
EVOLUTION OF THE BASE OF THE PYRAMID (BOP) CONSTRUCT THROUGH A BI-DIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Base of the Pyramid and the different ways to access it has generated a lot of literature searching for answers and proposing solutions. The objective of this text is to offer a vision of the BOP evolution in the last fifteen years based on the concept that focus in two dimensions of BOP studies, a first generation with focus on consumption through the offer of products and services that better fits the needs of the BOP and a second generation based on the development of mechanisms to alleviate poverty.

Key Words: Base of the Pyramid, Bottom of the Pyramid, Creating Shared Value

Introduction

Prahalad & Hart (2002) launched the concept of “The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid” which impact was rapidly perceived, Karnani (2009a) commented: “A libertarian movement that emphasizes free markets to reduce poverty has grown strong in recent years, attracting the attention of business executives, academics, and public officials” (p. 9). This idea is confirmed by Folmann (2012) that observes: “An online search identifies over 250 peer- reviewed papers on “bottom of the pyramid” or “base of the pyramid,” examining models in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. A dozen books have been published with BoP in their titles, dozens of other books include the topic and a Google search of the phrase “bottom of the pyramid” yields 1.37 million entries.” (p. 293)

In the last fifteen years all these literature proposed frameworks, models, has presented initiatives and case studies, in general concentrated in a few countries, industries and companies (Kolk et al 2013) and that can be divided in two generations that narrow this strategy to two major dimensions: a first generation focused in BOP as consumers through a strategy to profit from the allegedly huge number of people in this group and a second generation of BOP as a mechanism to alleviate poverty by generating activities that would help to improve the lives of these people. (Gollakota et al 2010)

The objective of this text is to evaluate the overall evolution of the BOP construct from the perspective of these two dimensions.

The text will start by giving an overview of the evolution of the concept of BOP, thus will individually discuss each of the key dimensions through the analysis of each generation of BOP, its criticism and the transition from one generation to another to present conclusions of the development of the role of BOP in business and markets.

Methodology

This work is based on a literature review of the seminal texts about “The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid” (Prahalad & Hammond 2002; Prahalad & Hart 2002; Hammond & Prahalad 2004; Prahalad 2005), additional 36 academic articles searched at the EBSCOhost database and Google Scholar on the topic “Base of the pyramid” and “Bottom of the pyramid” and inserts from two additional books.

The evolution of the BOP Construct

Prahalad & Hart (2002) argued that multinational corporations (MNCs) could grow their profits and help lift the lives of 4 billion of people out of poverty by recognizing the poor as resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers.

Through the changes of processes, modernization of distribution channels and innovation at R&D, “Selling to the world’s poorest people can be very lucrative and a key source of growth for global companies, even while this interaction benefits and empowers poor consumers” (Hammond & Prahalad 2004:31).

The potential market of the emerging economies was not entirely new, De Soto (2000) had called the attention on the subject pointing out that in most developing countries, defined as third world plus former communist nations, there were an increasing number of people moving to urban areas generating a huge amount of capital in unregulated business and unregistered property mounting to trillions of dollars.

Also the search for improved manufacturing process in search of lower costs or more flexibility was not new either. Since the 80s US industries were implementing new improvement programs, not always successfully, based on the Japanese JIT or TQM in order to acquire competitive advantage in most cases aiming to achieve lower cost production (Hayes & Pisano 1994).

The novelty of the BOP proposition was to name and target this segment of an allegedly huge number of potential consumers with a strategy questioning three interrelated presumptions that stopped companies to reach them: (1) the people at the BOP have no need for products and services beyond basic necessities; (2) even if they had such needs, they have insufficient purchasing power to acquire them and (3) small local firms are already meeting those needs. This strategy would reach the ultimate objective of profitability along with poverty alleviation (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Prahalad & Hart 2002; Prahalad 2005).

After almost fifteen years from the first publication on the topic, this concept has evolved and changed from its original proposal. This text will follow the concept that divides BOP in two generations: a first generation focused in the role of the poor as consumers that evolves to a second generation more focused in practical ways to alleviate the effects of poverty (Galakotta et al 2010).

