

A Bottom-Up Approach to Social Services in Subsistence Marketplaces

TCR 2025: Track 2 Proposal

Subsistence marketplaces are composed of consumers and entrepreneurs living at a range of low income levels¹, barely making ends meet. These marketplaces are the reality for a large proportion of the world's population. Though an increasingly common topic, research on subsistence marketplaces is still limited; noticeably missing from this body of knowledge is investigation of the unique roles played by social service agencies in these marketplaces.

A social service agency refers to an organization that provides services intended to benefit the mental and/or physical health of consumers in a community. For subsistence marketplaces, where financial resources are more scarce, the work of social service agencies grows in importance for consumers to meet their basic needs. Examining the interplay of a social service agency and the clients it serves can contribute to the subsistence literature, offering new insights into embedded organizational processes and consumer behaviors. Thus, the aim of our track is to explore the interplay between social service agencies and their stakeholders; with emphasis on improved understanding of the role of emotion and precarity as drivers of clients' consumer journeys in the context of subsistence marketplaces.

Academic research in marketing and related disciplines typically assumes a top-down approach with research questions guiding our understanding of marketplace dynamics². Alternatively, a bottom-up approach begins with observations of these dynamics as a guide to knowledge generation. Whereas the approaches can be complementary, the bottom-up approach has been evidenced to be more effective in revealing the realities and nuances of subsistence marketplaces³.

A bottom-up approach to understanding the role of social services agencies in subsistence marketplaces foregrounds the perspectives of agency leadership and clients, facilitating a process of holistic understanding of the unique circumstances under which these organizations operate. More specifically, it enables improved understanding of the emotional influences and temporal constraints that accompany financial precarity, as well as the design, goals, and effectiveness of the service ecosystem. Rather than prioritizing the assumptions of the researchers and/or benefactors, a bottom-up approach privileges the needs and experiences of the clients, providing additional perspective to extant theory.

Each member of our research team attended the *Third Subsistence Marketplaces Bottom-Up Immersion Conference* in Spring 2024. The conference agenda included an extended visit at [INSAF](#), a social service agency dedicated to supporting single mothers. Our team seeks to understand the social service landscape within this context and to impact INSAF towards supporting its clients more effectively. The leadership at INSAF has expressed interest in collaborating, indicating willingness to assist in data collection among its team and its service consumers.

The research team is already at work designing a qualitative data collection process intended to inform a subsequent quantitative process. Specifically, we plan to conduct virtual, in-depth interviews with INSAF leadership, frontline management and clients in the Fall/Winter (see schedule for details). The analysis of these interviews will permit us to design surveys that gather

insight into agency outcomes vis-a-vis the needs, goals and constraints of service recipients. These surveys will be distributed in Spring. In parallel, one of our team members is exploring the provision of marketplace literacy to beneficiaries of the organization; introducing the potential for collection of additional data/insight.

If selected to participate in TCR2025, we hope to dedicate our time together in DC to interpreting survey results, developing a framework related to effective deployment of social services in subsistence marketplaces, charting a roadmap to publication of a theoretical manuscript and hatching practical, impact-based solutions that meet the needs of recipients and serve the mission of the organizations.

Citations

1. Viswanathan, M. and Rosa, J.A. (2007), "Product and Market Development for Subsistence Marketplaces: Consumption and Entrepreneurship beyond Literacy and Resource Barriers", Rosa, J.A. and Viswanathan, M. (Ed.) Product and Market Development for Subsistence Marketplaces (Advances in International Management, Vol. 20), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 1-17.
2. Viswanathan, M., Sreekumar, A., Sridharan, S., and Sinha, G. (in press) "Addressing the Grand Challenge of Poverty and Inequality Through The Bottom-Up Marketing Approach: Lessons from Subsistence Marketplaces and Marketplace Literacy," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01022-z.3>.
3. Venugopal, S., & Viswanathan, M. (2017). "The Subsistence Marketplaces Approach to Poverty: Implications for Marketing Theory," *Marketing Theory*, 17(3), 341-356.

Preconference Timeline

Timeframe	Activity	Goal
August-October	Establish project scope & create data collection tools	Identify aspects of INSAF operations to evaluate. Develop interview guide and schedule
November	Interviews with INSAF Leadership (N≈3)	Understand the specifics of programming, related goals & constraints
December-January	Refine interview guides Interviews with INSAF Trainers (N≈3) and Clients (N≈15)	Understand actual experiences with programming, related benefits & opportunities for improvement
February - March	Analyze interview results Design survey	Understand the (mis)alignment of intended and actual client experiences.
April -May	Collect survey results (N≈60)	Quantify the role that emotions play in client journey with agency

Post Conference Write-Up Plan

Our research team views this as the beginning of a long-term partnership, amongst the researchers and alongside INSAF. In as much, we anticipate that we will be working together well past the conclusion of TCR 2025. Specifically, we anticipate that our collaboration will extend through at least 2026 and include the following activities:

- {Summer 25} Complete analysis of survey and develop deliverable for INSAF
- {Summer 25} Work with INSAF to interpret and implement findings
- {Fall 25} Prepare manuscript for publication in academic journals
 - Submit to TCR associated special issue
 - {Spring 26} Submit outcomes of collaboration to impact section of EJM
- {2026} Disseminate findings to academic research community
 - Society of Consumer Psychology
 - Subsistence Marketplaces Conference
 - Marketing & Public Policy
- {Ongoing} Collaborate with INSAF to meet their goals