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Business as a development agent: evidence of possibility and improbability

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An emphasis on making markets work for the poor has thrust companies into the role of 'development agents' – organisations that consciously seek to deliver outcomes that contribute to international development goals. This paper examines what business as a development agent means in terms of the promise, the conceptualisation and the developmental outcomes of several initiatives engaged in 'bottom billion capitalism'. It argues that, while these initiatives are hailed as a solution for poverty, the benefits of such engagement must be weighed against other factors, including exclusion, the emphasis on capital assets and the reinterpretation of positive outcomes. The paper presents an alternative model of business as a development agent that better meets the criteria for a genuine development actor.

Keywords: poverty reduction; bottom billion capitalism; bottom of the pyramid; business; legibility; market-based development

Introduction

For much of the postcolonial development period the role of business in development has been confined to its contribution to wealth creation, employment and the provision of goods and services. Business has served the role of a development tool – widely engaged in economic activity in developing countries but assuming little responsibility for the impact of that activity. By the late 1980s this posture had become difficult to sustain. Business came under the glare of public scrutiny for untoward labour, environmental and human rights practices and responded defensively by adhering to voluntary codes of practice that governed the social and environmental impact of its operations. More recently, however, business has move beyond this reactive stance to championing a far more proactive role in development, fostering new business models, partnerships and financial instruments to combat issues ranging from malaria and HIV to trade justice and poverty reduction. Aligning itself with contemporary development approaches of pro-poor business growth and making markets work

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for the poor (M4P), business is assuming the role of 'development agent' – an organisation that consciously seeks to deliver outcomes that contribute to international development goals.

This paper examines what business as a development agent means in terms of the promise, the conceptualisation, and the developmental outcomes of several existing initiatives engaged in what has come to be known as 'bottom billion capitalism' (BBC). Although BBC comprises a diversity of initiatives (eg Fairtrade labelling, microfinance, bottom of the pyramid (BOP) schemes, commercial social entrepreneurship), each of these harnesses the mechanisms of private enterprise for developmental ends by repositioning business as a development agent. We explain the meaning of 'development agent' and the possibilities it holds for various stakeholder groups, including its intended beneficiaries. Through analysis of empirical studies of BBC initiatives by the authors and others,[1] we identify the structural dimensions of business as a development agent, how the embodiment of 'development agent' differs from other development-related roles associated with the private sector, and the different types of instrumental interaction business has with development issues such as poverty and marginalisation.

The paper advances a new framework for assessing the effectiveness of business as a development agent (capital employed; conscious, accountable development-oriented effort; primacy afforded to development issues), and examines the empirical evidence to determine how this has been applied in a cross-section of initiatives. We demonstrate that, while a powerful discourse hails private sector initiatives as a solution to poverty and marginalisation, the benefits of such engagement must be weighed against other factors, including exclusion, an emphasis on capital assets, and the reinterpretation of positive outcomes, benefits and beneficiaries. We also show not only that developmental accountability is rare in these initiatives, but equally that this is unlikely to change in future because of paradoxes at the heart of the business–development relationship. The paper concludes by positing an alternative model of business as a development agent that better meets the criteria for a genuine new development actor. We set out the characteristics of such an enterprise and describe the type of institutional environment that is required to support the transformation of business into an effective agent of development.

Conceptualising business in development

'Development' can refer to two processes. It can refer to an immanent and unintentional process through which national economies, human well-being and household or individual incomes improve, particularly in poorer countries and former colonies (cf capitalist development). Or it can refer to intentional activities consciously undertaken to improve lives in those same countries.[2] Since the birth of the Bretton Wood institutions commercial enterprise has had a major role to play in development, but mostly as an unintentional actor. Whether it be direct investment by foreign companies, the flurry of activity by local entrepreneurs – not least in the informal sector – the attention given to international trade and capital flows, or the emphasis placed on export-led growth, the private sector has been an important agent in achieving development goals. However, since the 1990s, there can be little doubt that the private sector's role has become more overt as the development discourse has been subsumed within

a wider neoliberal discourse about economic growth, prosperity and well-being.[3] A vibrant private sector with well functioning markets is seen as the *sine qua non* of a properly developing economy.

Throughout the private sector's evolution in development theory and policy, the role of business can be characterised as that of a 'development tool'. By business, we mean a conceptual category that embraces any organisation engaging in commerce and trade. This is admittedly very broad, including everything from the start-up enterprise to the multinational conglomerate. However, conceptually at least, the empirical organisations captured by our meaning of the word 'business' share much in common and, as we will show, their primary, unifying function of trade and commerce has particular implications for their development role. In its narrowest form a commercial enterprise creates value for its owners, and in doing so contributes to the public good: creating jobs, obeying the law, supplying goods and services, and helping to fund necessary social institutions.[4] Value creation, therefore, can be said to create growth-driven development; hence business as the primary creator of wealth has a central role to play in development. However, this is the kind of role business could play anywhere in the world, at least wherever there is a functioning private sector. It is not by itself a development-oriented activity; it is no more responsible for development outcomes than a hammer is responsible for the carpenter's thumb.

The notion of business as a development tool – active in developing countries but not responsible for outcomes in these countries – came under closer scrutiny in the late 1980s. This was partly because the Washington Consensus and the role of markets within it were subject to increasing criticism.[5] On top of generic criticisms of the private sector, however, there was an emerging body of evidence associating individual companies with developmentally detrimental outcomes, such as human rights abuses and environmental pollution.[6] This marked the start of a shift from business as an unintentional actor in development (see above) to becoming an actor in intentional development. By the turn of the century multinational companies as diverse as Nike, Freeport Mining, Hershey, Unilever and Home Depot had signed up to voluntary codes of practice relating to one or other aspect of their impact on development. The emergence of voluntary governance initiatives with a developing country focus in the 1990s and early 2000s is well documented,[7] and these represented a notable new element in value chain governance that continues today.[8] However, to what extent does association with these initiatives allow companies to claim they are acting as anything more than a development tool?

