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**Transient assemblages, ephemeral encounters, and  
the ‘beautiful story’ of a Japanese social enterprise in rural Bangladesh**

**Abstract**

Eleven Japanese corporate executives and ten Bangladeshi village-based entrepreneurs stand around an array of gleaming solar panels perched precariously on piles of bricks and hay. Despite being labeled a “social enterprise,” this solar-energy initiative emerged neither from development planning nor from a company’s market strategy. Instead, the project emerged from a chaotic series of events and the Japanese state’s decentralized patronage politics that drew together a wide array of non-state actors in a haphazard initiative in Bangladesh. This article offers an ethnographic case of ephemeral encounters (building on Faier and Rofel, 2014) and contributes to a theory of transient assemblages in development (drawing on Tsing, 2015 and DeLanda, 2016). It teases apart the diverse factors that produced and were produced by a solar social-enterprise pilot project, which neither arose from a plan for a social enterprise nor generated one. I argue for a diffuse understanding of project agency, the productivity of non-communicative interaction, and the unequal material politics that characterize these encounters across difference. This alternative view on development decenters the project and instead focuses on the emergent properties of the act of assembling, even when the assemblage fails to cohere.

**Keywords**

Development, assemblage, encounters, social enterprise, Japanese corporations, Bangladesh

Yamada, a Japanese multinational corporation specializing in consumer and professional electronics, conducted a feasibility study in northwestern Bangladesh in 2013-2014 to introduce solar power in off-grid areas through an innovative business model.<sup>1</sup> Solar panels would generate energy to be stored in Yamada's industry-leading battery system, which in turn would charge satellite batteries, flashlights, and household LED (light-emitting diode) lights to be distributed to energy-poor households. The technological system promised to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions (compared with the use of diesel generators and oil lamps). The adoption of the system would help to improve local people's health and living conditions, and families would be able to pursue income-generating and educational activities after dark. With such a commitment to positive environmental and social goals in addition to financial profits, the new business would be a "social enterprise" and place Yamada in a leading role among Japanese corporations that were exploring new market frontiers in countries with high levels of poverty. The move was striking in the degree to which it departed from Yamada's traditional focus on middle-class and upper-middle-class consumers in Western Europe and North America.

Yamada's social-enterprise model, according to a short-lived website, depended on the enlistment of "iAgents" (or "Information Agents"), a rural network of young women entrepreneurs trained by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) to provide information and communications technology-based (ICT) services in Bangladeshi villages. Yamada would engage the young women in multiple stages during the formation of the social enterprise, first in conducting market research on the energy-usage patterns of village households; second, in making and extending markets by demonstrating the technology in households and by determining the prices people were willing to pay for the service; and third, in providing long-term market infrastructure as rural distribution channels for the circulation of charged batteries to households and depleted ones back to the mother system. In addition to positive social outcomes for villagers, the project would

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<sup>1</sup> Names of key people, places, and organizations have been altered to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

support women's empowerment and entrepreneurship in a country known for its gender inequalities.

Yamada's feasibility study for this social enterprise occurred over three ten-day visits to Bangladesh over a six-month period. In August-September 2013, the Japanese contingent traveled to five iAgent network locations across the country to select a place for the exploratory project. Three months later, in December 2013, Yamada installed the solar-panel-and-battery system (which it had shipped in advance from Japan, by sea to Chittagong Port and then by truck across the country to northwestern Bangladesh) and enlisted iAgents in conducting market research and renting the solar batteries to households in off-grid areas. Finally, in February 2014, the Japanese team collected the questionnaires that iAgents had completed regarding the energy expenditures of village households and their capacity to rent the batteries. Yamada team members aggregated the data, collected audio-visual evidence of villagers using the batteries, and packed up the technology for the journey back to Japan.

Yet, prior to these three visits, *no one had established a plan* for a social enterprise, and *no social enterprise resulted* from these activities. A "social enterprise" seems to have been an ephemeral entanglement – a transient assemblage – existing within, but not beyond, these three encounters. How can we understand the factors that produced these interactions and their results, if not a plan for a social enterprise or a market for solar batteries? Is this case a complex charade driven by personalized motives, does it signal a new and systematic dimension concerning this moment in international development, and/or does it exemplify the strange, messy, momentary, and spontaneous assemblages that arise from hybrid origins at the frontiers of capitalism and in capitalist ruins (Tsing 2015)?

The Yamada solar social enterprise initially appeared to be one of thousands of such recent attempts to generate positive environmental and social impact by building new markets for discrete projects and humanitarian goods at the so-called bottom of the economic pyramid (BOP), a "place" of untapped to-be consumers who possess little disposable income but who exist in great numbers and densities. Features of

this rising market are extolled by management guru C. K. Prahalad (2006) in *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits* and taught in business schools and start-up incubators around the world. NGOs seeking financial self-sufficiency and corporations seeking to render their corporate-social-responsibility (CSR) programs more profitable increasingly turn to BOP social-enterprise models to achieve these objectives. On the level of the project's brief publicity, the Yamada project resembled other BOP initiatives that engage local entrepreneur-distributors, such as Unilever's promotion of antibacterial soap among India's rural poor (Cross and Street, 2009), Hewlett-Packard's delivery of photography services to Costa Rican and Indian villages (Schwittay, 2008), and Mars Corporation's distribution of "healthier" sweets among Kenya's urban slums (Dolan et al., n.d.).

