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Using systems thinking to reach the poor through markets*

Un enfoque de sistemas para reducir la pobreza a través de los mercados

MAR MAESTRE Y JODIE THORPE**

KEYWORDS

Market systems; Private sector development; Vulnerable populations; Poverty reduction; Systems thinking.

ABSTRACT Following the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda of ‘leave no one behind’, this article argues for a new way of thinking about markets and the private sector that addresses these new challenges. It introduces market systems development (MSD) as a new approach for engaging with the private sector using complexity and systems thinking. By understanding better the role and limits of market-based approaches, policy actors will be better able to select strategies to create an appropriate institutional environment that shapes how the private sector and other actors operate for the benefit of vulnerable target groups.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Sistemas de mercado; Desarrollo del sector privado; Poblaciones vulnerables; Reducción de pobreza; Pensamiento sistémico.

RESUMEN Siguiendo la agenda de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) de “no dejar a nadie atrás”, este artículo argumenta la necesidad de un nuevo enfoque para trabajar con el sector privado como actor de desarrollo, que responda a los nuevos retos. El artículo introduce el desarrollo de sistemas de mercado

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utilizando principios de pensamiento sistémico y complejidad. Con este nuevo enfoque, los actores de desarrollo podrán analizar mejor la capacidad y los límites de los enfoques de mercado e identificar estrategias que creen sistemas de mercado favorables a la población más vulnerable.

MOTS CLÉS

Systemes de marché; Développement du secteur privé; Populations vulnérables; Réduction de la pauvreté; Réflexion systémique.

RÉSUMÉ À la suite de l'agenda des Objectifs du développement durable de 'ne laisser personne de côté', cet article défend une nouvelle façon de penser aux marchés et au secteur privé. On introduit le développement des systèmes de marché comme une nouvelle approche pour s'engager avec le secteur privé, en utilisant la complexité et la réflexion systémique. En comprenant mieux les limites de ce que les entreprises peuvent et ne peuvent pas atteindre, on sera plus capables d'identifier des stratégies pour créer un environnement institutionnel approprié qui définit comment le secteur privé et d'autres opèrent au profit des groupes cibles vulnérables.

Introduction

Substantial progress has been achieved internationally on reducing poverty since the launch of the Millennium Development Goals. However, despite these achievements, inequality is growing and extreme poverty remains high. It is becoming more difficult to reach those living in extreme poverty due to their geographically remote and fragile locations, and discrimination related to socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and disability. Recognising this rising economic gap and related exclusion, there is a renewed emphasis across the development sector on 'Leaving No One Behind'. It is a central commitment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed to by the world's leaders in 2015.

The SDGs state that resolving complex global problems will require active involvement from all stakeholders – including a bigger role for the private sector. Planning for the SDGs must include new approaches to make markets work better and new models of private sector, public sector and civil society collaboration. This new reality is also recognised by business leaders.

The issues we face are so big and the targets are so challenging that we cannot do it alone. When you look at any issue, such as food or water scarcity, it is very clear that no individual institution, government, or company can provide the solution (Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, cited in Brower et al., 2016).

Engaging the private sector and creating strong partnerships to deliver the SDG agenda requires initiatives which align business and development objectives, which are feasible and effective, and which lead to scale and sustainability. Reaching poor and marginalised groups through such efforts also means responding to the complex intersectional inequalities these groups face. Such conditions are far from straightforward to achieve.

In this article we introduce market systems development (MSD) as a new approach for engaging with the private sector in response to these challenges, using complexity and systems thinking. The intent of the paper is not to develop a new theory, rather to explore the possibilities and challenges of using a systems perspective to shape the way that markets operate. As well as exploring MSD in general, this paper reviews key elements that shape inclusivity and whether MSD will be more capable of 'leaving no one behind', while creating sustainable and systemic solutions.

From 'more' to 'better' business

Private sector development (PSD) approaches have gained prominence in the past 15 years. Supporters of PSD emphasise that economic growth, a precondition for poverty reduction, is impossible without business growth (Humphrey, 2014), which contributes to job creation, tax revenue and the development of innovative products that meet human needs. There is some evidence to support this perspective. Research has found that, for example, PSD which has elements of comprehensive coverage, such as infrastructure development or provision of improved seeds, may be particularly significant for improving the lives of marginalised groups (Baumüller *et al.*, 2014).