It is not our intention to evaluate specific initiatives; there are others who have done this using an array of empirical evidence and analytical frameworks.[9] However, most importantly for this paper, these initiatives to modify the behaviour of companies in developing countries begin to reveal some of the development issues that arise when companies extend the boundaries of the conventional development tool: issues such as inclusivity and exclusivity (eg the position of women, contract labour and indigenous people); and the governing of the poor and marginalised. Although the majority of the literature examines either the enhancement of voluntary governance initiatives,[10] or their efficacy for companies and intended beneficiaries,[11] it has also provoked some debate about the role of business in development overall.[12]

The experience of voluntary governance and the development issues it threw up played a part in a second wave of corporate responsibility initiatives in the 2000s. Perhaps aware that tackling working conditions, pollution, child labour, and so on – while a commendable response to stakeholder pressure – trapped companies in a debate about unethical business and what Kramer and Kania call 'defensive' corporate responsibility,[13] business started to look for 'offensive' opportunities whereby companies could burnish their reputation by tackling development challenges. The mainstreaming of Fairtrade labelling and microfinance, the rapid rise of the BOP concept of the poor as a profitable market, and the accommodation of development into ideas of social enterprise all happened during this decade,[14] and they drove calls for business to take a proactive role in development that went far beyond the original development tool idea.[15] Indeed, in the space of less than two decades, there had been a shift from companies viewing developing countries as a location in which to do business (the role of the development tool), to understanding that to a degree it was not only possible but necessary (for moral or material reasons) for companies to see themselves less as the inanimate hammer and more as the instrumental carpenter, ie to be a development agent.

Criteria for business as a development agent

What does it mean for business to be a development agent? The brief history presented above – to which should be added the extensive experience of extractive industries and others in assisting local community development[16] – shows that, for different reasons, the private sector has an interest not only in developing countries but also in the development of those countries. This interest is often self-interest (eg protecting a corporate reputation; promoting self-regulation to stave off government interference), although self-interest can involve mutual interest between companies and the poor or otherwise marginalised, a premise clearly projected in the BOP concept.[17]

Self-interest (or lack of it) is not a useful criteria on its own for assessing whether business is acting as a development agent. Some people may feel that for a company to act out of self-interest negates the value of its development contribution, but this is a spurious argument. A company makes a profit out of self-interest, but failure to be profitable would remove the company entirely from any development role because it would cease to exist. Some companies make a profit from implementing development programmes, typically on behalf of government clients. Thus there are companies such as Chemonics, PWC and Coffey International that deliver programmes for aid agencies. However, these companies are not investing in development, because they do not deploy their own capital. By contrast, Tropical Wholefoods (Uganda) is a food processor and exporter, which uses its own capital to invest in commercial development projects, while Vodafone/Safaricom (Kenya) matched aid funding with its own capital in setting up the M-Pesa money transfer service.[18] It is the willingness to deploy one's assets for activities with an expected, calculated development benefit that is one criterion for being a development agent, rather than whether or not there is a profit motive.

The second criterion – and one that marks the development agent out from the development tool – is that, in making an investment, the company gives

primacy to the benefits for the poor and otherwise marginalised (henceforward 'the poor'). For example, mining companies have often been criticised over the number and quality of jobs they create for local people. Consequently in projects such as BP's Tangguh gas field (Indonesia) companies may invest in building the capacity of local people to carry out skilled functions.[19] Equally the Body Shop consciously invested in Soapworks Ltd (Scotland) because it was located in a deprived community with high unemployment. As we shall discuss later, claims to be acting as a development agent are put to the test when company management has to choose between the seemingly competing interests of different stakeholder groups. For example, if the local labour force is inadequate, should a company such as BP import personnel and, if it does, what responsibility does it have for the pressure migrant worker families might place on local amenities, land rights and the job prospects of local families? Similarly, what is the correct response when the Body Shop is under pressure to close down the Soapworks factory because of falling profits?[20]

The third criterion we suggest is that development agents not only give primacy to benefits for the poor but they consciously and accountably strive to address poverty and marginalisation. This criterion comprises two elements. First, the company goes beyond providing opportunities that would seem to benefit the poor (eg siting factories in deprived areas; funding vocational schools in a mining area), to ensure as far as possible that the poor benefit from these opportunities. This means understanding the nature of poverty and marginalisation so that, for instance, contract workers are just as able to benefit from improved working conditions as permanent ones, or women are not excluded from new political opportunities.[21] Second, a development agent is a company that is accountable for its developmental outcomes just as it is for other core aspects of its business, such as financial performance. This does not mean demonstrating the instrumental benefits for the company of addressing development issues (something that could be accommodated in conventional auditing and accounting processes); it means providing an honest, fair and reliable account to itself and others of what it has achieved in development terms.

These three criteria relating to capital, pro-poor primacy and accountability will inform all the coming sections. Although not without controversy, the notion that business can and should be more than a development tool and something akin to a development agent is gaining ground. What we will demonstrate is that in reality the private sector development agent is an elusive being, for a variety reasons, all of which reveal something about the potential for the criteria to be met in the future. Furthermore, we examine the consequences for the poor of a failure to foster genuine development agents, especially given the current advocacy of the private sector in development.