Anthropological analyses of BOP social enterprises focus on their role in "greasing the skids of capitalism" and extending the market to unreached areas (Errington et al., 2012), often by appropriating the social relationships of poor consumers for capital accumulation (Elyachar, 2012). In the process, they use techniques for remaking the subjectivities of poor people in the service of global brands and rendering people and objects legible to corporate capitalism (Dolan, 2012, 2014). These BOP enterprises run at the forefront of a broader shift in international development from donor-driven moralities of help and social welfare to a market-driven ethics of self-help and economic growth (Author, 2017). They promote the ideology of the poor who better their lives through their own entrepreneurial skills, rather than through state or charitable forms of patronage (Schwittay, 2008). These practices are often aptly described as the financialization of poverty and the neoliberalization of international development.

Yet these observations do not hold true in the case of Yamada's solar project in rural Bangladesh for three reasons. First, rather than a deliberate market hegemony and push for economic growth and accumulation, this project was characterized by radical contingency and a dispersed form of agency that arose from decentralized state policies and the personalized nature of public-private partnerships (Bear,

2012), which necessitates a rethinking of existing assumptions about planning, intentionality, and agency in BOP projects. Ethnographic analyses of corporations examine how “CSR offers a novel framework through which the agency of the company is asserted” (Rajak, 2011: 28; also Gardner, 2012). While many corporate forays into “development” are indeed intentional, in this case a haphazard dispersion of project agency is revealed through the contingent, unplanned, and spontaneous elements that produced the brief encounter between Yamada officials and iAgents. Project agency may lie more in the *post hoc* narrative process of reinterpreting events to show a semblance of coherence, rather than in pre-figured forms of planning or intentionality (Mosse, 2004).

Second, the activities of this social-enterprise pilot project did not facilitate the inexorable extension of markets via BOP products as “anti-friction” devices (Errington et al., 2012). Markets, in this case, failed to emerge. Rather, they enabled the extension of patronage networks and hierarchical forms of reciprocity at local, national, and international scales. Corporations often engage in projects displaying ethical regimes in order to secure local compliance and license to operate (Gardner, 2012; Rajak, 2011). Yamada pursued no such objective. The extension of markets was not an original goal driving this project, even though it was momentarily narrated as such, because Yamada had long considered corporate entry into Bangladesh as non-viable. Instead, the key driver of the project was the Japanese government’s regional patronage policy, which enlisted Japanese companies such as Yamada to engage with bilateral partner countries. In Bangladesh, Yamada’s project presence, if not its individual project members, acted as an intermediary responding to short-term financial and political incentives rather than a long-term consumer-market expansion strategy.

Third, the calculative devices of price-setting mechanisms and market-research surveys did little to render people legible to corporate capitalism. Rather, the act of data collection was meaningful for the relationships – to the Japanese government for Yamada and to the local village community for iAgents – that it helped to generate. Meanwhile, Yamada executives and iAgents remained to a large extent mutually

unintelligible. In contrast with the development literature on interfaces (Arce and Long, 2002), brokerage (James, 2011), and translation (Mosse and Lewis, 2006), while various intermediaries played a role in drawing Yamada and iAgents together, their *failure* to enable communication allowed each group to follow short-term opportunities and maintain beneficial representations. The “social enterprise” played the role of vehicle (in a non-deliberate, non-premeditated way) for these other priorities to be fulfilled (Karim, 2011; Mosse, 2005). The devices used in the feasibility study served more relational, rather than calculative, ends (Street, 2012). The project enabled both parties to engage meaningfully not with each other, but in projects of knowledge production and legitimization directed at audiences external to the encounter.

The anthropological literature on energy-sector development projects and social enterprises focuses on materiality and actor-network approaches and draws attention to the deliberate work that goes into producing solar products and making markets for them (Akrich, 1994; Cross, 2013). These studies follow the injunctions of Appadurai (1986) and Callon and colleagues (Çaliskan and Callon, 2009; Muniesa et al., 2007) to understand objects via their social biographies and the continuous effort that organizations assert to frame them as particular (e.g., humanitarian) types of objects.

When products and projects fail, implementers may assess that they neglected to draw together diverse interests, to enlist wider political support, or to understand the habitus and practices of the intended users (Cross, 2013; Mosse, 2004). In a case Akrich (1994) discusses, despite strong backing from the French government (which sought to promote new energy sources and help the French photoelectric-cell industry create a market in Africa), the circumstances and preferences of the African users were considered irrelevant to the design process, and the technology (and all the use-related prescriptions it contained) constrained people’s ability to appropriate it.

In a similar vein, beyond being designed from afar with no user input, Yamada’s long-life photovoltaic-battery system was initially designed for an entirely different type of customer in social, political, economic,

geographic, and cultural terms. The technology did fail to take root and find a market, but not because of its inability to adapt to the Bangladesh context. Such a technology- and enterprise-centric analysis of success and failure risks assuming that a market for a solar social enterprise, with this technology at its core, was the intended and planned outcome. Instead, we need to shift primary focus from the technology itself to the production as well as the productivity of this technology-enabled encounter. It was the *relationship-generating potential* of the technology – in its ephemeral capacity to draw together diverse interests for a brief moment in time – that seemed to be the primary driver, thus making *the encounter* the generative force, rather than the technological system or even the market.

