

# Speculative futures at the bottom of the pyramid

CATHERINE DOLAN *SOAS, University of London*

DINAH RAJAK *University of Sussex*

Celebrated as creative, flexible catalysts of inclusive capitalism, urban youth are central to bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) models of development, which set out to repurpose the jobless as entrepreneurs in the making. We explore the multiple (at times conflicting) temporalities – the practices, technologies, and representations of time – which figure in a BoP initiative offering entrepreneurial opportunities to unemployed youth in Nairobi’s slums: from the invocation of clock-time discipline to the professional time of entrepreneurial subjectivities and the enchantments of the not-yet. But the appeal of BoP, we suggest, does not turn either on the here-and-now of survival or on an impossible pipe dream of prosperity, but rather resides firmly in the medium term: a foreseeable future of modest desires, which nonetheless remain tantalizingly just out of reach for most. By examining how these temporal conflicts play out in attempts to fashion a cadre of self-willed, aspiring entrepreneurs, we reveal the limits to entrepreneurial agency, and the contradictions inherent in the mission of (self-)empowerment through enterprise upon which the ideology of inclusive markets is built.

In October 2014, President Uhuru Kenyatta addressed a seminar on national security strategy at the Kenya School of Government. Detailing the ‘pervasive security threats’ facing the nation, from the Somali-based ‘terrorist’ organization Al-Shabaab, to drug trafficking and corruption, Kenyatta honed in on a homegrown crisis of disconcerting proportions: the multitude of unrestrained, ‘idle, frustrated youth’ threatening the legitimacy and sanctity of the state (Kenyatta 2014). The peril Kenyatta alluded to is hardly new. Across the nation, and indeed the continent, the ‘moral crisis’ befalling youth looms large in media and policy ‘scapes’, where a narrative of idle, disaffected youth crystallizes in fears of crime, violence, and social unrest, the unemployed cast as a seedbed of radicalization.

Lying alongside this depiction, in Nairobi’s informal settlements, we find a less menacing account. Excluded from education and training with remote prospects for employment, young people inhabit a state of chronic uncertainty and precarity. With

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the trajectory to adulthood curtailed by the effects of jobless growth, youth in Nairobi face extended liminality; they are a generation in waiting (Jeffrey 2010).<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this combination of threat and promise, material uncertainty and the possibility of anticipated becomings that has propelled youth to the forefront of the development agenda, as the private sector and international development agencies look to youth as an untapped frontier of enterprising energy to steward market growth. Celebrated as industrious, flexible catalysts of inclusive capitalism, urban youth are prioritized in bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) initiatives, a form of market-based development that has risen to popularity over the last decade. Originally conceived by the late C.K. Prahalad in his best-selling book *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid: eradicating poverty through profits, enabling dignity and choice through markets* (2004), the BoP proposition contends that multinational corporations facing saturated markets in industrialized nations can offset sclerotic growth rates, earn profits, and reduce poverty, firstly, by marketing goods and services to regions excluded from the reach of global markets, and, secondly, by providing the ‘underproductive’ poor with entrepreneurial opportunities selling these goods and services. Deriding what he considers aid’s ‘paternalism toward the poor’ (2004: xiv), Prahalad argues that by marrying business imperatives for profit maximization with development aspirations for poverty reduction, ‘[i]t is possible to “do well by doing good”’ (2004: 26).

Through an ethnography of Catalyst,<sup>2</sup> a social enterprise that aims to rehabilitate and repurpose ‘aberrant’ youth by offering them jobs as entrepreneurs selling ‘social/humanitarian’ goods in the slums of Nairobi, we examine how the BoP inclusive business model reframes the conditions of possibility for urban youth, engendering certain types of action while foreclosing others. As noted elsewhere (Dolan & Rajak 2016), while this new paradigm of development hails the innate entrepreneurial energy of youth as the driver of economic growth, the emphasis is less on *unleashing* natural entrepreneurial talent than on the purposive *making* of the entrepreneur. Through a process of recomposition, and often decomposition of previous modes of being and doing, informal actors are sculpted into a cadre of self-willed entrepreneurs and acculturated into the values and virtues of maximization to render them fit for global markets. In this article, we pursue a particular dimension of this project, focusing on how temporalities – the practices, technologies, and representations of time – figure in the rise of youth entrepreneurship and the reimagination of individual agency and aspiration that the BoP mission of self-empowerment seeks to bring about.

The ways in which people (such as informal entrepreneurs) attempt to conjure and carve their futures in a time of crisis has been a critical concern for anthropologists exploring the workings of millennial capitalism (Bear 2014; Guyer 2007; Miyazaki 2003; Nielsen 2014; Riles 2004). Within this anthropology of temporality, political-economic crisis is seen to be defined by temporal paralysis and the ‘abeyance’ of human agency (Miyazaki 2007: 430). A common thread runs through this work: the chronic impermanence that characterizes life under neoliberal capitalism for the so-called ‘bottom billion’ has created a bipolar temporal frame suspending people between everyday survivalism and the far horizons of a millenarian future; the latter a psychological palliative to the former (Allison & Piot 2014; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Guyer 2007; Piot 2010; Robbins 2007). More specifically, three decades of failed experiments in neoliberal development paradigms have robbed Africa’s youth of the capacity to project onto a tangible future. This reflects a wider tendency to see structural crisis as the end of time, underscoring the limitations of critical scholarship,<sup>3</sup> and the

failure to comprehend or imagine the possibility of renewal, the active production of social forms that is ongoing, the capacity for new channels of agency that come out of such conditions (see, e.g., Honwana 2014; Rabinow 2009; cf. Masquelier 2013; Maurer & Schwab 2005). But it is precisely in contexts of structural crisis that new economies of development, new social dynamics emerge as people seek new modes of projecting themselves onto the future that are neither fantastical nor millenarian.

Here we draw on ethnographic research conducted with Catalyst's youth entrepreneurs and trainers<sup>4</sup> to explore the multiple temporal registers through which conceptions of agency and the politics of expectation are reconfigured: from the technocratic invocation of clock-time discipline to the professional time of entrepreneurial subjectivities and the enchantments of the not-yet. We begin by looking at how a market-orientated temporality mediates between the perceived under-productivity of youths' past, where days of hustle, grift, and survivalism render time over-abundant, empty, or static, and the dynamism of an anticipated future, a life on the up and up. Through temporal mandates – diktats on time efficiency and punctuality, and deadlines to establish measurable, time-sensitive targets – Catalyst seeks to produce entrepreneurial dispositions purged of the vernacular timescape of 'unproductive' African time. Agents are articulated within a wider semantic order of enterprise and professionalism, the mastery of time serving to designate the boundaries between getting by and doing business, between the innate entrepreneurship of the street and the cultivated entrepreneurialism of the BoP, and between the inertia of the present and the vitality of the future.

This aspirational orientation, ingrained within the discourse and practices of BoP entrepreneurship, establishes a normative path of individual self-development, freighted with future possibility. It is speculation of better things to come, rather than present-day rewards, that permeates Catalyst's self-representations, the not-yet etched into the rhythms of quotidian door-to-door sales. Yet as our ethnography reveals, the futures that entrepreneurs conjure are not those of phantasmic prosperity but rather of mundane desires fulfilled: training, a stable income, and the respectability conferred through a steady job. Though entrepreneurs straddle a temporal fault-line between the precarity and disillusionment of the past and the seductions of an imagined future, their lives are marked by neither the 'evacuation of the near future' (Guyer 2007: 409) nor an impossible pipe dream of wealth or redemption. Rather, multiple temporal vistas are at play – long-term goals are built on the more tangible aim of netting modest medium-term returns, which are in turn concretely rooted in everyday pragmatism, graft, and opportunism, as entrepreneurs seize the space 'between what exists and what is possible' (Venkatesh 2006: 40).

