

Urban Menace or Valuable Asset? The Social and Economic Role of Street Vendors in Cities



Debra Efroymsen
Photos by Debra Efroymsen

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role in cities of street vendors, also known as hawkers, self-employed workers, and independent outdoor businesspeople.

“Street vendor’ means a person engaged in vending of articles, goods, wares, food items or merchandise of everyday use or offering services to the general public, in a street, lane, side walk, footpath, pavement, public park or any other public place or private area, from a temporary built up structure or by moving from place to place...”

--The Street Vendors (Protection Of Livelihood And Regulation Of Street Vending) Act, 2014 (No. 7 of 2014), India

While many street vendors sell food, they also sell clothing and other items. In addition to goods, people also sell various services on the streets: haircuts, shoe repair, use of a scale to weigh oneself, diabetes checks, pumping of bicycle tires, and so on.

In many countries, vendors are under attack due to various negative beliefs about them, including that they block footpaths and streets, make the streets dirty, sell unhygienic food, and are controlled by the mafia. The owners of established businesses may object to their presence because of the perception of “unfair” competition. Despite the objections to them, vendors are popular with the public, suggesting that they provide essential services that, in the words of Sharit Bhowmik, author of various articles on the topic, “neither the municipalities nor the larger retailing outlets can provide.”ⁱ Vendors play a vital role in urban life and economies. The complaints about vendors are typically related to the lack of sufficient, dedicated space and infrastructure for their use.ⁱⁱ It is important to understand the role of vendors in urban settings before deciding on a policy approach to their presence.



Vendors can indeed occupy entire footpaths, as seen here in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Economic issues

A thriving city needs a healthy economy. People need job opportunities. People also need access to goods and services at affordable prices. Vending provides all of these things. Vending provides employment and for many people, vending is the only available job. In the absence of a safety net (government-provided support for those in need), the “informal” sector is an essential service to prevent desperate poverty. In addition, vending provides affordable goods and services and – where governments issue licenses in exchange for a fee – contributes to local government revenues.

The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) was a study of street vendors in five cities: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; and Nakuru, Kenya. The study identified several ways in which street vendors strengthen their communities. These include generating employment for themselves and others, maintaining a household on their income, contributing to cleanliness and safety on the streets, providing friendly personalized service to customers, and contributing to city revenue via payment for licenses, permits, fees, fines, and taxes.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of the goods sold by street vendors are made by small local industries, thereby further benefiting local economies.^{iv}

The so-called informal sector is very large in many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and is vital to their economies. Unfortunately, rather than recognize their importance, governments are at best indifferent, and at worst hostile, to them. Too often, says Bhowmik, rather than recognize their contribution, “governments view street vendors as encroachers or criminals.”^v

Employment

“If they don’t let us sell on the streets anymore, will the government create new income opportunities for us so that our families don’t die of hunger and so that we have money to send our children to school?” – Hawker in Hanoi, Vietnam^{vi}

Street vending is a source of jobs both for the rural poor migrating to the city and for those who have lost their formal sector jobs after financial contraction.^{vii} Vending is not a hobby or an additional income source; for most street vendors, their occupation is the main source of income for their families.^{viii} Their work allows them to feed their families and pay their children’s school fees, thereby contributing to the wellbeing of the next generation. Vending creates jobs not only for the street vendors themselves but also for various others such as farmers, artisans, and porters.



Essential livelihood for the poor in Dhaka (photo by Maruf Rahman)

About a fifth of informal, non-agricultural employment in various cities in Africa comes in the form of street trading, and about ten percent in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Lima (Peru). About eleven percent of total urban employment in India and fifteen percent in South Africa is in the form of street vending.^{ix}

“I have two small children, three years and five months. My husband died last year in an accident. I’ve been selling for five years now. ... These days the police often catch us, so I lose my goods, my money, my customers. It’s really difficult. We just live day to day. I had to drop my studies, I don’t know any other way to make a living.” – Hawker in Hanoi^x