Taking as a focal point the events, interactions, and conversations that occurred during the three visits of Japanese corporate executives with Bangladeshi village entrepreneurs, this paper explores the factors that produced these strange encounters and the effects that the encounters themselves produced. Yet while an “ethnographies of encounter” approach (Faier and Rofel, 2014) would call for an examination of how our organizing categories – such as “BOP markets,” “corporate capitalism,” and “social enterprise” – and new spaces of hybrid culture emerge through everyday, worldly, unwieldy encounters across difference, the Yamada-iAgent case would not comply. The transient entanglements between the two groups did not produce a space for “creative friction” (Tsing, 2005), a hybrid culture (Faier, 2009), or even a collaborative (albeit unequal and messy) enterprise with negotiated understandings (Sedgwick, 2008). While the encounters were indeed productive, such productivity animated not the content of these confrontations but instead the content of the actors’ entanglements elsewhere. Thus, the analytical focus of this paper lies in emphasizing the experience of difference/foreignness, which encouraged renewed reflection by the separate parties about their own particular conditions.

Because no social enterprise emerged from seemingly social-enterprise-like activities among Yamada employees and iAgents, focusing on the acts and interpretations of encountering (versus the products of the



encounter *per se*) yields more interpretive advantage. To this end, this article engages with assemblage theory, and in particular Manuel DeLanda's (2016) parsing out of the *process* versus the *outcome* components of the concept's original French term, *agencement*. While *agencement*-as-noun is "an ensemble of components that mesh together well and produce emergent properties" (DeLanda, 2016:1) and is close to the English, "an assemblage", the gerundial form (best translated as "an assembling") refers to the action of mixing together a set of components. The productivity (or the "emergent properties") of the encounter under question arose not from any resultant assemblage but from the acts of assembling. The bringing together of the two groups enabled the production of "a beautiful story" that was useful for each party's separate pursuits. Thus, this analysis suggests an alternative view of development projects that decenters the project and instead focuses on the emergent properties of the semi-spontaneous act of assembling components of hybrid origins and dissociated futures.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the official representations (and the genuine short-term efforts of some Japanese individuals) focused on building a social enterprise, a transient-assemblage approach allows us to look beyond what "failed" to happen (would the social enterprise remain as central point of reference) and toward other generative forces, their effects, and the inequalities that underpin them. Assemblage theory helps us to see how meanings, practices, relations, identities, and subjectivities are produced in everyday life through these interactions, without assuming totalizing agency, market hegemony, technological centrality, or even mutual recognition among actors in the assemblage. This approach also enables an exploration of "the new orthodoxies of the unexpected" (Sedgwick, personal communication, 2015) that underpin the latest development practices and decentralized planning regimes and that signal the role of contingency and opportunism, personalized relations, and *ex post* narratives within such activities.

The Yamada-iAgent case provides material to advance the idea of transient assemblages. First, the

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<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who helped to recognize this analytical framing.

meeting of strangers may be less productively understood as the intersection and commingling of two separate epistemological worlds (cf. Rossi, 2006) but instead as the production of a new zone of non-communicative engagement that enables multiple agendas to be pursued. Second, project agency emerges as diffuse and harnessed by individuals primarily through the effective narration of events after their occurrence, rather than by directing the course of those events as they unfold (Mosse, 2004). Third, emphasizing the dynamics of inequality that are drawn on and reinforced through these encounters across difference is crucial (Bear et al., 2015). From them are generated renewed and strengthened bids for patronage in local, national, and international arenas; new configurations for the marketization of development; and a reinforced global narrative about the social, environmental, and financial virtues of social enterprises, despite the inability and lack of interest in producing such an entity within this particular project.

### **Awkward encounters**

Eleven high-level executives representing Yamada arrived in a remote village in rural northwestern Bangladesh one evening in August 2013. There they met some young women entrepreneurs who had been trained as “iAgents” (by a Bangladeshi NGO that promotes women’s entrepreneurship and technology for development) and who provided services such as internet access, mobile banking, and digital health diagnostics to marginalized villagers. The fees they collected from the clients of these services were meant to sustain their livelihood and help to bring their families out of poverty.<sup>3</sup> Given social expectations that women should refrain from spending time in the public gaze, and because they circulated through many villages and interacted with unrelated people, the iAgents sought constantly to reaffirm the value of their work and to show themselves as ethical actors. These young entrepreneurs speculated that the foreign visitors had created

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<sup>3</sup> See Author, 2017, forthcoming, for extended analyses of the iAgent program and the subject formation of village women as entrepreneurs.

a new technology that they could use to serve their clients in “modern” ways and, through brokering access to the new patron, thereby increase their status. The Yamada executives speculated that the iAgents would produce an efficient, low-cost grassroots “distribution mechanism” for the company’s clean-energy technology. These interpretations were mediated by the explanations of the iAgent umbrella organization, which used varying sets of representations to appeal to different types of actors.

I observed and participated in the three visits, which included the same core group of Japanese visitors and iAgent entrepreneurs. To include the longer-term and wider structural effects of these episodes, I draw on fifteen months of ethnographic field research in 2013-14 among the iAgents and their networks, which included iAgent work on Yamada activities between the visits and their efforts with other organizational partners prior to and following Yamada’s project. Applying this wide-angle lens sheds light on the role of this project within broader trends of shifting patterns of development in Bangladesh and beyond. To understand the genesis of the Yamada-iAgent engagement, I draw on my informal interviews of and everyday conversations with Yamada executives. Because Yamada products and services ultimately were not extended to villages, I do not focus on the villagers beyond iAgents’ efforts to gain legitimacy among them.