### **Time at the bottom of the pyramid: anthropology, temporality, and the problem of agency**

Since Marx's (1976 [1867]) and Engels' (2009 [1845]) critique of time under capitalism, social scientists have explored how capital colonizes time (Bear 2014; Castree 2009; Harvey 1991; Postone 1993; Thompson 1967). From the 'dictatorship of time' in the cotton mills of Victorian England (Engels 2009 [1845]), to the centrality of timekeeping to colonial rule (Nanni 2012), to the 'time and motion' innovations of the Fordist factory (Taylor 1911), and to the swathe of management tools (Gantt charts, just-in-time inventory systems, etc.) of neoliberal capitalism (Reinecke & Ansari 2014), we see the ways time – its devices, practices, and representations – is enfolded in, and constitutes,

the spaces, circulations, and processes of capitalism. Existing accounts often paint a relatively predictable, if not teleological, transition to a market-orientated temporality, whereby the hyper-regimented pulse of capitalist time runs roughshod over alternative conceptions of qualitative or processual time (see Postone 1993), the incursion of the clock coming to dominate not only all other forms of time-reckoning, but life itself (Postone 1993: 214).

Recent efforts by economic anthropologists to capture ‘the subjective experience of time’ (Bear 2014: 19) under neoliberal capitalism have underlined the shift from the regimented time of industrial capitalist labour to the fluid yet conflictual, and no less punishing, temporalities of neoliberal flexibilization (Bear 2014; Guyer 2007; Miyazaki 2003; Nielsen 2014; Riles 2004). The fallout from structural adjustment and hyper-liberal economic reform, Guyer argues, has ‘[evacuated] the near future’ (2007: 410) while dangling remote hope in an impossible future, thus, note the Comaroffs, spurring on the dreams of ‘precocious entrepreneurs’, of ‘disadvantaged young people ... from inner cities and from other terrors incognita ... [who] seek to make good on the promises of the free market’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 308). This neoliberal moment of precarity and precocity has, Allison and Piot (2014) argue, created a fixation on the present. Put another way, for Africa’s urban poor, there is no medium-term future.

Yet the ethnography of BoP sellers at the margins of formal markets that we explore below suggests the opposite. It is precisely the ‘ethics of immediacy’, as Mittermaier (2014: 54) puts it, that BoP entrepreneurs seek to escape, and a medium-term future that its proponents peddle. This is a starkly individualized vision of progress. It reflects a shift in the wider development industry from the grand schemes of macro-economic restructuring and social transformation that once animated national dreams of modernity, to the entrepreneurial individual as the catalyst to human improvement and national growth. Offering entrepreneurship in place of employment, and ‘inclusive markets’ in place of urban infrastructure development, these new economies of development go beyond the stop-gap of humanitarian aid, but stop well short of the long-term goals of sustainable broad-based development that less than a decade ago were the stock in trade of the development community (an ideal which now seems utopian by contrast). This new individualist paradigm of progress, in which development is re-scripted as personal development, has, as Zaloom points out, led to a temporal shift in planning from the long view of macro-economic restructuring to the shorter time-frame of micro-economic planning and individual choice (2007: 445).

In the context of a post-industrial, precarious economy, the ways in which individuals conjure the future have also changed. Aspirations of entrepreneurial success at the BoP reside firmly in the foreseeable future, echoing what Ringel (2014: 54) describes as ‘a vigilant anticipation of the future’, rather than faith in distant vistas. Even the messianic and magical thinking of conversion, as Thornton (2007) reminds us, is often tied to mid-term material goals for commercial success, if the long term is occupied by second comings and apocryphal endings.

This points to the danger of extrapolating experience from the structures which shape it (whether economic policy or religious doctrine) without showing how they are concretely experienced, or indeed how they might produce new possibilities for agency alongside impotencies (Knafo 2015). It is this question of agency that we foreground. Crucially, we stress that what is at stake in this discussion is not the essential nature

of temporality itself, but how it shapes or forecloses people's capacity to act within such precarious and constrained circumstances. What emerges in the ethnography of BoP enterprise that we present is a rather more intricate interplay of constraint, aspiration, and agency than the suspension of human agency that much of the work on neoliberal temporalities has described as part and parcel of its apparent 'enforced presentism' (Guyer 2007: 410; see, e.g., Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Miyazaki 2007). Just as BoP recruits have their sights firmly set on the medium term, so too we find spaces of (albeit limited) agency alongside the impotencies of lives lived under great pressure. This is not to replicate the discourse of the BoP itself: to demand optimism in the face of what is a bleak future (and grim present) for many, and to conjure a fraudulent dream of self-empowerment from economic disenfranchisement. Nor is it to deny or diminish the 'psychic turmoil' of such profound insecurity (Molé 2010: 39). Rather, our aim is to understand how people, despite such scarcity and insecurity, are enrolled and re-enrolled in aspirations of mobility or hope of a better life in the making.

### **The Catalyst opportunity**

Since the turn of the millennium, businesses have moved beyond conventional models of corporate social responsibility, pursuing instead 'offensive' opportunities that allow them to burnish their reputation by explicitly tackling development challenges (Blowfield & Dolan 2014). Aligning themselves with contemporary development approaches of pro-poor business growth and making markets work for the poor, businesses today assume the role of 'development agents' which consciously seek to deliver outcomes by drawing the world's poor into global markets through new models of financial inclusion, consumption, and entrepreneurship. This turn to 'millennial development', to use Roy's (2011: 17) term, not only reworks neoliberalism as a kinder and gentler process (Peck & Tickell 2002), but also reflects the emergence of a new development 'orthodoxy' which promotes the role of businesses and 'empowerment through "the market" as the panacea for global poverty' (Rajak 2011: 9). Implicit in this vision is the notion that development can best be achieved by pursuing a business agenda in which neoliberal market values – competition, efficiency, and self-governance – will revitalize flagging economies, expunge a culture of aid dependency, and uplift the poor through new opportunities for entrepreneurship.

It is within this broader casting that the BoP concept of the poor as a profitable market emerged. Whilst most often associated with corporate giants – such as Procter & Gamble, SC Johnson, and Unilever – that market fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) to communities living off the grid of infrastructure through 'door-to-door' or 'route to market' distribution systems (Reingold 2011), BoP initiatives now encompass organizations of varying sizes, including international financial institutions, small social enterprises, and non-profit organizations (see review by Kolk, Rivera-Santos & Ruffin 2014), and span a number of sectors, from energy, food, and toiletries to telecommunications and healthcare. Frequently involving hybrid partnerships between business, NGOs, and donors rallying behind the new orthodoxy of entrepreneurial solutions to poverty, they offer recruits entrepreneurial opportunities to sell a standard stock of 'social' or 'humanitarian' goods (Cross 2013; Errington, Gewertz & Fujikura 2013; Redfield 2012), such as portable water filtration systems, solar lanterns, clean cookstoves, nutrition supplements, fortified foods, anti-malarials, and sanitary pads, as well as everyday FMCGs such as beauty and hygiene products (Dolan & Roll 2013).