Censuses in Harare, Zimbabwe and in Lusaka, Zambia, found that many sellers of street food employ others, thereby generating up to three times as many jobs as there are vendors. Many also earned a considerable wage, at least in comparison to other jobs available.^{xi}

Contribution to the local economy

Vendors must obtain their goods somewhere. What they sell benefits those who produce or create those goods. Since they tend to sell local items, they contribute to the local economy. Vendors are an important link between rural farmers and their urban customers. They buy local products and make them available throughout the city, thereby increasing sales, which benefits the producers of the goods as well as the vendors. Governments that legalize vending benefit from the licensing fees and sometimes taxes; otherwise the fees for use of space simply go to political or other

elements that control access to public places. Large stores, on the other hand, tend to access their products outside of the local community – indeed, often out of the country – and move their profits out as well, so that the locale gains little, as opposed to the positive effects of small shops and, by extension, vendors.^{xii}

Vending provides another benefit as well. For low-income people to benefit fully from employment, at least some of the money they earn needs to remain at the bottom of the economic pyramid, among the poor, and circulate there. If the only option for obtaining goods and services is from formal businesses owned by the wealthy, then wages to the poor and middle class will simply rise back up the pyramid again. The presence of vendors means that at least some of the money that reaches the poor will stay there, benefiting other low-income people as well and avoiding the gravitational pull of money upwards.^{xiii}

Benefits to customers



In Hanoi and Vientiane, vendors provide services and tasty treats

The lack of overhead means that vendors can make their goods and services available at lower costs than in shops. The availability of low-priced goods is a boon for both the poor and middle class. In many cases, these may be the only goods that others can afford. Vendors provide other benefits to customers as well. The process of negotiating prices may lead to lower prices for the low income.

Social issues

“The city area, rich or poor or in between, harmed by an interesting sidewalk life and plentiful sidewalk contacts has yet to be found.” – Jane Jacobs^{xiv}



Vendors are popular in wealthy cities as well, as seen here (Boston and Copenhagen)

Livable streets, livable cities

Livable cities need lively, cordial streets in which many people are moving about and spending time outdoors. Vendors make an important contribution to street life, providing much colour and liveliness, as well as a reason for people to walk and to spend time outdoors.

When people are only walking outdoors but do not spend time in one space, then it requires many people to keep the streets lively. Only a few people spending time sitting or standing outdoors contributes the same liveliness to streets as a larger number of people moving. Vendors provide attraction to those on foot but also reasons to spend time outdoors: to stop at a tea stall and enjoy a cup of tea, to linger over a display of bangles or vegetables for sale, and to bargain and chat with the vendors.

Benefits to customers

“Street vendors are an integral part of urban economies around the world, offering easy access to a wide range of goods and services in public spaces. They sell everything from fresh vegetables to prepared foods, from building materials to garments and crafts, from consumer electronics to auto repairs to haircuts.” – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)^{xv}

In addition to low prices there are other benefits as well. Street vendors may offer a wider variety of healthy local snacks and fresh foods than is otherwise available in larger shops or in supermarkets. For instance, street vendors in Bangkok, in addition to various fried treats, sell boiled corn, sweet potato, and water chestnuts; a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables; and traditional treats such as coconut sticky rice in bamboo or

sticky rice mixed with banana and wrapped in banana leaf. In Vietnam, street food treats include tofu with fresh herbs and a seemingly endless assortment of noodle soups.



In Barcelona, shopkeepers imitate vendors, displaying fresh produce on the footpaths.

“Street trade also adds vibrancy to urban life and in many places is considered a cornerstone of historical and cultural heritage. Yet street vendors face many challenges, are often overlooked as economic agents and unlike other businesses, are hindered rather than helped by municipal policies and practices.” – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)^{xvi}

Street vendors also make goods and services available throughout the city, reducing the need for customers to travel to fixed shops. This saves both time and travel expense. People can shop near homes and offices, at train stations and bus halts, and at other convenient spots, as well as on trains and buses and at intersections. This is important as cities work to deal with congestion. Moving vendors, whether carrying goods in baskets or on bicycle carts, make such items as fresh vegetables, live fish and chickens, brooms made of traditional materials, ash to clean pots, and various snacks available to people at their homes. This is an important convenience to those who cannot easily leave their homes, whether due to physical incapacity, the need to care for an infant or others, or simply time constraints.