During each visit, explanations of the underlying factors that drew Yamada into partnership with the iAgents grew complex. I relate them in the order that the Japanese team members told them to me. No individual narrative is meant to represent any single causality explaining the emergence of this project *per se*. The multiple narratives are all relevant even if mutually contradictory, insofar as they are presented as factors according to which actors orient themselves and their choices. Jackson (2005) suggests approaching storytelling as an act of the present appropriating the past, which offers insight into how people evaluate and negotiate strategies for social and ethical action in the future. This peeling back of layers of representation provides insight into the ways in which policy narratives are crafted *post hoc* in an attempt to construct order out of ambiguity and happenstance (Mosse, 2004). This is the story of a transient assemblage, which

unfolded in three parts.

## **The first visit: developing a social enterprise**

### *A beautiful story*

How and why did eleven Japanese professionals materialize in a remote, rural village in Bangladesh where iAgent entrepreneurs worked? According to the pilot project's website (which existed for only the six-month period), the confluence was a quadruple-win scenario. Rural Bangladesh's high-density, impoverished population lacked reliable electricity. Yamada possessed a solar-powered battery that consumers around the world did not yet know they wanted. iAgent entrepreneurs – with their ICT training and rural networks – could be empowered with new income-generating services. And the environment required people in developing countries to exert a smaller carbon footprint. By linking these matching demands, new business opportunities could be forged that would supply positive social, financial, gender-parity, and environmental outcomes.

The project would also serve as a financially sustainable subsidiary business for Yamada rather than being a mere one-off CSR project incurring perpetual financial loss. Yoshio Ito, a senior manager at Yamada Computer Science Labs, summarized the words of his contact person at Japan's environment ministry, who said, "Look at it. Using green energy to help poor rural Bangladeshi villagers. The story is beautiful!" Ito and other actors were swept up in the discourses and dreams of social enterprise even as they knew the project was driven by the need for patronage elsewhere.

### *Meeting at cross-purposes*

While the eleven Japanese businesspeople drove north from Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city, to a village in

the northwest, the family of a young iAgent named Nazneen spent the day preparing. Over the phone the previous evening, Rohan (a Bangladeshi representative of the iAgent head office who accompanied the Japanese group) had instructed the iAgent that her house would be the foreigners' first stop. Nazneen fretted that the poor conditions of their home and courtyard would offend the high-status guests. Yet the family spent hours repairing the dwelling's earthen floor, purchasing and cooking food, and setting up rented plastic tables and chairs. Her family hoped that the quality of the hospitality would help to overcome the shame of poverty and would attract the patronage of the visitors.

The Yamada team and Rohan arrived well after dark from the district capital. Efforts to invite them into the house were embarrassingly futile. Once inside the dwelling, after an hour's tour around the village, they did not sit down on the rented chairs, and they ignored the offerings of food. Instead, they uttered surprise and excitement as they photographed every angle of the material conditions of the house, in which a single AAA-battery-powered lantern illuminated the single bare bulb disconnected yet still dangling from the roof beams. Makoto Kitano, the chief executive of Yamada's consulting firm, Sustech Consulting, turned to me to exclaim, "This is exactly what we are looking for! Very poor! Very off-grid!"

### *The intermediation of technology*

After leaving Nazneen's house with most of the food untouched but with dozens of digital photographs stored in DSLR cameras, the Yamada team visited the local NGO in charge of coordinating iAgent work in that area. The executive director of the NGO attempted to give a speech about the honor of hosting esteemed guests at their humble organization, but the Yamada team was as unfocused on Rohan's English translation as it had been on Nazneen's hospitality. Instead, Yoshio Ito, Makoto Kitano, and the others again used their cameras to assay the suitability of the space for their battery system. Standing outside in the courtyard, in the dark, they could not see if the roof of the NGO building was slanted or flat, if the surface was made of

concrete or corrugated tin, or if tall trees to the south would block sunlight from reaching the solar panels. Rather than asking NGO staff members to answer these questions, one of Yamada's two visiting engineers attached a large flashbulb to his DSLR camera, held it high over his head, and aimed it at the roof. His team gathered to peer at the resulting image. The flash had illuminated a flat concrete roof, which was indeed blocked by tall trees to the south.

The Yamada team employed similar practices of knowledge production to appraise each of four other locations across Bangladesh. They instructed Rohan to draw maps of each iAgent area and to segment places into on-grid and off-grid areas within a certain radius of the local iAgent-coordinating NGO (where the solar panels and mother battery would need to be housed). Wanting geometric schematics, they rejected illustrations that attempted to account for physical proximity but impassible roads. Verbal forms of information yielded to the simplification of technologically captured data. In the end, the Yamada team found a location in a district neighboring Nazneen's. Its choice occurred after, but not because of, the following encounter, which illustrates the lack of mutual intelligibility (and the failure of intermediation) between iAgents and Yamada visitors. Inscrutability ultimately enabled, rather than constrained, productive engagement. While the work on brokerage and translation assumes that communication ultimately takes place among different groups, this case shows the opposite, that non-communicative engagement is what enabled the encounter to be fruitful.

### *New patrons demand new performances*

Since the organization's inception in 2009, the leaders of the iAgent enterprise tried to attract well-resourced partners in Bangladesh and across the world. iAgents learned that emotive narratives tended to attract funding from foreigners, and they worked hard to generate affective connections during meetings and events.

