

# **Remaking Africa's Informal Economies: Youth, Entrepreneurship and the Promise of Inclusion at the Bottom of the Pyramid**

**Catherine Dolan (SOAS) and Dinah Rajak (University of Sussex)**

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, urban youth have emerged as a major focus in development agendas. At times condemned as a lost generation of deprived, restless agents of lawlessness, at others celebrated as resilient, creative, flexible catalysts of grass-roots capitalism, they are the subject of contradictory moral discourses that paint them as both the obstacle and panacea to development. Prospects of formal employment in Africa's shrinking blue collar sector have receded, leaving the growing population of urban youth at the margins of formal markets, reliant on the 'second economy', a vast reservoir of energy to be simultaneously contained and converted into appropriate human capital. With hopes of formal jobs fading fast (together with the commitment of governments to provide them), the quest for 'inclusive markets' that incorporate Africa's youth has become a key focus of national and international development efforts, with so-called bottom of the pyramid (BoP) initiatives (Prahalad, 2004) increasingly seen as a way to draw the continent's poor into new networks of global capitalism (Rajak, 2011; Eade and Sayer, 2006; Blowfield and Dolan, 2014). Cast variously as enterprising solutions to poverty, inclusive business or micro-enterprise, BoP initiatives champion youth (and women) as the untapped frontier of enterprising energy, an army of aspirant entrepreneurs who serve at the vanguard of economic growth and poverty reduction by selling goods and services door-to-door. The BoP win-win promises to conjure individual agency from economic disenfranchisement, offering up entrepreneurship in place of employment. Crucially, it is a moral mission that not only catalyses the transformation of the individual into industrious entrepreneurial citizen, but charges them with the responsibility of bringing about a second order of moral transformation, that is, serving the wider societal project

of ‘good growth’, a double moral injunction for the ‘poor to help themselves [*in order* to help] the economy’ (Elyachar, 2002: 500).

This celebration of grass-roots capitalism is not new (see for example Blim, 2005), nor is the elevation of the twin targets of micro-entrepreneurship (with which development has had a very long engagement) and youth as the embodiment of development. What is of particular interest, we suggest, is that while this new paradigm of development places the ‘raw entrepreneurial energy of the people’ (Chang, 2010: 53) at the heart of economic growth, we see a significant shift from earlier framings of African entrepreneurialism in which it was cast as innate (even indigenous), needing only to be unleashed<sup>1</sup>, to an emphasis on training, disciplining and transformation, driven as much from without as from within. A key focus now, is on the *making* of the micro-entrepreneur as a pivotal economic agent that must be brought into being through the assistance of external agencies. While the entrepreneurial spirit may reside in all, liberating the inner entrepreneur is not a matter of simply removing the constraints on market access and thereby ‘democratizing the market’. But rather what we find here is a great emphasis on training at a practical, psychological and moral level to produce this army of entrepreneurs who are enjoined to relinquish the quest for formal employment and go from ‘job-seeker’ to ‘job-creator’. The entrepreneur emerges as both beneficiary and catalyst, producer and product of this new economy of development.

The result of this focus on ‘producing’ entrepreneurs (and entrepreneurialism), has been the advent of a range of practical new enterprise initiatives (commonly driven by multinational business) which aim to galvanise a generation of ‘precocious entrepreneurs’, animating individual aspirations to ‘make good on the promises of the free market’ (newly re-rendered as the *inclusive* market) (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 308). This vision of a personalised economy of development is certainly compelling, shifting the focus from macro-economic restructuring to a more humanized focus on individual self-actualization. Autonomy, ingenuity, self-mastery, home-grown innovation, and freedom from the dependence of aid and welfare, are just some of

the moral and social goods that this discourse of new entrepreneurship in development lays claim to as both the driver and product.

It is no surprise then that youth entrepreneurship has gained such traction among a broad constellation of actors. From national governments to international financial institutions, donor agencies and NGOs, from big business to start-ups, diverse actors with varying interests, are rallying behind the potential of BoP enterprise to discipline, and at the same time unleash a new generation of African micro-entrepreneurs. Out of this constellation, novel partnerships and hybrids are emerging as the vehicles for stimulating and leveraging the productive power of youth entrepreneurship and facilitating access to market opportunities. Through an ethnographic case study of one such hybrid, a social enterprise aimed at youth empowerment in Kenya, this paper examines the values, expectations, material practices and outcomes of the entrepreneurial project. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in 2012-2013 with youth entrepreneurs, we trace the processes and routines of individual and collective ‘transformation’ that the mission of (self-) empowerment through micro-enterprise seeks to bring about.<sup>2</sup>

Operating at the borders of hope and despair, we ask to what extent do these schemes deliver meaningful possibilities of inclusion and mobility through market opportunity, or merely the elusive (and highly exclusive) hope of success (James, 2011: 334)? We suggest that if we look beyond the allure of entrepreneurial possibility we find a model of economic development that depends almost entirely on consumption – or more specifically retail - as the engine of a jobless growth, offering contingent opportunity in place of secure employment. While the development discourse of BoP entrepreneurship with its heroic self-starter is enticing, the life it conjures and validates is risk-ridden and precarious, spinning survivalism into resilience, and ‘getting by’ into resourcefulness, leaving individuals responsible for seeking ‘their own *individual* solutions to the *socially* produced troubles’ (Bauman, 2004: 90).

We begin, in the first section, by looking at the broader backdrop of mass joblessness, rapid urbanisation, an expanding young population and informal markets, against which BoP

enterprise has emerged as a key strategy for turning social crisis into economic opportunity. We then turn to our case study to explore the concrete processes, technologies and rituals of training and socialisation through which the values, skills and opportunities of BoP business are transmitted and embedded, converting ‘yesterday’s “criminal” into tomorrow’s “entrepreneur”’ (Heron, 2011: 2). We argue that, while such systems are meant to bring those below the poverty line above it, the ‘line’ is reified and reinforced through a range of discursive and strategic practices that actively construct and embed distinctions between the past and the future, valuable and valueless, idle and productive. In the final section we consider how (and whether) these broader ideals of entrepreneurship are internalised as personal expectations of ‘making it’ among those who have been recruited to the ranks of young entrepreneurs. Ultimately, we ask, to what extent these aspirations translate into experiences of material success and mobility, or persist as dreams deferred.

