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Madhu Viswanathan

Loyola Marymount University, madhubalan.viswanathan@lmu.edu

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# Subsistence Marketplaces: Challenges and Opportunities

Madhu Viswanathan, Raed Elaydi, Roland Gau, and  
Lisa Jones Christensen

Journal of Public Policy &amp; Marketing

2019, Vol. 38(1) 36-41

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DOI: 10.1177/0743915618820972

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## Abstract

This introductory article is a biennial exercise to reflect on the stream of subsistence marketplaces as a prelude to the special section on this topic following the Sixth Subsistence Marketplaces Conference in 2016. The call for papers was not restricted to conference presentations. At the end of the review process, the special section contained four articles spanning a diverse set of topics. The authors provide an overview of the subsistence marketplaces stream and a background of the conference series. This is followed by a brief introduction to the special issue. They then discuss the what, how, and why for past and future work on subsistence marketplaces.

## Overview of the Subsistence Marketplaces Stream

The subsistence marketplaces research stream has evolved over close to two decades. It adopts a unique bottom-up approach that is grounded at the microlevel in understanding the life circumstances and marketplace interactions of consumers, entrepreneurs, and communities. The term “subsistence” has been used to encompass the broad range of low income, from extreme poverty to the cusp between low and lower-middle income levels. Qualitatively, the term subsistence captures the essence of marketplace interactions and life circumstances for people who barely make ends meet. From survival to subsistence and transformative subsistence entrepreneurship, to marketplaces and exchanges in refugee contexts, tribal communities, rural and urban areas of emerging markets, and low-income populations in developed economies, this topic captures a diverse span of geography and culture. The subsistence marketplaces stream of literature has reflected voices in these settings by emphasizing a bottom-up understanding of daily life as the starting point for the development of policy, theory, and interventions.

Six biennial conferences and, most recently, the first of a possible series of bottom-up immersion conferences in situ, have served as forums for researchers in different academic disciplines, educators, practitioners from different sectors, and students. These forums have emphasized intersector and interdisciplinary interactions, keeping the phenomenon in primary focus, while creating interactions between diverse stakeholders. We aim for sessions to be of interest across a diverse set of stakeholders.

In turn, the stream itself, as reflected in the nature of these forums, encompasses research and education for students and practitioners as well as education and other outreach for the communities we study. Thus, the synergies between research, education, and social enterprise are at the heart of this stream. This follows from the bottom-up grounding, which, in turn, leads to strong cross-fertilization between research, education, and enterprise, each enriching the others. As such, every aspect of this endeavor is important, including this special section in which scholarly research is showcased. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* has been an ideal partner in recent years, with its emphasis on rigor and relevance, both elements construed broadly to allow for diverse approaches. Being at the meeting point of marketing, public policy and societal well-being (Stewart 2013), *JPP&M* is an ideal knowledge platform for this stream of work.

## Background of Related Conference Series

The following description borrows from the call for papers for the sixth conference. Subsistence marketplaces consist of consumer and entrepreneur communities living at a range of low income levels, and they are concentrated in developing

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Madhu Viswanathan is Diane and Steven N. Miller Professor in Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (email: [mviswana@illinois.edu](mailto:mviswana@illinois.edu)). Raed Elaydi is Associate Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship, Roosevelt University (email: [relaydi@roosevelt.edu](mailto:relaydi@roosevelt.edu)). Roland Gau is Assistant Professor of Marketing, National Chiao Tung University (email: [roland@nctu.edu.tw](mailto:roland@nctu.edu.tw)). Lisa Jones Christensen is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources, Brigham Young University (email: [ljc@byu.edu](mailto:ljc@byu.edu)).

countries and regions such as Brazil, India, China, Vietnam, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, many individuals and groups in developed countries live in subsistence. For more than a decade, the Subsistence Marketplaces Conference Series has been a leading forum for evolving and sharing research and fostering best practices in these communities.