On the other hand, just generating more business is insufficient to achieve poverty reduction. Power dynamics within value chains can perpetuate poverty, creating extra work without contributing to empowerment (Hale and Wills, 2005; Torri and Martinez, 2014), environmental pollution creates health hazards that fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable, while the benefits created through business growth often simply bypass the poorest. This reality has led to an array of 'pro-poor business' initiatives targeted to the reality of marginalised groups (Larsson, 2006; Dolan *et al.*, 2012). Here the objective is not only generating more business activity, but generating a particular kind of business activity.

One of the most influential theories of business and development was formulated by Prahalad and Hart (2002) in their work on the 'bottom of the pyramid' (BoP). The BoP approach emphasises business models that provide products and services, such as energy or housing materials, to those living in poverty, while delivering business profits. Other examples of 'pro-poor' business include 'inclusive value chains' and

'social enterprises'. Like the BoP approach, social enterprises sell goods or services to the poor and repay the owners' investments; however, unlike the conventional firms of the BoP thinking, the primary purpose of social enterprises is to serve society (Yunus *et al.*, 2010). Inclusive value chains seek to connect business and the poor for mutual benefit. The poor may be located at various points in the value chain, on the demand side, as customers, or on the supply side as employees, producers or entrepreneurs (UNDP, 2008).

Despite their popularity, pro-poor business has been widely critiqued. There is a lack of solid evidence of poverty reduction (Landrum, 2007; Garrette and Karnani, 2010; Wach, 2012; Kolk *et al.*, 2014), and a failure to achieve impacts at scale (WBCSD, 2013; Thorpe, 2015). There are trade-offs between commercial viability, return on investment and development goals (Garrett and Karnani, 2010; Baumüller *et al.*, 2014) which are rarely acknowledged. Relatively few new business models have demonstrated success (Karamchandani *et al.*, 2011).

From linear models to systems thinking

These pro-poor business approaches are based on relatively linear models. Women employees or entrepreneurs receive training that allows them to engage in inclusive value chains. Company innovation delivers a more nutrient-rich food that reduces undernutrition rates. Implicit in these models, however, are contestable assumptions: that women will have enough free time to attend training, given care responsibilities outside the paid economy (Maestre and Thorpe, 2016); or that if a nutritious product is available, consumers will eat it, ignoring issues of price, distribution or consumer choice (Humphrey and Robinson, 2015).

Disillusionment with the achievements of both PSD and pro-poor business has led to calls for more systemic approaches that respond to the complexity of development challenges. Koh *et al.* (2014), for example, highlight barriers constraining inclusive industries at the levels of firm, value chain, public goods and government, arguing that these overlapping barriers require solutions beyond individual businesses. Similarly, Gradl and Jenkins (2011) find that inclusive business initiatives have failed to reach their full potential because they are carried out in isolation from broader efforts by other stakeholders.

Market systems development (MSD), also known as 'making markets work for the poor' or M4P, offers an alternative, 'systemic' model. At the core of MSD is a focus on achieving long-lasting and widespread pro-poor change, by identifying and addressing the root causes of 'under-performance' of markets that matter to poor people (The Springfield Centre, 2008). The theoretical underpinnings of MSD

can be traced to Polanyi, Porter, new institutional economics, and evolutionary economics, and it has analytical synergies with work on complex adaptive systems (Hall and Clark, 2010; Ramalingam *et al.*, 2014).