Business' multiple interactions with poverty

There are three main categories of interaction between business and poverty.[22] The governance initiatives mentioned earlier are a response to companies being regarded as beneficiaries of poverty, infringing on the poor's rights and exploiting the conditions of the poor. In these instances business is blamed for causing or exacerbating poverty. Aside from any moral imperative managers might feel for addressing these issues, there are well documented instrumental reasons for

a company not to want to be associated with poverty in this way.[23] Less recognised in the business–development literature is that companies can be victims of poverty. For example, although companies are often accused of benefiting from (and indeed aiding) poor governance,[24] absence of the rule of law may benefit some individual companies but does not benefit business as a whole.[25] In quite different ways companies can be the victim of government policy, of a poorly educated consumer base and workforce, of poor and dangerous infrastructure, and of other conditions characteristic of developing countries. For example, companies such as SAB Miller and L'Oreal have initiated HIV/AIDS prevention programmes in South Africa because of the disease's impact on their workforces, including the management cadre,[26] and companies have funded the Global Road Safety Partnership because of the human and financial cost of unsafe roads.[27] It is possible that some actions business takes because it is either the cause or the victim of poverty could meet the aforementioned criteria of being a development agent. However, in this paper we will focus on the third category of interaction, wherein business sees itself as a solution to poverty, not just through the act of conducting business, but because of decisions informed by an awareness of and a desire to ameliorate poverty. As an exemplar of this we will discuss what Roy terms 'bottom billion capitalism',[28] a term that refers to a significant part of the theory and practice of addressing development through commercial enterprise.

Bottom billion capitalism

As noted, over the past decade business has moved beyond conventional CSR activities to become part of a broader architecture of global development – what Roy terms 'millennial development'.[29] This architecture comprises a different cast of actors and organisational forms – celebrities, business, consumers, philanthropic organisations, new donors and poverty specialists – who aim to revitalise development through new business models, partnerships, modes of finance and development assistance.[30]

It is within this context that a 'new frontier' of business engagement in development has emerged – BBC initiatives that draw the world's poor into global markets through new models of financial inclusion, consumption and entrepreneurship. Although Roy is concerned with how BBC, through the vehicle of microfinance, recasts poverty as a site of opportunity for both business and the poor, the concept builds on the work of Collier and Prahalad,[31] who popularised the phrase 'bottom billion' to refer to those living in extreme poverty. Where Collier advocates a mixed aid and trade approach to improving economic opportunity in bottom billion countries, Prahalad expounds a liberal view, holding up the market-building activities of multinational corporations as a catalyst to reduce poverty among the four billion poor at the so-called base of the pyramid.

Prahalad's vision has been remarkably influential, unleashing a plethora of market-led approaches that seek to reduce poverty in developing countries under the rubric of 'inclusive business' and 'creative capitalism'.[32] For proponents of these initiatives, the role for business in poverty reduction is clear: when business engages in development, the poor benefit. It is an assumption that informs support for several models of BBC, including not only BOP, but also microfinance, inclusive business and Fairtrade approaches, each of which is

underpinned conceptually by a neoliberal valorisation of private enterprise, market efficiency, entrepreneurship and the conviction that markets can work for the poor.[33] These models have been embraced by multinational corporations and multilateral development institutions alike, which look to the perceived 'efficiency' of the private sector to do what countless aid dollars and 'absent' states have been unable to do – reduce poverty among the billions of people living on less than two dollars per day.[34]

Although BBC initiatives share an ideological vision to ameliorate poverty through market engagement, in practice they embody different objectives and histories, constellations of actors and institutions, and sectors. Fairtrade, for example, focuses on rectifying 'unfair' markets by reconfiguring supply chains; microcredit aims to redress 'imperfect' markets by providing loans to poor borrowers who typically lack collateral; and BOP systems seek to create markets, bringing new products and services to underserved consumers. Each also includes firms of varying sizes, interests and levels of capitalisation, from multinational corporations and venture capitalists to small and medium enterprises, and spans sectors from food and toiletries to telecommunications and energy. However, while their structure and form differ, each enacts a set of practices, techniques, and ideologies that 'construct, and make productive, a global economy where poverty is a frontier of profit and accumulation'.[35]

A signature feature of BBC is new institutional configurations that pursue 'development through enterprise': market-based models that reflect a shift in poverty discourse from conceptions of the poor as beneficiaries of aid and development expertise to market actors – 'clients', 'partners' and 'entrepreneurs' – who will assume responsibility for their own development.[36] This emphasis on enterprise and entrepreneurship gained traction under a neoliberal policy agenda of privatisation and deregulation, which restructured relationships between states and their citizens, particularly the poor. Efforts to source social provision through private entities, to 'modernise' informal segments of the economy through rationalities of efficiency and responsibility,[37] and to galvanise the participation of the poor in the 'productive' economy, have redefined poverty as a condition amenable to market intervention. Yet, while BBC models are informed by the values of neoliberalism – competition, efficiency and self-governance – they are also premised on an ideology of inclusion, what Roy terms 'neoliberal populism'.[38] They seek to democratise access to markets, extending opportunities to access finance capital, earned income and affordable products to those who have been excluded (or included on unfavourable terms) from the productive opportunities afforded through integration into the global economy.