## **2. A Trinity of Despair (and Hope): Urbanisation, Unemployment and Youth Enterprise**

Two decades of jobless growth across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, but most significantly in those countries feted as the continent’s engines of growth (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya) has left young people with little meaningful hope of formal, let alone, secure employment. As Meagher (this issue) highlights, the reduction in jobs has disproportionately affected young job-seekers, with the rate of youth unemployment across Africa on average twice that of the adult population. In Kenya, young people between the ages of 15 and 34 make up 80% of the 2.3 million unemployed, while 15-29 year olds account for around 30% of those categorized by the OECD as ‘poor’ (OECD nd). The importance of these statistics, and the crisis they portend, became apparent in the nation’s post 2007 election violence, when the ‘youth problem’ figured prominently in the conflagration that erupted across the country (World Bank Country Social Analysis, 2007).<sup>3</sup> As Page (2012: 5) warns, the social and political ramifications of chronic mass joblessness are manifest: ‘Africa is not creating the number of jobs needed to absorb the 10-12

million young people entering its labour markets each year, and as recent events in North Africa have shown, lack of employment opportunities in the face of a rapidly growing, young labour force can undermine social cohesion and political stability’.

Indeed the problem of youth unemployment, as both economic and social crisis, is intimately linked with that of rapid, unplanned urbanisation, resulting in new exclusionary processes of citizenship that are contiguous with profound spatial inequalities (Robinson, 1997). Over the past 20 years, rural poverty and conflict have driven migrants to urban areas across Africa, and the rate of urbanisation (the highest in the developing world at 3.5%) shows no signs of slowing over the next 20 years (Ncube, 2012). More than 70 per cent of Africa’s urban population lives in slums - around 200 million people - the majority of whom are between the ages of 15 and 24 (Palitza, 2013). Kenya is no exception: Nairobi is home to approximately 2.5 million slum dwellers, 60% of the cities’ population, tightly clustered in about 200 informal settlements (Kibera, 2013<sup>4</sup>). Lacking in basic infrastructure and services – sewerage, waste management, workable roads, water and power, as well as clinics, schools and security services – these informal conurbations are both literally and figuratively ‘off the grid’. As spaces marked by the absence of formal state presence and development planning, they are viewed commonly in public and political discourse as repositories of lawlessness, crime and squalor, re-engaging a centuries-old ‘fear that the accumulation of the ‘redundant’ inside the cities would reach a critical point of self-combustion’ (Bauman, 2004: 37). Yet, alongside the commonplace fear of slums as a threat to social and political order, we find a contrary representation of informal settlements as sites of market opportunities, created precisely through their abandonment by formal development processes. The combination of chronic impermanence and lack of jobs is seen to open novel possibilities for the private sector to fill the void, offering consumable products in place of services or infrastructure (for example solar lamps instead of power lines) and entrepreneurial opportunities in place of jobs for those willing to sell them (Cross, 2013; Redfield, 2012; Dolan and Roll, 2013). Such entrepreneurial opportunities are converting

Kenya's growing youth population from a liability to an opportunity (Obonyo 2013), as new models empowerment through enterprise bring unemployed youth to the market, and market thinking to young people.

The emphasis on re-siting youth as a reservoir of entrepreneurial talent has neatly aligned with efforts afoot to “modernize” and “upgrade” Africa’s “underproductive” informal economies (Tokman, 2007), where as much as 72% of Sub-Saharan Africa workers can be found (Sparks and Barnett, 2010). Departing from earlier depictions of the informal economy as a space of disorder and dysfunction, a haven of tax evaders and illicit enterprises that were a “drag on growth,” informality has been re-scripted as a potential palliative to Africa’s development ills (Dolan and Roll, 2013; Meagher, 2013; Elyachar, 2005; see also De Soto 2000). Aid agencies, regional development banks, and national governments seek not to contain Africa’s spaces of informality but to free them, seeking ways to unlock and redirect their pool of ‘natural’ assets – resourcefulness, ingenuity, opportunism and socially-embedded webs of economic exchange – into new avenues of job creation and economic renewal. A new model of inclusive business – the bottom of the pyramid – offered one such way, creating new markets for goods and services while simultaneously capturing and capitalizing on the individual energy and ‘collective social capital’ of Africa’s burgeoning informal economies.

### **3. Moving the Line: Entrepreneurship at the BoP**

Originally conceived by the late CK Prahalad in his seminal work, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits* (2004), the BoP proposition contends that multinational corporations facing saturated markets in industrialized nations can offset sclerotic growth rates, earn profits and reduce poverty by marketing goods and services to regions excluded from global markets. This conceptualisation, most often associated with corporate giants such as P&G and Unilever that market consumer goods through ‘door-to-door’ rural distribution systems, was initially acclaimed as an ‘innovative’ marriage of profit and poverty reduction, though has

recently come under criticism as a way to buoy consumer markets at the expense of the poor (Karnani, 2007). In response, Simanis and Hart (2008) developed the BoP 2.0 protocol, a model focused less on growing profits than fostering collaborative networks between the private sector and poor communities.

In both cases, however, BoP initiatives operate across multiple registers, coalescing an array of actors, materials, knowledge practices, and interests. BoP enterprises circulate objects of both moral and commercial value, ranging from portable water filtration systems, nutrition supplements, and cook stoves to cosmetics, shampoo and Coca-Cola (Cross, 2013). The geographies it traverses encompass sprawling urban zones of social abandonment (Biehl, 2005) and rural communities living off the grid of infrastructure and beyond the hand the state. It has “no central, controlling corporate apparatus” (Welker, nd:7) but constellates firms of varying sizes and levels of capitalization from global manufacturing giants to small social enterprises (see review by Kolk et al., 2014).

