

The 'Enterprising Self' at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Avon Cosmetic's Repurposing of South Africa's 'Informal' Workers<sup>1</sup>

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Catherine Dolan  
University of Oxford

In the wake of C. K. Prahalad's 2004 publication, *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid*, "bottom-of-the pyramid" (BOP) schemes have become increasingly prominent on the development landscape. Lauded as the century's most influential model of socially responsible business (Anderson and Billou 2007), the BOP approach weds development practice and the pursuit of profit, maintaining that development goals can be achieved by simply extending the scope and scale of capitalism to the four billion men and women who live on less than two dollars per day (Cross and Street 2009, Prahalad 2004). It is a vision driven not by corporate largesse, but by a web of entrepreneurs<sup>2</sup> who are purported to stimulate capitalism while delivering poverty reduction and gender empowerment door-to-door. From 'poor' women selling Danone yogurt and Bata shoes house-to-house in rural Bangladesh, to Unilever's Shakti *Ammas* (mothers) distributing soap among remote villages across India and to Avon ladies peddling perfume on the streets of Soweto, Bangkok and Mexico City, BOP schemes advance a form of development that positions the (poor, often female) individual rather than the state or the market as ultimately responsible for generating (or not) development.

Development's engagement with the private sector is certainly not new. But in recent years leading development agencies (e.g. World Bank, Asian Development Bank, USAID, DFID etc.) have sought to repurpose "informal," "subsistence," or otherwise 'underproductive' workers as entrepreneurial "clients" and "partners," as development practice in a neoliberal context shifted from state- to market-led approaches such as microfinance and Fairtrade (Elyachar 2005; Rankin 2001; Sharma 2006; Dolan 2010). BOP models both share and depart from this genealogy. On the one hand they too are built on the premise that

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<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this paper, co-authored with Mary Johnstone-Louis, has been published in *Focaal: European Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 2011, 60 (Summer): 21-33.

<sup>2</sup> Prahalad (2004) argued that the key to empowering the poor was in viewing them as consumers. He claimed that that the 4 billion people living on less than one dollar a day represented an untapped consumer market for multinational corporations, who could be served through innovative products and services.

poverty can be attenuated through partnerships with the private sector, specifically by unleashing new forms of entrepreneurship and finance (UNDP 2004). Yet in contrast to previous development models, BOP approaches cast neither the corporation nor the development institution as a grantor of rights, protections, or opportunities. Rather, they work through self-regulatory modes of governance, or what Foucault (1977) terms the “technologies of the self,” rendering the entrepreneurial citizen as the vehicle through which development aspirations can be realized. In what Rose describes as the “double movement of autonomization and responsabilization,” the entrepreneur, whether a *Shakti Amma* or an Avon representative, is both a subject and an object of power, “set free to find their own destiny....[but] made responsible for that destiny, and for the destiny of society as a whole in new ways” (Rose 1999:174).

This paper explores how ‘informal’, ‘under-utilised’ or otherwise ‘unemployed’ women are re-purposed as the instruments of development through an archetypal BOP model --- Avon Cosmetics.<sup>3</sup> Avon’s capacity to draw thousands of women, as well as their attendant networks of kin and community, into productive work has rendered it an exemplar for private sector approaches to poverty alleviation (Chu 2009). However, while BOP systems like Avon provide new avenues for income generation for some “poor” women, the practices through which women are “converted” into “empowered” entrepreneurial subjects can induce new forms of discipline and control while giving rise to the now familiar consequences of contingent work: an absence of employment protections and benefit provisions, high work intensity and increased risks of vulnerability. Indeed, while targeting the “bottom of the pyramid” may elide the distinction between the maximization of profit and the imperatives of sustainable development, devolving development to the underutilised, “entrepreneurial poor” raises new questions on the implications of “making poverty business.”

### **The Entrepreneurial Self**

Over the last decade entrepreneurship has gained favour in development circles as a way to facilitate economic growth by revitalizing the legions of un- and under-employed workers in developing countries. In South Africa, this ethos of “productive citizenry” gained traction in

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<sup>3</sup> The paper is based on a qualitative and quantitative study of black South African Avon representatives and consumers conducted in three municipalities from 2007–2010: Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan, and Polokwane. Over the two-year period, we implemented two semi-structured surveys (167 and 300 respondents respectively) and conducted approximately 75 in-depth interviews with randomly selected Avon associates (at all organizational levels) and consumers, as well as several open-ended interviews with management at the Johannesburg headquarters.