Clues to the development agent

Although models of BBC are endorsed as 'pro-poor', the degree to which business consciously strives to address poverty and marginalisation through them (ie the extent to which it operates with a logic of pro-poor primacy) is little understood. Empirical evidence on the strategies and impacts of BBC models is variable, ranging from predominantly 'qualitative' case-based studies of BOP and Fairtrade schemes to randomised control trials (RCTs) of microfinance, making generalisation difficult. Indeed, despite increased emphasis on 'evidence-based policy', there is little indication that any of these models has

yielded positive impacts that are scalable.[39] In addition, there is a lack of knowledge of how business conceptualises poverty, except in terms of its role as an engine for its alleviation, that is, as a development tool. While conceptions of poverty within development have expanded beyond economic and material indicators to include the realms of health, education and empowerment,[40] management studies have been largely silent on the issue of poverty.[41]

What we do know is confined to the economic impacts of initiatives, either the income gains of beneficiaries or the instrumental benefits to companies (growth, market share and net present value).[42] This focus on a singular metric of output reflects a convergence of trends within business and development, mirroring, on the one hand, the 'epistemic privilege' of the market in an increasingly managerialist development industry, in which alternative ways of measuring benefit are often discounted,[43] and, on the other hand, a business climate in which success is measured on return on investment. Certainly, income growth and economic returns matter; but BBC initiatives that base success on indicators of conventional business performance, or even on the economic benefits (eg access to capital, income) accrued by beneficiaries, not only devalue non-monetised contributions but shed little light on the extent to which business inhabits the position of development agent in the sense of affording primacy to the needs and benefits of the poor.[44]

One way of assessing this is by examining how business defines the field of poverty intervention and to what effect: what normative assumptions underpin the private sector's conception of development problems (ie poverty), development's purported beneficiaries (the poor), and business's role in advancing solutions to improve both?[45] Here, we take our cue from anthropologists Ferguson, Escobar, Li, and Mosse, who have examined how the discourses and practices of development institutions determine the form and possibilities of interventions.[46] Drawing on Foucault, Li describes two key practices that underscore the making of a development intervention.[47] The first, problematisation, refers to the process of 'identifying deficiencies that need to be rectified', making certain types of market intervention knowable and thinkable.[48] It reflects a concern with ontology: how poverty is constructed as a particular type of problem, that of market failure, amenable to solutions at a particular scale (that of the bottom billion) in the context of a particular policy instrument (enterprise).[49] The second is the practice(s) of 'rendering technical' the domain to be governed 'as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics'. This entails 'defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible…and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed'.[50] This analytic lens has been widely applied to understanding how aid institutions produce and enact development knowledge.[51] Here, we build on this work to examine how business frames its subject matter in the field of poverty reduction, defining what falls within and beyond the scope of attention,[52] and making the object of its intervention knowable, calculable and predictable to global business.[53]

Problematisation: recasting poverty problems as market solutions

In BBC models the process of problematisation is grounded in a normative framework that positions poverty as a product of market failure and its alleviation as the managed integration of the poor into global finance, capital and product

markets. In diagnosing the scope of intervention, business tends to recognise only those problems for which a solution within the competence of the enterprise or marketplace can be produced (see also McGoey in this issue). Indeed, in many cases the notion that a particular product will be *the* solution to a development dilemma is a foregone conclusion, as the problem itself is recast in market terms. As the World Economic Forum's report on unleashing the potential of the BOP acknowledges, 'companies can reframe the problems' they encounter in BOP markets by 'finding ways to leverage them into business opportunities', redefining, for example, concerns around water, environmental degradation and disease as market opportunities for soap, cooking stoves and bed nets.[54] For companies operating in bottom billion markets, there is often a tendency to focus on issues that will enhance brand differentiation and competitiveness in poverty markets. As Steven Philips of Exxon Mobil responded, when asked why his company was getting into the business of bed nets in Africa: "'This was not beneficence or corporate social responsibility…We put our resources in places where they earn the best value per dollar, and this had demonstrable shareholder value…Chevron wasn't in malaria. BP wasn't in malaria…Malaria became our differentiator'."[55] Indeed, evidence suggests that the problems business deems significant and the solutions it proffers often accord more with the needs of capital than the needs of the poor. For example, Basheer calls into question the ultimate purpose of the World Bank's Handwashing Initiative, observing that 'The choice of a state that has the lowest incidence of childhood diarrhoea and water-related epidemics could indicate that the project is more about paving the way for the MNCs into the informal personal care market than bringing down the diarrhoeal death rates in the country'.[56]

Similarly, studies of Fairtrade illustrate how the identification of a development problem is shaped by its proposed solution.[57] Research on Ghanaian cocoa producers, for instance, describes how market interests influenced the allocation of Fairtrade's social premium: although producers declared a preference for spending the premium on better roads, cars, televisions, places of worship or simply a cash transfer, these desires did not accord with the poverty solutions envisioned by corporates and Western consumers, for whom a development benefit was equated with 'needs' such as health and education.[58] Similarly, in Kenya, tea producers claimed that, while the projects funded through Fairtrade's social premium were useful, they did not necessarily reflect their priorities – piped water and/or electricity – problems the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International deemed beyond the proper scope of premium funds. Thus, the market episteme that underpins BBC initiatives tends to discount solutions that are incommensurate with commercial imperatives,[59] that is, which fail to build consumer satisfaction or brand differentiation. What falls outside Western perceptions of poverty reduction, such as converting Fairtrade premium funds to cash or selling 'frivolous' goods (eg lipstick and skin whitening cream) through BOP distribution networks, or what lies beyond the purview of market remediation, is taken off the table as being insufficiently pro-poor. This process, however, shifts the development beneficiary from a rights-bearing subject – a citizen whose rights are bestowed and enshrined by the state – to a 'value-driven consumer' whose needs, desires and preferences are defined and fulfilled by the market.[60] As the director of UK-based Business Fights Poverty described it: 'for too long

development has been about treating poor people as recipients, as dependents [sic], and actually for the first time we're seeing them treated as agents of their development…as customers for the first time'.[61]

