

Developing products and business processes to serve subsistence marketplaces (or the roughly 4 billion poor around the world referred to as the bottom of the pyramid) is a significant challenge for businesses. Despite the importance of subsistence marketplaces, most product development educational curricula have been focused on relatively resource-rich and literate consumers and markets. We teach an innovative year-long product development course which includes an international immersion experience and which covers a broad spectrum of learning from understanding poverty, to consumer behavior, to product development and engineering design specifically for subsistence consumers. This unique course represents a pioneering effort to focus attention and create knowledge about product development, marketing, management, and engineering practices for subsistence marketplaces. Our two-semester course sequence for graduate-level students in a variety of business and engineering disciplines and industrial design combines in-class pedagogy with experiential learning and results in useful and marketable product concepts and prototypes. Working on projects with multinational companies or startups, students identify an opportunity of general need, conduct field market research to better understand subsistence consumer needs and contexts through an international immersion experience, develop a product concept, convert the concept to a workable prototype, and develop a manufacturing plan, marketing strategy, and overall business plan for the product. Overlaying the content found in a typical new product development lab course we develop a contextual understanding of subsistence marketplaces, setting the stage for new product development. A central aspect of the learning experience is travel to subsistence markets for actual immersion in the context and to conduct market research. Our course is at the confluence of two of the most important issues facing humanity, subsistence and sustainability. Lessons learned here can also be extended to other radically different contexts, such as future scenarios involving severe energy shortages or climate change consequences. Such educational initiatives provide challenging learning experiences in preparing students for the unique demands of the 21st century.

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