As a model of development, the BoP is a compelling proposition, promising to enfold the poor into new networks of inclusive capitalism. Yet while seductive in its promise, the phenomenon has attracted relatively little attention among scholars of development. Most analysis, the bulk of which is located in business and management studies, frames engagement at the BoP in instrumental terms, describing how firms like Hewlett-Packard and SK Johnson have turned to ‘frontier’ markets to generate a ‘pro-poor’ corporate revenue stream (Hart, 2005; London and Hart, 2011; Prahalad, 2004). Yet as an emergent literature in anthropology suggests (Elyachar, 2012; Schwittay 2011; Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, 2011; Cross and Street, 2009), the rapid diffusion of BoP capitalism raises critical questions of whether, how and with what effects market-led development is assimilating informal economies into the ambit of global markets.

This paper redirects inquiry from the economic benefits accrued to firms operating at the BoP, that is the question of ‘impact’, to the cultural economy of BoP entrepreneurship, focusing on how business seeks to convert the latent dynamism and creativity of Africa’s informal

economies into a usable resource for economic development, by offering youth opportunities to sell a range of products (healthcare, hygiene, consumer goods, energy, food, financial services) to ‘poor’ consumers. Premised on Avon Corporation’s model of door-to-door sales, such ‘last mile distribution systems,’ from Solar Sisters and Living Goods in Uganda, to Health Keepers in Ghana, Yogurt Mamas in Tanzania and Women First Mozambique, are now common features of Africa’s development landscape, where a growing number of institutions (e.g., World Bank, USAID, DfID etc.), support private sector engagement as a way to repurpose ‘informal,’ ‘subsistence,’ or otherwise ‘underproductive’ workers (see World Bank, 2001): Here, we focus on the opportunities provided by one such initiative – Catalyst<sup>5</sup> – a social enterprise that provides unemployed youth with entrepreneurial opportunities in Kawangware, one of Africa's biggest slums. Situated on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kawangware is a landscape of constrained possibilities—a labyrinth of makeshift homes where nearly 300,000 residents live ‘off the grid’ of running water, basic sanitation and electricity (Plan USA, 2012), crafting livelihoods through hustling, peddling and economic ingenuity. Youth under the age of 35, who comprise the majority of the slum’s population, face few prospects for employment, a crisis Catalyst’s director described as a ‘a major problem all over the world’ but one that crystallised in Kenya when idle, ‘impressionable’ youth were readily co-opted into violence following the contested 2007 election. ‘It became clear,’ she said, that Kenya’s under-utilised youth were not only a ‘wasted resource’ for national development but were fomenting crime and civil unrest in the country (Rooparanine, 2013). They were, she suggested, eating away at Kenya’s future, siphoning value from a national project of economic and political renewal.

### *The Catalyst Vision*

Catalyst’s mission is to repurpose Kawangware’s reservoir of idle street youth, leveraging their resourcefulness to sell life-improving products in slum communities. Like other BoP distribution systems, Catalyst seeks to mine the entrepreneurial capital honed in Africa’s ‘*économie de la*



débrouillardise', what MacGaffey (1991) terms the self-reliance or DIY economy, where livelihoods are crafted through a mélange of hustling, peddling and economic ingenuity. As the director of Catalyst explained, the creativity and cunning required to operate as a trader, vendor or hawker in Kawangware's 'hand to mouth economy' is a font of business potential: not only are there millions of unemployed youth endowed with 'incredible raw sales skills' but they are uniquely equipped to solve a 'distribution problem that exists all over the developing world' by selling life-changing goods to untapped, hard to reach markets (cited by Roopnarine, 2013).

Catalyst offers sales training and the prospect of a job to un- and under-employed youth, primarily single parents and 'street kids' between the ages of 18 and 24 who have an intimate familiarity with the nuances, economic strategies and social relations of the slum. Upon successful completion of a two-week training course and evidence of a guarantor, entrepreneurs are eligible to access \$75 (£50) worth of products on credit, an arrangement Catalyst describes as 'teaching people how to fish and ... selling fishing rods at the same time' (cited by Miesen, 2013). The organization operates a daily consignment model: each morning youth arrive at the office and select an item(s) from an assortment of 30 or so 'life-changing products' such as solar lamps, clean-burning cook stoves, eco-friendly charcoal briquettes, and reusable sanitary products, returning the next day to either exchange or replenish their consignment (Interview, 30 April 2013). Agents earn a commission of between 10 and 20 percent on revenue of the products they sell and a tiered bonus during their first three months.

Catalyst, however, promotes less an opportunity to sell than an entrepreneurial future, a promise of upward mobility that forms the currency of recruitment and business strategies. As the director of Catalyst explained: 'From the beginning we've wanted our sales agents to actually think of themselves as entrepreneurs...they don't just wake up and sell a product. Every day they need to be making decisions on what product they can sell and where they can sell it.' Though recruits generally come from 'the base'—an informal territory youth occupy in the slum—they are exhorted to define themselves as self-starting entrepreneurs who will find success as up-and-

coming businesspeople. As 21 year old Susan explained, Catalyst was attractive because it offered training and business skills that she could parlay into starting her own business; she would no longer be ‘making do’ through survivalist activities but would be ‘moving up,’ ‘crossing the line’ as a respectable agent of capitalism (Interview, 20 June 2013).

Though Susan conjures the line as a separation between an idle past and prosperous future, the livelihoods of Kawangware’s inhabitants are determined by the very permeability of the lines between informal and formal markets, between the second economy and the kind of formal entrepreneurial activity that is recognised in the new lexicon of BoP business. Yet, as we will explore in the next section, the processes by which aspirant entrepreneurs are recruited, trained and brought into the Catalyst fold aim to sharpen these lines, translating them into normative boundaries which aspiring entrepreneurs are enjoined to cross in order to access the much-anticipated fruits of the ‘inclusive’ market.