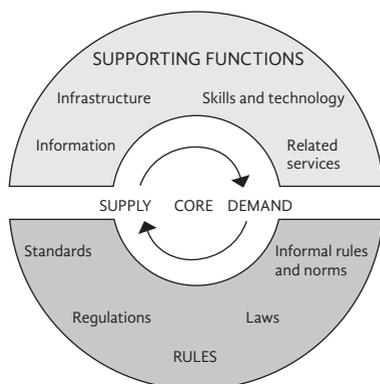
MSD approaches recognise that markets are complex, interconnected and dynamic (or ‘adaptive’) systems. “A system is a perceived whole, made up of parts that interact towards a common purpose” (Burns, 2015). These parts include actors, objects and processes, each with their own motivations and strategies (Williams, 2015). The patterns and dynamics of the system emerge from their interactions, often with unanticipated positive or negative effects. The elements that affect the way markets perform lie outside the core transaction of buying and selling, and out of the control of any individual actor or firm. Actors are influenced by the rules, incentives and conditions of the environment in which they operate, as well as by other actors’ decisions. As a result, changes in one part of the system can lead to (often unpredictable) outcomes that emerge elsewhere, with positive and negative impacts (sociocultural, environmental, economic or political). Those who are most vulnerable generally have little voice or influence in these processes, but are affected by the consequences.

By embracing a systems lens, development practitioners shift from engaging with a single private sector entity to understanding the system of public, private and civil society actors that affect the market, as well as the processes, infrastructure, environment and relationships that influence their behaviour (Thorpe and Reed, 2016). For example, a systemic approach to air pollution might involve the Ministries of Health, Energy, Transport and Industry, as well as companies in heavy industry and oil and gas, electric car makers and renewable energy providers, each with their own motivations and influences. Systems thinking tries to identify from all these actors, those with the incentives and capacity to foster sustainable and large scale changes.

Market systems development

A few authors have been key in operationalising market systems theory for practitioners (Elliott *et al.*, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Taylor and Donovan, 2016; Cunningham and Jenal, 2017). Market systems practice has been codified in the M4P Operational Guide (The Springfield Centre, 2015).

As shown in figure 1, a market system is a series of interconnected supply-demand transactions (the core market system where goods or services are exchanged – often through a value chain); which are supported by services, resources and infrastructure (e.g., roads, inputs, credit); and by formal and informal rules that influence how market exchanges take place. How the market system functions will determine its impact on poor women and men.

Figure 1. The market system

Source: *The Springfield Centre (2015)*.

MSD approaches aim to reduce poverty by transforming market systems in which poor households could or do participate, by selling goods, services or labour; or by purchasing product and services (eg. water). The target group therefore is part of the supply or demand in the core system. MSD seeks to facilitate¹ lasting and widespread pro-poor changes, by:

- 】 Tackling root causes of market failures (rather than immediate symptoms).
- 】 Leveraging the incentives, behaviours, and capabilities of system actors.
- 】 Using systems thinking to guide implementation, acknowledging that markets involve interrelationships with power dynamics emerging from their interactions.

In MSD, donor agencies, impact investors, governments and other development actors are asked to rethink their role in bringing about pro-poor change. For example, a traditional approach to undernutrition might involve donors or governments directly supplying micro-nutrient fortified food to poor households. While nutrition may improve in the short-term, these outcomes are likely to be time-limited (until funding finishes) or too expensive to scale. Through MSD, in contrast, development practitioners provide temporary support to local actors (such as food companies or local governments), or stimulate changes in the rules, relationships, barriers and incentives, to overcome market failures affecting the provision of more nutritious food. The ultimate objectives are sustainability, meaning that actors will continue to perform new or 'improved' roles; and scale, with replication of positive innovations, and crowding in of actors beyond those directly influenced. See Boxes 1 and 2 for examples of an MSD approach.

- 1 Facilitation approaches catalyse change by influencing the capabilities and incentives of market actors towards new behaviours beneficial to the poor. As external agents, facilitators have a temporary role, and should not become part of the system themselves. It is not about direct delivery or providing direct solutions (e.g. directly supplying fertilisers or medicines).

Box 1. Private Enterprise Programme Ethiopia (PEPE)

PEPE works with the garments sector in Ethiopia. It identified a lack of skilled workers, high turnover of employees and lack of relevant training programmes as sectoral constraints. It also learned that local factories value women workers, but women often lack access to appropriate training. PEPE identified an entry point – firms that provide training – in a sector that has the potential to impact women – garments factories. It partnered with training providers to help them design courses better tailored to women's requirements, and to coordinate with factories to ensure employment for their graduates. In the longer term, PEPE also plans to support factories to establish a human resources function to better retain skilled women employees (e.g. through flexible working hours). The outcome is improved coordination between training providers and garments factories based on a business model to provide relevant and accessible training to women, with new customers for training providers and a stable and healthy workforce for factories.