In its sixth iteration, the 2016 conference was titled to highlight how subsistence marketplaces are at the intersection of diverse disciplines as well as the interface of research and practice: “Developing Pathways at the Crossroads of Interdisciplinary Research and Practice.” A key emphasis was to look back to the previous five conferences and the resultant research, education, and practice as well as to look forward to pave new pathways for current and emerging scholars. In doing so, the conference highlighted boundary-spanning research and practice as well as work that moves from research to practice and back again. Thus, we aimed to highlight the importance of rigorous and relevant research and how such research is informed by, and can further inform, meaningful and engaged practice.

The specific themes for this conference helped organize the broad work in the field and facilitate discussion among participants. *Traversing Theory and Practice—Stakeholder Dialogues of Subsistence Marketplaces* referred to developing a deeper conceptual understanding of subsistence marketplaces and their linkage to business, social enterprise, and policy. *The Institutional and Organizational Dimensions of Enterprises and Public Partnerships* examined the unique aspects of institution building, organizational design, and market creation in subsistence marketplaces, covering social and commercial enterprises. *Integration and Visioning in Subsistence Marketplaces Research* emphasized extending and integrating research across disciplines, across stakeholders, and with practice; generating research problems with implications for practice; examining how research can translate to practice and vice versa; and conducting research at the interface of disciplines ranging from the physical to the social sciences. *Survival, Subsistence, and Transformative Entrepreneurship* examined the nature of survival at both a material and psychological level and explored how entrepreneurship can facilitate the evolution from surviving to thriving. *Sustainability and Consumption from the Bottom Up* examined how consumption and long-term perspectives on environmental, social, and/or economic changes in subsistence interact with and affect individuals, organizations, and/or institutions engaged in subsistence marketplaces. *Subsistence Narratives, Incentives, and Agency* examined the processes that surround justice and empowerment for individuals as consumers, entrepreneurs, and producers as well as the implications for organizations and/or institutions engaged in subsistence marketplaces. *Disruption, Technology, and Innovation* examined how technology and innovation can cause disruptive forces, and how the benefits/drawbacks of those disruptive forces can be better understood from the perspectives of individuals, organizations, and/or institutions. *Curricular Innovations* referred to the development of modules, courses, and programs that bring subsistence

marketplaces into the classroom, and around the world through online education. Finally, *Junior Scholar Mentorship* connected junior scholars with those with experience in the field and in the academy to facilitate research and develop long-term relationships.

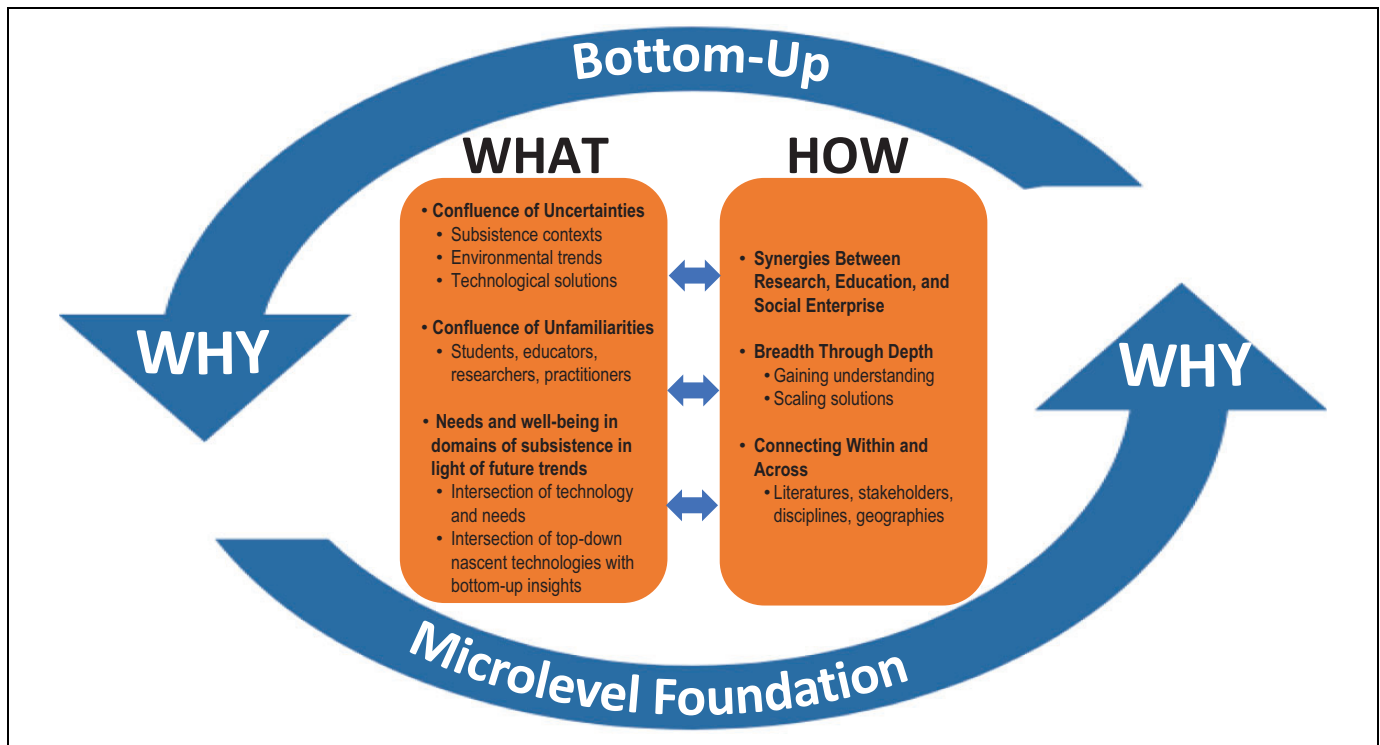
## Summary of Articles in Special Section