#### **4. The Entrepreneurial Conversion**

At the centre of this project of economic progress and social improvement through is an ideal entrepreneur, one who can respond to the moral exhortation to ‘help oneself’ by embracing the opportunities provided by business initiatives such as Catalyst, to become, as Gordon (1991: 44) puts it, ‘an entrepreneur of himself or herself’. But before aspirant youth can seize these opportunities, they must be acculturated into the values and virtues of maximisation necessary to equip them for market enterprise. As the director of Catalyst explained, youth need to be ‘rigorously shaped’ to serve at the frontline of BoP markets: ‘They might not be what traditionally we consider employable but after learning how to wake up on time and show up on time and report to a manager and, you know, talk to customers and present themselves, they are...’ Indeed, though informal economies are often celebrated for their natural affinity for entrepreneurship, what the Shell Foundation (2005) terms their ‘business DNA,’ in practice

entrepreneurial subjectivities and the attendant virtues of responsibility, competition, and risk-taking are whetted.

This occurs through discursive practices that valorize enterprising qualities and promise self-transformation to those who will ‘pull themselves up by their boot straps’ (Mayoux, 2002: 23), as well as through management technologies that seek to inscribe and hone the requisite traits of industry, market-discipline and entrepreneurial distinction to succeed in business. In the following, we explore how these techniques—rituals of readiness (training and role plays); professionalization (bodily discipline); and performance (monitoring and metrics) seed new norms, dispositions and habits among ‘informal’ youth in the slum, creating a cadre of entrepreneurs to drive forward BoP’s vision of inclusive capitalism.

#### *Rituals of Readiness: Training and Role Plays*

In order to attain the emancipatory and transformative power of the market, a conversion is required and social enterprises like Catalyst often devote considerable resources to fostering entrepreneurial readiness, tutoring workers’ in the principles, goals, and ethics of the market (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, 2011). At the heart of this endeavour, exclaimed one of Catalyst’s lead entrepreneurs is ‘Training, training, training!’. The didactic promise extended to potential recruits relies not solely (or even chiefly) in the lure of immediate material benefits, but in its derivative values: the intangibles of self-empowerment, infusion of the entrepreneurial spirit, and the tantalizing prospect of ‘making it’. Like many such youth entrepreneur schemes, Catalyst training combines the more prosaic tools and techniques of frontline selling and fluency in the salesperson’s patter (knowing the product, reading the customer), with the loftier goals of self-actualization. Trainers kick off this process of socialization, underscoring the importance of self-knowledge as the basis for self-realisation:

*Who are you? Are you a choleric or sanguine or a phlegmatic...? We would like to know who you are...Who knows self? Who knows self? [Silence] I am waiting for you to tell me who knows who they are?... There are four groups of personalities. You have to know where you fall under. .*

The claim, according to Catalyst trainers and managers, is that recruits do not simply learn how to sell Catalyst products door-to-door; rather, they transform themselves. ‘Making the economic habitus’, as Bourdieu suggests, is not a process of adaptation but of conversion (Bourdieu 2000: 23), in this case to an entrepreneurial rationality: a spirit of calculation and competition, individual self-maximisation, autonomy from the sticky web of dependence on others, self-discipline and, at the same time, risk-taking and opportunism.

The transformation from jobless youth to young entrepreneur is imagined as an overtly moral transformation: ‘the guy came to me and said, we want to change your life, if you are interested in changing your life we can do something with you,’ a Catalyst entrepreneur recounted, explaining how he had joined. In turn, entrepreneurs present their own stories as testimonies of former lives of grift and hawking forsaken in favour of the redemption offered by true entrepreneurship. These accounts serve as allegorical parables of self-improvement and salvation for future recruits, delineating what is to be considered ‘work’, while delegitimising petty trade in the informal economy as unproductive, and even economically subversive. Built on the moral certainty of binaries that juxtapose productivity with informality and twin idleness with vice as the chief obstacle to personal and societal progress, these narratives resonate with a strongly Victorian condemnation of indolence as the source of under-development (Smiles, 2002 [1859]). This is exemplified in Silas’ story as he told it:

*People in the community were used to seeing me idling around...these days it is not easy to find me because when I leave the house at 7.30 am...I will go to the field and I will market the products as much as I can...people see you as a different person when they see that you can work. They look at you as someone who is hard working. They look at you as someone who is responsible and independent...I have avoided so many bad things I could do in the village. Let me give an example*

*with today...I left home very early, I came to Catalyst and I will get back home very late in the evening, I will take a bath when I get home and take a rest unlike the previous days when I used to think of so many evil things as a result of being idle* (Interview, 27 June 2013).

Indeed Silas' juxtaposition of industry and idleness and clock time and 'African time' is a key marker of the entrepreneurial transition. Aspirant entrepreneurs are expected to master the mechanics of timekeeping, calibrating schedules, prioritising tasks, adhering to deadlines, and making rational decisions about the temporal flow of their days, by for example, spending money on a *matatu* instead of walking or exercising self-control over how long they choose to linger in conversation. Punctuality is taken as a marker of a keen eye, or strong grip, on the future (Bourdieu, 2000: 28), drawing a symbolic and material "boundary" between an aimless past and an abundant future (Rose, 1999). Drilling on time-management and future planning plays a key role in training sessions, both as markers of professionalism and a broader self-mastery: 'If you are told to come to work at 9 am... what time should you be here? You should be here by 9 am. When some of you come in at 9.30 am... if we entertain you then we will be entertaining a bad habit... we are preparing you... *we are preparing you not to be good for Catalyst but for yourself*' (Training, 21 June 2013). Time-keeping is one of the more material attributes of the entrepreneurial habitus - alongside dress, gait, style and speech - that Catalyst agents must adopt and perform as markers of their graduation to the status of entrepreneur. At the same time, alongside the celebrated values of self-mastery and discipline, training sessions stressed the somewhat less romantic virtues of grit, sweat, and discipline. Though BoP initiatives truck in the promise of self-transformation, they do not, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 313) suggest of millennial capitalism, dangle 'the allure of accruing wealth from nothing.' Trainers reiterated time and again, almost as a mantra, 'you have to be very hardworking and not lazing around,' an injunction that reminded entrepreneurs that the fruits of the BoP dream were bore through toil and endurance. As a Catalyst trainer emphasized:

