



Vending in Public Space: The Case of Bangkok

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Context and Culture

One of the first things that strikes visitors to Bangkok is the sheer number and diversity of vendors on the streets, lanes (*soi*), and remaining waterways. The city is possibly one of the world's "jewels" when it comes to selling goods and services in public spaces both day and night. How did this situation come to be, especially given the country's evolving political and economic agenda? What are the cultural, economic, political and other broader social foundations of this situation, including the role of vendors themselves? What are the current opportunities and challenges associated with vending in public space in Bangkok and what can other contexts learn from the specific experience of Bangkok and vice-versa? This brief answers some of those questions.

Snapshot of the Current Situation

In addition to "traditional" street stalls selling wares such as food, clothing, flowers, toys, electronics, and even foot massages, Bangkok is the home to some fairly unique examples of hawkers operating in public spaces. Examples, from both the past and present, include the well-known "floating markets" (*talaad nam*) on the city's waterways as well as opportunities for vending eked out in some very unusual places such as train-tracks. There are even vendors specialized in selling "kits" to offer to Buddhist monks before dawn (Yasmeen 2006).

According to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) statistics of 2010, the BMA permitted 664 des-



Bangkok's experience with respect to vending in public space is, in some ways, an example to the world due to the scale, diversity and creativity involved but one that is also fraught with contradictions and a history of struggle.

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Vendors on Railway Tracks

A YouTube video illustrates a market on the railway tracks where the vendors pull their stalls down “just in time” before the train passes and then quickly put them back up afterward. [Play video](#)



designated areas for street vending, which were occupied by approximately 20,000 vendors. The BMA also has a list of approximately 19,000 street vendors who operated without permission in another 750 vending locations.

The BMA’s number of street vendors in 2010 thus consists of approximately 40,000 individuals. However, it is likely that these statistics highly underestimate the actual number of street vendors and hawkers in the city. Even the 1997 and 2003 labour statistics of the National Statistical Office indicated that the number of hawkers and vendors in Bangkok was around 250,000 thousand and 380,000 respectively (Nirathron 2005). A discrepancy in the statistics may also be due to the fact that many vendors are officially renting their selling spaces or selling in other locations, such as public markets, rather than using public space and therefore are counted in the labour statistics but not in the BMA data.

A close look at one of the inner city districts in the old commercial area found that in 2010, “legal” vendors who sold in the designated areas accounted for only 18.7 per cent of the 2,648 vendors in the area. Interestingly, only 16.9 per cent of the “legal” vendors reported



Despite an increase in the number of middle class vendors, a large number of vendors still belong to the city’s urban poor and earn subsistence earnings or even less.

residing in the district. The rest were residents of other districts of Bangkok or migrants from other provinces. In terms of the types of goods sold, it was found that food accounted for 26.8 per cent whereas non-food items such as clothing, jewelry, or other items accounted for 77 per cent of total merchandise sold.

Traditionally, the best organized vendors are those who sell near the central market, *Pakkhlong Talad* although the late 1990s witnessed the emergence of vendors’ associations along busy thoroughfares such as Silom Road (Yasmeen 2006). There are also reports of the recent establishment of “district level vending committees” comprised of vendors (Tulaphan 2014). Figure 1 depicts Silom road and illustrates the clash between traditional vending and the growth of the modern cityscape.

TABLE 1
Types of Goods Sold by Street Vendors in an Inner District of Bangkok in 2010

Type of establishment	Total Number (approx.)	Approx. no. of workers
Food	710	710
Clothing	130	130
Personal items: accessories	938	938
Household goods	187	187
Other	683	683
Grand Total	2,648	2,648

Source: City Law Enforcement Section, Samphanthawong District

History of Vending in Bangkok's Public Space

Many would argue that vending in public places, especially of food, is traditional in Southeast Asia (Van Esterik 1992) and deeply rooted in the local culture. However, most scholars argue that a turning point in the region, including and especially in Thailand, was the arrival of migrants from China, particularly in the 19th century, concomitant with the growth in urbanization. This demographic change accelerated after World War II (Skinner 1957, Keyes 1987).