By 2011, there were 439 BoP initiatives recorded in nine sub-Saharan African countries (Karamchandani, Kubzansky & Lalwani 2011), with Kenya a regional forerunner in BoP business innovations and 'route to market' programmes.<sup>5</sup>

Here, we focus on Catalyst – a social enterprise that aims to repurpose idle street youth in Kawangware, one of Africa's biggest slums. The organization, established in 2011, is the brainchild of two well-educated, twenty-something Americans, who abandoned lucrative careers in finance to devote their energies and talents to 'doing good', part of a flock of social entrepreneurs who have descended on Africa in recent years. Though the founders had little understanding of the lifeworlds of the slum, they had met many young people on their forays to Kenya who were 'really bright, really intelligent, witty, clever' but faced bleak futures in a nation with the highest youth unemployment rate in East Africa (Sunday 2017). Seeking to convert this wasted resource into a productive asset, they developed a programme modelled on Prahalad's double-value proposition: on the one hand, marketing difficult-to-access products such as imported clean cookstoves and solar lights to slum communities living 'off the grid' of basic infrastructural services; and, on the other hand, creating opportunities for 'idle' young people who lack the resources and/or opportunity to access further education or formal employment to become entrepreneurs, selling these 'life-improving' products door-to-door.

Like other BoP distribution programmes, Catalyst seeks to mine the entrepreneurial capital honed in Africa's '*économie de la débrouillardise*' (economy of resourcefulness),<sup>6</sup> 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 co-founder of Catalyst explained to us, 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 unemployed youth endowed with 'incredible raw sales skills', but they are also uniquely equipped to solve Africa's distribution problem by selling life-changing goods to untapped, 'hard-to-reach markets like slums'. It is an objective that resonates from the streets of Kawangware to the Nairobi statehouse. As President Kenyatta declared, income-generating programmes such as Catalyst's are ideally equipped to redirect the 'immeasurable potential' of youth towards gainful enterprise, enabling them to make good on 'the Kenyan dream' (Shundo 2014).

Catalyst offers sales training and the opportunity to sell Catalyst products to un- and under-employed youth between the ages of 18 and 24, primarily single parents and 'street kids', who have an intimate familiarity with the nuances, economic strategies, and social relations of the slums. Upon successful completion of a 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 thirty or so 'life-changing products' such as solar lamps, clean cookstoves, eco-friendly charcoal briquettes, reusable sanitary products, and solar-powered phone chargers. As objects of modernist desire, the products themselves convey the BoP promise of entrepreneurial transformation to consumers-in-waiting.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, 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.



### Moving from idleness to industry at the BoP

On the outskirts of central Nairobi, Kawangware's 300,000-odd residents live in makeshift houses with little or no access to running water, basic sanitation, and electricity (Karanja & Makau 2011). Youth under the age of 35 comprise the majority of the slum's population and face few prospects for employment; a crisis which, according to Catalyst's director, crystallized when idle, 'impressionable' youth were readily co-opted into violence following the contested 2007 election. 'It became clear', she explained, that Kenya's under-utilized youth were not only a lost opportunity for national development but were also fomenting crime and civil unrest in the country. As the organization's website warns, 'unoccupied' young people are susceptible to the appeals of Al-Shabbab 'to launch grenades into neighbourhood markets': idle time a pathway to transgressions with geopolitical implications.

Here Catalyst's reading of the crisis befalling youth – a jobless and restive 'lost generation' occupying the development gaze – is the problem of idleness. Echoing Victorian anxieties that partnered idleness with social decay, the impediment to national progress (Smiles 2002 [1859]), Catalyst semantically twins idleness with lawlessness and vice, reflecting broader currents in Kenya's public sphere. Debated in the National Assembly (*Hansard* 2008) and pervading media and policy reports, the 'menace' of idleness is represented as a deficit in moral character rather than a by-product of marginalization and the structural inequalities that beset Africa's increasingly urbanized and neoliberalized economies. The discourse of idleness frames Nairobi's legions of unemployed youth as responsible for their own under-productivity: do-nothings who need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps or delinquents in need of time discipline (Guyer 2007: 417). Rooted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century temporal distinctions – order/disorder; regularity/irregularity; backward/progressive; traditional/modern; developed/underdeveloped – the ostensible scourge of idleness is twinned with the so-called 'curse' of African time, cast as the obstacle to growth, another mismanaged resource holding the continent back. As former President Gbagbo of the Ivory Coast exclaimed in his 2007 campaign: 'African time is killing Africa, let's fight it' (Pflanz 2007), the pathology of lateness retarding the progress of development, a failure not only to keep time but to 'keep up *with* time' (Nanni 2012: 9, italics in original).

Such refrains are not lost on Catalyst agents, who often describe BoP entrepreneurship as a way to avoid idleness and its attendant risks, their expectations of wealth and mobility sometimes secondary. Beatrice, who emigrated from western Kenya with her husband and child to find 'a better life' in Nairobi, told us that she'd far rather do a loathsome job than be idle. Despite her distaste for working for Catalyst, she explained, it was better than 'idling' at home. For most recruits, idleness was fraught with anxiety, faith in the future depleted by days of (unmarked) time. Idle time, as Oian (2004) reminds us, is a produced category, an adjunct of the linear time-frames of modernity, whose logic demands that the passing of time be converted into a cumulative set of actions which denote progress and productivity, generating a perception of continuity between the present and the future. By contrast, for the unemployed, idle time is a protracted waypoint between past and future lives (Jeffrey 2010),<sup>8</sup> an ontological condition of perpetual suspension, neither here nor there. The occupied time of the employed is placed in opposition to the wasted time – or 'dead time', as Bourdieu describes it (2000a: 222) – of the unemployed, the former as purposeful, the latter as 'meaningless'.<sup>9</sup>

Among Catalyst entrepreneurs, idleness is cast not simply as a lack of work. As in Victorian London, where moral rehabilitation entailed adherence to the principles of time-thrift (Nanni 2012), the passing of empty time in the slums of Nairobi is imputed to be not only wasteful but also sinful. As 24-year-old Silas, one of the few agents whom Catalyst has promoted beyond sales suggested, idling at home is less a state of being than a moral failing. One morning, as we waited together for the daily meeting to begin, Silas recounted his troubled upbringing upcountry, where he bounced between relatives, intermittent stints at school, and illicit money-making activities before finding ‘respectability’ at Catalyst: ‘I am not idling at home’, he said.

I have avoided so many bad things I could do in the village . . . I used to think of so many evil things as a result of being idle. I would think of going out to look for some friends who would not be very good ones and they might have taught me their evil deeds.

Loaded with immoral intonations, the idler’s day is rendered in Silas’s and other accounts a subversive terrain, paved with ample possibilities for wrong-doing. In turn the productive activity which forms idle time’s constitutive binary is assigned a moral bearing: to be productive is to be an upstanding citizen, to fulfil one’s social obligations, or, as Silas put it, to be ‘a person with potential’, endowed with the possibility of progress.

### Market time

Catalyst 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.’ A key aspect of this entrepreneurial transition is the introduction of temporal structures that govern agents’ actions within the parameters of market time.

Acculturating agents into the values of time-maximization gets underway at Catalyst’s pre-training programme, held at its headquarters in Kawangware. Thirty young people from the surrounding area and beyond crowd into the training room for the six-day programme. The trainers, Joshua and Joseph (experienced agents themselves), conduct these sessions with the reassured confidence of those seasoned in the rigours of BoP sales. Over the course of the programme they deploy exercises to steer the youth through the tools and techniques of sales work, instructing agents in the *dos* and *don’ts* of street enterprise and the virtues of time-management, the latter repeatedly underlined as a core feature of the model BoP entrepreneur, who out on the streets of Nairobi, away from the gaze of managers, will maximize sales, profits, and potential. Trainers coach prospective recruits in the vital importance of punctuality; by arriving at meetings on time and hastily chasing up sales opportunities over the phone, they will be recognized as ‘serious’ by their prospective clientele and the wider community. The boundary between viable candidates for entrepreneurial success and those lacking the requisite discipline is set out clearly in prescriptions for punctuality. As Joshua cautioned, if entrepreneurs couldn’t manage to keep time, they shouldn’t bother coming to work at all. For some entrepreneurs, though, punctuality had less to do with entrepreneurial discipline than crippling traffic jams and long journeys on foot to reach the office each morning. Daniel, a self-described ‘hard worker’ who supplements his earnings by selling insurance and Oriflame cosmetics in the evenings,



found the organization's unyielding 'obsession' with timeliness counterproductive. He described how Catalyst punishes agents who arrive late for the morning meeting by docking their end of month earnings or preventing them from signing out products, thereby scuppering their daily sales plans:

If you are there at 8.01 a.m., it will be noted. At the end of the month, if you were late one minute, then 500 shillings will be deducted from your pay . . . you know you cannot always be punctual to come to work. Sometimes you could be late as a result of traffic and other unforeseen circumstances but they never used to understand that.