*What you are going to do is be prepared. When you go home at night practice with your partner, practice with your friends and practice with your family...When you are on a football team you do not just show up and play the game, you practice. Right? So when you go out there practice. Don't just sit there and say 'I am going to be great.' The best people, they work hard in whatever they do to achieve what they want (Training, 21 June 2013).*

At the same time, trainers made clear the responsibility incumbent on trainees to make good on the opportunity Catalyst provides. Should they fail to do so, either because of laziness or incompetence, they have only themselves to blame. The opportunity, trainees were told, was much deeper than merely selling products for Catalyst. Rather, through Catalyst, trainees would learn the essence of self-help itself:

*The opportunity you have and the way you will behave...will connect you to something else. To another thing that might be better. There are so many ways that will open for you while you are still here at Catalyst...what you should know is that I am not training you to be a failure...I am, training you so that you can help yourself (Training, 21 June 2013)*

Entrepreneurs are thus apprenticed in the values and transferable skills to join an emergent cadre of Nairobi's young businesspeople, turned from job-seekers, not merely into employees, but into job-creators (albeit within the short timeframe of a 10 day training course): 'even when I get out of Catalyst I will use the experience and the skills that I will have gained to start up and run my own business', Susan a new recruit explained. Here we see a doubling of the BoP's value proposition; recruits are exhorted not to see the fast cash rewards of peddling solar lanterns as the apotheosis of their entrepreneurial tenure, but rather as a stepping-stone to the much sought after but highly elusive future as a small business owner. This anticipatory future, transfused into entrepreneurs through trainings, has its own productive effects, focusing attention beyond the turbulences of the everyday and rendering failure in the here and now as constitutive of future possibilities.

Helping oneself is also twinned with the broader ethical vision of improving life in the slum, as it is only through selling life-enhancing products that the entrepreneurial self can be actualized. Catalyst trainers presented the role of the newly transformed entrepreneur as an ambassador/evangelist spreading the virtues and opportunities of small business to the ‘community’ through their engagement with customers and through the social benefit of the products themselves. Catalyst represents itself as ‘a solution for a better life’ and its sales agents as brokers of a new BoP trickle down of entrepreneurial values and the promise (if not the reality) of material gain. Using role-play on selling solar chargers, Silas showed how this was to be done:

*Silas: Another thing is that you can use it to charge your phone...*

*Woman 1: So I can use it in my rural home to charge my phone? And I can also use it to charge other people's phone there at a fee?*

*Silas: Yes...It can be a business....*

*Woman 1: I can open up a small shop out there and start up a phone charging business.*

*Silas: As long as you have the sun.*

The emphasis on the mutuality of personal and societal transformation that Silas embraces, however, obscures the panoply of technologies and concrete practices through which self-empowerment is to be materialised. Despite earlier invitations for trainees to reflect on what kind of person they are, to pursue a quest for self-actualisation, in the end, trainees are enjoined to focus on ‘doing’, rather than ‘thinking’ in order to demonstrate their suitability for Catalyst and their readiness to enter the market. On the final day of a training course, the trainer addressed the room of recruits:

*If you want to work say it...Who is still searching within yourself if you are ready to go to the field?*

*[One youth rises up his hand]. You are still thinking? If you are still thinking then I think we will tell you that we are very sorry for having wasted all your time...We are very serious here...I do not want people who are thinking. I want people who are ready to work (Training, 21 June 2013).*

Catalyst draws on a repertoire of corporate management tools such as team building, role-plays and motivational rituals to ensure that doing rather than thinking is patterned into the structure of the day. In the morning youth gather for a 'briefing', where they are called upon to recount the successes and failures of the previous day. Those with sales are singled out, invited to share the algorithm of their success, and recognized with applause from the group. Entrepreneurs then stretch, cultivating their corporeal agility for walking long hours under a hot sun, and before departing partake in a ceremonial bonding (reminiscent of sports teams before a game), placing their hands together and at the count of three raising their hands in unison and chanting 'Catalyst!'. Each day youth re-enact these rituals that aim to reanimate individual drive, and impart a stake in the collective vision of the group.

Similarly, the rituals of readiness include frequent role plays, where participants perform mock sales in a staged setting to give neophyte entrepreneurs an opportunity to rehearse their sales pitch. Though role plays are meant to develop and hone entrepreneurial skills, they also muddy the distinction between discipline and self-improvement. During trainings each trainee assumes a seat alone in the front of the room and improvises a sale to a fictional customer, played by the trainer. At one training session, a steady stream of fledgling entrepreneurs enacted myriad strategies to persuade reluctant customers of the merits of cookstoves or sanitary pads. Though some managed creditable performances, most stumbled to articulate a compelling storyline, inviting heckling from team members and often unforgiving criticism from trainers, who reminded trainees of the fragility of the BoP opportunity: 'In the afternoon we are going out there to sell. Right now I will be eliminating some of you. If you will not be doing it very well today, I will not compromise with you. I want to be left with few people who will deliver. ... You see we are getting less and less as the end approaches.' Indeed, while BoP's 'democratization' of opportunity implies universal inclusion, not all are chosen, as training, role plays and performance metrics aim to sift out the potentially savvy from the lacklustre



entrepreneur, drawing a line between those who generate value and those who are likely to take it away.

