

Hanoi - Fresh markets, a way of life and public health under threat

Stephanie Geertman

Consultant HealthBridge Liveable Cities Programme

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Introduction

As in other middle income countries globalization and commercialization is putting great pressure to Vietnam's traditional fresh food markets, with implications for the country's nutritional status, culinary culture, social-economic fabric and population health. European owned and copied hypermarkets and supermarkets are vying with fresh markets to supply food to the growing middle class. This paper (1) introduces the situation for Hanoi; (2) gives seven arguments why fresh-markets are keys to Liveable Cities; and, (3) concludes with policy and action that needs to be taken.

1. Hanoi

1.1 History of Hanoi as market city

Markets have always been at the center of Hanoi's cultural and economic existence. The economy of the city developed upon a distribution of a market network which was established between ancient Hanoi and the neighboring areas. By the seventeenth century, the city was even given another name, *Ke Cho*, or market place, to reflect the importance of its economic and commercial activities through the existence of markets (Logan 2000; Luan 1997, Hy 2002).

The markets in Hanoi as such are part of the historical and cultural identity of the city Hanoi. With exception of the new urban areas, all neighborhoods in Hanoi have fresh markets in the morning, they provide residents with fresh food at affordable prices, and secondly they provide a space for social relationships in neighborhoods to emerge.

However, recently food safety issues emerged at the fresh markets, and due to their stuffy and messy appearance, the markets do not contribute to the civilization policy (clean and organized street), in addition there is a strong pressure from foreign and local real estate developers. It is this context in which the Hanoi People Committee (HPC) started a policy in which traditional fresh markets are largely going to be replaced by supermarkets and hypermarkets.

1.2 Policy: markets will be replaced with shopping centers, super- and hypermarkets.

In 2009 the Hanoi Trade Department proposed to the HPC a plan up to 2020 in which 489 markets, 162 shopping centers of all kinds and 178 hypermarkets, supermarkets will be built. In the city 402 current markets will be upgraded, which means that large scale markets are going to become shopping centers combined with residential living; and the small markets, will gradually be upgraded into supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores (Anh Quân, 2009).



Figures 1-3. Hom Market, photographs taken by Nguyen Quang Ninh, 21/11/2009. published in Geertman 2010.

The new supermarkets in the existing city will replace existing markets (figure 1-3), or are planned to develop next to existing markets. At the same time fresh markets are not included anymore in new urban areas, instead supermarkets and hypermarkets are constructed (Geertman 2010; Geertman & Thong 2010; Giao Thong Van Tai, 2010). In addition the HPC started a ban on street vendors (2008), including sellers in alleyways and footpaths that, technically, are also the traditional markets, although the latter is still largely ignored by vendors in Hanoi, these new policies will have great implications for Hanoi's existing market culture.

1.3 New and renovated markets in Hanoi

Most new markets are purposely designed to become commercial centers rather than places with affordable fresh foods from the surrounding country side. Some are even designed for high-end services, like offices and apartments for lease on the upper floors. Investors and managers are therefore unwilling to sully the good image of their new buildings by allowing fresh food to be sold on the first floor (Kim Thai, 2008:23).

In Hanoi there are two prime examples of markets that are redeveloped, Cua Nam and Hang Da markets, both belonging to the oldest markets in Hanoi.

1.4 Examples of Cua Nam and Hang Da market

The Cua Nam market started its redevelopment in October 2007, the HPC worked together with Hanoi Art company who invested 200-230 billion VND to redevelop the place into a new shopping mall. However, after opening in 2009 the VietIn Bank leased almost the whole building. The only retail function in the building is one desolated supermarket on the first floor. The building has a car parking in the basement. The name *Cho Cua Nam* (market Cua Nam) is still placed at the entrance of the building, however there is no fresh-marked to be found inside the building. The name only refers to a

lost place. Vendors at the markets their lost jobs, only a few moved to other nearby markets where they have a hard time competing with other vendors (from interviews February 2011).

The other redevelopment, Hang Da market is replaced by a modern shopping mall, here as well there is a car parking in the basement. Different from Cua Nam market is that this building still provides space for the fresh-market, however, the fresh-marked is now hidden in the basement, just as the car parking.

The design of the new Hang Da market is from Ho Thieu Tri, a well known French, from Vietnamese origin, architect in Hanoi. The project is an investment of 220 billion VND (11.5 million USD)¹ by three companies consisting of the Red River Construction Joint stock company (PVC Incomex), Nhat Nam Joint Stock Company and Investment & Trade Limited Company KAF. The construction started in the second quarter of 2009 and was finished just before the celebration of the 1000 years of Thang Long / Hanoi, 10 October 2010. Exclusive leasing is done by the global real estate consultant CBRE. **Lease prices**. Vendors at the market now sublease their spots to others, while the lease price is too high, and business went down. Others still have their stall, but do not have customers. As they told us “The market is dead” (From interviews February 2011).



Figure 4: New Hang Da Market, source architect Ho Trieu Tri, earlier published in Geertman 2010.