One such spectacle was a field visit in September 2013 by seventeen foreigners, including the Yamada

delegation, who packed into the meeting room of the local NGO. Rohan had coordinated the visits of reporters from a South Korean national news agency, documentary filmmakers from Switzerland, the Yamada delegation, and the resident anthropologist from London. All four groups recorded, filmed, and photographed the event.

Six iAgents sat quietly on chairs in an arc at the head of the room. After Rohan's elaborate introductions, he asked the women to introduce themselves and requested two iAgents, Rahela and Dipa, to tell stories about their experiences. Rohan used the process of interpreting as an editing device by translating the iAgents' words selectively. (Italics indicate speech omitted in the English translation.) The significance of the narratives lie not in the facts of the content *per se*, but in their interpretation as performative scripts.

One of my clients' daughters was sick. Some people said she was under the influence of a ghost; there are many superstitions like that. I informed the mother that we were hosting a health camp that facilitated live consultations via videoconference. I enrolled the mother and daughter in the consultation with the doctor, who advised that the girl needed to come to Dhaka for treatment. *The villagers told the mother that her daughter would be trafficked. After arriving at the hospital, the mother saw that many children were dying and blamed me for sending her daughter to a place to die. Then the doctor needed to draw blood, which the mother thought would be sold to people in other countries. After the procedures, the girl was sent back home. My father forced me to stop working. He said, "You are doing something wrong with the community, and you are making people angry with our family."*

The foreigners clapped enthusiastically, which seemed to surprise the iAgents, who did not understand the translation or the visitors' backgrounds. Rahela had nearly alienated her family from the village community. But the Koreans in the news team talked excitedly, and another layer of translation probably diluted her words.

After Dipa's story, Rohan invited the audience to ask questions, and a Japanese man's hand shot up. Having worked in Bangladesh for several years, Takashi Toyama positioned himself as a broker between Japanese companies and Bangladeshi NGOs to encourage social-enterprise development. He had introduced Yamada's consultant (Kitano) to the iAgent organization. He asked skeptically, "How are these stories connected either to ICT or the iAgent core business of making money?"

While the misty-eyed documentary and news teams were moved by Rahela's and Dipa's narratives, the Japanese broker focused on the technical aspects of the program rather than on its sociopolitical content. The deciding factor in the end for Yamada to partner with iAgents was not the visit to the countryside, nor was it in hearing iAgent stories, but rather in seeing, several days later in the iAgent head office in Dhaka, the detailed income and expense data that entrepreneurs (supposedly) sent daily. For effective report-writing to secure resources for the project, Yamada needed numerical rather than anecdotal data.

While some Yamada-delegation members stressed one type of representation of iAgents (as promoters and potential purveyors of technology and as numbers on a spreadsheet), iAgents asserted a different one. Their use of drama-laden narratives, in their experience, was the most effective (and affective) way to generate revenue for the umbrella social enterprise. Such stories had been the most potent form of account when the social enterprise drew income primarily through grants from foundations. Now, with a new kind of potential patron to impress, iAgents needed to adapt their stories to focus on different registers. Rohan's attempts at mediation between iAgents and visitors – selecting particular iAgents to speak and partially redacting the messages – proved also to be irrelevant, as the content failed to capture the Yamada delegation's attention. To secure the participation of actors such as Yamada (and many similar companies that were soon to come), multiple other simultaneous forms of knowledge had to be available for invoking (which the iAgent head office later presented by way of the cash-flow data). During this first visit, while iAgents sought patronage – via displays of hospitality and skillfully crafted narratives – Yamada executives



sought technological compatibility and needed to view iAgents as abstract vectors of information and distribution. While it may seem that the pilot project somehow managed to proceed *despite* the lack of mutual intelligibility of the two different groups, the subsequent two visits reveal a more complex picture.

### **The second visit: a market home for a repurposed battery**

#### *Desperately seeking success*

The Yamada team rented rooms in an NGO guesthouse in December 2013, near the place where Rahela and Dipa had described their experiences to the Korean, Swiss, and Japanese visitors. Each day the visitors walked to the local iAgent NGO to unpack the crates sent from Japan; devise a rooftop substructure on which to install the solar panels; and hook up the mother-battery system and charging units in an empty room below. Yamada engineers were preoccupied with testing the technology and did not interact with iAgents. Kitano, the consultant who coordinated the data-gathering process and would write the feasibility report, developed a protocol for disseminating questionnaires. Ito, concerned with corporate publicity, visually documented the process and the material conditions of village life in rural Bangladesh. Another consultant from a global audit company attempted to calculate the project's carbon-emission-savings potential. The youngest and only female member of the Yamada team, Mari Kawaguchi, was also the only Bengali speaker. She had previously worked for Japan's international development agency in Bangladesh and helped to train local-level government officials. Although she worked in Yamada Energy Devices Corporation and had the greatest potential claim over the project (her division had signed the ministry agreement), she was the most junior member. Nobuyori Uno, a senior planning manager from Yamada Corporation who hovered around the engineers and the technology, was the nominal leader. They had all met for the first time the week prior to the first visit.

In the evenings, the Yamada team and I shared dinner at the iAgent-coordinating NGO, and I learned about the project's background. Kitano proved to be the most forthcoming about Yamada's reasons for sending this exploratory team to Bangladesh. Rather than responding to the need of rural villagers for clean energy (or the need of shareholders to see new corporate-ethics projects), it was the Yamada Corporation that needed to find a new market for its product. The following is Kitano's explanation.