Rendering technical: expertise and legibility

Discourses and practices of expertise are critical to the problematisation process, as those problems that are identified and corroborated by 'expert' knowledge or that can be made legible through management tools are often prioritised. For example, business's diagnosis of development problems often draws legitimacy from the authority of science, which is harnessed to define problems in ways that require business intervention. The tools of scientific knowledge – surveys, measurements and observations – confer epistemic weight to the diagnoses propounded by business, particularly where a legitimate correlation must be drawn between a development problem and a market/commercial solution. For example, like many market solutions, the 'Health in Your Hands' initiative in Ghana, a partnership between Unilever and NGOs which promotes hand washing and hygiene, invokes scientific 'evidence' to demonstrate the connection between hand washing and child mortality (and thus the need for soap). Indeed, 'robust' assessments of market-based initiatives have become pro forma for companies, who employ business schools, research institutions and consultancy firms to conduct RCTs and impact evaluations to validate proposed product solutions, assessments that are especially prominent 'in public health contexts where the social credentials of a product depend upon evidence of its medical effects'.[62] P&G, for example, now has an army of contracted nurses who travel from school to school in Ghana providing puberty education, a training that addresses hygienic sanitary practices and in which the capacity of different sanitary care products to absorb blood is tested in situ. Such studies enhance the visibility of certain products, according them recognition as the (commercial) remedy for development dilemmas: soap is not simply a cleaning agent but an antidote to infant morbidity and mortality in Ghana; sanitary pads are not only a technology that facilitates the absorption of menstrual blood, they are also a pathway to reduced fertility and teenage pregnancies. In doing this, science legitimates and facilitates certain courses of action: 'the problems chosen, categories used, relationships investigated, and confirming evidence required' all support the material and ideological purpose of business to convert the realm of public provision into private goods,[63] or, as Roy put it, to transform 'economies of need' into 'economies of profit'.[64]

Business also draws legitimacy from partnerships with development 'experts' (humanitarian, multilateral, quasi-governmental and NGOs), whose public credibility shields business from allegations of greenwashing and grants authenticity to their engagement with the poor. NGOs are key nodes in BBC assemblages, their perceived local knowledge and experiences providing a doorway to local markets by making the unfamiliar social practices of the poor knowable and legible to corporations. Uncovering these 'hidden community resources' the World Economic Forum writes, requires 'companies to collaborate with other organizations', as most possess little on-the-ground experience of markets that exist beyond the scope of conventional retail and lack the resources, knowledge or credibility to localise their product solutions for 'poor',

rural consumers.[65] NGOs, often in partnership with market research firms, help business to better understand the cultures, habits and behaviours of their target beneficiaries,[66] rendering the problem of poverty comprehensible for purposes of business engagement. Central to this process has been a shift away from surveys and focus groups to the use of ethnography and Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques to hone business's 'native capability', ie its capacity to engage 'in deep listening and mutual dialogue with income-poor communities' and to co-create new business models that resonate with 'the local cultural infrastructure' (http://www.bop-protocol.org).[67] Communities in bottom billion markets are now host to 'Rural Immersion Programs' where MNCs like Danone, Nestlé, Dupont and Pepsi acquire knowledge of local practices through participatory methods and visits to village elders, homes, churches, health and education facilities, and so on.[68] Like the high modernist schemes described by Scott, rural immersion reformats the poor as an object of calculation, enabling business to get a 'handle on its subjects and their environment', while demarcating who falls within and beyond capitalism's domain of concern and/or intervention.[69]

Thus, a considerable amount of 'expertise' goes into making the problem of poverty comprehensible and amenable to business intervention.[70] Yet the process of problematisation goes beyond the identification and framing of a development problem and a product solution. It also specifies and remakes bottom billion beneficiaries as a particular object of governance: the enterprising, self-regulating entrepreneur.

Beneficiaries or instruments of development?

The previous discussion illustrates how what is amenable or not to business intervention as a development agent is commonly premised on a priori conceptions of what the poor need. This in turn is typically needs that are legible to a capitalist worldview, and that can be remedied through solutions that align with commercial imperatives. This normative framing extends to how business defines the target beneficiaries of BBC initiatives. We noted at the beginning that the poor in the past were viewed as 'liabilities', whose ability to transcend deprivation was hitched to aid and philanthropy, or whose conditions posed a risk to corporate reputations. Models of BBC have restructured relationships with the subjects of development, positioning them as sites of opportunity rather than dependence.[71] No longer are the poor portrayed as passive victims of either poverty or of corporations themselves: models of BBC such as Fairtrade, microfinance and BOP are premised on a notion of entrepreneurial development in which the market failure of poverty is overcome by activating the enterprise and entrepreneurship of the poor.[72] The poor are thus recast as agents of development, who can benefit by remaking themselves to conform to the discipline of the market,[73] and by redirecting their capabilities, talents, assets and social networks to market opportunities.[74] For example, BOP entrepreneurs who distribute the products of Unilever, Danone, Coca-Cola, etc door-to-door become 'empowered' entrepreneurial subjects through technologies of management and government that craft 'self-driven' entrepreneurial subjects. In BOP initiatives these technologies assume many forms, from calculative devices such as time management and performance metrics, to pedagogy such as training in sales, recruitment and financial discipline, all of which aim to produce a market

subjectivity with clear business acumen.[75] As the Shell Foundation notes, the poor must acquire 'business DNA': those 'skills and entrepreneurial instincts ... that business people everywhere use to identify and assess business opportunities'.[76] However, the talent and initiative that is held to be a 'natural' quality of the entrepreneur is, in fact, produced. While a meritocratic ideal of social mobility – everyone has a shot at being a successful entrepreneur – is widely propounded,[77] it is through integration into the market discipline of BBC markets that the poor develop their capacities for autonomy and self-reliance. To illustrate: BOP entrepreneurs are often assigned a geographic zone, a demarcated target market for which they shoulder responsibility.[78] These zones provide the socio-technical infrastructure of management; it is within them that the poor are observed, inventories are managed, sales and revenues tracked, and accounts assessed. Such data render these sites readable to corporations and provide a blueprint for sales and growth. They do not simply 'relay facts' or make markets more legible; they play an active role in the reconfiguration of bottom billion economies, enabling business and the aforementioned development experts to shape, as well as gauge, the achievement of entrepreneurial attitudes, behaviours and skills. For example, although sales data represent product uptake and market penetration (where, what and how much a product sells), they also recognise the entrepreneurial fitness or otherwise of workers, serving as an instrument of 'value coding' that draws a line between the responsible, enterprising and ambitious, and those who are not.[79]