### *Professionalism*

This process of classification – stratifying the entrepreneurial cohort through what Aganost terms ‘value coding’ – materialises most visibly in the professionalization of bodily appearance, dress and speech. Deportment crafts a distinction between entrepreneurialism and ‘salesman’: the former associated with professionalism, upward mobility and status, the latter with no status, meagre commissions and hawking, as one agent put it: ‘some think that working as a house help is way better than walking and working as a sales agent’. At trainings youth are told that voices should be loud, projection clear, carriage upright, lest people wonder ‘how the security guard’ let the entrepreneur in. Slouching is disparaged. Smiling and positivity are encouraged, so that entrepreneurs will radiate the transformational possibilities that inhere in the goods they sell. As a supervisor instructed an entrepreneur during a role play, ‘You should look so happy as you are giving them the product, so that when they are getting the product, they will feel like you are giving them a [birthday] present’ (Training, 21 June 2013). One of the main ways professionalism is forged is through deportment, and in particular through the donning of branded uniforms, identification cards and bags. As entrepreneur Maggie put it, you can’t just ‘walk around with your product like a hawker showing it to everyone. You walk like a professional’ (Interview, 16 June 2013). Uniforms, especially, are signature feature of ‘moving up’, signalling the kind of person a BoP entrepreneur is, and conversely, the kind of person they are not (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, 2011). As a Catalyst entrepreneur said, ‘first impressions matter a lot.’ The uniform, she said, gives her clout, makes her look professional, and signals to others that she is trustworthy—not a ‘hawker’ or ‘con man.’ ‘When people see me in uniform’ she said, ‘they think that I have a very good job and earn very good money’, repositioning her as

a 'hardworking' member of society, as someone who is on the 'up and up' (Interview, 20 June 2013).

Indeed among BoP entrepreneurial schemes, 'proper' dress is a synecdoche of market success and is emphasised in organisational communications. As one trainer described, appearance is the most essential 'skill' to doing business: 'When you approach a customer and say this product is Ksh 3,000, the customer will look at you to see if you are dressed as someone who can sell a product at Ksh 3,000,' indicating how deportment not only conveys the respectability of the entrepreneur but signifies the quality of the brands they sell (Training, 21 June 2013). Dress and carriage are also ways the organisation detects entrepreneurial commitment and winnows the enterprising from the apathetic. For example, at one training the trainer scanned participants, assessing their appearance and asking those who met his approval to stand up. His eyes settled on a row of women, 'I have always seen you smartly dressed since you started this training. You too. You and you, and a few of you behind there. But some of you here, you can never dress well.... I will only recruit the youths who are standing. The rest of you will not be qualifying to do the job' (Training, 21 June 2013). Such admonitions reveal the significance of entrepreneurs' bodily capital, not only as a prerequisite for eliciting value through the sale of goods, but as a form of derivative value for the organisation's own reputational capital.

### *Performance*

Underpinning entrepreneurship is the implicit, and at times explicit, claim that the process of conversion involves a shift in mind-set that is both moral and temporal, rejecting the apathy of here-and-now survival for goal-oriented, future thinking, a personal teleology that embodies the modernist preoccupations of classic developmentalist thinking. In contrast to the improvisational, intermittent and piecemeal livelihood activities youth pursue in the slum, BoP entrepreneurship is highly scripted, routinized and temporally ordered. Future planning

structures the flow of the day. Catalyst training emphasises the importance of ‘learning to be goal-oriented’ as a virtue in itself, regardless of whether the goal is achieved, or even achievable. As Stephen, a Catalyst entrepreneur described, he is compelled to set new goals every month even when he has failed to achieve his previous ones. There is also forensic attention on quantification and tracking results. As social scientists have pointed out, numbers are not disinterested forms of knowledge; they convey authority and expertise (Strathern, 2000) and embody powerful social and material effects. At Catalyst, sales numbers reflect the value of the entrepreneur, i.e. their results, but also form the compass that orients entrepreneurs’ daily activities. You must, one entrepreneur said, ‘be able to see it [the goal], you must be able to measure and you must write it down.’ Entrepreneurs commit to personal monthly sales targets, usually between 10,000 and 20,000 Ksh [115 to 230 USD], that are carefully tracked and assessed, as high performers earn accolades as embodiments of efficiency while those with ‘disappointing’ sales face reproach at the ‘one-on-one.’

The one-on-one is a bi-weekly performance appraisal that draws entrepreneurs into the sights of market discipline, on the one hand aiming to spur the productivity of ‘enterprising’ youth and on the other, pulling wayward entrepreneurs back into the fold. Though framed in idioms of collaboration and participation, it is an ambivalent encounter, sometimes sanguine and affirming, other times tense and punitive. For some entrepreneurs the one-on-one casts a shadow of anxiety and disaffection over the days preceding it. One new entrepreneur, Mary, expressed her frustration with the appraisal, complaining that if you haven’t made it half way to your goal by the one-and-one, ‘What do they expect you to do in one week to make sales of 30,000 shillings that you have not been doing in the past three weeks?...It is pressure’ (Interview 28 June 2013). For others, however, the one-on-one was invested with trust and empathy, as concerns were shared, problems resolved and commitment renewed. Reflecting on her most recent one-on-one, Susan said she learned ‘you cannot give up. You should keep up the spirit.

Have it in mind that even when some disappoint you, not everyone will disappoint you’  
(Interview 20 June 2013).

Both targets and the one-on-one afford metrological scrutiny of entrepreneurial competence (von Schnitzler, 2008), bringing hitherto disorderly youth into new forms of economic calculation (Callon, 2009:270). This scrutiny extends to the daily progress chart, where the qualification of ‘enterprising’, ‘ambitious’ and ‘capable’ assumes material form as a set of data points on a spreadsheet, hung pride of place on the wall as you enter the organisation). Though the chart manifests efficiencies and accomplishments (where, what, and how much an entrepreneur sells), it also unmoors the ‘real world’ of selling from the fabric of the urban slum, stripping away the plethora of connections and relations that shape and constrain entrepreneurial success. The capriciousness of consumers, the perils of poor infrastructure, the depleted body, the emotional weight of poverty, and the extent of social networks an entrepreneur has to exploit - all of which condition performance - recede from view. Entrepreneurial fitness becomes a technical means-ends calculation, where revenue is commensurate with performance and the entrepreneur a sum of his/her economic transactions.