After the magnitude-9 earthquake and resulting tsunami that devastated Japan in March 2011, a spike in demand for high-quality long-life batteries grew domestically. Hundreds of thousands of middle-class families suffered weeks without electricity at home, and they wanted to prepare for future disasters. Responding to market demand, Yamada quickly developed a product prototype that was ready to be commercialized. Yet soon after the incident, the Japanese people forgot their prior hardship, and demand for the batteries fell, and Yamada needed to explore new markets for them. The batteries would not gain purchase in Japan, Europe, or North America, where their "traditional" (middle-class and upper-middle-class urban) customers resided but also where the electricity grid was stable. In countries such as Bangladesh, demand would be high, but households possessed low purchasing power. The social-enterprise puzzle was how to aggregate many households around a common photovoltaic system, which included solar panels and the mother battery originally intended for a single Japanese middle-class household.

Ito later suggested that the problem of capturing markets was a wider company (and not product-specific) problem. He claimed, "This project is Yamada Electronics Division's last chance at survival. Its power is diminishing, with our products edged out by competitors." The primary competitors were Chinese companies, which Ito criticized as lacking in ethical commitment because of their exploitation of labor and their lack of compunction about engaging in bribery (to ease market access and bypass regulations). These activities lowered the costs of production, and because Yamada refused on ethical grounds to engage in them, the company could not compete with the ever-decreasing retail prices of Chinese consumer electronics. Ito

later added, “I retire in the autumn of 2015. I have only two years left. This project is also *my* last chance to leave a mark. I want to leave having done something meaningful for Yamada, so I need this social-enterprise market to work.” Beyond being merely a cynical publicity stunt, the idea of a social enterprise had also entered into the dreams and identities of individuals during this brief juncture.

### *Like oil and water*

The first task for the Yamada team to complete was to unload the wooden crates that had been delivered several days previously. Although each Japanese visitor came from a different division and played a different role in the project, everyone helped in the set-up process. In addition to the mother-battery system, tools in heavy metal boxes needed to be sorted, and two types of satellite batteries, flashlights, and LED lights needed to be assembled from basic parts. Each unwieldy solar panel had to be lifted carefully from its Styrofoam housing within the crate and laid on the grass to be washed and tested.

iAgents watched from the periphery and speculated about the elaborate production process. They commented on how the Japanese seemed to take on the tasks equally. “If they were Bangladeshis,” Nilufar surmised, “they would have hired our brothers to do this carrying and washing. But look – the oldest ones are working the hardest! You can’t even tell that they’re ordering the others what to do.” Dipa, who had been selected to travel to Germany with Rohan on a fully funded trip to accept a corporate-sponsored award for ICT activism, explained why. “It’s because foreigners all work as if they are individuals. They don’t understand patronage.”

Meanwhile, the two Yamada engineers argued about how to construct a suitable substructure to support the solar panels on the building’s rooftop. They settled on a framework using bricks cemented in place overnight by a hired builder and then layering hay on top, which they had acquired from a neighboring farmer. When the iAgents climbed the stairs to the roof the next day, after the solar panels had been installed,

they laughed that the scene represented the relationship between the two countries. “This is what a Bangladeshi-Japanese partnership looks like! Two parts coming together but not in communication,” one part traditional and the other one modern (image 1). Rather than hindering the project, each of these misunderstandings – about the other group’s motivations, priorities, and roles – enabled each side to forgive differences and also rendered efforts of translation irrelevant.

<IMAGE 1 HERE>

### *Efforts of translation*

Back in the meeting room where Rahela and Dipa had spoken about their iAgent work, the women entrepreneurs greeted the Yamada team for the second time. In a training session, the iAgents received the seven-page questionnaire (in both Bengali and English, translated by Rohan) that they needed to administer among off-grid households. Rohan instructed them to use their knowledge to translate between Japanese and local understandings. One question asked the annual interest people paid for microcredit loans. Villagers did not typically know this figure as an annual percentage rate but as a proportion of their weekly repayment amounts. Regarding fuel oil, Yamada wanted to know consumption per person in liters per month, but households purchased oil weekly by weight or in units of the width of multiple fingers lined up from the bottom of the container.

Yet when iAgents visited off-grid villages to complete their questionnaires, without bothering with any precise metric-vernacular conversions, their translation practices were not communicative efforts to render village energy behaviors legible to the knowledge conventions of the Japanese. Rather, they reinterpreted the Japanese presence from meanings of making markets to those of gaining a new patron. “We have a new project,” they explained. “These batteries come from Japan, so they are high quality. These people invented this technology for me to provide directly to you.” iAgents then extrapolated most of the information they

entered in the questionnaires. Rather than efforts to translate between different bodies of knowledge (as Rohan had instructed them to do), iAgents used the opportunity to re-narrate Yamada's disinterest in them as the appearance of patronage.