The first BOP generation focus on consumption, from the type that Hemaïs et al (2013) call Hedonist, where consumption is a tool to reach happiness and success, what compared to the challenges faced by both the poor and its markets and the corporations to translate this opportunity in reality seems a bit farfetched.

That is why the literature gives to this first generation the merit of calling attention for such an important issue (Folmann 2012; Galakotta et al 2010), as Simanis & Hart (2008) states “While commendable as an initial step, most “first generation” corporate BoP strategies have, in our view, failed to hit the mark” (p. 1) and Karnani (2006:2) reinforces: “Eradicating, or at least alleviating, poverty is an urgent challenge”.

I find the greatest contributions of this book are, first, raising awareness of the BOP, the challenges they face, and global poverty and second, challenging corporations to increase innovation and creativity, with a special emphasis on strategies for entering emerging economies.(Landrum 2007:9)

The second generation started with the criticisms from Karnani (2006) that states “The BOP proposition is indeed too good to be true. It is seductively appealing, but it is riddled with fallacies” (p. 2), which led challenging researchers to recognize the realities in serving the people at the BOP and to identify other ways to effectively reach BOP customers.

Folmann (2012) posits: “They note that the BoP concept originally promoted as a way for multinational corporations (MNCs) to sell products to impoverished populations (the first generation), underwent fine-tuning as on-the-ground examples and cases were identified and studied.” (p. 294). Each generation will be further discussed in details.

The first BOP generation: BOP as consumers

This first generation focused on the initial ideas presented in the seminal BOP texts (Prahalad & Hart 2002; Prahalad & Hammond 2002; Hammond & Prahalad 2004; Prahalad 2005) that generated a huge impact on scholars, especially after 2007 where the number of published articles had increased four times compared to the average of the previous five years (Kolk et al 2013).

Kolk et al (2013) analyzed the period from 2002 to 2009 and posit that in this period articles were more practitioner oriented showing direct applications with focus on case studies and BOP initiatives. They seemed to be concentrated in a few markets (e.g.: China, India and Bangladesh) and a few companies (e.g.: Unilever and Grameen Bank). This review shows that the vast majority of articles view the poor primarily as a consumer, but their studies fail to identify rigorous measures of the real economic, social and environmental impact of these initiatives.

To support this approach of the poor as consumers the literature presented examples of initiatives from large MNCs such as the P&G - PuR: Purifier of Water in the Philippines, Guatemala and Pakistan, Danone – Shakti doi yogurt in Bangladesh (Garrette et al 2015) and Unilever – Fair & Lovely cream in India (Hammond & Prahalad 2004).

Considering the perspective of BOP as entrepreneurs, “Perhaps the most well-known cases are Hindustan Lever Ltd, an Indian subsidiary of Unilever, which makes food and personal care products and Grameen Bank, which provides microloans to women. Unilever’s 150 factories in India employ up to 40,000 people, support 12,000 wholesalers and 300,000 shop owners and employ 250,000 independent “Shakti Amma” entrepreneurs in rural villages who sell Unilever products” (Folmann 2012:296), about the first BOP generation Folmann (2012) concludes:

Together, the early BoP studies offer evidence – including some data on increased profits, jobs and numbers of customers – suggesting that MNCs can engage the BoP profitably and also create what Prahalad (2005) describes as increased self-esteem and economic progress for people at the BoP. Within a year of the publication of *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, however, Prahalad’s definitions, assumptions, cases and propositions would be brought under scrutiny. (p. 297)

First BOP generation: criticisms and a path to a second BOP generation

Garrette et al (2015) state that to justify and earn the connotation of a true BOP the initiative must really offer products or services that unquestionably improve the life of the poor and based on their research they find only a few examples that fit this description.