The examples of Cua Nam and Hang Da market show us that economic development, pressure from commercial developers has changed these public spaces into semi-private spaces. The development at present indicates the fresh markets in Hanoi are slowly disappearing. However, fresh markets are vital for a Liveable Cities. We present here seven arguments why urgent action is needed to change the course of this development in Hanoi.

2. Seven arguments why fresh markets contribute to a livable city, from experiences elsewhere

From the several researches and policy making documents related to markets in Europe and Asia, we identified seven aspects related to fresh markets in general and the impact of replacing them with shopping-malls in particular, which we found important to address for the case in Hanoi; (2.1) social relationships in neighborhoods; (2.2) well-being; (2.3) nutrition; (2.4); cheap versus expensive (price of goods); (2.5); cultural ways of life, and to; (2.6) the local economy; (2.7) rural-urban relationship.

1 <http://www.thesaigontimes.vn/Home/dothi/hatang/14077/> - date consulted website: 30 January 2009.
Language: Vietnamese

2.1 Social relationships

When replacing or renovating fresh-markets it is important to not just look at the economic consequences, but also the social impact: *“Redeveloping of a retail site is destruction of a social space”* (Dines et al, 2006:35)

In a research in East London it was concluded that the market was like *“no other space in the local area”* (2006:35), and they concluded, *“it [the market] appeared to play such a valued social and cultural role for so many people”* (idem). Research in the Netherlands concluded that the market has a great role in social integration of people in neighborhoods and in cities.

Research in Bangkok and Hong Kong shows that both sellers and buyers in fresh markets value the warm relationships which emerge through interactions by daily conversation and the subsequent in-depth interaction going beyond transactions (Lui, 2008:6; Jaibun 2006).

In comparison with fresh markets, the management of a supermarket has in many features adopted the “rational” McDonalized systems of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, a phenomenon known as McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2001). Research in Thailand argues that, supermarkets are unlikely to replicate these benefits for either workers or consumers because they establish a relationship with less social solidarity between staff and consumers and they rely less on local produce (Jaibun, 2006).

In short, the fresh-markets in Hanoi are vital for solid social relationships among citizens, and related to this they are important for well-being of urban citizens.

2.2 Well-being

The ways in which people describe their experiences of public spaces (and other local features and resource) can reveal the contexts in which their well-being is experienced (Ellaway et al, 2001; Airey, 2003, Dines et al 2006).

In London it was reported that simple gestures such as nods and smiles at the market were often reassuring and could establish the basis for future, closer contact. *“The social encounters in Queens Market made some people feel happy, safe and relaxed, and could raise their spirits”* (Dines et al 2006:28). In the same research informants pointed to markets (and streets) as therapeutic spaces due to shared elements of public space, the social vibrancy of urban life and seeing other people. In addition it is argued here that memories of favorite places can have an important influence on well-being. *“They represent intimate recollections of growing up”* (Dines et al 2006:27).

Thus, Fresh markets, have a direct impact on well-being of people, they contribute to a greater sense of well-being and thus to public health of its users. It is important to remember that presumably the point of economic growth is to increase well-being. It thus does not make sense to engage in activities that reduce well-being for the sake of growing the economy.

Aside social relationships and well-being, of course one of the most obvious impacts of fresh-markets on people's public health is nutrition.

2.3 Nutrition transition and food safety

Respected nutrition transition authorities have proposed that in middle income countries which Vietnam will be soon, hyper/supermarkets are primarily responsible for the diffusion of the high energy,

low nutrient processed food, which are associated with the negative consequences of the nutrition transition (Mendez and Popkin, 2004). Supermarkets in Hanoi do sell components of traditional local diets, however in a very limited extend, they mostly sell the low nutrient processed foods.

There have been many scandals with food safety, especially with pesticides in Vietnam. The visible food safety issues with vendors and traditional markets tend to be acute, but do not have lasting effects. However, the dangerous effects of consuming foods that contain various chemicals or are heavily processed (in supermarkets) have effects that are more long-term and dangerous like cancer. Given that trade-off, it is not at all clear that supermarkets always deliver safer food.

Everywhere around the world, the new middle class in general is now having a diet which is less healthy than when they only used the fresh market. Where diet worsens and non-communicable disease (diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancers) increase as a result, there is again a negative economic result, as governments, insurance companies and the individuals themselves all must pay the cost of treatment, and bear the other costs of premature illness and death. Again, economic policies should not be encouraged that are likely to reduce rather than increase well-being. For Hanoi these factors are important to keep in mind by replacing fresh markets with supermarkets.

2.4 Cheap versus expansive

For the lesser well-off in society the fresh markets are the place where they can buy affordable fresh food. In contrast to supermarkets at fresh markets the price is flexible, negatively it can be used to manipulate customers (rounding up the price, weight which is not correct), positively it is used to bargain and uses the interest of customers. In the most socially equitable sense, it allows those who are willing and able to pay more to do so, while giving the possibility of lower prices for those who cannot afford to pay more. This is a possibility that obviously does not exist in supermarkets, except in the choice of less nutritious, cheaper foods.