### *Capturing (the semblance of) a patron*

During the second visit, iAgents continued to seek meaningful connection and to restructure their performances according to their evolving understandings of what Yamada people wanted to see. Nilufar was most successful in attracting Yoshio Ito to her working area. At sunset, she requested Ito to accompany her as she distributed freshly charged batteries. She had noticed that he spent significant time behind the camera lens and that he grew animated when he saw villagers handling his company's technology. We walked into the darkest part of the village and crowded into an unlit thatch hut. Nilufar plugged an LED light into the USB port of a portable box battery, and suddenly the room was illuminated. In the next house, three children worked on their exercise books, crouched around a small oil lamp. When Nilufar switched on a light there, the youngsters gasped in surprise. "It's very impressive," Ito commented as we walked to the next household. "It goes straight to the heart," he clarified, voice full of emotion and eyes moist. He added that he and his colleagues had never experienced such complete darkness, away from city lights on a starless, moonless night. Nilufar must have intuitively grasped that offering a phenomenologically powerful experience would impress the foreigners. She had been present but silent when Rahela's and Dipa's turning-point narratives had failed to move this particular group of visitors.

In this second visit, the need for new markets emerged from the loss of old ones. Although markets are the driving factor for Yamada in this set of explanations, for iAgents, the pursuit of patrons secured their participation and carried the project forward. Yet even this relationship needed not to be two-sided, because iAgents crafted their own explanations to villagers. In the third visit, patronage – albeit on a much wider

scale – ends up being the motivating force for Yamada as well.

### **The third visit: tracing links and logics of connection and disconnection<sup>4</sup>**

#### *Extending national interests and profitable connections*

Three months later, Yamada returned to collect the survey results, and the plot thickened. Makoto Kitano clarified that the project was never initially a plan for a social enterprise, nor was it a viable means of rescuing the company from its market challenges (although this explanation held great narrative power for the project's members). Mari Kawaguchi had explained in Japan, prior to visiting Bangladesh, that product emplacement would not be viable. It would be impossible to bring solar energy below the cost of kerosene under *any* type of business model. (Yet because Mari was a woman and the most junior member, these comments were conveniently elided in the official scripts.)

The 2011 earthquake and tsunami had far wider-reaching effects than on Yamada's domestic market share. The Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant experienced a meltdown at three reactors, and other plants were taken off-line. Japan had relied heavily on nuclear power prior to the earthquake, which helped Japan to stay on course to meet its Kyoto Protocol targets for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reductions. The events following the earthquake weakened Japan's contribution to global climate-change efforts and thus its negotiating power on other fronts.

As a result, Japan pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol beyond the initial commitment period, but it still pursued various avenues for advancing its emissions-cutting goals. The country acted under bilateral mechanisms to cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by setting up energy-management systems and forest-protection projects in developing countries and using Japanese technologies. Credits earned through bilateral agreements were used

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<sup>4</sup> Themes of connection and disconnection are significant in analyses of international development (Gardner 2012).

toward meeting domestic CO<sub>2</sub> targets.

Japan had a pre-existing policy to facilitate the export of Japanese technologies and boost the domestic economy. Because such technologies were expensive compared to those of competitors, the finance ministry subsidized the expansion of Japanese companies abroad. Strengthening bilateral relations contributed to extending Japan's influence in the region and countering China's expanding economic power, which was a goal at the forefront of Japan's national policy. A significant part of this patronage policy was decentralized through public-private partnerships, which produced ambiguous, behind-the-scenes negotiations and unpredictable outcomes, such as the project with the iAgents.

Japan's environment ministry circulated in 2012 a request for proposals for research on reducing carbon emissions in its eight bilateral carbon-trade partner countries. The ministry approached Makoto Kitano, CEO of Sustech Consulting, to encourage his client corporations to submit proposals. Kitano, who had negotiated carbon trading for several multinational corporations including Yamada, and who also had contacts in Bangladesh and Mongolia (the latter of which happened not to reply in time), brought together his connections. The broker in Bangladesh, Takashi Toyama, ran a profitable business that stimulated Japanese corporations' engagement in social-enterprise activities in South Asia. Toyama knew about the iAgent network and sought to enhance his authority with the NGO by producing a prominent foreign company as a new partner.

Simultaneously, Yamada submitted a proposal to conduct a feasibility study in Bangladesh in order to access the generous funding provided by the Japanese environment and finance ministries. Being non-technical and non-business persons with no understanding of the energy realities of Bangladesh, the bureaucrats were sufficiently convinced. Yet then Yamada needed to carry out some form of token project, however it would manifest.

These brokerage flows defy the notion of a direct partnership between Japanese corporate executives

and young Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs. Many layers of intermediaries with different agendas (not to mention natural disasters, technological breakdowns, forgetful consumers, and government policies) influenced the course of events. At each of the pre-project stages, the form and content of the project took new directions, none of which pointed explicitly to any particular market form. Agency was exerted in a dispersed, step-by-step way by different combinations of actors. The “plan” took shape in snowball fashion, by capturing bits and pieces as it veered ultimately (but not linearly) toward rural northwestern Bangladesh and never coalesced until the precise moments of implementation. This is a case of a strange, transient, messy, and spontaneous assemblage whose significance lies in the myriad acts of assembling rather than in any resultant and durable ensemble.

In the project’s literature, these layers are shrouded by the seemingly self-explanatory “social-enterprise” business plan. Yet instead of market-driven development, the iAgents, Yamada, and the Japanese government all sought patronage, but they remained locked into a powerful discourse of markets, partnership, social enterprise, and corporate ethics.

### *Profitable disconnections*

During the third visit, Amit, the local NGO member responsible for the iAgent program, asked the Yamada team how much they would pay the iAgents per questionnaire administered. Blank faces indicated that the issue had not been considered.