Karnani (2006) posits that “There is neither glory nor fortune at the bottom of the pyramid – it is all a mirage” (p. 2). He argues that the construct as presented is flawed and inconsistent with empirical evidence. Karnani (2006) further offers arguments contesting many points stated in the first BOP generation:

Market Size and financial potential: BOP market and its financial potential is oversized, “the bottom 44% of the world population accounts for only 2.5% of the total purchasing power” (p. 5) and because profits made in these markets would be repatriated based on local exchange rates the relevance for MNCs is extremely reduced.

Product costs: A primary basis of first BOP generation is to reduce costs and profit from large scales but because “The poor are often geographically dispersed and culturally heterogeneous.” (p. 6) distribution and marketing costs are higher thus preventing profitability.

Creativity & innovation: The single most mentioned example of changes in product offerings is related to single serve alternatives, sachets or small packs that “In most cases, the packaging cost per unit is higher for small packages. Small packages often do sell at slightly lower unit prices” (p. 8)

Karnani (2009b; 2010) also criticized initiatives that were heavily addressed as successful cases (Garrette et al 2015; Hammond & Prahalad 2004):

P&G PuR: Purifier of Water: PuR is a powder that mixed with water produces a clear drinking water that was launched in 2000 and tested in BOP markets of Guatemala, Philippines and Pakistan until 2004. Even though it was charged at US\$ 0.10 per sachet the product had low penetration and failed to achieve scales. P&G officially abandoned the project in 2005 and turned it into a charitable program selling the product at cost price to non-profit humanitarian organizations.

Danone – Shokti doi yoghurt: Result from a joint-venture with Grameen bank, Grameen Danone launched the shokti doi yoghurt a “specifically designed to alleviate child malnutrition” (Karnani 2006:33). They were supposed to start operating in 2007, break even in 2008 and from 2010 on start working at full capacity, results that were never achieved. “GDFL had an operating loss of 21 million takas (\$0.3 million) in 2008, and is expected to generate roughly the same level of loss in 2009 even though volumes are supposed to grow” (Karnani 2006:33).

Unilever – Fair & Lovely cream: A different case, Fair & Lovely is a product distributed in 40 countries, but in India the advertising promoting the product was deemed “racist, discriminatory, and an affront to women’s dignity,” which led to negative reactions from civil society and were subsequently withdrawn by Unilever that still claims to be social responsible. (Karnani 2010; 2011).

In sum, the main focus of criticism to approach and target BOP as consumers is directed to the environment the poor are exposed, not only the market is not as large and profitable as stated but also the poor instead of fully capable and willing participants in the free market economy, according to Karnani (2015) “in fact, are vulnerable by virtue of lack of education (often they are illiterate); lack of information and economic, cultural and social deprivations.” (p. 50)

In terms of consumption habits and freedom of choice, Karnani (2015) also argues that “Civil society organizations have often argued that targeting the poor as a market might cause them to wastefully spend part of their already meagre income on low-priority products and services” (p. 49) what is confirmed by the studies of Banerjee & Duflo (2007) that after a substantial survey in 13 countries found out that people living under US\$ 1 a day spend from 5% to up to 8% of their income in alcohol and tobacco and most surprisingly 99% in India and 90% in Africa of people in this extremely poor segment spent money in festivals (e.g.: weddings, funerals and religious parties).

Garrette & Karnani (2010) identified four traps faced by corporations based on first BOP generation concepts:

- 1) **Unmet needs:** The BoP concept assumes that the unmet needs of the poor generate a huge business opportunity, profitable to MNCs addressing them. The major flaw to this concept is that from an economic point of view unmet needs and markets are simply not the same thing and do not have a direct relationship. The estimates based on the potential market size for an item does not reflect an actual market size for any product.
- 2) **Affordability:** BoP argues here that the poor have a significant aggregate buying potential and willingness to consume high quality products, what does not happen because of inefficiencies in distribution and product development, along with other basic priorities of the extremely poor.
- 3) **Distribution:** The BoP consumer is usually in rural areas where building a distribution structure is just too expensive and thus making any project not feasible. Some companies tried to associate with local organizations, for example Danone tried to associate with Grameen bank, but even in this case the project was not successful.
- 4) **Multiple objectives:** BoP markets demands multiple objectives—profitability, generating employment, environmental sustainability and social development—and most of the times they are in conflict. It is simply too dangerous to try to achieve too many objectives simultaneously, this usually leads to the project’s failure and none of the objectives being achieved.