“There are some products that I can only buy from vendors, not in the market or in a supermarket. For instance there are local fruits and vegetables like boiled sweet potatoes or peanuts. Of course I could buy sweet potatoes in the market and boil them at home, but I don’t know why, they are never as delicious as when I buy them already boiled from a street vendor. Everyone in my family enjoys eating them. Sometimes

when we sit at home we see a vendor go by and call to her, it's really convenient. It's the same with vegetables. And the vendors compete with each other and thus sell the produce at low prices which is so important in these difficult economic times." –

Customer in Hanoi^{xvii}

In many cases, a vendor can have relationships with her or his customers that last for years and that involve various benefits, not the least of which is the social: a friendly greeting, daily conversations, a show of concern about one's wellbeing, a particularly warm smile. The benefits can extend beyond that to selecting the best fruit, selling on credit, storing bags, and so on. They are also willing to sell in very small quantities, which can benefit single people, particularly the elderly.

"I asked for a drink at a stand one day in the park in Hanoi. The vendor said she was sold out, then promptly proceeded to sell a glass to a local person. I was offended at first, then realized that the customer was a regular and the vendor always reserved a glass for her. In some ways it was a trivial matter, but it gave the customer a sense of importance which she might be lacking in her daily life." – Foreigner visiting Hanoi

Vendors can also help to make public places more usable by selling items that enhance the experience for visitors. This includes selling children's toys, drinking water, and snacks. Early morning exercisers at Mount Lavinia Beach in Sri Lanka can enjoy a glass of *kenda* – a hot herbal beverage that is good for health. The *kenda* stand itself provides a venue for socializing among the regular users of the beach and is a place where morning exercisers can leave their sandals and bags of fresh fish. For some, the friendly greeting from the vendors may be more important than the nutritional value of the drink.

Beach visitors also can enjoy pineapple, cassava chips, and other items. Similarly, the vendors at Galle Face in Colombo add to the enjoyment of the visit for many and ensure the availability of affordable snacks. As a study on public space in Sri Lanka found, "Vendors can turn ordinary landscapes into a festive scene with their various items for purchase."^{xviii}

"People come to this park to stroll, run, walk, or exercise in groups. When they need a drink, I can sell to them. I have a lot of regular customers among those people; after they exercise they come and sit at my stand to have a drink and rest. The older people are really cheerful, they tell interesting stories and teach me a lot of life experience. I don't have any other way to make a living and can't imagine what I would do if I

couldn't work here."

– Vendor in Hanoi^{xix}

Reasons to buy food from hawkers include convenient location, freshness of the food, low price, and good taste. Further, vendors often provide a needed social outlet and a chance to converse while shopping. Many vendors provide a space in front of their stall to consume what they sell; people gather there, chatting with each other and with the vendors, thereby alleviating the all-too-common loneliness and social isolation of life in cities.

Hawkers and walkers



The experience of walking in Bangkok is greatly enhanced by the presence of vendors

It is true that vendors can create a nuisance by blocking footpaths, and that they or their customers can contribute to a lack of cleanliness. However, vendors have a business interest in maintaining cleanliness around their stall, and are likely to keep the area neat and clean.^{xx} Meanwhile, vendors provide many advantages to those on foot. The safety of those walking, especially for women and in the evening, is dramatically increased by the presence of other people. Jane Jacobs famously referred to the importance of “eyes on the street” in enhancing safety. Vendors provide just that.