We have four articles reflecting diverse enquiries in different geographies. DeBerry-Spence, Ekpo, and Hogan examine the role of mobile photography as a method in Ghana. In keeping with the bottom-up approach that defines the subsistence marketplaces research stream, the article demonstrates how this method is a powerful way to gain insights at the micro level, providing guidance for researchers. Hasan, Lowe, and Petrovici compare and contrast a variety of innovation adoption models in a study set in Bangladesh. In turn, this empirical approach provides insights on the unique aspects of subsistence marketplaces. Babah Daouda, Ingenbleek, and Van Trijp study the process by which entrepreneurs move from low- to middle-income markets for their products. In doing so, this research has important implications for how subsistence entrepreneurs themselves grow and evolve into transformative subsistence entrepreneurs and, subsequently, higher-income entrepreneurs as they negotiate the domains of suppliers, customers, families, and other stakeholders and develop marketplace literacy to envision beyond the immediate. Huang, Chu, and Cheng examine subsistence migrant consumers in China, overlaying the dimension of migration on subsistence contexts. They show how subsistence migrant consumers negotiate a variety of challenges to strive for well-being and life satisfaction. These articles individually and collectively reflect the diverse theoretical, substantive, and methodological directions of the subsistence marketplaces research stream.

## Pathways Forward for the Subsistence Marketplaces Stream: What, How, and Why

### What?

We begin with examples of “what” the subsistence marketplaces stream can focus on (Figure 1). Much of the scholarship on subsistence marketplaces to this point has examined activities that can improve the concrete, day-to-day elements of subsistence life. However, there is a need for research that connects subsistence life to trends in society that are shaping the future. For example, various studies have examined how current technologies (e.g., mobile phones, payment technologies) are used in subsistence, but less attention has been devoted to understanding how more arenas, such as sustainability, will become day-to-day elements of subsistence life in the future. Focusing on consumers’ current unmet needs (i.e., domains of subsistence: water, food, health, education, etc.) is critically important, as is research that envisions future unmet needs in light of projected trends.