Food vending in the capital city of Bangkok dates back to the early period associated with the Kings Rama I-III. Whereas in the days when Bangkok was still known as the "Venice of the East" Thai vendors preferred to work from floating markets, Chinese immigrants were pioneers in land-based retailing (Nirathron 2005). Figure 2 shows an archival photo from 1954 (B.E. 2497) depicting some of these early street vendors, who were later replaced by poor migrants from the Northeast of Thailand. Street vending, which had earlier helped Chinese immigrants subsist, became the "survival strategy" of another wave of migrants. Mass rural-urban migration perpetuated by economic development created both demand for, and supply of, street vending. Factors contributing to this phenomenon included uneven income distribution between Bangkok and rural areas and rapid urbanization of the capital.

The aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, which saw many laid-off workers take up street vending, was a testimony to the "paradigm shift" in government policy on employment as well as to the government's strong role in Thai culture. Activities in the informal sector were henceforth regarded as valuable economic endeavors, not only because of their role in capitalism, but also because of their role in

Taling Chan Weekend "Floating Market" in Thonburi, Metropolitan Bangkok

This contemporary floating market illustrates floating vending activities that used to take place throughout Bangkok and other cities in Thailand, which have well-established waterways. Over time, most of Bangkok's canals were paved over into roads.



◀ Play video



Figure 2: Archival photo from 1954 (B.E. 2497) depicting some early Chinese immigrant street vendors

employment creation for the unemployed due to the uncertainty in wage employment in the formal sector. Over time, a certain urban culture and economy emerged with vending in public space, becoming a Bangkok hallmark.

Street vendors have a complex economic status. Many earn subsistence earnings or even less, but there are also vendors who accumulate capital and, considering their daily earnings, can be classified as people of middle income. Some street vendors are able to expand their ventures (Nirathron 2005; Government Savings Bank 2013). A shift in employment precipitated by neoliberalism and globalization induced “a new generation” of vendors on the street. For these people, street vending is not a “survival strategy” but, rather, an alternative income generating activity leading to economic

mobility. Nirathron (2005) found that the common factors that contribute to the success of street vendors of all economic status are self-confidence and selling venues. Street vendors who earned subsistence income valued an inexpensive source of raw materials whereas better-off vendors gave high importance to capital, family support and knowledge.

Like other income earners, street vendors are taxable individuals, and their income is classified in category 8 of the tax code (income from business, commerce and others). Individuals who earn more than 30,000 baht per year are required to submit the tax form. Failure to comply results in fines of 200 baht. In general, street vendors’ declared earnings are much less than earnings level required to pay tax.

Gender Roles and Issues

An issue of significant importance in Bangkok, which pertains to Thailand and Southeast Asia in general, is the unique configuration of gender roles with respect to hawking and how this meshes with urbanization, immigration, and – most importantly – how one interprets the meaning of these roles. Visitors to Bangkok will notice the strong presence of women vendors in comparison to South Asian countries. Migrants from other parts of Thailand and from neighbouring countries also factor into the informal labour force. Female labour force participation rates in Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular are very high and are combined with late age of marriage, many unmarried women and few children per woman. There are debates among scholars as to what extent this is a sign of “high” or “low” status (see Keyes 1984, Kirsch 1985). No matter what the interpretation, one thing is certain: Thai women are not confined to the home and easily access all the parts of the city as both buyers and sellers of goods and services in a myriad of public spaces. In terms of the expansion of trade and growth of micro-enterprises for upward mobility, women may be in a more disadvantageous position as they have less control over the time and labour of members in the family (Kusakabe 2006). Nirathron (2006) demonstrated that, by the 1980s, vending in Bangkok was no longer female dominated and included roughly as many men as women.



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Vendors in Bangkok sell goods produced in Thailand as well as the rest of the world, including and especially China. Hence, they are part of global supply chains.