Instead, those who fail to meet time-keeping standards are further admonished as 'not serious', their tardiness regarded as a deficit of character and betrayer of poor entrepreneurial potential.

Youth are repeatedly exhorted by trainers to use their time efficiently; instructed to 'talk fast' to potential clients, and not 'waste time', the persistent refrain. Out on the city streets, agents are expected to lay out their sales pitch to prospective clientele at break-neck speed, while quickly identifying capricious customers on whom their efforts will be wasted. Carefully calibrated schedules of appointments and rational plans for the sales day ahead also form part of the self-mastery expected of young entrepreneurs, protocols which target the precision and application of agents' time. Set both daily and monthly by the organization's managers, sales targets materialize the norms of productivity in the field (not unlike clock-time on the assembly line), in effect commanding how much (literal) ground an agent should cover and how many sales per hour they should make.

After training, reminders of these time-maximizing imperatives are made at the daily morning meetings, when the previous day's performance is assessed and plans for the present day's selling are laid out. Joshua, the trainer, works his way around the room, inviting each entrepreneur to share accomplishments (where, what, and how much they sell); success is applauded and failure is the butt of jokes. Results are also plotted on a chart pinned to the wall so that entrepreneurs can compare and contrast their performance with others. The materiality of the chart straddles temporalities, not only passing a judgement in the here and now but also casting a prediction of the future, identifying those who will (or will not) realize the fruits of the entrepreneurial promise. The effects of these judgements became clear when we sat in the training room one morning with Paul, a new member of the sales team, waiting for him to check out a cookstove. Having recently completed bible school, Paul explained how Catalyst is a bridge between his religious devotion and his aspirations for material success (i.e. he is bringing 'life-improving' goods to his congregation). But he found the pressures of Catalyst daunting, noting his aversion to the daily sales chart looming in the front of the room, where everyone could see whether he was moving up or staying stuck. Yet it was the moral weight accorded to the chart that seemed to unsettle him:

I feel like I am being watched and I happen to feel that if I sell more I will be more appreciated; which is actually true. If you sell well you are given a gift. It makes me feel like I need to sell more to also get that gift and also increase my salary.

The implicit sentiment – that sales act as a symbolic shorthand for self-worth – was echoed by Silas, who described how the chart sowed 'weird feelings' within him, knowing that someone had made a sale and he hadn't, a feeling that told him he needed to work harder to be 'seen' on the chart.

Failure to achieve temporal self-mastery is not simply equated with financial loss but also seen as an impediment to personal development, a failure to realize the loftier

goals of self-actualization that Catalyst envisions for entrepreneurs. ‘Why didn’t you keep time? I told you we are preparing you ... we are preparing you not to be good for Catalyst but for yourself’, one trainer told a tardy recruit. Ensuring that entrepreneurs adapt to the authority of the clock is a crucial concern for Catalyst, as it seeks to demarcate the temporal precision of BoP retail conducted by its agents from the perceived temporal aberration of much-maligned ‘street-hawkers’, who rove the polluted streets of slums lugging all manner of wares. ‘Don’t walk around with your product like a hawker showing it to everyone’, warns the trainer, the practices of entrepreneurial time not only serving as technical means of increasing productivity but also imbued with the symbolic capital of corporate management practices, delineating not only ‘serious’ entrepreneurial subjects but also respectable ways of *doing* business. This distinction held sway with agents as well, for whom hawking, peddling, and (illicit) trading inhabited a register of value they felt they had left behind; it was not uncommon to hear the hawker disparaged in conversations, serving as a foil for entrepreneurs’ new identity as hard-working, upwardly mobile, and productive citizens.

Yet the interpellative capacity of Catalyst’s mobilizing claims often lies in tension with the ephemerality of the entrepreneurial subject in grounded practice. The oft-repeated injunction that agents are businesspeople rather than ‘hawkers’ and ‘con artists’, for example, glosses the reality that out on the cacophonous streets of Nairobi, agents are often perceived as the latter, as their authenticity as ‘entrepreneurs’, and by extension the value and worth accorded them, is called into question when they fail to carry licences that are quite literally a badge of their legitimacy. All businesses in Nairobi (and Kenya), whether a self-employed ‘hawker’, retail store, or manufacturing company, require a licence from the Nairobi City Council to operate. Catalyst has a business licence but did not obtain licences permitting agents to sell (reportedly as a cost-saving measure), leaving entrepreneurs vulnerable to harassment, extortion, or fines, or even detention at the police station for unlicensed hawking. Fear of Nairobi City Council, with its zero-tolerance stand on licences, haunted agents, who were permanently on the look-out, ever-vigilant to the threat of detection, always ready to run. The well-oiled ‘formal’ entrepreneurial subject, so vigorously crafted by the organization, was thus labile in the face of the state, the agent re-signified as a miscreant.

### **The allure and illusion of professional time**

Catalyst seeks to whet the entrepreneurial appetite (and ensure profitability) through commission-based earnings. Young entrepreneurs receive a small basic wage for three months, after which their earnings depend entirely on commission. In most BoP programmes, such structures of performance-related pay are typically associated with a sales-maximizing regime of flexibilized time that casts entrepreneurs as masters over their workday, choosing their own rhythms of work and leisure. In practice, however, the entrepreneur is understood as ready and willing to seize all waking hours as an opportunity for sales, expected to forsake any leisure time for greater earnings in order to produce the self-styled ‘win/win’ of the BoP promise (Dolan & Johnstone-Louis 2011). In contrast, Catalyst expends little effort to make itself omnipresent in its agents’ waking lives. Rather, it seeks to structure its agents’ days to reflect idealized conditions of 1950s-style American workfare, segmenting days into predictable work routines that vary remarkably little from week to week, month to month, and constructing a rigid boundary between the professional and the private, and work and leisure time (Zerubavel 1979). Agents arrive in the morning and take tea, socializing together while

they wait for all team members to arrive. When everyone is present, they congregate in the training room, where they are led in stretching and 'motivational' exercises. The trainer then selects entrepreneurs to enact role-plays where they confront reluctant customers, and he or she calls upon seasoned entrepreneurs to offer feedback to the new recruits. At the end of the morning meeting, entrepreneurs are dismissed to sign out products, and spend the rest of the day on the streets touting Catalyst's goods, returning to the office at 4 p.m. to check in any unsold products. Though permitted to keep the products overnight, Catalyst disincentivizes agents from doing so by holding them accountable for any damage to the product or packaging. With one cookstove worth over a month's wages, this is a significant hindrance for most. Agents do, however, carry a catalogue of products from which they might tempt potential customers. But few net sales outside the daily work schedule, or attempt to sell within their social networks. While Saturdays follow the same structure, Sundays are maintained by all as days of rest. Hence agents' weeks are structured to mimic the traditional *nine-to-five* of formal labour, rather than the discontinuous time of the 'option-maximizing self-manager' (Dörre 2011: 85), a temporal regime which does not attempt to realize the full potential either of agents' time or of their social ties, which are left largely unexploited in the pursuit of profits. According to Mary, newly married and at 18 one of Catalyst's youngest agents, the injunction to bring unsold products back to the office by 4 p.m. means that she can't reach areas of the city where there are likely customers for the organization's products and return before the office closes. She explained that it's impossible to sell cookstoves in the saturated markets of Kawangware and adjacent slums, and customers in wealthier areas nearby are sequestered in gated enclaves, beyond agents' reach. Mary's remarks point to the contradictory imperatives governing Catalyst's representations and practices of time: in the bid to enforce temporal precision and order, limits to agent's productivity are established, with opportunities to sell outside of 'open hours' left unrealized.