Amit sent someone to procure the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the local NGO and the iAgent head organization. Kitano said, “Yamada already paid the iAgent head office, so it is up to the head office to decide how it allocates its money.” While leaving the room, he paused and added, “You shouldn’t show me this MOU, because we have an agreement with the iAgent head office, the parent agreement. This local agreement is the child agreement. If I influence too much on this level, iAgent



headquarters can accuse me of overstepping.”

After the Yamada team members absented themselves from ethical decisions such as fair compensation for labor within their own “social enterprise,” they resumed focus on the purely technical aspects of the project. (iAgent officers decided to pay the iAgents thirty taka (26p) per questionnaire, but when I left Bangladesh six months later, the NGO had not yet released the funds. iAgents speculated angrily that Amit had “eaten” the money himself.)

Another key moment of detachment occurred during Yamada’s final visit. The photovoltaic system could not remain *in situ* for its continued use by iAgents. The battery system was a prototype, not yet on the market, and Yamada did not want to be held liable for any problem that happened once the pilot project ended. Each component was embossed with the Yamada logo and was easily traceable back to the company. The solar panels might stay, however. They were not manufactured by Yamada but by another client of Kitano’s, a photovoltaic company in Japan that had agreed to provide the technology (also a prototype) in exchange for data about its performance in Bangladesh’s climate. To escape responsibility for the panels during a project over which it had no control, that company had not stamped its logo on the product. Nameless, the panels were already detached from their makers. They remained perched on their bed of bricks and hay, collecting dirt and bird droppings.

Yamada Corporation and its officials never again appeared in northwestern Bangladesh. The problem of who might purchase the photovoltaic system remained unsolved. The carbon emissions that could be saved if villagers abandoned oil lamps was so negligible that Yamada did not find it worth calculating.

Apart from Mari’s personal knowledge, the Yamada team knew before visiting Bangladesh that a social enterprise would not be feasible. Ito explained that Yamada did not have an official presence in the country, which indicated that the company had already deemed Bangladesh to be an unviable market. Yet the environment ministry wanted to pay Yamada for a feasibility study. Having “such a beautiful story,” in the

words of his contact in the ministry, would enhance the image and political capital of the agencies involved.

## **Discussion**

Although a social enterprise ultimately was never produced, the encounters between Yamada executives and iAgent entrepreneurs generated three notable effects. First, despite the failure of an enterprise to materialize, Yamada's uplifting feasibility report produced a renewed focus on and increased legitimacy for promoting social enterprises led by Japanese companies in bilateral client countries. Makoto Kitano (the consultant), Takashi Toyama (the broker), and Japanese ministry officials each used these reports as "best case practices" to encourage their other corporate clients.

Second, the fleeting partnership convinced the iAgent organization leaders that a shift toward corporate partners for the program (versus advocacy, foundation, and NGO affiliations) would be advantageous to the head office because of their income-generating potential (money that was not passed down to the iAgents). This move is part of a broader swing toward market-driven approaches in Bangladesh and elsewhere, which displaces patron-client NGO relations and has the broader effect of eroding the ability of the poor to make claims on existing patrons (Author, forthcoming).

The third effect is the reinforcement of unequal outcomes arising from these development projects. While iAgents and Yamada officials alike experienced momentary agency in the sense-making process of reinterpreting events in ways that furthered their own interests, playing along with the charade of a social enterprise may not be advantageous in the long run. Yamada, and increasingly other multinational companies, will continue to look for markets where they may not find profits, and iAgents and other people similar to them may not be better off under this new kind of detached and fleeting false patron.

Despite being labeled a "social enterprise" and a "bottom-of-the-pyramid" project, this initiative

emerged neither from development planning nor from a company's market strategy. New forms of decentralized state planning, combined with expansionist corporate capitalism and the push for rural entrepreneurship, produce these ephemeral encounters that appear to be planned markets and organizational forms, when instead they are haphazardly drawn-together assemblages born of short-term relational exigencies. This account diverges from the anthropological literature on BOP social enterprises in its observation that, in a seemingly market-driven development initiative, the extension of markets, the imposition of market subjectivities, and the rendering legible of people and objects to corporate capitalism are far from inevitable. The analytical lens through which this article presents the ethnographic case is one that does not take the social enterprise as central point of reference (which would lead to an interpretation of its discontinuation as a "failure"). Instead, it foregrounds the messy act of assembling and the disassembled productivity that these encounters enabled.

Rather than being isolated and idiosyncratic, perhaps this case is increasingly emblematic of the current moment in development. The apparent need to extend markets ever further, the models of markets that compel instantaneous reaction to volatile events, and the unstable partnerships among public, private, NGO, and individualized spheres driven by disaster and poverty capitalism push people and organizations into new, unplanned spaces of interaction. This situation is not new because of the meetings across difference that occur, but because these confluences are constructed by personalized, political, and random vectors even as people reinterpret them as policy models for markets. Perhaps we need more analyses of "development" that decenter the development project and instead focus on the emergent properties of the act of assembling and encountering and the politics these processes encode.

The "beautiful story" of the solar social enterprise – with its joint ethics of care and ethics of commercial interest – was ultimately a façade behind which a multitude of human and non-human forces managed to assemble, if only for a brief moment in time, and these efforts fell away to reveal instead

multiple ethics of patronage. The ethnographic perspective demonstrated here reveals people's attempts to attach political meaning and extract political value from the encounters and events enabled by these supposed efforts to find a market for a battery.

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