Current Issues

The growth, boom, bust and recovery of the Bangkok economy – as well as rates of economic growth in China and other parts of Southeast Asia – has affected the nature of vending in public spaces in the city. In addition to the well-known pattern of migrants from the impoverished Northeast of the country (*Isaan*), Bangkok is now witnessing the growth of more middle-class vendors selling food (including Chinese and other non-Thai items), goods from China, etc. Many of these individuals are men of Chinese ancestry – some of them quite well educated. One of the most well known examples is Sirivat, the “stockbroker turned sandwich vendor”, who started his venture in 1997 after the collapse of his real estate business (Yasmeen 2001a). His food vending venture has grown and expanded over the years beyond sandwiches – which Thai people did not traditionally eat – to include introduction of innovative new products such as brown rice sushi and *onigiris* (Japanese “rice sandwiches”), organic brown rice crackers and mulberry juice, to name a few examples. Sirivat himself no longer sells on the street, but, instead, hires salespeople to sell for him. He has indicated a scarcity of sales staff to the point that he has had to resort to hiring students who want to have part-time job. Sirivat also began a coffee shop chain beginning with outlets in hospitals where the rents are much lower compared to those in shopping centers (see <http://thaipublica.org/2012/11/series-15-year-crisis-sirivat-3/> and <http://www.sirivat-sandwich.com/story/>).

At the other end of the spectrum, Bangkok streets are welcoming a new cohort of migrants from other countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and China, many of whom are relatively poor. Though there are still no official statistics on how many of these vendors there are, the situation has been confirmed by staff of the Law Enforcement Department of the BMA.

Illustration of Contrasts: Migrant Vendor from Northeastern Thailand and Thai-Chinese Middle Class Vendor

This 2013 Rockefeller video was produced as part of the Informal City Dialogues series. [Play video](#)



Interview with Sirivat the Sandwich Man

Sirivat Voravethvutikhun speaks in a 2011 interview about the impact of the stock market crash of 1997 and his transition from the world of finance to selling on the street and building a successful business over the next 15 years. He also touches on lessons learned. [Play video](#)