Source: Personal communications with PEPE.

Box 2. Samriddhi, Bangladesh

Samriddhi supports market coordination and service provision in 12 value chains in Bangladesh, including some (medicinal plants, chicken rearing) which are particularly relevant for poor and women farmers. For medicinal plants, for example, production can be done close to home, which addresses barriers to women's mobility. It uses available assets (land along roadsides) for cultivation, and targets sectors in which women traditionally work. Samriddhi facilitates long-term change by catalysing a system for the ongoing provision of inputs and technical and financial services to farmers. Capacity building of local service providers and associations is achieved through linkages to private and public agencies. Samriddhi also supports farmers to organise into micro and small enterprises that are able to engage with these service providers.

Source: Personal communications with Samriddhi.

Reaching the most marginalised?

MSD represents conceptual progress in moving from a linear to a systemic theory of change, along with some evidence of tangible results of poverty reduction². One

- 2 For example, the BEAM Exchange provides an 'evidence map' of resources that describe the impact and effectiveness of MSD programmes. The current map shows resources with 'high confidence' of positive impacts particularly in the areas of improved access to information, improved input supply and improved value chain coordination. In some cases, evidence is at the level of interventions, but others indicate an impact on poverty reduction: <https://beamexchange.org/resources/evidence-map/>

outstanding question, however, is whether MSD creates outcomes that can benefit the poorest – whether directly or indirectly (Sahan and Fischer-Mackay, 2011; Blaser, 2014). In other words, can MSD programmes catalyse changes that reach beyond the ‘better off’ poor, who have more skills, assets and income, making them relevant and able to benefit from markets?

Some may argue that this question misses the point, and that any impact on poverty makes MSD a valid approach to development. However, following the SDG commitment to leave no one behind, paired with globally rising inequality and extreme poverty, suggests there is a need to understand the potential and limits of MSD in this respect. Can better functioning markets lead to improved incomes for very poor households, and does that equate to improved quality of life? If the answer is yes, then what are the conditions that enable these outcomes? If the answer is no, then this limitation must be recognised, along with appropriate investment in alternative solutions.

Recent research on market approaches (not specifically about MSD) suggests that market-based approaches *can* reach further down the economic pyramid, by using targeted interventions or policies in key areas³, through which the poorest can benefit from markets; and by responding to context-specific circumstances that contribute to isolation and exclusion (Thorpe *et al.*, 2017). However, this research does not explore ‘how’ programmes can most effectively target interventions or identify context-specific circumstances. Applying a systems perspective suggested three elements: setting appropriate boundaries, testing assumptions and managing adaptively.

Boundaries, assumptions and adaptive management

‘Boundaries’ that define what falls within or outside a system is a crucial concept in systems theory, yet is often forgotten or obscured in programme guidance. System boundaries are subjective – their definition is based on the perceptions of interested parties, and will be experienced and understood differently by different individuals, based on their position, role and experiences. Everyone understands both the boundaries of a system and the interconnections within it differently (Checkland, 1981). Donors or policy-makers construct the boundaries of a market system at the beginning of a programme. How they do this will deeply impact the analysis they conduct and the interventions they design. If the boundaries are too narrow, the sector or approach selected may exclude marginalised groups, or may impact them negatively through unintended consequences.

3 The entry points identified were: making the most of available assets and skills, organising collectively, coordinating across the market system, engaging employers and others to overcome barriers and ‘providing a leg up’, such as through graduation approaches or access to social protection.

For example, a programme to improve the life of poor farmers may draw the system boundaries around factors and actors that contribute to farmer's income, including market access, input supply, finance or infrastructure. A different definition of boundaries, however, could also include other factors, such as vulnerability to risk, degree of individual agency or family health and nutrition. If a farmer shifts to a high yield crop, for example, he/she may have better market opportunities, but also a higher risk to climate shocks, or less time to prepare food for the family, impacting negatively on the children's health and well-being.