Although primacy for the poor is often mentioned when business seeks to be a development agent, the meaning of 'poor' is highly circumscribed in ways that have little to do with poverty itself. BOP initiatives are concerned with a particular categorisation of beneficiary – the 'viable poor' – enterprising entrepreneurs who are capable of being integrated into the market and consumer society.[80] Likewise, Fairtrade targets producers who are marginalised, but not so much so that they are unable to invest in the resources necessary to meet the quality standards of Western consumers, thus privileging certain categories of beneficiary (the landed, men, entrepreneurs) while marginalising others (the very poor, landless and certain categories of women). As Mutersbaugh's study of organic coffee producers in Oaxaca, Mexico, demonstrated, Fairtrade can carve out new forms of distinction and uneven development in rural economies, differentiating between those communities and households that possess the resources to engage in certified agriculture and those who do not.[81] In fact, despite the 'democratization of opportunity' that BBC initiatives promote, development institutions and companies target those who will generate maximum return on investment. Similarly, strategies of microfinance promote financial inclusion by winnowing out 'those too poor or too economically inactive to participate', employing a range of technologies to construct and maintain boundaries between the economically active and the underproductive poor.[82] As Moreno concluded in reference to microcredit as a strategy of poverty alleviation in the Philippines, 'microcredit is applicable only to the enterprising poor. The application of microcredit to other poverty groups who actually need subsidies and social safety nets would be a mistake.'[83] While ostensibly a neutral financial calculus of creditworthiness, such judgments make a moral determination of who is worthy of help and who is not.

Conscious, accountable effort

Alongside the investment of capital to address the needs of the poor, another feature of the development agent explained earlier is that business is willing to be accountable for development outcomes, just as the development tool is accountable for its financial performance and its legal responsibilities. Our discussion of problematisation and beneficiaries has highlighted some of the potential problems with any genuine accountability, not least because current theory and practice does not guarantee that companies understand or are willing to act on what is material to the poor. Moreover, as mentioned in the section on stakeholders, the views of the poor are not prioritised, and where they are sought it is through a process of technical rendering by experts with their own epistemologies.[84] Consequently, in marked contrast to conventional notions of accountability, development agents lack the conditions for being accountable to those who are the intended beneficiaries of their actions.

However, even within the limitations imposed by the structural conditions highlighted in relation to problematisation and beneficiaries, accountability is a weak area of the development agent construct, and certainly the forms of accountability practised are much weaker than in other aspects of business where business has to be accountable to others. In part this is because of the difficulties of assigning causation between the investments companies make and outcomes among the poor,[85] but there is also a reluctance on the part of companies to make claims that could be challenged in court. However, the bigger barrier to accountability is that, as with corporate responsibility in general, companies are primarily interested in the instrumental benefits for the firm and its shareholders.[86] Although some companies make available findings from their internal social and economic impact assessments, at present this type of assessment is more concerned with business as a development tool than as a development agent.[87]

One can detect at the centre of the lack of accountability for development outcomes a paradox that cuts across discussions of business as a development agent. There is not space to do this justice here, but it is what we call the 'Porter Paradox', after the work of management theorist, Michael Porter. In recent years Porter has written about a 'higher form of capitalism', where not all profit is equal and commercial activities with a social purpose can expand the total pool of economic and societal value in society. This is called creating shared value.[88] As Porter to an extent acknowledges, creating shared value is at odds with the theory which made his name, ie competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is earned through cost leadership, differentiation and concentration on particular market segments,[89] and is closely linked to cultures of efficiency and productivity that dominate managerial thinking. It excludes many social and environmental impacts, and is blamed by some for leading to unsustainable growth that exploits the poor. It has also helped create some of the key indicators that companies are held to account by, for instance by financial analysts. The Porter Paradox, therefore, is that companies are rigorously held to account for maintaining their competitive advantage, even as this greatly restricts the actions they can take as a development agent. The response to this is that not all companies should engage in creating shared value, and those which do will find that it aids their competitive advantage. As yet, this is an a priori assertion.

There are successful companies that have taken alternative approaches to efficiency and productivity, and created a wider pool of value in the process (eg Lincoln Electric, renowned for its guaranteed employment policy[90]), while companies such as Patagonia have reincorporated themselves as 'benefit corporations' legally required to create general benefit for society as well as for shareholders. It may be that such examples will inspire others to consider the accountability dimension of being a development agent but at present these are very much the exception, and for most companies the Porter Paradox is another trap that hinders them from becoming conscious and accountable agents.

Conclusion: a new generation of development agents?

There appears to be a growing number of commercial enterprises taking development issues into consideration as part of their operations. They are a small minority compared with the number of companies performing the role of the development tool, but they include multinational companies, large international and national companies, and a host of smaller enterprises, many of which were founded on the principle that for-profit entities can deliver positive developmental outcomes. The array of initiatives is broad and falls into a variety of categories, but common to them all is a consciousness that business can deploy its capital for development ends. This is fundamentally different from the use of others' funds to implement development projects, or the use of a company's surplus for philanthropic purposes.