**Figure 1.** Pathways forward for the subsistence marketplaces stream: what, how, and why.

Examples of such research include the intersection of technology with needs in arenas such as energy, transportation, and environmental sustainability. These factors will greatly affect the physical environment of subsistence marketplaces in the coming years, though some of these topics may seem distant from daily life in subsistence marketplaces. For instance, how the increasing demand for electricity or transportation is met in populous regions such as China or India may directly affect air quality for millions of people. However, the impact may only be felt over time, and the voices of those living in subsistence may be belated, if at all heard. This parallels issues in urban planning in developed economies, where low-income communities, including minority communities, have been particularly affected by placement of freeways, train tracks, and economic development zones. Yet their voices were barely heard when policy was being decided, much to their future detriment when their social institutions and day-to-day life were disrupted.

Furthering this notion is the need to study nascent technologies, which are inherently top-down in that they evolve far from subsistence marketplaces, yet need to incorporate insights from the bottom-up to create innovations. Given the microlevel starting point and bottom-up nature of subsistence marketplaces research, what is the meeting point of top-down technologies such as genomics and blockchain with applications based on bottom-up insights? Such enquiries will need to be truly interdisciplinary in bridging the technical with the social. In this regard, domains of subsistence require research that is interdisciplinary beyond the social sciences to bridge the

social and the technical. For instance, technical issues underlying water and sanitation, and how they interface with the social context, are central to developing solutions grounded in bottom-up insight.

In a sense, a confluence of uncertainties intersects with a confluence of unfamiliarities (Viswanathan, Gau, and Sreekumar 2018). The future for what is inherently a context filled with daily uncertainty represents a confluence of uncertainties, as environmental issues and climate change are overlaid with uncertainty relating to technological progress and related innovations. Moreover, there is a confluence of unfamiliarities among researchers, research partners in the field (Jones-Christensen et al. 2017), educators, students, and practitioners that the subsistence marketplaces stream aims to address.

Several other aspects relate to the “what” in the future of the subsistence marketplaces stream. Creating the synergies between research and education, bottom-up learning experiences that begin with grounded reality can encompass virtual and actual immersion as key elements. Similarly, bottom-up social innovation captures the orientation of the subsistence marketplaces stream. At the broadest level, this stream emphasizes the importance of aspirations, beyond needs and wants, for marketing and other disciplines.

Imperative in the stream of subsistence marketplaces is to remain grounded in the everyday realities of subsistence life. Research questions that can lead to insights that can better lives in subsistence areas are central to this endeavor. It is critical to be grounded in day-to-day reality and to ask ourselves if we are “bottom-up” enough in order to stay true to the promise of

starting at the micro level of life circumstances. In a sense, this relates to a constant dance between bottom-up insights and top-down evolution of knowledge and method. Ideologies at a macro level certainly represent one end of the top-down to bottom-up continuum but so do theories that are not reinvigorated constantly by bottom-up insights reflecting life circumstances. Indeed, reality is messy, and top-down abstractions need to capture as much of it as possible.

Consider the topic of well-being outcomes for subsistence consumers as the confluence of financial, social, relational, and physical well-being (London 2009), reflecting a diverse set of capabilities. Nuanced understanding of well-being encompasses social well-being, such as how and when people connect with others in noneconomic exchanges, what these connections enable, and what trade-offs they create. A germane topic here is how economic and social interactions change the way people connect, stay connected, or disconnect. Studying well-being in a situated way invites consideration of expectations of the inherently positive nature of “growth” and whether “growth” should be the default desired outcome for subsistence individuals. What are the alternatives to unquestioned growth and “development”? Are efforts to “help” actually doing that, and not hurting (Corbett and Fikkerrt 2014)? Are the “successes” actually successes? And even when successes are observed in the short run, are there long-term negative externalities? What can *we* learn from the contentment we often see in subsistence marketplaces, as well as from the social or relational richness in the midst of material poverty (Viswanathan 2017)? What can we learn from those who do not adopt innovations? Being reflective about our work in subsistence marketplaces can lead to more effective research questions that address important outcome variables and lead to insights from (and in service of) individuals and communities in subsistence marketplaces.