The apparently 'un-entrepreneurial' practice of strict working hours reflects how Catalyst's organizational norms and practices act as signifiers for the professionalism it touts, driving a symbolic wedge between a Western-style business on the up-and-up and the rash of Ponzi, multi-level marketing schemes operating at the BoP. But it also points to the moral valences and values of time (and how they are deployed symbolically). The archetypal work-week contrived by the organization offers agents an escape from denunciations of idleness, and a means to attain the status awarded to those seen to follow bureaucratic norms of productivity. Stephen described this newfound social recognition. Forced to drop out of school when his family could no longer afford the fees, he was taken in by the social enterprise Kito, which rehabilitates Nairobi street youth by offering them employment skills. One day, while making bracelets and sandals recycled from tyres at Kito, Stephen met Catalyst's co-founder, who sponsored his return to school and eventually offered him a job at the organization, 'changing his life completely'. Reflecting on his past experiences, Stephen said, 'I am not the person I used to be . . . I used to keep company with those bad boys, steal, and snatch bags from women, abuse drugs and alcohol, you see?' External respect was a key marker of this transition for Catalyst recruits. Now, Stephen explained, people

have high regards of me because I work and I no longer stay there at home idling around. And also I am not with those young boys of my age who do criminal activities . . . when I wake up in the morning, I come here. I do my work here and get home in the evening.

Productivity is thus a temporal and spatial category erected around traditional working hours, demarcating a boundary between the idleness of the past and aspirations for the future. At Catalyst, the regime of the professional work-week, while a product of the abstract time-reckoning of capitalist forms of production, is employed for its symbolic content rather than as a simple attempt to increase productivity. For entrepreneurs able to deploy the relevant markers of professionalism, status is the reward, particularly among those whose previous social position and public bearing were marked by their antithesis: 'vice' and criminality. For example, Joshua's notoriety as street thug turned upstanding entrepreneur earned him respect and stature in the community. As we accompanied him through Kawangware's streets one afternoon, people emerged from market stalls and makeshift shops to greet him. A group of young men sitting at the street corner, a woman selling chips, and an old man hawking charcoal all called for his attention, while women from the market tutted that they no longer see him now that he is a 'rich man'. People, Joshua told us, see him as a different person now that he is working, as someone who is responsible and independent. Making the entrepreneurial habitus, as Bourdieu argues (2000b: 23), is a process not of adaptation but of conversion, the passage between idleness and industry marked as a moral transition, a realization of the professional self. Time, it might be said in this instance, is status.

### Aspirational time

Entrepreneurs working for Catalyst are not new to the world of business. Prior to working for the organization, they passed years and days in a familiar set of *jua kali* (hot sun) activities: vending all manner of goods from fruits, vegetables, and charcoal briquettes to second-hand clothes and phone cards; peddling services such as cutting hair, brewing, and tailoring; or meandering through Nairobi's congested traffic tempting passersby with an assortment of everyday wares. As we have seen, others were (and often still are) on the 'hustle', scrambling for day labour, exacting favours, and chasing ways to obtain food, water, or fuel through means that often confound licit/illicit distinctions. Marked by improvisation and adaptation, these often-fleeting business pursuits mediated between the precarity and uncertainties of the slum and the hope of a better life on the horizon. This pairing of anxiety and anticipation is a familiar leitmotif in recent anthropology of African economies (Archambault 2014; Cooper & Pratten 2014; de Boeck 2011; di Nunzio 2015), which highlights how uncertainties of survival beget currencies of hope and anticipation rather than despair, as individuals conjure a future released from the precariousness of the present. As neoliberalism and structural adjustment reduce the creative possibilities in the present and near future, speculations of fast wealth and high returns from gambling and pyramid schemes offer the promise of a 'life-transforming' future (Piot 2010: 66).

Though this temporal dissonance, between 'fantasy futurism and enforced presentism' (Guyer 2007: 410), is a familiar theme in accounts of social and political life on the continent, BoP schemes construct a different order of speculative practice, articulating a future distinct from the tantalizing goods and riches that loom in a utopian vision. As recent work on African futures has shown (Archambault 2014; di Nunzio 2015; Goldstone & Obarrio 2017), the indeterminacy of what is to come need not compel imaginings of the spectacular and sublime but rather may engender concrete action in the present through which individuals recuperate hope for a very ordinary (and actualizable) future. The material futures espoused by Catalyst entrepreneurs, for instance, are remarkably prosaic – better employment, improved skills, professional

development – attained through graft and perseverance. Though allusions to future possibilities, rather than present-day successes, permeate Catalyst's communications, agents do not envision an entrepreneurial future entirely dissociated from the reality of current circumstance. Joshua, for example, seeks to move to another 'hood', escape Dagoretti, and start his music business anew; Silas plans to go to college; and Beatrice hopes to sell second-hand clothes. It is through taking grounded action in the here and now that the future is thought to be activated – a horizon of likely possibilities that unfolds through patience, discipline, and self-sacrifice in the present (Vike 2013). One afternoon while waiting for hours with Stephen for a woman to show up with money for a cookstove, we asked him how he coped with the long hours spent hanging around each day. Yet Stephen didn't view waiting for a customer as 'dead time' suspended between moments of productivity. Rather, it was part and parcel of the entrepreneurial project. If you cannot wait, he explained, or sacrifice yourself, you cannot call yourself an entrepreneur. The job requires that 'you have the courage to face it'. One cannot accrue wealth from nothing, he suggested. Only through a rational, well-managed set of actions and perseverance would prosperity flow. The language of sacrifice and courage was recurrent, deployed by trainers and echoed by trainees recounting what it takes to become an entrepreneur. While it evokes a broadly religious register implicitly assigning a moral value to that capacity to withstand and endure, within the discourse of entrepreneurial conversion, sacrifice is conceived neither in the millenarian sense (self-sacrifice in the current life for redemption in the next), nor as Stakhanovite (sacrificing the self in the service of the nation/greater good). Rather, what is stressed is a sacrifice of present needs and desires (and submission to the grinding rigours of the work) to achieve personal success in the foreseeable future.

On offer, then, is not the far-sighted, millenarian future of 'irrational', magical wealth (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000), nor the 'the long run' vista of macro-economic projections (Guyer 2007), but an apparently achievable mid-term trajectory of personal development conveyed through the rhetoric and practices of training. Indeed, the 'promissory notes' defined by Wittrock (2000) as a keystone of modernity – bundles of hopes to which all individuals annex expectations of progress – find their natural home in Catalyst's training schemes, inculcated in a means-end equation of greater knowledge and skill to greater attainment. In fact, training (rather than employment) is at the heart of Catalyst's appeal to youth in Nairobi's slums. Posters beckon potential recruits with the promise: '*TRAINING, TRAINING, TRAINING*', as sales work is decidedly less attractive than the offer of education. If youth are told it is a sales job, Silas explained, they will not come. So when he recruits he emphasizes training, telling prospective agents if they need a job after the training then there will be one, and even if they should choose not to work at Catalyst, the training will nonetheless help them to start and manage their own business. This was mirrored in our conversations with other sales agents, who cast training in a positive, often aspirational, light, but struck a more pragmatic tone about possibilities of entrepreneurship.