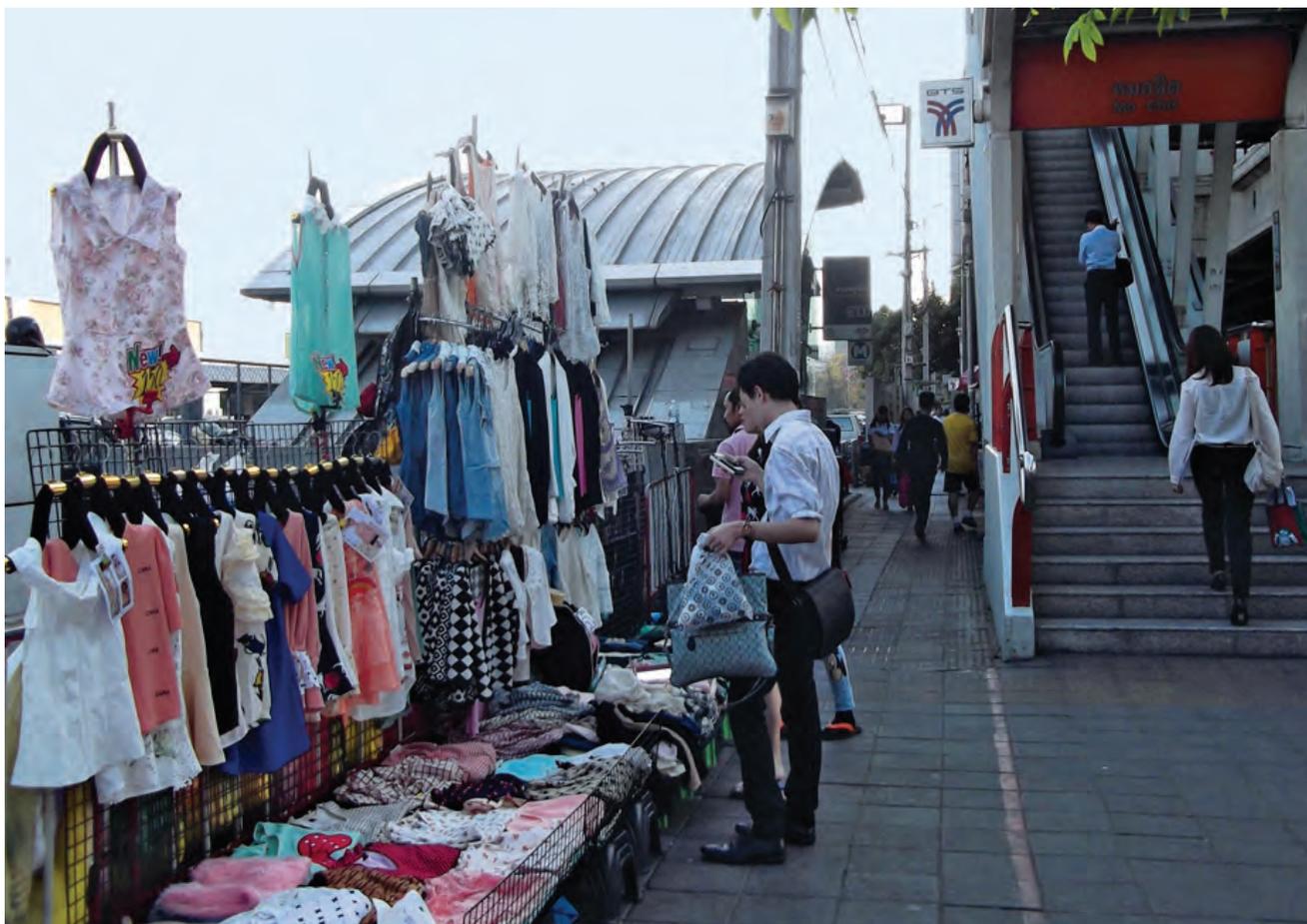


Figure 3: Access to public space has also been a source of conflict both historically and recently, with high land-value areas being “hotspots” for controversy. Ratanawaraha (2014) has indicated diurnal differences in how these high land-value areas are used – they can be more or less sought after in the evening depending on the location. Indeed, skytrain stations are particularly strategic locations for vending.

In their case study of Soi Convent – a small street known for the quality and variety of its food – Sareena Sernsukskul and Pattama Suksakulchai point to the nimbleness of various types of street vendors and their adaptation to the changing urban environment:

Sidewalks were intended for pedestrians but are now being used for business transactions. They encroach on the common rights of urban space, but through the history of vending in Thai culture, the compromising nature of Thais, the dependency of many Bang-

kokians for affordable goods as well as the necessity of the majority of Thais to make a living through this informal means, this activity becomes readily embraced on the most part and becomes a social, economic and cultural force that shapes the urban life of Bangkok.

(Sernsukskul and Suksakulchai 2011)

However, as the following section will describe, access to public space has also been a source of conflict both historically and recently. The increasing number of street vendors in Bangkok has been observed by the local authorities and has been identified as a cause of concern. The Soi Convent case study, for example, speaks of a 2011 dispute between vendors and Chulalongkorn University with respect to the commercial area of Siam Square over the use of the sidewalk near the skytrain station (Tangmeesang 2011). The resulting protests resulted in the university referring the dispute to a committee to examine the situation. This situation points to what Ratanawaraha (2014) has referred to as the “street level political economy” with high land-value areas being “hotspots” for controversy. Furthermore, he has indicated diurnal differences in how these high land-value areas are used – they can be more or less sought after in the evening depending on the location. Indeed, skytrain stations are particularly strategic locations for vending (figure 3). Pedestrians can also conflict with street vendors interests; in June 2013, the Facebook group “saynostall” was established to campaign on the right of the public to access the pavements, particularly as pedestrians (see <https://www.facebook.com/saynostall>). In January 2014, the group had more than 2000 “Likes”.

Policy Moments and Collective Action

The Thai government's attempt to monitor street vending in Bangkok initially appeared in 1941 when the then Bangkok Municipality enacted separate regulations monitoring fixed and mobile vending. Generally speaking, mobile vendors are poorer than those operating from a fixed pitch. Figure 4 depicts an itinerant vendor with a pole and two baskets (known in Thai as *hab rae*) at the Bang Bua Canal community, which was recently upgraded in collaboration with the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (see <http://www.designother90.org/solution/bang-bua-canal-community-upgrading/>).

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration was established in 1972 by combining the cities of Bangkok and Thonburi, which is on the opposite side of Chao Phraya River. Regulations relating to street vending, which have been put into place over the years, have dealt with food vending more than other commodities vending due to the predominance of this sector and the health and sanitary issues involved. With respect to poverty reduction during economic recessions, street vending is regarded as a "solution" to unemployment and high cost of living. However, during times of economic progress, street food vending is viewed as a "threat" to orderliness. This dual attitude towards street vendors has been reflected in policies at the national and local levels over the last forty years.

The city of Bangkok has become more lenient, accommodating and sometimes even supportive of vending over the years, recognizing its importance for the culture and economy of the city and the livelihood of its millions of urbanites. Policies concerning street vending in Bangkok have pertained to the environment of the city, hygiene and poverty reduction.