Researchers Figuié and Moustier (2008) researched the rise of supermarkets in Vietnam, and it shows that poor consumers depend on a diversified network of formal and informal outlets to ensure food accessibility, credit opportunities and low prices. Poor consumers purchase very little from supermarkets due to material constraints (price, transport, etc.), although they have a high opinion of supermarkets and in particular the quality of the products sold. The researchers conclude that in order to be favorable to poor consumers, food distribution policies should aim to maintain the balance of the different forms of outlets and enforce public quality standards to guarantee the right of all, to safe food (2008:2010).

Thus, closing down fresh-markets in favor of the development of supermarkets will have a direct impact on the lesser well-off. When fresh-markets are really declining, and the supermarkets win, the lesser-well off will purchase the cheaper and less nutritious foods. In addition with the decline of fresh-markets in cities, a part of the cultural way of life on fresh markets get's under pressure as well.

2.5 Cultural ways of life

Due to its special culture of fresh markets in which local people interact and unique local foods are sold the fresh markets have become important places for local culture. Fresh markets are perceived as important assets that play a key part in the identity of neighborhoods (Dines et al. 2006:14; Banwell, 2010:9).

Markets in European and Asian cities are seen as important assets to the identity of these cities. Many fresh markets in cities as Amsterdam, Paris, Barcelona, London, Hong Kong, Thailand and in Hanoi have become interesting spots for tourists to explore local culinary and daily culture. This is often supported by local governments. In Amsterdam for example there is a demand for a new policy, which is promoting the city as a Market City: '*A diversity of markets makes the city as a word city*' (Hoogerwerf 2007).

In Hanoi, the culinary culture part of fresh markets and street markets are characteristics that the supermarkets do not have. It gives identity to places and is very much appreciated by locals and foreigners. Thus by replacing fresh markets with super and hypermarkets, and cleaning side-walks for informal activities is an action which is similar in 'taking a part of the cities culture away'. This is not only drastic for the cities' cultural identity, but as already mentioned also drastic for the cities' economy.

2.6 Local Economy

Fresh markets have great benefits of a good functioning network of shops nearby, at the same time the shops have great benefits of a good functioning market. The interaction between market, shops and hospitality is therefore an important ingredient of a diverse, dynamic and inviting (inner) city or neighborhood (Esselink et al 2004:2; Jaibun, 2006).

At present in Hanoi, the renovated modern buildings lease space to vendors, however the space is not suitable or not affordable (often both). The result is that the vendors at fresh-markets lose their jobs.

"Very few people want to go inside, as they can get everything they need in shops on the street in front of the market," said Ms Thanh, the owner of a plastics shop in the market. "I'm looking for someone to sublease my stall, because I can't make enough money here." (Kim Thai 2008:22)

Thus renovating or replacing fresh markets has a direct impact on the local economy in the area. When a market is replaced it needs to be looked at how this can be done in such a way it improves the local economy in the area, at present it is more destroying the local economy in areas in the city.

2.7 Urban rural – relationship

Today food production in Vietnam is mostly developed from small-scale production. Of the total 390,000 units, 80% are small-scale and household producers (Vietnam News 2007). This means the fresh-markets in Vietnam are still the dominating places where fresh-food is sold. The fresh produce comes at present from the peri-urban areas surrounding Hanoi. There is a strong relationship of the city with its hinterland. As such the fresh markets in Hanoi are one of the keys in the connection rural urban economy.

If the fresh-markets disappear in the city, and (international) corporations take over the supply of food in the city than the rural-urban relationship will change. Fresh-foods than will be processed and go directly from the surrounding areas into the large supermarkets, in Hanoi. Lot's of foods from other regions and overseas like China will then enter the food chain in Hanoi.

This disturbance in rural-urban relationship will cause for losses in the local economy, in social networks, in a loss of cultural identity, and it will likely lead to a less nutrient food supply in the city.

3. Conclusion, policy implications & action for Hanoi

Fresh-markets and traditional retailing is in particular important to poor consumers and for equity reasons it would be good when the diversity of retail outlets should be maintained. However when we observe the functioning of the current new markets in Hanoi, the fresh-markets are not protected well enough, policy action is urgently required. The seven key arguments why to maintain fresh markets in cities needs to be researched in more detail, how to they work out in Vietnamese cities? Based on this policies to support adequate functioning of markets in Hanoi can be developed.

If the government wishes to safeguard the maintenance of the fresh-markets, offer a diversity of food retail formats, and provide choice for consumers, it should acknowledge the socio-cultural, economic and nutritional importance of fresh markets in more detail in its policies, and it should acknowledge that they need to protect the fresh-markets from global super-markets chains. Many large markets already have been target of redevelopment, however Hanoi still has lively streets markets, and important fresh food supply distribution centers are still functioning, as the Long Bien market.

Policy action might not be able to protect all markets, but at least new policy on markets and fresh foods in Vietnamese cities can support to maintain the fresh markets still left, and ensure that in new urban areas spaces are reserved for fresh-markets.

The irony is that in many developed countries fresh markets are 'planned back' into cities, a costly process. Vietnam on the other hand still has cities' with strong market cultures, and the lesson for Vietnam should be: let's not repeat the mistakes of other cities around the world.

Let's join together, bring knowledge and facts to the table, and protect the few fresh markets still left in Vietnamese cities!