the late 1990s, as the country embraced a welfare strategy founded on “neoliberal motifs of ‘empowerment’”, ‘self-sufficiency’ and “independence” (Ferguson 2007: 74), promoting an entrepreneurial citizen who would supplant the inefficient state-led development (Colvin, Leavens, and Robins 2009: 9). Government programs such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) aimed to galvanize the participation of black South Africans in the “productive” economy, conceptualizing the market not as a natural system of relations but a realm to be cultivated through the development of entrepreneurial dispositions (Lemke 2001: 196). By recasting the unemployed as “microentrepreneurs” (Ferguson *ibid.*: 74), the government provided fertile ground for BOP’s “empowerment” approach, mapping a national discourse of economic self-sufficiency onto the bodies of newly enterprising individuals.

During the late 1990s, when Avon entered South Africa, the country was rife with aspirant entrepreneurs. Formal job creation had failed to accommodate the rising levels of labour force participation and informal employment accounted for the bulk of job creation (Davies and Thurlow 2009). As is the case around the world, this informality was highly gendered: women were far more likely to be “self-employed” with 94% of them engaged in informal businesses, largely focused on hawking agricultural produce or traditional handicrafts, often from the roadside or another informal environment (Naidoo and Hilton 2006). Informality was also strongly racialised with black women in South Africa registering much higher levels of engagement in informal economic activities than either white women or black men (*ibid.* 2006). In both cases women confronted significant financial, educational, and infrastructural constraints, as well restrictive socio-cultural norms and gender-based discrimination that kept them confined to marginally-profitable forms of petty trade (Mass and Herrington 2007). Against this backdrop, the social and economic mobility associated with selling ‘upscale’ manufactured commodities (e.g. Herbalife, Amway, Tupperware, Yabal, Avon etc.) offered a compelling proposition, fostering what Katherine Verdery (1996: 203) has called a kind of “competition ... of the excluded.” By 2010 there were 102,000 “Avon ladies” in South Africa, up from 35,000 in 2007 (Avon-Justine, interview 11/7/2010), seeking financial and personal transformation through the company.

The Avon system, as well as its BOP successors --- Project Shakti, Grameen Phone and CARE’s Rural Sales Programme --- all target women as their intended beneficiaries. While there are several factors driving this --- from the realisation that investing in women is the most efficient way to improve not only household welfare but the social and fiscal health of nations to the fact that most goods marketed by the global consumer culture --- cleaning products, food products, cosmetics --- are purchased and used by women (Dolan and Scott

2009), such schemes also offer women a viable avenue to participate in networks of global trade. For example, the costs of entry into the Avon system and the risks of participation are very low - especially in comparison to micro-lending schemes, which tend to have high interest rates, and allow for much greater debt exposure. Although the company will only extend credit to those individuals who are deemed credit-worthy under the 2007 National Credit Act, a representative can join the system on a cash-only basis, on payment of a small fee (about £4) and the cost of products. Avon fills orders as they come in and does not charge interest. Like other BOP schemes, the structure of the Avon system is particularly amenable to the participation of poorer women. Avon extends a small amount of credit at the outset, and most women begin by filling small orders: a tube of moisturiser, a can of body spray, or a roll-on deodorant, for example, and convert the profits from these small sales into subsequently larger orders. Avon representatives receive an average commission of 20 percent of the retail price of goods, on a sliding scale based on the volume of goods they sell.

The system is not without its benefits. In our survey of 300 randomly-selected black Avon representatives, the mean Avon income earned was about ZAR900 a month, putting an Avon earner in the top half of black women. The income picture becomes more auspicious the longer a woman is in the system: women who relied on Avon for their primary income and had been in the system 16 months or more were earning a striking ZAR1,409 a month (Scott et al. forthcoming).<sup>4</sup> Yet while the BOP model may provide poor women the opportunity to earn an income by selling lipsticks and moisturisers through their existing informal trade networks, income is, as always, only part of the story. Whilst BOP initiatives espouse a vision of partnership, empowerment and inclusive growth, the everyday reality is often less benign, transmitting and upholding inequalities of power (cf Henkel and Stirrat 2001; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Rajak 2007).