Figure 4: an itinerant vendor (known in Thai as *hab rae*) at the Bang Bua Canal community. Generally speaking, mobile vendors are poorer than those operating from a fixed pitch.

Local and national authorities have regarded street vending as one of the income generating activities that can eradicate poverty, particularly in times of crisis. Over four decades, from 1973 to 2013, promotion of self-employment through micro-enterprises and larger ventures has featured prominently in both the local and national plans. On the local level, policies designed to initiate income generating activities through skills training have been in place since the 1970s, as per the First Bangkok Metropolitan Development Plan (1977-1981), and have been on the list consistently until the

present plan of 2012-2016. At the national level, the National Economic and Social Development Plans have promoted self-employment as a means to eradicate poverty and to attain self-reliance.

Table 2 provides an overview of both local and national policies regarding street vending over the decades, and the section following describes some of the table's highlights.

TABLE 2
Summary on Policy Regarding Street Vending in Bangkok: 1973-2013

Years	Policy Direction and Measures		Periods of Bangkok Metropolitan Development Plans and National Plans
	Negative	Positive/New solution	
1973 to 1977 Five governors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1973 Vendors were forced out of the streets to market areas. Not sustained. • Clean-up campaign. Not sustained. • 1974-1975 same as 1973. Not sustained. • 1976 Enactment of two BMA Ordinances on the control of mobile vendors and fixed vending. The Ordinances provided definitions for “fixed vending” and “mobile vendor”. They prohibited vending in public spaces without permission. • 1975-1977 continuous strict monitoring in problematic areas. Protests of vendors against strict monitoring resulted in pro-vendor interventions by the Ministry of the Interior. • Sustained restoration of pavements in some areas. 	Made an exception and allowed vendors to sell in permitted areas.	1972-1976: <u>3rd National Economic and Social Development Plan (National Plan)</u> Promoted employment.
1977 to 1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1977-1979 strict monitoring in problematic areas. • Continuous monitoring resulted in sustained restoration of pavements in some areas. There were spells of vendor protests. • 1978 setting up “City Police Unit”, which included monitoring of street vending, to facilitate enforcement of BMA laws. The Unit ceased in 1982. 	Coordinate with public and private markets to provide space to vendors with “grace period”.	1977-1981: <u>1st BMA Plan</u> Promoted petty enterprise to alleviate poverty through provision of seed money. <u>4th National Plan</u> Promoted self-employment.
1979 to 1981	Leniency applied due to oil crisis and subsequent recession.	Leniency applied due to oil crisis.	
1981 to 1985 2 governors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1981-1984 re-imposed strict monitoring. • 1984-1985 strict monitoring. 	Made an exception and allowed vendors to sell temporarily in some areas. There were 164 areas permitted in 1984. The areas were later revoked.	1982-1986: <u>2nd BMA Plan</u> Promoted petty enterprise to alleviate poverty through provision of seed money. <u>5th National Plan</u> The Plan regarded “petty enterprise” as a means to reduce poverty.