Vendors also give people a reason and reward for walking. While walking can be a pleasurable activity, it can also seem a burdensome chore, especially when walking long distances, in uncomfortable weather, in poor walking conditions, or in barren, sterile environments. People enjoy having something to look at and to distract them. Vendors provide them with something to see, do, and buy. People can look at the goods for sale, watch other people, hunt for bargains, or just enjoy the colour and liveliness in the presence of vendors and their customers.

Other issues: legal status and unions

In many cities around the world, street vending is illegal. Despite this, vendors are common. A number of difficulties arise when the law prohibits vending, including the following:

- The illegality makes it difficult or impossible for the government to regulate the vendors, including where they are and are not allowed to sell, the maintenance of proper hygiene around their stalls, and the assurance that the food they sell is hygienic.
- Street vendors, rather than pay the government for a licence, must instead pay corrupt officials, policemen, or gangsters; this contributes to corruption and illegality.
- By not collecting licensing fees, the government denies itself an important source of revenue.
- Assessments of the contribution of vendors to the local economy are often disregarded, which can lead to poor policy decisions that have a negative effect on the local economy and on employment.
- Lack of legality puts undue pressure and stress on vendors. The psychological strain of fleeing police is accompanied by the economic stress and uncertainty in being forced to pay bribes. This is not a humane way to deal with a significant sector of the society.

Different cities take different approaches to street vendors, ranging from full acceptance and legality to aggressive intolerance, with various gradients in between. For example, a study by Bhowmik found that only a few Asian countries have policies for regulating and protecting street vendors: Malaysia, Philippines and India. In other cities the legal situation is less clear. However, of those three countries, only Malaysia has made progress in terms of successful implementation of its policy. Most Malaysian street vendors are licensed; those with a license receive appropriate facilities as well as credit.^{xxi}

Their market base consists of a mass of consumers who welcome the accessibility to inexpensive goods and services that they provide. ... when urban management policies allow vendors to conduct their trade, positive impact results on several fronts: on poverty, employment, entrepreneurship, social mobility, and peace and order. Economic and social resources are democratised, including between women and men.

– International Labour Organization^{xxii}

Despite its national policy, the government in Philippines generally refuses to recognize street vendors and uses harsh measures to remove them from sidewalks. While waiting for enforcement of their policy, street vendors in India continue to face harassment from the authorities and are forced to pay high rent for the spaces they occupy.^{xxiii} In Mongolia, street vendors must undergo a difficult process in order to receive a license that is only valid for one month. As a result, most do not bother – and are thus subject to harassment and forced to pay bribes.^{xxiv} In Singapore, vendors are covered under the Environmental Public Health Act (Chapter 95, Section 113)^{xxv}; their condition is better than in many other countries, and the government issues licenses which enable them to have proper stalls and helps with the maintenance of hygiene.^{xxvi} Despite a number of policies to restrict vending and a tenuous legal situation that changes under different governors,^{xxvii} Bangkok is one of the most vibrant in terms of widespread availability of goods and services day and night throughout the city.

The situation in Latin America varies widely across countries. In Chile and Colombia there are fairly clear legal frameworks that allow vendors a degree of security which also contributes to their economic wellbeing. In Peru and Venezuela, the situation is more complicated, with different and conflicting legal frameworks and mandates. The complexity leads to confusion and conflict, thereby resulting in poor enforcement of existing laws and insecurity and poor working conditions for vendors.^{xxviii}

In Africa, the percentage of street vendors operating legally can vary widely, at just 17% in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire) and as high as 82% in Accra (Ghana). Too often the regulations are complicated and the process of obtaining a legal permit is time-consuming.^{xxix}

Actions on behalf of/by street vendors

Street vendors face a difficult time in negotiating better conditions for themselves, in part because they typically do not belong to any unions. In fact, most large and mainstream unions are not interested in involving street vendors, and vendors have, for the most part, not succeeded in creating their own unions. Street vendors are typically not aware of what rights they do have. The National Federation of Korean Street Vendors (NFKSV), the National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), and the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India are important exceptions. NFKSV has had difficulty achieving genuine progress due to the hostile stance of the Korean government.^{xxx} Indian associations have been more successful at local and national level policy dialogues and interventions, which led to the existing national policy. This national law recognizes, regulates and protects the livelihoods of street vendors^{xxxi} although, as mentioned above, enforcement has been slow. A study by the Food and