### **Informal Workers at the Frontline of the Corporation**

At first blush, it may appear that the development orientation of Unilever, Danone, Grameen and Avon BOP systems would provide women with benefits and protections denied to the those engaged in more orthodox forms of nonstandard work. Yet despite the fact that women are marshalled into BOP entrepreneurship under the mantle of 'ethical capitalism' there is little employment security on offer. Like other BOP schemes, Avon harnesses a large, flexible, and self-regulating work force without incurring the cost of managing employment relations or

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<sup>4</sup> Some caution is warranted, as these are not longitudinal data, but snapshots from the same data collection period.

reproducing labour (Biggart 1989). However, these costs do not disappear but are rather absorbed by Avon's army of self-employed, independent contractors onto whom Avon outsources key business functions including employee management, marketing, and distribution, a structure that allows the company to 'govern at a distance' (Rose 1993). And, like all workers situated at the heart of flexible labour strategies, the BOP entrepreneur straddles the margins of formal and informal work. Subsumed within a formal enterprise, women nonetheless confront the lack of employment security, rights, benefits or social protections epitomized by most 'informalised' work in the global labour market while bearing the responsibilities for domestic and reproductive labour.

Yet the risks and vulnerabilities of BOP informality not only stem from an absence of contractual rights and labour protections but also from the social and economic costs associated with self-governance. First, the success of any representative lies in their ability to orchestrate social relationships within their sales network. Whereas the separation of affective ties from the workings of capitalism was once deemed necessary for managerial control, "affective labour" is central to many BOP initiatives (Hardt 1999: 90), as calculative rationalities must suffuse the non-economic spheres of social relations for a representative to be successful. While income can be earned by selling products, real gains are derived from recruiting others to sell and recruit to sell and recruit, thus accumulating profit from those labouring "underneath" (Jeffery 2001). Though not a Ponzi scheme, the entire social architecture is orchestrated to galvanize a continual process of generational reproduction. However, exchanges that are socially mediated are messy, and several women conveyed the difficulty of collecting payments from family members and close friends. As evidence from microfinance illustrates, using social relations as the currency of capital accumulation can in fact reduce social capital, converting trust into mistrust (Rankin 2007).

Second, although Avon does not require advance payment for products, representatives can become squeezed between buyers and the company if payments are delayed or are not forthcoming, for whatever reason. Over two-thirds of the representatives we interviewed claimed that payment issues often caused tensions. This situation is particularly difficult for low-income women, who typically lack the resources to cover such contingencies.

Third, although direct selling is touted as 'flexible', allowing women to work from home at their own convenience, earning a viable income through Avon is extremely time-intensive. Women confront ubiquitous pressures to sell, recruit and reach sales targets, as we observed when attending a training session in a Johannesburg township. Representatives there were told: "You have to try and be ambitious so that you can succeed," "You can make it, you

just need to have faith in yourself,” and “It is you that decides what you want to do with your team in order for them to be successful.” We listened as the trainer described a bedridden Avon representative who was, because of her ambition, the highest earner in the area. Managing her sales using “a phone and a laptop on her stomach,” this “amazing” woman was touted as an example to the trainees, who were chided for being outperformed by a woman confined to her bed. The pervasive emphasis on the link between positive attitude, hard work, and material success can have a quixotic appeal, speaking to the latent capacity of each person to succeed, if they simply “develop,’ ‘exercise,’ or ‘give rein to” their inherent potential (Jeffery 2001: 32). Yet in a socioeconomic and political context with palpable constraints on personal achievement—for black South Africans in general and for black South African women in particular—the championing of individual agency can be debilitating. Because one can never have “enough” motivation, drive, or commitment, the insistence that poor women “are in charge of [their] own success,” equates any failure with individual deficiency. As Bröckling (2005:9) summarizes in her analysis of the enterprising self: “In every incentive to do ‘more’, the verdict of ‘not enough’ is hiding.”

### **The Calculative Practices of Empowerment**

Yet it is not simply the status of ‘informality’ that can render women particularly vulnerable but rather the “calculative devices” (Callon 2009) that are employed to transform the “unproductive self” into a “productive” one (Hanser 2005). Described by Callon (2009: 270), “entities to be calculated are first ‘detached’ or moved and ordered into a single space whether a... spreadsheet or an invoice, then some manipulations or transformations are performed upon the entities before, finally, a result, a sum or a choice, is extracted.” In the case of Avon, women are deliberately detached from a perceived torpid world of dependency and enfolded into the enterprising ‘community’ of Avon, remade as “entrepreneurs” through a set of practices that seeks to banish entitlement and idleness in any form. Unstructured “free” time can and should be “redeemed”, interpersonal relationships can and should become sources of income, and a representative’s body can and should be transformed into a business asset. To illustrate, the following sections provide a brief entrée into how Avon deploys two specific calculative practices --- targets and tracking and time management --- to construct the subjectivity of the economically empowered entrepreneur, practices that conceal the risks of informality behind the veil of “messianic capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). It is in understanding the disciplinary effects of these strategies that the friction between Avon’s vision of development and the dilemma of the informal, enterprising self becomes apparent.