Years	Policy Direction and Measures		Periods of Bangkok Metropolitan Development Plans and National Plans
	Negative	Positive/New solution	
1985 to1992 (1985 to 1989; 1989 to1992) One governor: two terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establishment of “City Police Unit” in 1986 as the City Law Enforcement Department. • Focused on intensive laws, arresting both vendors and buyers. • Prohibiting selling on Wednesdays. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made an exception and allowed vendors to sell in some areas. • Compromised with vendors on conditions of restoring cleanliness, safety and orderliness. • Issued safety and cleaning policies for a convenient and safe co-existence between pedestrians and street vendors. • Survey and classified areas into “strictly prohibiting” and “generally prohibiting” areas. • Had Wednesdays as cleaning days. 	<p>1987-1991: <u>3rd BMA Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted petty enterprise to alleviate poverty through provision of seed money. <p><u>6th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted self-employment. • Policy to promote “petty enterprise”. Measures such as skills training, social protection and access to capital money were introduced and to be implemented by the Department of Public Welfare, the National Housing Authority and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.
1992 to1996 One governor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Public Health Act of 1992 authorizes BMA to designate areas prohibited from vending. • Designated areas strictly prohibiting from selling. • Focused on law enforcement, arresting both vendors and buyers. • Prohibiting selling on Wednesdays for cleaning of selling areas. • Establishment of City Law Enforcement Department (formerly City Police Unit). • In 1996, fines in accordance with Article 20 of The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992) was 19.6 million baht, the number of arrests was 52,972. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992) authorized BMA with the approval of Traffic Police Bureau to designate areas permitted for vending. • Designated areas permitted for vending. • 286 selling locations were designated to 15,000 vendors. • Had Wednesdays as cleaning days. 	<p>1992-1996: <u>4th BMA Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the goal of reducing the number of street vendors in all districts of Bangkok. • In the same plan, petty trade was regarded as a means to reduce poverty. <p><u>7th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petty traders (or self-employed people) were listed as one of the six groups of poorest people that the government singled out for special attention.
1996 to 2000 One governor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on law enforcement, arresting both vendors and buyers. • In 2000, fines in accordance with Article 20 of The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992) was 20.7 million baht, the number of arrests was 68,049. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated areas permitted for vending and areas strictly prohibiting from selling. • Maintained safety and cleaning policies, in particular food hygiene and sanitation. 	<p>1997-2001: <u>5th BMA Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Plan aimed to limit the increase of street vendors and prohibited the preparation of foods on the streets. • Economic security of people was important. <p><u>8th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted economic security of family.

TABLE 2 (continued) Summary on Policy Regarding Street Vending in Bangkok: 1973-2013

Years	Policy Direction and Measures		Periods of Bangkok Metropolitan Development Plans and National Plans
	Negative	Positive/New solution	
2000 to 2004 One governor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on law enforcement arresting both vendors and buyers, but with some lenience regarding implementation • Enactment of BMA Regulation on Cleaning Fees for Fixed Vending (2002) for the collection of cleaning fees of 150 baht per month for 1 m2 selling area. • In 2004, fines in accordance with Article 20 of The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992) were 66.7 million baht. Number of arrests was 211,308. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated areas permitted for vending and areas strictly prohibiting from selling. • Had Mondays as cleaning days. • Focused on clean environment. • Enactment of BMA Regulation on Cleaning Fees for Fixed Vending (2005), cleaning fees was reduced to 100 baht per month for 1 m2 selling area. • Areas permitted for selling increased from 494 areas in 2004 to 667 areas in 2008. 	<p>2002-2006: <u>6th BMA Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic security of people was important. • Skills training for economic self-reliance were highlighted. <p><u>9th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted self-employment and micro-enterprise through skills training and access to capital.
2009 to 2012 2013 to present One governor: two terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on law enforcement, arresting both vendors and buyers. There were spells of protest. • In 2012, fines in accordance with Article 20 of The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992) were 87.8 million baht. The number of arrests was 202,372. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced cleaning days to 2 days per month. • The campaign “Street Vending: Charms of the City” started in 2011. • BMA and the Metropolitan Police Bureau came to accept that street vending is here to stay. • Locations permitted for selling increased from 667 areas in 2008 to 726 areas in 2013. The areas are currently occupied by 21,065 fixed vendors. 	<p>2007-2011: <u>First period of BMA 12 Year Plan (2009-2012)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic security of people was important. • Skills training were highlighted. <p><u>10th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted self-employment and micro-enterprise through skills training and access to capital. <p>2012-2016: <u>Second Period of BMA 12-year Plan (2013-2016)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen grass-root economy, micro-enterprise. • Skills training are highlighted. <p><u>11th National Plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes self-employment and micro-enterprise through skills training and access to capital. • Promotes small and medium scale enterprises. • Promotes community enterprises.

Source: Kusakabe (2006); Nirathron (2006); Siritum (2007); <http://www.bangkok.go.th/citylaw/>; <http://circular.bangkok.go.th/bmacircle/plan.html>; <http://www.nesdb.go.th/Default.aspx?tabid=62>; Bangkok 12-Year Plan [http://office.bangkok.go.th/pipd/02_Plan%20BMA/01_Plan%20Development%20BMA/plan%20development%2012%20year%20\(%202552-2563\).pdf](http://office.bangkok.go.th/pipd/02_Plan%20BMA/01_Plan%20Development%20BMA/plan%20development%2012%20year%20(%202552-2563).pdf)