A nascent body of work is exploring how non-economic factors such as social norms, household dynamics and power relations, often root causes of extreme poverty, should be reflected and addressed within MSD (Jochnick, 2012; Thorpe *et al.*, 2016; Maestre and Thorpe, 2016; Markel *et al.*, 2016; Klassen *et al.*, 2017). A key insight is that factors that are outside the traditional boundaries of private sector development can be accommodated conceptually within system boundaries and addressed practically through MSD. Interventions may involve partnering with different (non-economic) actors, such as government agencies, understanding and responding to household dynamics, or influencing social norms and informal institutions⁴ (Maestre and Thorpe, 2016).

The setting of system boundaries will ideally be carried out explicitly, by gathering different perspectives, including from the intended beneficiaries, to reveal what boundaries and goals are relevant for who, define the market system and root causes of poverty, and to inform programme interventions. As market systems are dynamic, the process will continue iteratively and constantly, adapting interventions based on the continuous flow of relevant information (Burns, 2015).

Alongside setting system boundaries, programmes need to be explicit about their intended impact pathways. Being explicit means acknowledging assumptions which underpin the programme's understanding of how it will reach targeted groups. The complex nature of systems means the outcomes of interventions are not knowable in advance. By being explicit, programmes can test these assumptions and adapt, expand or terminate the interventions as new information comes to light in an 'adaptive' approach to programme management.

For example, a government may try to reduce undernutrition in a rural community by assuming that an increase in agricultural yields will translate into improved household income, a more diverse diet and better nutritional outcomes. However, when this assumption is tested, the finding may be that farmers spend the new earned income on improving their housing or buying a television. By taking an adaptive approach to programme management and expanding the boundaries of the system, the focus of undernutrition programmes may shift instead to the government for better nutritional awareness campaigns, or civil society to change social norms.

4 The references above provide further information and detailed guidance on how to do this.

Testing assumptions means asking questions such as ‘How can a particular goal best be achieved under given circumstances?’ or ‘Who has (had) the power to decide how goals are supposed to be reached?’ instead of ‘Is the intervention reaching a particular goal?’ (simplified as ‘Did we do things right?’) (Befani *et al.*, 2014). It also means considering the multidimensional consequences of interventions beyond the intended outcomes, which may mean positive or negative impacts for the poorest (whether or not they are the intended beneficiaries). While it will not be possible to have a complete understanding of all programme effects at any given time (Osorio-Cortes and Jenal, 2013), assessments which go beyond intended impacts and allow for unanticipated changes to surface from people’s experiences and observations can provide important learning about how programme implementation needs to be adapted.

Conclusion

We can conclude that market systems development (MSD) introduces a more targeted approach than traditional private sector development, focusing on sectors with poverty reduction potential; and shifting the focus beyond individual businesses or value chains. By emphasising the whole market system, including the institutional environment, supporting services and infrastructure, rather than a narrow engagement with one firm or value chain it becomes possible to identify underlying constraints and innovative solutions to poverty reduction. The intended result is not only successfully delivering a product or service, or creating a new market opportunity, but rather behaviour change amongst system actors, with resilient, sustainable and large-scale outcomes of equity, inclusivity, and sustainability.

MSD has, however, been challenged in terms of its ability to reach and benefit very isolated or marginalised groups, with the risk that the poorest are ‘left behind’. Drawing on systems theory, this article suggests three key elements of MSD practice that shape the inclusivity of these approaches. These are: testing assumptions of how the programme will reach marginalised groups; adaptively managing programme implementation based on the learnings derived; and engaging broad perspectives in defining system boundaries. System boundaries may include economic or non-economic causes of market exclusion and involve actors ranging from small, medium and micro-businesses, business associations, community organisation, government agencies, professionals, civil society organisations, as well as intended beneficiaries.

Market systems development represents a relatively new approach when compared to decades of development practice based on direct interventions, and more evidence to understand its potential and limitations is needed. By understanding better what market-based approaches can and cannot achieve in a given environment, policy actors will be better able to select appropriate responses. These responses will include catalysing changes and shaping markets to the benefit of vulnerable target groups, but

also supporting other measures such as social protection and appropriate regulation, where markets fail to reach or cause detriment.

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