THE SUBSISTENCE MARKETPLACES INITIATIVE SEeks to develop and disseminate actionable knowledge for creating sustainable solutions for subsistence marketplaces.

Our work on subsistence marketplaces for over a decade has created unique synergies between research, teaching, and social initiatives.

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The Program

The Subsistence Marketplaces Initiative seeks to develop and disseminate actionable knowledge for creating sustainable solutions for subsistence marketplaces. The radically different context of subsistence and the emphasis on sustainable solutions provides a very challenging setting for research, education, and practice in management. Our work is at the intersection of subsistence and sustainability, and the lessons learned are likely to be useful in all contexts to collectively face the challenges that confront humanity.

Unique to our approach is a bottom up orientation that begins with a micro-level analysis of buyers, sellers, and subsistence marketplaces. We adopt a marketplace rather than a market orientation, viewing subsistence contexts as more than markets to sell to, rather as individuals, communities, and marketplaces to learn from. Our focus should be distinguished from macro-level economic approaches, and mid-level business strategy approaches such as base of the pyramid (BOP) research. Our goal is to understand and enable the progress from subsistence marketplaces to sustainable marketplaces, that is, marketplaces characterized by sustainable production and consumption that conserves natural resources and enhances individual and community welfare.

Our initiative is based on over a decade of fieldwork and has created unique synergies between research, teaching, and social initiatives. In all three arenas, our work involves engagement of students, businesses, and social enterprises as well as a diverse set of faculty and campus entities across different disciplines. Core members of our team who provide field support for our initiatives in India grew up in subsistence contexts and have decades of experience working with subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs. We have also created forums to connect a community of researchers and practitioners and enable outlets for publication.

For more information, please visit:
http://www.business.illinois.edu/subsistence/

Sponsorship Opportunity

Students in the Sustainable Product and Market Development for Subsistence Marketplaces program work for a year to produce a product prototype and a business plan tailored to the needs of a sponsoring company. Business, engineering, and industrial design students collaborate in this carefully guided program to produce insightful and actionable materials based on the latest scholarship and sound business intelligence.

We have worked successfully with small startups as well as large companies, such as Unilever, Motorola, Microsoft, and Kraft. Our passionate students begin the course by experiencing virtual immersion in subsistence contexts through such means as a poverty simulation and analysis of interviews and videos of subsistence individuals. In the next emersion phase, they grapple with principles elicited from a rich set of case studies and guest speakers including social workers, technologists, and entrepreneurs. In parallel, each project begins with extensive idea generation, filtering to a family of ideas that students evaluate on a one-of-a-kind international immersion experience during which they interview subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs and observe urban and rural subsistence contexts.

Once fully prepared, in the spring semester, students apply their business and technical skills to design a product prototype and related business plan. Projects to date have dealt with information technology, education, energy, food, and health. From a company’s perspective, projects that fit well with this course are those that involve product design. Additionally, our students sign non-disclosure agreements for company-sponsored projects, signing over ownership of intellectual property and agreeing to confidentiality. To support the cost of prototyping costs and a field trip, sponsoring companies typically contribute grants of $10,000 per project.