Of course, the data do not simply represent ‘facts’, i.e. the productivity of labour, but also surveil entrepreneurs in new ways (see Carrier and Miller, 1998). Describing this, one entrepreneur explained, ‘The chart is updated every day... Every morning they must ask who made sales the previous day. And if you do not rise up your hand then you feel like you are being watched. If two days down the line you do not rise up your hand as having made a sale.... then you will definitely feel like you are being watched.’ It is not only management that watches however, as the progress chart exposes entrepreneurial performance to public view. It allows everyone to ‘see whether you are going up or not,’ becoming the yardstick by which value is measured and an augur for entrepreneurial promise. Individual achievement and success are publicly applauded in daily ritualised performances geared to catalysing internal competition between entrepreneurs. The inscriptions on the chart and the public recognition mirror what

entrepreneurs should think of themselves, but also what others are thinking about them, again, a form of ‘value coding’ (Anagnost, 2006) that reifies the distinction between the responsible, enterprising, and ambitious and those who are not. But, the verdict of not being enough can loom large. It makes you, reflected entrepreneur Silas, ‘have a weird feeling ... when you come to look at this chart and find someone has made a sale and you have not.... I happen to feel that if I sell more I will be more appreciated’ (Interview 27 June 2013). Failure itself, as organisations acknowledge, can be productive (Harford, 2011), motivating lacklustre performers to kick-start their entrepreneurial drive so that ‘everyone will clap’ and they ‘will also be seen from the chart.’ But it can also be dispiriting, as the chart not only passes a judgement in the here and now but is endowed with prophetic power, predicting (and establishing a hierarchy) between those who are likely pull themselves up by their bootstraps and enrich themselves and those who will not.

Indeed, the performance chart, like the trainings and one-on-one is intimately bound up with the broader moral question of who remains within and beyond the domain of inclusive business. As the director of Catalyst told us, ‘you have superstars and you have kind of the average and then you have the bottom ten percent of those that you should be letting go every month.’ This ‘letting go’ and the separations it entails are a constitutive feature of BoP entrepreneurship, as success hinges on bracketing off the ‘economically active’ from the underproductive poor (Roy, 2010: 99; Rankin, 2001). Indeed, as trainers reiterated, trainings were not simply pedagogical; they were competitive selection processes, aimed at culling ‘the best’ to the exclusion of ‘the rest’. The imperative for trainees to demonstrate worthiness as a true entrepreneur, by embracing this competitive and meritocratic individualism was equally stressed: ‘that is why we all go to school, be in the same class and learn the same things but it is one person who will emerge as the number one’ (Training, 21 June 2013). Ultimately the approbation of market competition runs contrary to the language of inclusive markets that promises to draw the marginalised into the embrace of market opportunities rather than creating processes which can further their exclusion, in short, as Mary put it, ‘without sales you aren’t anybody’ (Mary, 28<sup>th</sup>

June 2013). According to this Darwinian logic, failure to sell, or failure to sell in sufficient volume, signifies a deeper failure to make good on the promise of transformation, and the injunction to help oneself, by squandering the opportunities of the market.

## 5. Dreams Deferred

Catalysts' mix of evangelism and management technologies has, to some extent, seeded 'an entrepreneurial mentality' aligned with an expectation of material transformation (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis, 2011). But to what extent is the promise of transformation internalized and fulfilled? The accounts of a number of Catalyst sellers suggest a rather ambivalent picture, the faith in entrepreneurial transformation was tempered by a worldly acknowledgement of the constraints to realising its rewards. Joshua encapsulates this ambivalence. At the outset, he recounted his biography as a moving testament of salvation and conversion, from street child to businessman, from criminality and idleness to the morality and productivity of the true entrepreneur, brought about by the combined agency of Catalyst training and self-mastery:

*I didn't have a job. I used to idle around the streets, steal from people in the market...abuse alcohol and drugs...I would say, what got me encouraged, it is the moral I had when I was coming from the streets. I came out of the streets wanting to change and become a better person...women perceived me as a bad person especially from the market. They knew me from when I was a small boy. I was never a decent person...They saw me sell products that can change lives. They saw I was serious to change and that is how they started buying from me...In my first life I was in the streets. Right now I live in house...Catalyst has changed my life.*

Yet, with a notable change of tone, Joshua undercut this initial expression faith in the exuberant promise of transformation through the Catalyst way, expressing a more pragmatic valuation of his own 'story' as moral and material currency—both to recruit new 'youth agents' and to raise external donor money for the initiative:

*She took a few videos of me, she started selling my story, ...How I live in the streets and how I want to change and I need help, the story sold out well and they started receiving funds ...Then I was put in charge of leading the morning meeting, taking out the white visitors who came; I would take them out to the slums whenever they came...My story really sold (Interview, 26 June 2013)*

Joshua's assessment of the marketability of 'his story' was pointed. After all, as he had commented earlier, in this new economy of development 'everything is sales' – whether the products peddled by Catalyst recruits, or their stories mobilized to sustain the myth of broad-based entrepreneurship. This disjuncture between the anticipated rewards and lived experience of entrepreneurship was reinforced as Joshua went on to speak of the need to maintain the myth of deeper transformation through training, as inducements for new recruits. When he is recruiting, he said, he puts up posters announcing that youth 'are needed urgently for *TRAINING! TRAINING! TRAINING!*', not sales. Most of the youth, he said, "hate to do sales. So if you write it is a sales job, then they will not come. So I tell them the training can help you start and run your own business... I don't tell my fellow youths how it really is down here since they will lose hope' (Interview 21 June 2013). The precariousness of these entrepreneurial promises, and the acknowledgement of trainers themselves that the chances of success may remain elusive to many if not most, alert us to the expediency of a doctrine that emphasises (and even privileges) grit and hard graft over business acumen as a key characteristic of the entrepreneur.