As Mains (2012) has described, through the progressive structuring of learning, experienced as a process of incremental advancements, individuals imagine themselves to be developing in tandem. The rationality of the means (i.e. cumulative steps towards clearly defined goals; an ongoing interplay between assimilating knowledge and assessment; periodic evaluations of competence; and the final stamp of certification) makes the ends seem attainable. The ends themselves are prudently framed. Dreams of owning a small business, obtaining a steady job, and pursuing a respectable livelihood

are the aspirational currency of Catalyst's training. In their account of 'millennial capitalism', Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 317) posit that 'as the connections between means and ends become more opaque, more distended, more mysterious, the occult becomes an ever more appropriate . . . metaphor for our times', offering untold hope while demanding blind faith and often heavy financial investment. Yet in tracing a carefully defined path to relatively modest visions of success, Catalyst's training is imbued with the prosaic yet perhaps equally potent magic of the ostensibly rational. The organization creates and capitalizes on the sober hopes invested in education. In one training session, recruits were told, 'I am training you so that you will succeed. I am training you so that you can help yourself. You will find that this training will help you even in your own business if you are planning to have one'. This aspirational promise underlay even the most mundane tools and techniques of selling. Nevertheless, the skills imparted extend their promise well beyond the immediate context of street-selling to an imagined future of self-started enterprise, an assertion which chimes with some prospective agents, like 21-year-old Susan, who has been unemployed and living with her mother in Kawangware since completing secondary school three years ago. Susan was attracted to Catalyst because of the business training the organization offered. She had always wanted to open her own business and saw the training as a pathway to becoming a businessperson, not simply a sales agent.

Pitched less as an opportunity to earn money in the here and now than as a promise of eventual material and status rewards, Catalyst frames itself as the first rung on the ladder of professional success. As one trainer told the assembled recruits: 'Catalyst opens doors for the youths to get better jobs . . . We don't train you to stay here at Catalyst and work for us, but to be the best out there in whatever you do' – the entrepreneurial pursuit of street-selling with its attendant hardships reduced to a mere stepping stone on the path to inevitable success. As Catalyst's director noted, it is not the offer of sales work but the promise of upward mobility that is 'the most important' goal of the organization. 'We prepare youth for a life of financial independence and personal success', its website declares. Even the monetary gains of selling 'life-changing products' are rendered in its communications as financial capital, implying an accrual of resources to be invested towards future goals. Underpinning entrepreneurship, Catalyst tells us, is a temporal conversion – an active shift in mind-set from the here and now of survival to goal-orientated, future thinking. At Catalyst, 'learning to be goal-orientated' is cast as a virtue in itself, a marker of self-mastery: to set goals for the days and months ahead is not only to lay out a judicious path towards a marginally improved future, but also to embark upon it; the very act of plotting a possibility lending it a sense of concreteness and, to the goal-setter, the aura of pro-active pursuit. For entrepreneurs, learning how to plan was deemed essential to success: without planning there would be no sales, the calculative prerogatives of the plan elevating selling into the sphere of enterprising activity. In keeping with the broad principles of BoP entrepreneurialism, Catalyst coaching has affinities with the stock toolkit of managerial technique, reincarnated for the self-management of the enterprising individual.<sup>10</sup> As with managerialism, the appeal to measurable goals and precise trajectories enables agents to project themselves onto the future and, so the BoP promise to self-empowerment goes, to gain traction on time (Knafo, Dutta, Lane & Wyn-Jones 2015).

This belief in an open future, in which success can be realized with the requisite planning and toil, circulates throughout the organization. Narratives of troubled street



boys made good plot past and future in a continuum that flows from despair to fulfilment, infusing recruits with the opportunity to aspire. Joshua's transition from a life of criminality and homelessness to entrepreneur, for example, offers a morally inflected lodestar for other agents: 'We listen to him tell us of his unfortunate life; we get encouraged', Silas remarked. 'You ask yourself, "If this man was like this but now he is like this as a result of Catalyst, what about us?"' 'It's very empowering', he added, 'because Joshua's life has changed completely'. The narrativization of a troubled past becomes a redemptive tale, mobilizing entrepreneurial energies through representations of a future with transformational possibilities.

Such linear time-frames exert an ever-present influence at the level of cognition (see Oian 2004): the belief that the future will be better than the present an enduring ideological orientation, even where progress appears less than likely. Indeed, despite the many obstacles faced by agents in the Nairobi slums – soaring unemployment and living costs; decaying infrastructure and services (Dolan & Rajak 2016) – agents' renderings of the future are permeated with assumptions of personal progress: 'whens' not 'ifs' of owning their own businesses, or ascending up the professional ladder; self-empowerment continuing to hover tantalizingly around the corner.

### Subverting time

Evidently, Catalyst is not simply marketing cookstoves and solar lamps. It is selling a value proposition: through a regime of predictable and routinized temporal mandates and frequent exhortations to efficiency, idle youth are redefined as people who create value. But the temporal reorderings upon which the idealized entrepreneurial subject rests often jar with the 'recalcitrant rhythms' of daily life (Bear 2014), interrupting the temporal exigencies of the entrepreneurial outlook (Binkley 2009). As Mains argues, time can simultaneously be conceived in the abstracted terms emphasized by Marxist theorists, while being governed by social rather than economic imperatives. For unemployed young men in Jimma, Ethiopia, Mains writes, 'time is not money . . . time is relationships' (2012: 85). Similarly, where Catalyst trainers preach a creed of 'talking fast' to clients, agents deride this abstraction from the world of sales – a lengthy process of relationship-building and negotiation, where even those most experienced in the patter of the sales pitch may expend significant efforts for no return. While agents are exhorted to maximize their sales time and use their days efficiently, many spend hours crossing the city by foot to arrive at their sales point for the day, the business of selling reduced to a few hours before the long journey back to the office. 'I now know how to walk for long distances. I am also used to spending the whole day without lunch', Paul drily responded when asked how his life had been changed by the organization. The idealized timescapes of Catalyst's discourse of productivity are met by contradictory encounters with the timescapes of the city, where space, travel, and unruly customers refuse to be cajoled into the strictures of clock-time. In turn, Catalyst's entrepreneurs subvert the dictates of minute-by-minute time management and fast-talking, quick-selling efficiency by tempering their rhythms to those of the street, in order to manage exigencies outside the Catalyst training room. As Prentice (2016) argues in her account of competing temporalities in a Trinidadian garment factory, there is a disjuncture between the 'idealized representations of time and workplace discipline . . . the rigid model of "now for now" production time imposed by management, and time . . . enacted by workers themselves, according to the rhythms of their own desires and plans'.

Catalyst itself does little beyond rhetorical incitements to narrow this ‘clash between technocratic and lived time’ (Abrams & Weszkalnys 2011: 14). As described, organizational practices often actively inhibit attempts to maximize sales time: daily meetings eat up significant portions of agents’ days, as does the to-ing and fro-ing between the office and the day’s sales point. Catalyst’s refusal to cover travel expenses also ensures significant parts of agents’ days are spent walking the city. As Fred, an artist who left Catalyst to sell soap and buckets for Unilever, recounted,

I used to walk a lot because I didn’t have fare. I would go to so many far places and I would come back without having sold a thing with all the walking. Sometimes you would be late to come back yet you have not sold anything and the office would start calling you saying you should be in the office right now.