## Targets and Tracking

Avon representatives are christened into the company through a personal orientation process with their upline, who is then responsible for managing their long-term performance with the organization. It is the responsibility of uplines to steward this process by indoctrinating new representatives into the habits, dispositions and modes of conduct that they will need to succeed and ‘reproduce’ in the Avon family. This involves creating what Callon (2009: 270) calls “spaces of calculability,” contexts that facilitate “the capacity for economic calculation” through a range of devices such as performance targets, pedagogical tools (“Weekly Goals” worksheets), monitoring regimes (“Progress to Date” check-in calls), and performance reviews (“Let’s Talk” chats<sup>3</sup>). Through these devices, uplines exercise control, facilitating the productivity of ‘active’ members and pulling wayward downlines back into the Avon fold “whenever they become idle” (Lan 2002: 176).

Avon establishes concrete numeric targets governing the levels of recruitment and sales necessary for representatives to gain commission. These goals are fixed and clearly remunerated. They are also exacting. For example, in order to qualify for commission, a mid-level representative must reach a personal sales target, recruit a given number of new representatives, and, through relational supervision, ensure that her downlines’ sales meet specific levels. If not, as Louise explained, even those who “really go an extra mile” on personal sales lose their commission. At a training session, Louise emphasized the importance of meeting institutional targets to the uplines gathered in her cramped living room. Describing the process of recruitment, Louise said, “[t]his is a numbers game... Don’t just go out and say that you are going to see what happens... you set yourself a target... you say ‘I am going out prospecting and I won’t come back until I have ten names.’” Callon’s “binaries” are thus created as representatives are confronted with the choice between success/failure and enterprise/idleness infinite times a day, and become accountable to their Avon “family” for their choices.

Targets do not craft self-directed and self-monitoring workers alone; their achievement is closely observed and assessed through upline/downline relationships, replacing as Lan (2002: 181) notes, the “iron cage of bureaucratic management” with the practices of “network surveillance” (Lan 2002: 181). At a training, for example, Louise cautioned her downlines to “focus” hard on their recruits so they don’t “miss anything.” They wouldn’t, she advised, want to repeat Caroline’s mistake, a ‘friend’ who lost her commission because two of her downlines sold 0.5% under their target. Louise offered a palliative to such fates: a set of tools to monitor,

and hence render downlines governable, including “Development Call Observation Forms” (used to assess downlines during “informal appointments”) and “Training Logs” (to track the “development” of a downline to “make sure they are successful”). Results, she noted, were to be continually measured and success (and failure) tracked. Similarly, representative Barbara described how assiduously she tracks her downlines’ performance to ensure that their sales keep “going up, because if it goes down there is going to be trouble... I am going to be on the phone. The one thing that they [downlines] hate about me is when I am really, really mad, I will SMS them at midnight and they just hate it.” Indeed, these strategies can be potentially disempowering. As one representative noted, “[R]eporting everything, how many recruits you have made or how many orders, immediately de-motivates you”, even if such practices are cast as the ticket to market success.

The strategies of calculability, however, are often more subtle. Stephen, a representative from Polokwane, described how he plays the roles of “good cop” and “bad cop” with his downlines, explaining that he had to be “strict” and “tough” to reach his team performance targets, but once they were achieved he would “laugh and joke” with his team “so that they can feel more at home.” Other times, uplines cultivate discipline by tapping into cultural sentiments that venerate obligation to kin and community. Louise, for instance, reminded her downlines of their maternal responsibility to help their recruits saying, “You are mothers now. You need to help your babies.” This familial metaphor, however, obscures the web of calculation that upholds it: Avon mothers are not only ‘watching’ their “babies” but are also being ‘watched’ themselves, positioned in the centre of a generational hierarchy with ties of responsibility to members above and below them.

These strategies aim to produce the “empowered” women that are central to Avon’s mission. But, they also render representatives subjects of, and subject to, the discipline of on-going monitoring, the effects of which are sanitized by the company’s informal vernacular of “chats” and “check-ins.” Monitoring and surveillance are re-coded as “Let’s talk”, prospecting for a sale or a new recruit becomes “striking up a conversation with a friend”, and achievement and performance evaluation are euphemized as “being a good example for your downlines.” Like Benson and Kirsch’s (2010) study of corporate oxymorons, the deployment of benign idioms serves to confound the distinction between discipline and empowerment, while at the same time effecting what might be considered a “strategic ignorance” among representatives (Carrillo et al. 2000).