Agriculture Organization (FAO) of street vendors in West African cities found that most of the vendors want some sort of formal organization to help them obtain their rights, despite the limited success of such organizations to date.^{xxxii}



WBB Trust and Avantgardes meeting in Dhaka to discuss “Vendor Management for a Clean and Green Dhaka” project

Other examples of positive initiatives regarding street vendors follow:

- In Durban, South Africa, street vendor organizations came together to prevent the demolition of a market in order to create a formal mall.^{xxxiii}
- In Imphal, India, vendors are included in the urban plan. The municipality provides space for them; it also charges a fee for garbage collection and sweeping, besides collecting license fees. Both the vendors and the municipality benefit from their formal recognition.^{xxxiv}
- In Bhubaneshwar, India, an inclusive and participatory mapping process, efficient use of space, and infrastructure improvements have significantly benefitted the livelihoods of vendors. The mapping led to the creation of a series of vending zones. The city proceeded to build fixed kiosks in those zones. Benefits to vendors have been significant: 67% report an increase in the number of customers and 61% report increased sales.^{xxxv}
- In Dhaka, Bangladesh, NGO advocates at Work for a Better Bangladesh Trust and Avantgardes are working together to design integrated facilities that would provide vendors with a high quality environment in which to do business while reducing or eliminating the problems typically associated with their presence. The work includes interviews with vendors and customers, observation of various streets including measurement of street width and availability of unused or underutilized space, creation of various designs, and a pilot test. It is hoped that the study will result in a successful pilot project that can then be used to convince policymakers to implement similar projects throughout the city. Important facilities to be provided include shade, racks or shelves for vertical rather than horizontal display of goods, and dust bins.

- A street vendor association in Ghana succeeded in convincing the government to exempt street vendors from paying the Value Added Tax (VAT) seeing as they did not have receipts for their purchases.^{xxxvi}
- The Centre for Urban Equity at CEPT University in Ahmedabad, in collaboration with Cardiff University, in the report *Inclusive Design for Street Vendors in India* (2014), shows various ways to accommodate vendors while easing the problems they are perceived to cause and improving their comfort and safety while working.



In Montreal, clever design allows a bicycle cart to become a multi-purpose shop and deli.

Recommendations

Legal recognition of vendors would benefit vendors, their customers, and municipalities. Licensing fees could become a significant source of revenue for municipalities. Legal status would also mean that vendors could take loans from public institutions, thus allowing them to avoid moneylenders.^{xxxvii}

“When urban plans allot space for hospitals, parks, markets, bus and rail terminuses etc. they could take into account that these places usually develop as natural markets for hawkers. For example flower and fruit sellers gather around temples as the devotees find it convenient to buy these offerings while going for worship. Similarly, it is natural to find food vendors, sellers of green coconuts and fruits outside public hospitals. The patients inside these government or municipal run hospitals and the visitors who come there need these services. We can find hawkers outside the railway stations ... and major bus stands in the cities, selling a wide array of goods and eatables. People embarking from these trains or busses, on their way home, find it convenient to purchase their requirements from these hawkers. ... One forgets that hawkers selling

their wares at the areas that become natural markets are in fact providing essential services to the people at low costs. Their removal will not only deprive them of their sources of livelihood but will also inconvenience the public at large as they will have to spend more and travel longer distances to get the same services. Hence if urban development plans are to be effective and people oriented, they must make provisions for the growth of such natural markets.” — Sharit Bhowmik^{xxxviii}



Goods can be displayed so as not to occupy pavement space, as seen in Copenhagen and Bhaktapur (Nepal).