### How?

How can this stream of work be more impactful for subsistence communities (Figure 1)? We look inward and outward to understand and project forward. A case in point can be found in the synergies developed within the stream between research, education, and social enterprise, such as the forward loops from research to impact and the backward loops to enrich research (Viswanathan 2012, 2013). The Subsistence Marketplaces Initiative has emphasized research about these challenging contexts, education about subsistence marketplaces for students and practitioners, and social enterprise through marketplace literacy for subsistence communities. This represents a symbiotic relationship between the academic enterprise and the social enterprise, distinct from other models such as action research. This is sustained involvement through the trifold goals of research, education, and outreach. This model is, in one sense, very fitting, in being grounded at the micro level and in the bottom-up process of creating insights. Learning by doing represents the bottom-up process as much as anything. The philosophy here is that sustained presence on the ground with the separate goal of community outreach is important

when enabling and enriching research and education. Each element strengthens the others. This is the model that has evolved independently in what began as the academic endeavor on subsistence marketplaces, with the added goal of relevant research that could, in turn, have a positive impact on the communities and individuals studied. Figure 1 represents only one model, but the aim here is to be true to being bottom-up. However, this level of symbiosis and synergy represents one point on a continuum wherein there are other approaches conducive to sustained engagement through relationships.

Another element of being grounded is to create breadth of understanding (or education or outreach) through depth, and scale through depth (i.e., achieve breadth through depth; Viswanathan 2016). For instance, cognitive predilections may generalize across contexts but be exhibited in different ways. Local environmental issues may vary widely because of the differential effects of climate change. Furthermore, understanding of the complexity of variables and their interactions can be achieved at several levels: individuals, communities, social structures, and the larger context. This is also the case through implementation in a narrow context. These deep dives also enable the evolution of methods for research. Unfamiliarities for researchers and practitioners combine with inherent uncertainties in subsistence marketplaces to accentuate the importance of learning through depth.

Smith and Stevens (2010) suggest that embedded social enterprises should “scale deep” by focusing on one problem, and then using that platform for change to create new, deeper solutions for more challenging issues, such as addressing structural poverty. Scaling deep is a community-level perspective that focuses on the firm’s ability to embed itself within a community to then build local capability. Scaling-deep organizations are seen in terms of their service to the community, and how they support a community’s core values, customs and norms in the long run. Ultimately, the firm’s success is intertwined and interdependent on the community’s overall well-being (Elaydi and McLaughlin 2012; Viswanathan et al. 2009).

The notion of scaling through depth may run contrary to scaling up globally to maximize impact. Scaling to billions may hinder a firm’s ability to scale through depth and affect structural poverty alleviation. So, rather than focus exclusively on organizations that can scale up in the sense of bringing products into subsistence communities, sustainable alternatives may involve the capability to manufacture products locally, with the potential to export the product beyond the community. Scaling through depth also does not happen quickly; it focuses on building community and creating an ecosystem (i.e., beyond selling a product). Overcoming challenges may take years at a time; thus, organizations must build a long-term perspective into their mindsets (Elaydi and McLaughlin 2012).

The subsistence marketplaces stream can also move forward by actively connecting researchers with organizations that are committed to scaling through depth. The ability to push for deeper understanding of phenomena and building of long-term research projects as well as the increasing capability for data collection should work for both scholars and enterprises in

this area. In addition, researchers should strive to scale through depth in their own research efforts. Since the early work on subsistence marketplaces research, there has been a push to move from more descriptive research to more explanatory research. This should go hand in hand with the tenets of scaling through depth when working in subsistence contexts. A long-term connection between the researcher and the communities being studied can lead to deeper questions, which, in turn, can lead to understanding of more complex or more sensitive phenomena.

Parallel to connecting across diverse stakeholders is connecting across literature streams. This is important to avoid siloing of disciplinary streams focused on low-income settings as well in learning from literature across socioeconomic status to compare and contrast. In terms of “how,” we also emphasize the importance of couching work in the larger context of a variety of literatures and contexts. In terms of work in different geographies and cultures, it is important to compare and contrast to understand what generalizes and what does not. Some internal focus may be natural in the early stages of research streams, subsistence marketplaces included, but broader perspectives in couching the work are important as the journey evolves.