To distinguish such efforts from the development tool role undertaken by other companies, we have used the term 'development agent'. It complements the predominant neoliberal development paradigm, and on current evidence seems likely to be of growing significance for as long as that paradigm flourishes. However, empirical studies show that we need to be cautious about the developmental efficacy of development agent approaches. Not only does their impact tend to be assessed in terms of the instrumental value to business rather than to the poor and marginalised, but the very notions of the poor, poverty, beneficiary, and development worthiness are being constructed around what is material, instrumental and comprehensible to business. In the process the nature of the poor's relationship to development is changing in a powerful shift in kind-making wherein, for instance, people are no longer recipients but customers and agents. It is tempting to look at this shift from a moralistic perspective, as something good or bad, and the role of business is certainly often viewed in this way. However, one does not have to take a stand about whether we are shifting from a better conceptualisation of development to a worse one or vice versa to understand the importance of the fact that a shift is taking place that is influenced by a managerialist, capitalist and populist logic. (For the historical precedents, see Kothari in this issue.) Although this shift is populated with examples of private enterprise demonstrating a pro-poor awareness, the meaning of pro-poor is defined with reference to the normative biases of business and endorsed by private and non-private sector agents that not only fail to reflexively consider the consequences of this, but show no appetite for holding business to account for the outcomes.

Two questions arise from this. First, if the normative conditions that prescribe what business does as a development agent cannot be changed because

they are structurally embedded, can anything be done to increase the pro-poor elements of initiatives? This is something that could usefully drive a future research agenda, so that we move from a focus on justifying or criticising business's engagement as a development agent to an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of ideas such as BBC.

Second, and more radically, is it feasible to develop a Mark II (variant or improved) model of the development agent where issues such as pro-poor primacy and accountability are foregrounded? The characteristics of capital, pro-poor primacy and accountability need not change, but there would be two fundamental differences between the Mark II model and its forerunners. First, although it would continue to be a profitable enterprise employing its own capital to optimise development outcomes through commercial activities, its decisions would be based on what the poor would choose. It would, for instance, be likely to include job creation and retention, inclusion and helping people build their capabilities and/or their capital assets (eg social capital). Its products would be selected because they were socially and environmentally positive, as well as providing an acceptable financial return to investors. Overall, its business model would be developed so that it was resilient to the social, economic and environmental cycles that affect business sustainability, and it would be responsive to the needs of the poor as producers and consumers.

There are elements here that are complemented by emerging ideas such as impact investing and benefit corporations. Such ideas are still at the gestation stage but they highlight the need for a congruent and supportive environment of the kind that would lift the development agent out of the trap of the Porter Paradox. Such an environment would require changes to company law to free Mark II agents from the fiduciary and other constraints of mainstream company law. They would also require alternative forms of finance of the kind starting to be seen in impact investing, blended capital, patient capital, venture philanthropy and social venture capital. However, the changes are not simply a matter of replacing the old with the new. Financing the Mark II model implies a renewed role for international finance institutions, especially given the fall in foreign direct investment since 2007. History tells us that the emergence of new business models depends greatly on input from incumbent industries and companies,[91] and this is an area missing from current research. In the second difference from its forerunners, the Mark II model would require the rule of law to protect companies from arbitrary actions by other parties, and to protect citizens from pro-business zealotry.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the feasibility of a Mark II model of the development agent, but it is important to highlight that it is different from what is currently being practised and often held up as an exemplar. The Mark I development agent has had success in engaging business in the issues of poverty and marginalisation, but it has done so by requiring that the primary intended beneficiaries conform to the requirements of business. A Mark II model would continue to encourage commercial enterprise, but it would be built around and judged upon what it achieved for the primary beneficiaries, who to date have been incidental to acting out the role of development agent.

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Notes

1. The discussion of Fairtrade is based on two multi-sited studies of Fairtrade (tea and flowers) conducted in Kenya from 2004 to 2007. Each study entailed interviews with smallholders, wage employees and industry stakeholders in Kenya, as well as with 'ethical consumers', companies, NGOs, and Fairtrade organisations in Europe. Evidence on BOP initiatives is based on two research projects – the CARE Bangladesh Rural Sales Programme (2008–10) and Avon South Africa (2008–11) – which examined the impact of BOP entrepreneurship on poor women's economic empowerment. Both included interviews with micro-entrepreneurs and their customers, government and civil society stakeholders, as well as participant observation and videography. The paper is also informed by extensive fieldwork conducted on CSR by the authors over the period of 1997–2007.
2. Cowen and Shenton, *Doctrines of Development*, 50.
3. McMichael, "Changing the Subject," 3; and Rankin, "Manufacturing Rural Finance."
4. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*.
5. Rodrik, "Goodbye Washington Consensus"; and Collier, *The Bottom Billion*.
6. Ballinger and Olsson, *Behind the Swoosh*; INGI, "Unjust but Doing It!"; and Morrison and Delaney, "Marine Pollution."
7. Vogel, *The Market for Virtue*; Jenkins et al., *Corporate Responsibility and Labour Rights*; and Kolk et al., "International Codes of Conduct".
8. Ponte et al., *Governing through Standards*.
9. See O'Rourke, "Outsourcing Regulation"; Bendell and Kearins, "The Political Bottom Line"; Hughes, "Learning to Trade Ethically"; and Prieto-Carron, "Women Workers."
10. Locke et al., "The Promise and Perils of Private Voluntary Regulation"; and Mosley, *Labor Rights and Multinational Production*.
11. Knudsen, "Company Delistings"; and Baccaro and Mele, "For Lack of Anything Better?"
12. Newell and Frynas, "Beyond CSR?"; and Reed and Reed, "Partnerships for Development."
13. Kramer and Kania, "Changing the Game."
14. See Blowfield and Dolan, "Outsourcing Governance" on Fairtrade; Prahalad and Hart, "The Fortune at the Bottom" on BOP; and Jackson and Nelson, *Profits with Principles* on social enterprise.
15. See Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*; and Wilson, *Make Poverty Business*.
16. Noyoo, "Corporate Social Responsibility"; and Frynas, *Corporate Social Responsibility*.
17. See Kolk et al., "Reviewing a Decade of Research."
18. See Brett, "Fairtrade, Fair-Trade, Fair Trade" for Whole Foods; and Blowfield and Murray, *Corporate Responsibility* for Vodafone/Safaricom.