At the same time, young entrepreneurs often go about their days at an unhurried pace, stopping in to do errands, greet friends, and chat with their fellow agents. When accompanying Carol on her sales route through Satellite, an adjacent slum, we were baffled when she stopped selling in the early afternoon, although the streets were visibly teeming with potential customers. But, she told us, she frequently doesn’t market past 2 p.m., choosing instead to spend the remaining hours of her work-day grocery shopping, visiting friends, or resting before returning to the office at 4 to return her unsold wares. Other agents flouted Catalyst’s efficiency-maximizing practices, from removing the requisite Catalyst uniform when out of sight of the office to refusing to attend the morning meetings. At one point, Fred said, he simply couldn’t drag himself to one more meeting where everything that is said was said yesterday and will be said tomorrow and the next day. As Heintz’s (2004) ethnography of temporal practices in Romanian enterprises highlights, a ‘time is money’ ethos may rhetorically rule while leaving alternate historically sedimented time regimes largely untouched.

### Hope foreclosed

The rituals and disciplines of temporal self-mastery, the traditional work-week, and the aspirational temporalities of future self-made enterprise cast a veneer of formality over Catalyst. But the underlying conditions of labour at the organization still approximate the informal and precarious dynamics of hawking, offering agents no contract, no security, and little by way of a reliable or decent livelihood. Paul stated simply, ‘The money is very little. It can’t pay bills . . . it can’t pay even half of the bills’ – an experience shared by many of Catalyst’s agents, where average monthly earnings of 5,000 Kenyan shillings (US\$50) force most to moonlight or rely on the support of others to get by. For these young people, the deliverance from idleness offers little beyond the survivalism of the informal entrepreneur traipsing the city streets. The objective conditions of long hours, low wages, and no security remain stubbornly familiar. Where Dörre (2011) echoes many critiques in pointing to the ‘secondary exploitation’ of those forced to work in ‘discontinuous time regimes’ under the increasingly prevalent conditions of flexibilized labour and its attendant insecurity, Catalyst illustrates how the bureaucratic time of organized workfare and other trappings of professionalism might be put to use to draw attention away from such precarious conditions.

By the same token, Catalyst’s attempts at positioning itself on the path to eventual affluence often fall short. With goals continually raised in order to plot an upwards trajectory of achievement, the techniques of target-setting unsurprisingly lead to bafflement and frustration among many of the young entrepreneurs. Severed from

context and contingent on luck and the whims of customers as much as good salesmanship, targets can become a counter-motivational force, damaging agents' belief in the transformative power of the organization. Stephen, for example, decried Catalyst's goal-setting techniques, claiming the organization plucked fanciful targets from the air, increasing expectations week by week regardless of whether a target was ever met and caring little for what was achievable and what was not; consequently, unrealistic attempts at imposing norms of productivity generated tensions between futures imagined and the eventualities of the unfolding present. Stories of success – sales figures hit or surpassed, and modest profits reinvested in stock or a small home enterprise – allay disenchantment among other recruits, even if the gains have yet to (and may never) materialize for them, but only for so long. Here the anticipation of future success (on which entrepreneurs are enjoined to focus) works to distract from the daily grind of door-to-door sales, demanding a power of endurance and patience which is at odds with the immediate material needs of life at the margins. In many ways, then, the working day of the BoP entrepreneur looks much more like the long, repetitive grind of the factory floor than Guyer's (2007: 409) description of 'punctuated time' or what Bear (2014: 19) terms the 'staccato rhythms of precarious work' for the many millions trying to get by at the margins of markets. At the same time, while salespeople endure the slow drudgery of the work-day which takes them on long circuits going door-to-door through the city, the income it yields is unreliable and often scant.

Material hardships of the work are not easily obscured by the promise of better things to come; many recruits do not complete the training once they learn of the labour conditions, while the retention rate for new agents remains low despite the ultra-high unemployment rates of the Nairobi slums. Nor do visions of progress match up to the experience of young entrepreneurs unable to find improved prospects outside Catalyst. While Catalyst remains confident in the value of its training and jobs programme, in slums now awash with development schemes, its appeal is being tested. According to Catalyst's managerial discourse (and the trainers who deliver it), the project of entrepreneurial conversion is never complete. The value of conversion comes not in the achievement of a finite goal, but in attaining the very capacity to strive continuously for goals whether or not they are reached: that is, the means *is* the end. Yet this wears thin as profits prove disappointing, and the social cachet of being an entrepreneur dwindles along with the faith that the work will yield returns. For many recruits, deferment of aspirations to the 'not yet' turns to disenchantment and disillusion with the process itself.

Catalyst reported that with many NGOs paying for young people to attend training sessions, recruitment has become difficult: young people assert the value of their time in the here and now, seeking to be treated as beneficiaries not the self-sacrificing entrepreneurs of the BoP vision. Agents meanwhile report the difficulties of recruiting their friends and acquaintances to participate in such an un-lucrative activity with waning social cachet. Stephen claims that youth from his 'hood' scoff at the idea of being paid once a month; most do odd jobs for a daily wage or work in construction, where they are paid weekly. 'How are we expected to survive the other twenty-eight days?' they ask him. The wager with the future implicit in Catalyst's developmental proposition is more convincing at some times than at others.

The disjuncture experienced between the promise and the reality of entrepreneurial life means some agents report feeling 'deceived' by the organization. Even for Joshua, who frequently features as Catalyst's 'success story', hopes are receding. A talented

rapper and *kapuka* musician,<sup>11</sup> Joshua aspired to parlay his Catalyst earnings into a recording opportunity. But, he told us, ‘My dream never came to pass. I had dreams for myself and the dreams are dying’. The ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) of the BoP dream, which asserts that anyone, anywhere can succeed, does not leave all unscathed. As Comaroff and Comaroff describe, the generation of new desires and expectations has its consequences: ‘This, of course, is the flip side of the coin: the sense of impossibility, even despair, that comes from being left out of the promise of prosperity’ (2000: 315).

## Conclusion

As emerges from the accounts and activities of Catalyst entrepreneurs described above, those brought into the BoP fold find themselves subject to contradictory temporal injunctions: they must simultaneously show themselves to be conforming to the strict discipline of industrial rhythms of work, and to demonstrate self-actualization by claiming control over their own time, as masters of their own entrepreneurial destiny. In contrast to their waged labour counterparts, the possibilities of entrepreneurship unfold not through the ‘managerial gaze’ of shop-floor supervision, but through the capacity of individuals to control their own time responsibly, constituting themselves through time as respectable businesspeople. This is a double challenge. Time – and how the young Kenyans whom Catalyst targets use it – becomes a signifier of a broader moral value premised on stark black and white binaries: idle versus industrious, aimless versus goal-orientated, improvident versus forward-thinking, parasitic versus productive. According to this logic, the dissipated time young people are seen to inhabit is taken as the individual’s moral failing rather than the broader failure of development and a more ‘predictable futurity’ of which they have been robbed (Muehlebach 2013: 297). At the same time, through their submission to standardized, Fordist-like regimes of time efficiency, youth are promised a second-order transformation as upstanding market-orientated entrepreneurs, their temporal alignment with the market cast as a passport to financial accumulation and moral virtue. Like Weber’s ascetic Protestantism, in which the productive use of time gave direction and purpose to individual action, the discipline of corporal activity and exigencies of entrepreneurial time are seen as the cornerstone of a virtuous and useful life; with punctuality, schedules, and targets embodying salvific potential (Weber 2011 [1904]). Time itself thus offers transcendence, catalysing the moral self-efficacy of the entrepreneur through its methodical and judicious deployment. By straddling these competing temporal logics – time as an instrument of discipline and of moral conduct – BoP enterprises like Catalyst are able to position themselves as a vector of *both* social and economic transformation, extracting economic value through workers who march in step with the ticking of the clock, while generating moral currency through the reconstitution of ‘idle youth’ as productive citizens.

