About

The Sustainable Marketplaces Laboratory builds on the foundation of the Subsistence Marketplaces Initiative (SMI), in the College of Business at the University of Illinois, which has pioneered a bottom-up approach to research, education, and practice at the intersection of poverty and marketplaces.

We bring together students, faculty, educators, and practitioners from a diverse set of backgrounds to seek actionable knowledge to enable sustainable marketplaces through research, teaching, and social initiatives. We focus on sustainability, emphasizing learning from subsistence marketplaces which represent the most unsustainable of contexts.

Learning from these contexts, which have faced extreme resource constraints and deteriorating environments, enables sustainable innovation and bottom-up enterprise to face the challenges of the 21st century. We offer a number of educational experiences to a variety of audiences.

Our efforts in research have generated more than 40 authored publications, including three books, and we have edited roughly 60 refereed publications through special issues and organized six biennial conferences bringing together scholars and practitioners.

Direct educational experiences derived from our experiences on this topic reach almost a thousand students a year at the University of Illinois, and many more students online, including a year-long interdisciplinary course and a one-of-a-kind international immersion experience. Educational materials are disseminated worldwide through a web portal (https://business.illinois.edu/subsistence/resources/resourcesmlp/).

This work has led to a unique marketplace literacy educational program that tens of thousands of individuals have received in seven countries – India, USA, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Argentina, Honduras, and Mexico through the Marketplace Literacy Project, a non-profit organization founded in concert with this initiative and other partners.

In a nutshell, we have developed understanding of the radically different context of subsistence marketplaces, created education for subsistence marketplaces, and created education about subsistence marketplaces.
ENABLING SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION AND BOTTOM-UP ENTERPRISE

Where We Work

Research
Beginning with a research program on low-literate consumers in the US and low-literate, low-income buyers and sellers in subsistence marketplaces, we have now conducted research for almost two decades on low-literate, low-income consumers in the United States, and subsistence consumers, entrepreneurs, and marketplaces with a field team in South India, South America, and Africa.

Our research spans the spectrum from understanding subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs at the level cognition, affect, and behavior to product development, business models, and sustainable development, keeping the promise of a bottom-up approach.

We have received several grants from groups such as the National Science Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada.

Publications

Forums
We have founded and nurtured the field of subsistence marketplaces, providing a variety of platforms and forums for scholars and practitioners in marketing and related fields. Within this work, a community has come together through an ongoing series of biennial conferences since 2006.

Learning Experiences
Using a strong research foundation, we have developed and teach a series of educational experiences on this topic, reaching almost a thousand students a year at the University of Illinois.

A year-long, innovative, inter-disciplinary graduate-level course on sustainable product and market development for subsistence marketplaces with international immersion was ranked one of the top entrepreneurship courses by Inc. Magazine, and a student group won a prestigious design award. Students earn a certificate in sustainability based on their accomplishments. Companies and social enterprises have received approximately 50 projects to date over 10 years, each involving interdisciplinary skill sets. Insights from projects are implemented by sponsors, including potential commercialization of prototypes.

- Sustainable Product Design and Enterprise Plan Development, Parts I and II (BADM 332/532 and 333/533)
- Sustainable Business Enterprises (MBA 505 and Online Undergraduate)
- Engineering for Global Development (ENG 198)
- Sustainable Global Business Horizons (Executive MBA and iMBA)
- Coursera Course on Subsistence Marketplaces
- John Hedeman International Immersion Experience
- Professional Responsibility Module in Business 101 for all incoming undergraduate students
- Sustainability Certificate
- Service Learning: Entrepreneurs Without Borders (Student organization focused on enabling entrepreneurship among students and within subsistence marketplaces)

Where We Work