From the corporate side, Olsen & Boxembaum (2009) studied organizational barriers that prevent the implementation of BOP initiatives, they state “Until now, very little attention has been paid to the internal organizational barriers that, all else being equal, can pose significant barriers to the bringing of BOP from idea to action, even within the most proficient and forward-thinking MNCs” (p. 101).

Based on a practical case of the analysis of the implementation of a BOP initiative by Novozyme, a Danish firm, they identified a set of four internal barriers:

- 1) **Conflicting mindsets:** They identified two key mindsets, on opposite sides: a trade-off mindset with focus on shareholder value and a win-win mindset with focus on sustainability.
- 2) **Radical change to routines:** There was no continuity between the current practices and the new proposed BOP model that actually needed the development of procedures unknown to operations.
- 3) **Project evaluation criteria:** The BOP project collided with two evaluation criteria: NPV (net present value) and Risk evaluation that due to the risks and uncertainty make it “appeared to be a complex, resource-intensive, and time-consuming affair. Worst of all, however, was the general expectation that BOP projects would produce meager financial gains at best” (p. 114).
- 4) **Incentive structures and discrepant mandates:** A key barrier that impacted the acceptance of the project is that operations are rewarded based on KPIs which went against the perspectives of the project, so in general there was a power division between operations and corporate sustainability divisions.

Olsen & Boxembaum (2009) conclude that “BOP can pose significant organizational challenges for companies that seek to incorporate sustainability into their practice. In Novozymes, these (...) barriers have collectively been sufficient to prevent the company from implementing such a project. Although our findings are particular to Novozymes, the difficulties it encountered reflect those that many other companies are experiencing” (p. 122).

Those examples of both external and internal factors that impact the adoption and implementation of BOP initiatives illustrate the risk and complexity to find the correct approach to succeed but despite all criticism Garrete & Karnani (2010) conclude “The desire for a positive outcome should not blind managers and policy makers to the difficulty of the challenge” (p. 45).

The second BOP generation: BOP as a mechanism to alleviate poverty

In his criticism, Karnani (2006) started to define a path that would lead to a second generation of BOP:

We will propose an alternative perspective on how the private sector can help alleviate poverty. Rather than focusing on the poor as consumers, we need to view the poor as producers. The only way to alleviate poverty is to raise the real income of the poor (p. 2)

The way this second BOP generation found to better access this alternative perspective is based in three complementary concepts: segmentation, partnerships and creating shared value initiatives.

Segmentation

The development of this new BOP generation starts with the segmentation of different levels of poverty (Folmann 2012; Rangan et al 2011) as “It defines and describes the process and then advocates for a micro versus macro segmentation approach, recognizing that the poverty marketplace is as vast and diverse as humanity itself” (Kotler & Lee 2015:74).

The literature review offered four types of segmentation of BOP markets: through retail channels, living standards, value creation roles and formal institutions (Alur 2013; Rangan et al 2011; Webb et al 2010; London & Hart 2004).

The segmentation by retail channel differentiates two retail channels serving BOP: Urban with a higher assortment and sometimes structured close to retailers in developed markets and rural usually small, independent family-owned stores that sell groceries and some durables (Alur 2013).

Rangan et al. (2011) describe segmentation by living standards with distinctions between three different groups that make up the four billion people at the BoP:

- extreme poverty: < \$1 a day (1 billion people);
- subsistence: \$1-\$3 a day (1.6 billion people); and
- low income: \$3-\$5 a day (1.4 billion people) (p. 114)

As businesses recognize distinctions between these segments different strategies can be used with each level that varies from low-income to other extreme of those in extreme poverty that must be viewed primarily as clients who need agents (government, NGOs or CBOs) to provide resources for them. (Rangan et al 2011).