## **Time Management**

Uplines are encouraged to “show, share, and observe” their subordinates, vigilant, above all, for idleness or underperformance. Diaries are provided to new representatives so that they can banish “unproductive” time from their lives through careful planning and “time management”. This imperative to partition time is, on one level, a technology of discipline that inscribes the efficiency of the clock into the comportment of representatives, serving as both a symbolic and material ‘boundary’ between an aimless past and a modern future (Rose 1999). Yet Avon normalizes a system of time management that is “all Avon, all the time.” Uplines drill their downlines on the “Four A’s” of Avon, a motto that urges representatives to “anytime, anywhere, always ask”<sup>4</sup> if they can share an Avon brochure, thus fusing representatives’ public and private worlds and recasting each and every human interaction as a business opportunity. For example, as we were waiting for colleagues at a petrol station in Limpopo, a senior representative traveling with us took advantage of our “spare” ten minutes, “redeeming her time” by leaving our vehicle and introducing the Avon opportunity to women at and around the station. Representatives thus inhabit a universe that troubles easy binaries, where the economic bleeds into the social and the public into the private, effectively diffusing the “entrepreneurial form to all forms of conduct” (Burchell 1996: 275). It is not uncommon, for instance, for representatives to recruit or sell inside hospitals, churches or at religious functions, circumstances conventionally anathema to marketing and sales. Louise, for example, describes the need to prevent her downlines from resting “too much” over the Christmas holiday, while Stephen explained that he would have little sympathy for a downline who missed a target because they had to attend a funeral claiming that “[i]t’s not an excuse... you meet people there at the funerals.” A funeral, he reasoned, provides a good opportunity to show off a new fragrance, and by engaging in conversations with other funeral attendees, one might have as many as five new customers at the end of the event. Every moment and interaction thus become expectant as all spheres of social life --- sustenance, worship, grief, and leisure --- can and should be appropriated for commercial ends as the world of informal social ties becomes indistinguishable from free market capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

‘Market-based’ approaches to poverty reduction have gained considerable purchase in recent decades, endowing transnational business with the authority to tackle global development challenges. Within this context, the BOP proposition, which claims to stimulate corporate profits while drawing the ‘under-productive’ poor into new forms of commercial activity, has emerged as a ‘paragon’ of ethical capitalism, admired by corporations and NGOs alike (Cross

and Street 2009). Yet while many BOP systems aim to repurpose ‘under-utilized’ women, it is only through the governance of the individual enterprising self that development aspirations can come to fruition. In fact, while companies like Avon gloss their webs of entrepreneurs as a form of *development*, it falls squarely on poor South African “entrepreneurs” to generate both the capital and the subjectivities required to transform the “realm of possibility” (in Avon vernacular) into an “everyday reality” of material security.

Indeed, while outsourcing poverty reduction and gender empowerment to the BOP allows development agencies a way to privatize (and offload) development (Blowfield and Dolan 2008), and transnational firms like Avon to enjoy new markets and reputational currency, it poses real questions on how development initiatives that engage with the private sector are governed. Notwithstanding the broader questions of whether a market-driven model of development can generate sustainable and gender equitable poverty reduction, whether it is prudent or ethical to pursue development by increasing consumption, or indeed what processes of inclusion and exclusion such systems may occasion, we might ask whether breeding a growing workforce of self-exploiting, self-governing, informal workers be celebrated as a development solution? Indeed, while BOP systems like Avon may engender material improvements and a measure of empowerment in women’s lives, whether this is the type of empowerment development practice and policy should support requires greater reflection. It is not simply that the vulnerabilities of contingent work are sustained through BOP entrepreneurship or that affective ties are rendered fungible and converted into resources for economic gain. Rather, it is what it means to deflect development governance to the already poor and marginalized, hitching the promise of social and economic improvement to a process of subject making in which they are made responsible for their own transformation (Jeffery 2001). Indeed, while BOP initiatives are cast as a way to make business work for the poor, in reality they absolve both the private sector and development institutions from the responsibility to effect socio-economic change. Rather, it is left to the networks of informal entrepreneurs to assume accountability for leveraging the development benefits the BOP promises to offer.

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