19. McKenna and Braithwaite, "Large Corporations and Obstacles to Peace."
20. "The Company File."
21. Blowfield and Dolan, "Fairtrade Facts and Fancies."
22. Blowfield, "Business and Poverty Reduction."
23. Blowfield, *Ethical Trade*; Freidberg, *The Contradictions of Clean*; and Archer and Fritsch, "Global Fair Trade."
24. Fig. *Corporations and Moral Purpose*; and Utting, "The Struggle for Corporate Accountability."
25. Ruggie, "Reconstituting the Global Public Domain"; and Vogel, *The Market for Virtue*.
26. Salomon, "AIDS is Risky Business".
27. Nelson, *Leveraging the Development Impact*.
28. Roy, *Poverty Capital*, 5.
29. Ibid., 6.
30. Richey and Ponte, *Brand Aid*.
31. Roy, *Poverty Capital*; Collier, *The Bottom Billion*; and Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom*.
32. WBCSD, "Inclusive Business is Key"; and Kinsley, *Creative Capitalism*.
33. Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism"; and Mosse, *Cultivating Development*.
34. UNDP, *Human Development Report*.
35. Roy, "Ethical Subjects," 110.
36. See Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession*; Ferguson and Gupta, "Spatializing States"; and Rankin, "Governing Development."
37. Ferguson, "Formalities of Poverty."
38. Roy, *Poverty Capital*, 32.
39. See Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch, *The Economics of Microfinance*; Nelson and Pound, *A Review of the Impact of Fairtrade*; and Ansari et al., "Impact at the 'Bottom'."
40. Sen, "Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom."
41. Bruton's review of leading management journals found that only 11 articles published between 1989 and 2010 contained terms related to poverty. Bruton, "Business and the World's Poorest Billion."
42. See Hall et al., "Entrepreneurship and Innovation" for BOP; Raynolds et al., "Fair Trade" for Fairtrade; and Hermes and Lensink, "Microfinance: Its Impact" for microfinance.
43. Lewis and Mosse, "Encountering Order and Disjuncture," 6; and McMichael, "Changing the Subject," 3.
44. Blowfield and Dolan, "Fairtrade Facts and Fancies."
45. Schwittay, "The Marketization of Poverty," S71.
46. Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine*; Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Li, *The Will to Improve*; and Mosse, *Cultivating Development*.
47. Li, *The Will to Improve*.
48. Ibid., 7.
49. Cf. Boyd, "Ways of Seeing."
50. Rose, cited in Li, *The Will to Improve*, 35.
51. See Mosse, "Global Governance"; Escobar, *Encountering Development*; and Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine*.
52. Li, *Neo-liberal Strategies of Government*, 4.
53. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*; and Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
54. World Economic Forum, *The Next Billions*, 6.
55. Quoted in ibid, 51.
56. Basheer, "The Handwashing Initiative," para. 1.
57. Cf. Li, "Practices of Assemblage and Community," 267.
58. Berlan and Dolan, "Of Red Herrings."
59. McMichael, "Changing the Subject," 3.
60. Kuriyan et al., "Consumption, Technology, and Development."
61. University of Oxford, "The 'Bottom of the Pyramid'".
62. Cross and Street, "Anthropology at the Bottom," 6.
63. Taylor and Buttel, "How Do We Know?," 405–406.
64. Roy, "Ethical Subjects," 107.
65. World Economic Forum, *The Next Billions*, 17; Viswanathan, "A Micro-level Approach"; and Hart and London, "Developing Native Capability."
66. Corporate Citizenship, *Inclusive Business*, 14.
67. See also Elyachar, "Next Practices."
68. Kashyap, *Rural Marketing*, 77.
69. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 2.
70. Cf. Boyd, "Ways of Seeing."
71. Roy, *Poverty Capital*.
72. Dolan, "The New Face of Development."
73. Roy, "Ethical Subjects," 1.
74. Ivo, "The Redefinition," 81; and Rankin, "Manufacturing Rural Finance."

75. Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, "Re-siting Corporate Responsibility"; and Schwittay, "The Financial Inclusion Assemblage."
76. Shell Foundation, "Enterprise Solutions," 12.
77. Ibid., 207.
78. Dolan, "The New Face of Development."
79. Anagnost, "Strange Circulations," 510; and Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, "Re-siting Corporate Responsibility," 29.
80. Ivo, "The Redefinition," 82.
81. Mutersbaugh, "Ethical Trade and Certified Organic."
82. Schwittay, "The Financial Inclusion Assemblage," 395. See also Roy, *Poverty Capital*, 99; and Rankin, "Governing Development."
83. Moreno, *Good Governance in Microcredit*, i.
84. Blowfield, "Reasons to be Cheerful"; and Lund-Thomsen, "Assessing the Impact."
85. Barrientos and Smith, "Do Workers Benefit?"
86. Margolis and Walsh, "Misery Loves Companies."
87. See Clay, *Exploring the Links*; and Kapstein, *Measuring Unilever's Economic Footprint*.
88. Porter and Kramer, "The Big Idea."
89. Porter, *Competitive Strategy*.
90. Koller, *Spark*.
91. Perez, *Technological Revolutions*.

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