Rangan et al (2011) also argue that “businesses need to understand the roles those people can play in the value-creation relationship: as consumers, co-producers, or clients” (p. 114). As consumers, their needs for services and products can be identified and considering that sometimes they pay premium prices for them, innovation can provide value for both business and BOP, “When a company views BOP residents as co-producers, it provides them with work and income (...) as Mars has done with cocoa farmers in West

Africa” (p. 115) and as clients BOP most usually need agents (e.g. NGOs and government agencies) to help them find resources.

Segmentation can be also made with a comparison between formal institutions from developed markets and BOP markets as proposed by Webb et al (2010). This segmentation compares capital markets, labor markets, infrastructure, contracts and enforcement and property rights and shows that developed economies are supported by well-developed formal institutions while the developed regions in developing and emerging economies are supported by developed formal institutions, although in some cases, the formal institutions may have sources of inefficiency or may not be fully developed within a particular region. In contrast, the formal institutions of BOP markets are often undeveloped (London & Hart, 2004).

All these ways to segment the BOP market are intended to help firms to better understand the complexity of this market and find specific solutions that would be beneficial for both business and society.

Partnerships

Altman & Rego (2009) states: “To meet the needs of the BoP market, companies will need to pursue relationships with local delivery providers, social development players, entrepreneurs, government officials and potential customers” (p.47).

London & Hart (2004) posits that to successfully enter BOP markets MNCs should follow three strategies based on establishing local partnerships: collaborating with non-traditional partners, co-inventing custom solutions and building local capacity in order to get a better expertise and relationship with local institutions, corporate and non-corporate.

An already mentioned successful story of partnership between MNCs and local BOP is the “Project Shakti” from Unilever in India. Launched in 2000 to develop a door-to-door distribution channel to reach dispersal villages and increase sales of products such as soaps, lotions and detergent, Unilever partnered up with local NGOs and communities to select & train this salesforce. In 2007 the project had expanded to 80,000 villages with 30,000 sales people (Simanis & Hart 2009). “Project Shakti now accounts for 5% of Unilever’s total revenues in India and has extended the company’s reach into rural areas and built its brand in media-dark regions, creating major economic value for the company” (Porter & Kramer 2011:71).

For corporations to generate the long-term, sustainable growth markets of tomorrow, they require a new approach to innovation. This strategy would be based on humility and dialogue — and would ultimately bring corporations together in equal partnership with communities to nurture an embedded form of business (Simanis & Hart 2009:79).

The importance to establish partnerships due to NGO’s flexibility, knowledge and relationships with the local market is also pointed out as a benefit to grow competitive advantage to develop and launch new products (Rabino 2015).

Sanchez & Schmid (2013) posits “We argue that the success of BoP projects depends on the partnerships established by the organizations engaged in BoP projects and the resources they provide to it“(p. 60) and Sing et al (2014) states that “Such business–NGO partnerships do lay the foundations for co-creation of shared value and develops as a pilot project for trying new business models for future” (p. 364).

Creating shared value initiatives

The notion of reciprocity is central to the BOP concept and the idea of mutual benefit may be the most common theme in the BOP literature (Folmann 2012). London & Hart (2012) suggests that a business strategy based on mutual value creation offers the best prospect for generating economically viable enterprises that also enhance quality of life.

According to Porter & Kramer (2011) “The solution lies in the principle of shared value, which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges” (p. 64).

London et al (2009) states that “Any BoP venture potentially affects three groups of local stakeholders: sellers, buyers, and the communities in which it operates” (p. 107), the integration of these local stakeholders through MNCs strategies are the basis of Porter & Kramer (2011) proposal, that posits that through three key ways - reconceiving products and markets, redefining productivity in the value chain and enabling local cluster companies can create shared value opportunities.