Though for most recruits, the much-feted boons of the BoP are yet to come, the power of BoP enterprise to enlist and (for a time) sustain recruits in regimes of anticipation and expectation is evident. Even when anticipation turns to disappointment, and expectation to disenchantment, there are always more recruits to be galvanized by the hope of making it, stoking the dream of empowerment through the market. The appeal of the BoP lies in the very fact that it promises neither an immediate opportunity for a fast fix from intense insecurity, nor a distant dream of riches and redemption from today’s toil. Rather, BoP models of enterprise (and development) claim to equip recruits with the skills to confront and seize the potential inherent in the precariousness of the market, and turn its very insecurity into a bankable opportunity in the medium term.

The BoP proposition is, then, not purely one of opportunity, but also one of conversion – transforming putative listless loafers who live irredeemably for and in the moment into productive, forward-thinking citizens. In return, BoP sellers must demonstrate their entrepreneurial spark and mettle by juggling unflagging optimism with realism; rational planning with risk-taking; and routinization with a *carpe diem* opportunism. Underlying this is a belief that sacrifice and endurance in the present will lead to profit in the future, and that success in selling can be parlayed into the next business opportunity. Though it is not long before agents confront the limits of entrepreneurial agency, as the gap between expectation and what is actually possible emerges, they do not forsake their pursuit of medium-term goals. Catalyst's entrepreneurs are neither chasing a far-fetched dream of wealth and modernist consumption nor trapped in the enforced presentism of daily survival. Even in the face of the disappointments that the BoP project brings, they keep their sights set on the possibilities of the near future, born from the pragmatics of what is and tethered to the hope of what can be.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The condition of precarity permeates current writing on neoliberalism in the Global South, held up as a signifier of a new subjectivity and class position (Standing 2014). While precarity has become a buzzword in the literature on poverty, it has come to define conditions of vulnerability beyond the material and political-economic dimensions of labour markets and livelihood insecurity, extending to the psycho-social and emotional insecurity this engenders (Barchiesi 2016; Molé 2010; Muehlebach 2013).

<sup>2</sup> To protect the anonymity of informants, the names of the organization and all informants have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> Rabinow, for example, writes 'in our time, as never before, the continuity of past to future is broken' (2009: 59). Guyer herself describes this '“countdown” to zero' as symptomatic of social science 'caught up by crisis' (2009: 367) as opposed to seeking 'new horizons of agency' (2009: 356). Yet she does precisely this in her account of 'enforced presentism' and the 'evacuated' middle future (Guyer 2007: 410).

<sup>4</sup> Ethnographic research consisted of participant observation of entrepreneurial life at Catalyst over a twelve-month period from 2012 to 2013. This included accompanying entrepreneurs on their daily sales routes through Kawangware and adjacent slums (Mathare, Makadara, Kibera, Satellite, and Githurai), and sharing time together during breaks, meals, and after work. Over the year, we often audio-recorded conversations that occurred between entrepreneurs and ourselves as we walked the sales beat or in the many hours we sat waiting for meetings to begin, the rain to stop, or *matatus* (minibuses) to arrive. We also observed the week-long entrepreneurship training at Catalyst headquarters and conducted in-depth interviews with Catalyst's directors, office management, and several entrepreneurs who had left the organization.

<sup>5</sup> These initiatives include Solar Sisters, Sollatek Electronics (both solar power companies), Living Goods (health products), Safaricom (mobile money), Mars Maua (confectionery), Community Cleaning Services (sanitation), Ecotact (Ikotoilets), Shekere (social goods), and I-CARE (sanitary pads), among others.

<sup>6</sup> The term emerged during Zairian President Mobutu's reign (1965–97), when he called for the citizenry to fend for themselves by whatever means necessary, as neither the state nor the formal sector could support them. Popularly referred to as Article 15, Mobutu's signature catchphrase *débrouillez-vous*, or 'do it yourself', has come to signify the array of unreported, often illegal, activities individuals pursue to survive (MacGaffey 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Products such as solar-powered phone chargers offer customers the possibility of starting their own micro-enterprise, such as a charging kiosk.

<sup>8</sup> The intimate relationship between waiting and power (or impotence) is important. The experience of time as powerlessness is not purely one of paralysis, but is itself coercive, as the cycle of raising and deferring hopes keeps people hanging on in a state of expectancy (Bourdieu 2000a: 228).

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu (2000a: 222) describes the temporal experience of the jobless as one of 'dead time, purposeless . . . dispossessed of the vital illusion of having a function or a mission', so replicating the normative discourse which characterizes the condition of joblessness as 'negated', wasted, empty, and pointless, assuming formal work to be the primary source of meaning and direction in life (see also Bayart 2007; Mdembe 2004; Ralph 2008; Seabrook 1982).

<sup>10</sup> This individualization of economic management in pursuit of individualist ideals of success and the means to achieve them denies the interdependencies and solidarities that make life possible, particularly in contexts of insecurity. The individualized economic trajectories that youth entrepreneurs are urged to pursue contrast the collective or relational modes of financial action that enable economic agency and aspiration in other contexts, as chronicled in Deborah James's work savings clubs (James 2014).

<sup>11</sup> *Kapuka* is a form of hip hop popular in Kenya.

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## Futurs spéculatifs au bas de la pyramide

### Résumé

Encensés comme les catalyseurs flexibles et créatifs du capitalisme inclusif, les jeunes urbains sont au centre des modèles de développement « par le bas de la pyramide » (BoP), qui visent à transformer les chômeurs en entrepreneurs en puissance. Nous explorons les nombreuses temporalités (pratiques, technologies et représentations du temps), parfois contradictoires, qui figurent dans une initiative « BoP »

offrant des opportunités d'entreprendre aux jeunes chômeurs des bidonvilles de Nairobi, de l'invocation de la discipline de l'horaire au temps professionnel des subjectivités entrepreneuriales et aux enchantements de ce qui n'est pas encore. Nous suggérons toutefois que l'attrait du BoP ne concerne ni l'ici et maintenant de la survie ni une impossible usine à rêves de prospérité, mais s'inscrit plutôt solidement dans le moyen terme, dans un futur envisageable où se réaliseraient des désirs modestes et pourtant tout juste hors de portée du plus grand nombre. En examinant la manière dont ces conflits temporels se jouent dans les tentatives de créer un corps d'entrepreneurs volontaires et ambitieux, nous révélons les limites de l'agencité entrepreneuriale et les contradictions inhérentes à la mission d'autonomisation (de soi-même) par l'entreprise sur laquelle s'est bâtie l'idéologie des marchés inclusifs.

Catherine Dolan is a Reader in the Department of Anthropology at SOAS, University of London, and holds fellowships at the James Martin Institute, Green Templeton College, and Said Business School, all at the University of Oxford. She is co-editor (with Dinah Rajak) of *The anthropology of corporate social responsibility* (Berghahn Books, 2016) and *Digital food activism* (Routledge, 2018).

*Department of Anthropology, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. cd17@soas.ac.uk*

Dinah Rajak is a Reader in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. She is the author of *In good company: an anatomy of corporate social responsibility* (Stanford University Press, 2011), co-editor (with Catherine Dolan) of *The anthropology of corporate social responsibility* (Berghahn Books, 2016), and co-founder of the Centre for New Economies of Development ([www.responsiblebop.com](http://www.responsiblebop.com)).

*School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, UK . d.r.rajak@sussex.ac.uk*