Specific recommendations include the following:

1. Local, regional, and national governments should recognize the importance of street vendors to local economies and to social life in cities. That recognition should be enshrined in national policy that is properly enforced throughout the country. Specific legal provisions should include the licensing of vendors and full legal protection for them. Rather than pay bribes to use space, vendors should pay licensing fees directly to government, with some of the proceeds being used to provide vendors with appropriate working conditions and facilities (as described below).
2. The problems that can be caused by vendors should be addressed with specific policies and actions to remedy the harms while maintaining the benefits. This can include designating different parts of the cities as high-vending areas, limited-vending areas, and vending-free zones, as long as appropriate and sufficient space is allocated for them. In order to address a high demand for licenses, spaces could be allocated for a specific number of hours per day so that each space is used by at least two vendors daily (more if vending can continue well into the evening/night). Vendors must be included in the formulation of these policy measures.

3. Rather than ban vendors, cleanliness could be enhanced through provision of proper facilities. In order to gain the advantages that vendors bring while reducing or eliminating the problems, vendors should be accorded not only legal rights to their space, but also basic facilities such as shade, electricity, public toilets, water taps, pedestrian-oriented lighting, and trash disposal services. Rules can govern the display of goods and where vendors can set up shop in order to prevent obstruction of footpaths. Proper sanitation and drainage are essential. High-quality stalls, lockers, and shelters not only help to make vendors more legitimate but also remove the need for them to transport their wares to and from home each day.^{xxxix} The provision of these services benefits not only vendors, but also, according to WIEGO, helps “make public space safer, more comfortable and aesthetically pleasing,” benefiting those on foot, local residents, and other visitors.^{xi}
4. The services provided to vendors could be paid for partly out of vendor licensing fees and also from car/motorbike parking fees.
5. Vendors could contribute to footpath maintenance, in a new spin on public-private partnerships (PPP). Vendors, as representatives of the private sector, can be involved in agreements with the public sector to maintain the cleanliness of the space around their stalls and to ensure the quality and hygiene of the products they sell in return for obtaining a license to do business there. Since the presence of vendors can also increase safety, they can be involved in helping to reduce crime.^{xii}
6. When allocating space for vendors, it is important not to limit oneself to sidewalk (footpath/pavement) space. Some street space could be liberated from parked cars, thus putting the space to far more economically-efficient use. Pedestrianizing market streets would also create more space for vendors while lessening the negative effects that their use of space can have on traffic flow.

“Vendors’ economic well-being is delicate, and policy changes should be undertaken with caution. Any relocation effort or move towards formalization must be context-specific, in consultation with vendors, and transparent in its motives and methodology. For example, when possible, infrastructure should be created where street vendors have already demonstrated their desire to sell their goods.” — Embarq^{xiii}

While different cities and countries will require measures that are appropriate to their particular situation, many of the issues regarding vendors are common worldwide, and solutions will be similar. One thing is certain: these changes could substantially improve lives for the millions of vendors in cities around the world, as well as benefiting local economies and the social life of cities.



In Bangkok as elsewhere, much space could be liberated from parked cars and used more productively for vendors' stalls.

Conclusion



Whether you need tailoring, food, or flowers, street vendors make it easily available (Bangkok)

The existence of street vendors elicits a passionate response in many. Some are vehemently opposed to their presence, feeling that they block footpaths and streets, make cities dirtier, contribute to corruption and chaos, and undersell established shops. Others equally passionately argue that vending is an essential safety net for the poor, preventing desperate poverty and starvation; that not only the vendors but their customers and local economies benefit from their presence; and that vendors play an important role in maintaining safety, attractiveness, and a vibrant social life on the streets.

The numbers make clear that vending provides an essential livelihood for many, and is a major contributor to local economies. The ideal solution, then, would be to give full legal and social recognition to vendors while working to reduce or eliminate the problems that their presence can, indeed, sometimes cause. Appropriate policy strategies do exist and have been utilized in some cities, with positive results. It is time to apply those results more broadly so that more cities can enjoy the manifold benefits of vendors while ceasing to suffer from the problems that poor management and illegality can bring. We can do better by our cities and our populations; the time to start is now.

Endnotes

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