### Why?

We ask “why” both generally and in explaining the “what” and the “how” (Figure 1). For subsistence marketplaces, “business-as-usual” (in academics, public policy, or business) collides with the many challenges and urgencies of the twenty-first century. The fragile lives that those with low incomes lead are overlaid with vulnerability to environmental challenges. As we have noted, in terms of the intersection of uncertainties, gains in poverty alleviation can be undone with the effects of climate change. Economic projections are just that; they are focused on economic factors and typically based on extrapolations that do not account for scenarios in which all bets are off.

Our stream of work is, at its core, about understanding these challenging contexts in their own right and in their complex entirety, to the extent possible. This is the bottom-up that we strive for. Our philosophical foundation is that such a bottom-up perspective beginning at microlevel life circumstances is much needed and is often neglected. True to a bottom-up perspective, our insights have evolved with each research project, educational innovation, and social enterprise, not only about the phenomenon in question, as is customary, but what it means to be bottom-up. Thus, in expounding on the “what,” we refer to the confluence of uncertainties inherent to day-to-day life in subsistence marketplaces, to what comes with the destabilization and extremes associated with climate change, and to where technological solutions are going to come from. To have an impact, the subsistence marketplaces stream needs to be rooted in understanding the first two uncertainties while complementing top-down technology with bottom-up

insights. We similarly refer to the unfamiliarities of researchers, educators, students, practitioners, and partners of subsistence marketplaces reiterating the importance of the bottom-up approach.

Starting at the micro level by itself does not suffice to have the potential for impact. Indeed, bottom-up requires finding ways to translate the microlevel insights often tied to different contexts into actionable outcomes that create positive impact. Thus, a central challenge here is in constantly finding ways to traverse up, whether it be in developing products, creating enterprises, or developing policies. In this regard, perhaps there is no more bottom-up way of learning than by doing, whether through educational innovations or through social enterprise. Thus, we emphasize blurring the academic and the social enterprises (the symbiotic academic–social enterprises at one extreme) as an approach that has evolved in this stream. We distinguish this approach from action research, engaged scholarship, and a variety of other points on the continuum—each very amenable to the bottom-up approach we espouse. Such a symbiotic approach holds our feet to the fire in that “there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1943, p. 118). It also points toward a different notion of dissemination, in which the researcher is deeply involved in implementing on the ground. This encompasses gaining substantive and theoretical insights while being adept at field research methods, and, in turn, translating them into practice for positive impact. In this regard, the academic triad of developing knowledge, designing methods, and delivering education is indispensable. In one sense, translation occurs due to the researcher as much as the research.

Being grounded, beginning with life circumstances, also means being interdisciplinary to the core, as reality unfolds in messy ways and holistic understanding is crucial. Thus, as domains of subsistence are studied, the notion of interdisciplinarity across related social sciences simply does not go far enough. Rather, it is critical to unite the technical with the social, whether it be in understanding bottom-up perceptions of “top-down” concepts of sustainability, or gaining insights into the value chain of water or other domains in the usage situations and life circumstances of subsistence customers and entrepreneurs. Again, marketing is uniquely positioned as a discipline to be the focal point for a variety of issues relating to exchanges in subsistence marketplaces. In this regard, a challenge for this stream is to examine the confluence of the nascent technologies, which are inherently top-down in one sense, with the bottom-up approach in subsistence marketplaces

Finally, emphasizing “groundedness” means emphasizing depth—thus, our discussion of scaling through depth—and that depth can lead to breadth (Viswanathan, 2016). Perhaps it is best to think of this process as increasing reach, rather than scaling with its top-down connotation, reflecting strategic intent or a long-term “what is possible” approach to the growth and transformation of subsistence marketplaces (Elaydi and Harrison 2010). Again, these insights emerge from the

bottom-up in all its manifestations, including the symbiotic academic–social enterprise.

In conclusion, the impact of the subsistence marketplaces stream with its bottom-up emphasis lies in the holistic outcomes flowing from research, education, and practice. When viewed in light of the large challenges in subsistence marketplaces, such integrated impact is imperative.

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