Certainly for many, the dreams of a future animated by entrepreneurial success continued to reside tantalizingly on the horizon, beyond their grasp. Indeed, several entrepreneurs grouched that the chase was hardly worth the effort. James, for example, described how he nursed hopes that Catalyst would enable him to stand on his own two feet but he has found the job wanting. 'I have not' he said, 'been able to do it because the money we receive is very little. You might find you made sales of 76,000 shillings [93 USD] and at the end of the day you will receive 8,000-10,000 [115 USD]... This cannot take you to the end of the month if you are living by yourself

here in Nairobi. You need to eat. You need to pay rent, pay transport and other bills' (Interview 28 June 2013).<sup>6</sup> Mary, who joined Catalyst to save money to open a salon echoed Daniel's frustration. Never mind the salon, she sighed, she's not been able to raise enough to pay a month's rent. Like most of the youth we met, both were careful 'to appreciate' what they did earn, but their hopes and aspirations ran much deeper. They weren't in the BoP market to 'make-do'; they were staking a claim to upward mobility. As Joshua described, 'I dreamt of becoming a musician ... I am a good rapper, I do hip hop music, *kapuka* music and.... I thought one day I will be able to raise enough money to record the music.' But, he lamented, that is a dream in waiting. Maybe when you come back next year, he said, things will be better but today it is still 'a life of hustle.'

## **6. Conclusion**

The BoP concept continues to gain prominence on the development agenda, tendering a new strategy to marry economic growth and the social good under the mantel of inclusive business. SSA has become an inviting frontier for such systems, as capital sets its sights on the continents' vast 'under-served' informal economies, harnessing the entrepreneurial mettle of youth to create new markets for a range of products.

BoP entrepreneurialism evokes a compelling proposition, circulating a vision where market engagement and moral imperatives are naturally aligned and the "efficiency" of the private sector offers a salve for the failures of aid and absent states. In Africa especially, where legions of disenfranchised youth are seen as a flashpoint for instability and unrest, BoP's income earning opportunities are held up as way to stem a brewing social crisis, by transforming idle street youth into productive citizens. Even on the streets of Nairobi's slums, where youth navigate the borders of desire and despair, BoP entrepreneurship is a seductive antidote to a seemingly precarious and uncertain future, a gateway to the inclusionary yet elusive promise of global capitalism. The allure of possibility BoP schemes conjure is why youth like Silas, who have



spent their lives in the hustle, are hedging their bets, curbing pursuit of illicit fast cash for prestige and respectability as a 'legitimate' entrepreneur, seeking the chance to parlay their earnings into a small business of their own, carving out a life where work and consumption walk hand and hand.

For sure, participation in BoP's inclusive market initiatives can bring some entrepreneurs a modest income and social recognition, as well as, in some cases, a sense of autonomy, confidence and self-esteem through the earnings accrued (Dolan and Scott, 2009; Dolan et al., 2012). These benefits and the transformational narratives that accompany them are not easily dismissed in a continent where many experience less an adverse incorporation in the global economy than an exclusion from it (Ferguson, 2005). But though entrepreneurs may emerge, if even tenuously, from the 'shadows' of the slum into recognition as 'legitimate' market actors, their inclusion into BoP circuits of capital hinges on an *ex ante* conversion, as transforming the self is a prerequisite to the realm of hope and possibility the BoP project evokes. Indeed, though these emergent economies of development replace, as Meagher (this issue) notes, old narratives of marginalization with the new orthodoxy of inclusion, this inclusion turns not on populism or entitlement but on the capacity of the entrepreneur to embody and exercise values bestowed through management tutelage. For the discourse of entrepreneurship combines the celebration of 'an age of the daring individual' (Prentice, 2009), with the everyday graft of 'selling, selling, selling' in equal measure. Here we find the figure of the new development entrepreneur, whose moral clout and possibilities for mobility inhere not in a genetic predilection for entrepreneurship ("the entrepreneurial DNA"), but rather in their capacity to master and enact the principles of market discipline. As the paper suggests, though the emphasis on 'producing' entrepreneurs is meant to breed success, bringing those below poverty line above it through new skills, attitudes and a tough love meritocracy, in practice the line itself is crystalized, as fostering distinctions between the productive and unproductive, the professional and hustler, and the enterprising and lazy poor animate the entrepreneurial project.

While enterprise solutions proffer the possibility of redeeming the failure to find gainful employment, responsibility for which is individualised, they shift attention from the failure (and profound inequities) of the economic structure in which their targets exercise limited economic agency. The paradox, of course, is that the experience of entrepreneurship may deliver precisely the opposite of what inclusive business implies, reinforcing the fissures between Africa's redundant urban proletariat and the new swathe of bootstrap capitalists.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Tiffin (1976).
2. The research consisted of in-depth interviews with Catalyst's directors (2), office management (2), consumers (4) and field entrepreneurs (15). All interviews were conducted by the author or our Kenyan research assistant in the first language of informants, and were recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis. We also spent several days shadowing the selling process, accompanying entrepreneurs on their sales routes through Nairobi, and observed four days of the entrepreneurship training. Analysis of data was informed by the authors' research projects on BoP distribution systems in Uganda, South Africa and Bangladesh.
3. Following the outbreak of violence in the wake of Kenya's 2007 election, the government sought to subdue tensions by addressing the 'problem of youth unemployment' through *Kazi Kwa Vijana* (Work for Youth), a largescale public works programme that aimed to employ 'idle' youth in the slums in road building, water harvesting and waste collection (OECD, nd: 1).
4. <http://www.kibera.org.uk/Facts.html>

5. To protect the anonymity of informants, the name of this scheme and all participants have been changed.
6. The average annual income of entrepreneurs interviewed was approximately 15,000 Ksh (173 USD).

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