Ramachandran et al (2012) call the attention for the fact that progress in such initiatives has been largely restricted to some views of BoP interventions and studies of technological innovations for the development of new products and processes and some authors heavily criticized the CSV concept by saying that it is too simplistic and has a limited understanding of the concept of CSR (Beschorner 2013) and that it ignores the tension between economic and social goals (Crane et al 2014).

However the idea proposed by Porter & Kramer (2011) and defended by Folmann (2012) can be helpful by developing and providing opportunities for the BOP, as concluded in their article “Not all societal problems can be solved through shared value solutions. But shared value offers corporations the opportunity to utilize their skills, re- sources, and management capability to lead social progress in ways that even the best-intentioned governmental and social sector organizations can rarely match” (Porter & Kramer 2011:77).

Other similar form of poverty alleviation mechanism is called BOP producer, where businesses can also serve another critical objective: transfer BOP-produced goods or services to wealthier markets. (Smith & Pezeshkan 2013; Ramachandran et al., 2012)

BoP businesses, especially BoP producer businesses enrich the capabilities of the poor by increasing the social contribution of their labor hours, enhancing the extent of their knowledge and skill-base, improving their ability to innovate and building indigenous institutions and organizations which aid in developing their social capital. (Smith & Pezeshkan 2013:53)

As Davidson (2009) states regarding Shakti project “The income derived from the distribution services provided by the women, the skills that they learned, and the accompanying psychological benefits all served to create a net benefit for the communities” (p. 28).

Discussion

The increasing number of BoP initiatives towards poor communities suggests the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of this market, specially that to reverse global poverty it is necessary a deep

change in actual assumptions about growth, development and progress concerning the relationship between MNCs, governments, and communities in search for a true balance between increasing local income and giving access to products and services (Ansari et al 2012).

By dividing the BOP studies in two generations the literature takes advantage of the benefits provided by first generation BOP in terms of calling the attention for the existence and needs of the BOP market and then the improvement on the approach by second generation studies.

The second BOP generation proposes that through segmentation of markets and their different needs, the establishment of partnerships and the incentive of shared value creation initiatives MNCs could really offer these markets a mechanism to alleviate poverty, in this sense Bonsu & Polsa (2011) states that “the BoP strategy is a purposeful crafting of the poor as partners in a mutually beneficial set of market processes, yielding enhanced value that is shared—albeit inequitably—among partners” (p. 239).

In the development of these initiatives there are a lot of factors that must be taken into consideration. Davidson (2009) raised many ethical issues that should be considered when doing business with BOP regarding the appropriateness of products, fair pricing, advertising, distribution, branding and packaging. The consideration of these items and the right balance between them would make the difference of the developed initiatives for the BOP. In this sense Hall et al (2012) argues:

“We analyzed different entrepreneurship policies in order to improve our understanding of how some BOP entrepreneurship policies generate positive outcomes and others do not. We found that (...) entrepreneurship can provide the BOP with opportunities to improve social welfare. It can also be the cause of wider social problems. Policies addressing both economic and social perspectives are likely to foster more productive entrepreneurial outcomes, although at the expense of a more constrained pace of economic development “(p. 807)

This text argues that any BOP initiative to succeed should be evaluated on the basis of whether it advances capability transfer, diffusion and retention by enhancing the social capital between a community and other more resource rich networks and at the same time preserving the existing social capital in the community, in an integrative form where businesses, government and civil society may develop a more inclusive approach to growth (Ansari et al 2012).

Conclusion

This text contributes by extending conventional notions of BOP through the confrontation of two dimensions of studies on the subject: BOP as consumer and as a mechanism to alleviate poverty and its association with two generations, each one representing one of these dimensions.

The first generation although not successful in its approach of the BOP as consumers raised the discussion of the importance of BOP markets and then a second generation of studies offer alternatives to better approach these markets through initiatives that would generate engagement of BOP and efficiently serve as mechanisms to alleviate poverty.

The subject is still polemic and complex and thus further studies on the way MNCs successfully approach these markets are necessary and so is the continuous studies of the evolvement of this market and their relationship with MNCs, government, NGOs and local communities.

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