the same way, the United Nations has been criticized for becoming increasingly dominated by the political and financial strength of corporations while Member States have lost power (Cardoso *et al.*, 2017); similar criticisms confront The International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization and the World Bank (Bustillo and Mares, 2016). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are deemed to be a reassertion of early twentieth century European colonialism that violates current international law (Lempert, 2017). Arora and Romijn (2012, p. 497) argue that if the current discourse is continued, it “will only serve to reproduce existing inequalities at the local level and further entrench the dominance of national and global capitalist formations”.

Implications

This study argues for a change in this hegemonic approach, one that is strength-based and built upon a moral economy, one that is more consistent with the non-business literature on BoP and subsistence markets. To reframe BoP and subsistence communities as traditional exemplars of sustainability, the solutions and outcomes would be markedly different. In this non-business stream of literature, BoP and subsistence communities are defined as resilient, sustainable, efficient markets defined by empowerment, hard labor, living at the margins but full of joy, happiness, abundance and a good life. This representation is dominated by the subsistence ethic which seeks to preserve traditional lifestyles, increase social capital, maintain connections and relationships and operate in informal markets. This results in a moral economy, sufficiently shared resources, reduced poverty and increased social equity, a balance in consumption and production, independence, self-sufficiency, a close relationship with the land and nature and preservation of traditions. Therefore, this counter-hegemonic approach toward sustainable development offers lessons for BoP researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from those who have sustained their traditional livelihoods, preserved natural resources, avoided resource and economic inequalities and maintained self-reliance and independence. These are the outcomes sought by sustainability researchers but they are at odds with the outcomes sought by “business-as-usual” researchers, even when business-as-usual is placed within the BoP context.

If we identify the powerful entities that put forth the dominant discourse, we find that there may be opportunities to change the capitalist-oriented discourse that views BoP communities as problematic and in need of transition to a business-as-usual market-based economy and instead to adopt strength-based discourse that views BoP communities (including indigenous communities) as traditional exemplars of sustainability that can serve as models of a moral-based economy. These opportunities exist in the discourse of structures that guide business behavior, such as the UNs' SDGs, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), and other similar organizations and their guidelines.

The UNs' SDGs consists of 17 goals and 169 targets aimed at enhancing the quality of life around the globe. However, the UN continues to frame poverty in economic terms (reinforcing neoliberal business-as-usual approaches) rather than a broader definition encompassing social and environmental factors (Soederberg, 2017; Spann, 2017; Weber, 2017). As demonstrated in this review of non-business literature on the BoP, communities often view their wealth in terms of family and relationships, tradition and culture, self-reliance and independence and equality; resources that money cannot buy. By contrast, the business literature on the BoP is oriented toward economic definitions of poverty rather than non-economic definitions of wealth.

The GRI is the most widely adopted sustainability reporting format for companies (Calace, 2016). The GRI requires participants to report on 91 environmental, social and economic indicators. However, the GRI defines sustainability through an economic lens that reinforces the notion of business-as-usual (Landrum and Ohsowski, 2018) and has been criticized for its focus on internal company performance and failure to consider external environmental, social and economic impacts (Fonseca, 2010; Landrum and Ohsowski, 2018; Milne and Gray, 2013).

Although there has been enthusiastic uptake of the SDG and GRI by businesses, there exist other structures that reinforce the hegemony. For example, making a move beyond economic and business-as-usual approaches toward the BoP will also require us to reexamine the use of the gross domestic product (GDP) as our measure of a country's progress that is the *de facto* standard of economists, The International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. The GDP is measured by consumer spending, government spending, business investment, plus net export of goods and services. In the USA, the leading indicator in the GDP is consumer spending. Therefore, it is the powerful interests of multinationals and governments that are advanced through the business discourse to turn the BoP citizens into consumers to enhance the profit and growth of companies and national economies. However, the GDP does not measure citizens' well-being (Kapoor and Debroy, 2019; Stiglitz, 2018), including measures of poverty. Alternative measures, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, include measures of human well-being alongside economic well-being and represent a shift away from a focus on growth and consumption and toward a focus on human well-being. Stiglitz (2018, para. 1) sums it up best: "if we measure the wrong thing, we will do the wrong thing." This brings us back to our study of discourse and the politics of representation. To change our discourse from viewing the BoP as a problem that needs an economic solution, structural and systemic change must happen that will allow us to view the BoP as an exemplar of traditional sustainable lifestyles that can provide lessons on how to alleviate poverty.

Limitations and future research

The primary limitation of this research is the convenience sample used for this study. The literature review for a presentation served as the dataset for this research and, as such, was purposeful rather than random. The publications included both business and non-business

literature. The stark contrast between the two sets of literature in the representation of subsistence markets was the impetus for this study to document those differences. A broader random sample of base BoP literature could result in different findings.

Studies of subsistence have been a topic of study outside business much longer than BoP has been a topic of study within business. Therefore, it is possible that BoP research is not yet fully developed and has not yet explored all relevant concepts. More recent calls (BoP 3.0) encourage a wider sustainable development approach toward the BoP, however, given the aforementioned criticisms of the SDGs, GRI, GDP, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, World Bank and other hegemonic structures that continue representation of business-as-usual, this wider approach has not been realized.

While this and other studies have highlighted the hegemonic discourse that influences our actions within subsistence contexts, future research could focus more intently on how to transition the business representation of subsistence communities from one of weakness to one of strength. How can business adopt a more strength-based view of subsistence markets and transition toward more inclusive and balanced action that validates the subsistence ethic instead of perpetuating the hegemony?

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the power of discourse as form of representation and how those views can lead to different actions and outcomes. The BoP literature has been criticized for failing to deliver on its promises to help alleviate poverty and economic inequalities through market-based strategies (Cañeque and Hart, 2015; Karnani, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Landrum, 2007, 2012, 2014; Simanis *et al.*, 2008); this study offers one perspective on the cause of this failure.

Through the CDA lens presented here and in previous studies, it has been noted that the BoP literature advances neocolonialism (Faria and Hemais, 2017), applies a Western capitalist model (Peredo and McLean, 2013), marginalizes economic alternatives, suggests BoP individuals are motivated to maximize their own self-interest and presents BoP markets as problematic, dysfunctional, inefficient and in need of formalization and reform (Montgomery *et al.*, 2012). Yet this study shows that the non-business literature offers a different representation of subsistence contexts as resilient, sustainable, efficient and characterized by joy and social capital.

This analysis follows the business vs non-business literature's discourse of representation of subsistence contexts through to the goals pursued, the solutions proposed and the outcomes achieved. It is revealed that the Western-oriented business literature's solutions result in the exacerbation of the problems they were designed to alleviate: depletion of resources, resource inequalities, poverty and increased consumption, dependence and environmental degradation. By contrast, the non-business literature utilizes an opposing representation of traditional subsistence contexts that are moral and strength-based, revealing a resilient, sustainable and efficient market which can serve as an exemplar of sustainability for Western markets.

In this politics of representation, the business literature view of the BoP is promulgated by powerful actors that have structures and systems in place to continue the discourse; examples include BoP researchers, multinational corporations, the UNs' SDGs, the GRI and economists' use of the gross national product. The challenge is to confront this discourse and its impacts and seek structural and systemic change toward a strength-based and moral economy view of the BoP.

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Corresponding author

Nancy E. Landrum can be contacted at: nlandrum@luc.edu