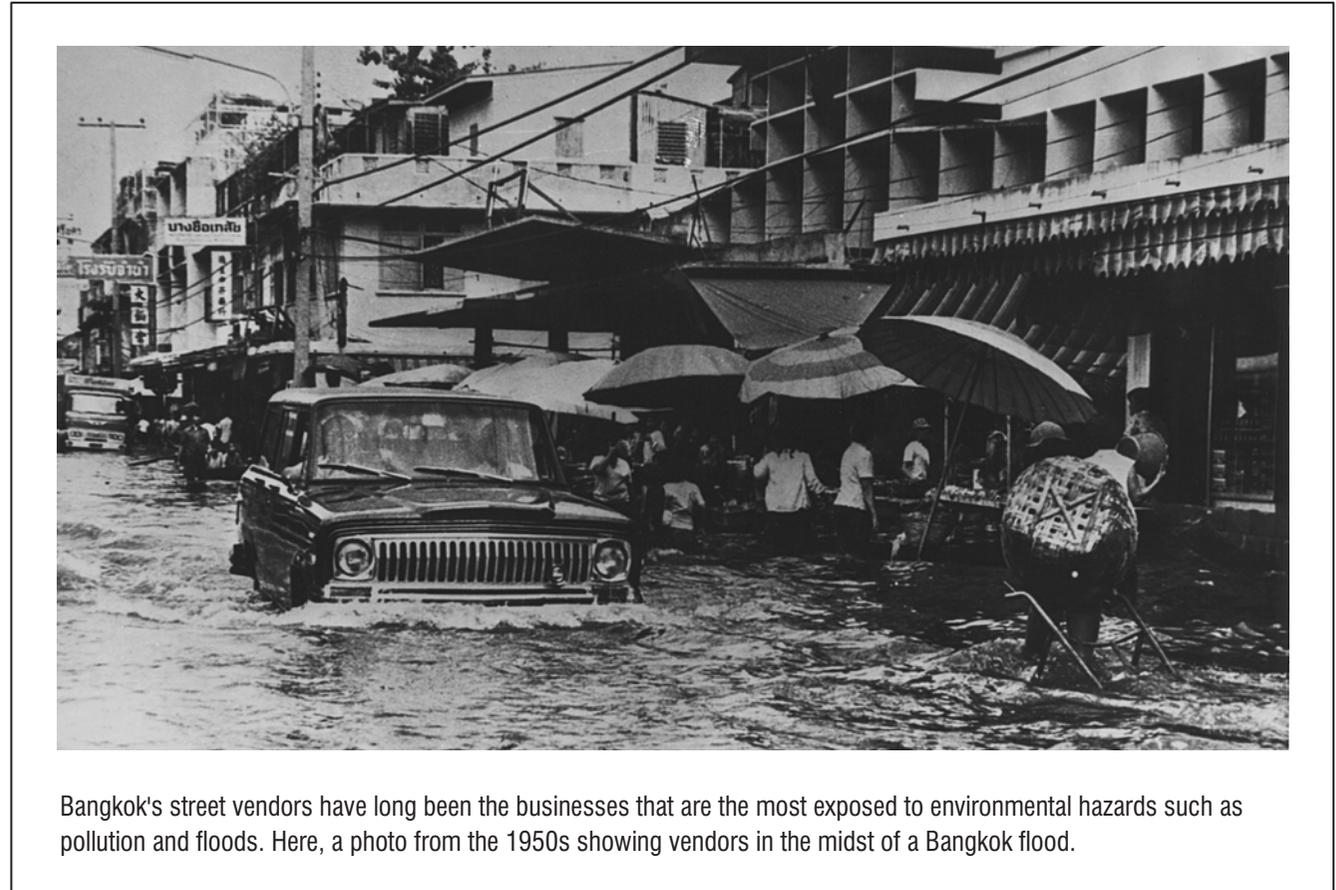
1973 to 1981: Transition Period – from Prohibition to Regulation

The first BMA governor took office in 1973. The attempt to restore cleanliness and orderliness to Bangkok pavements started the same year. Although the BMA allowed vending in some areas, in other parts of the city, vendors were forced to move out of the streets into regulated markets, only to return later to the streets. In 1976, the BMA enacted two ordinances on the regulation of mobile and fixed vending. There was continuous strict monitoring in the problematic areas where vendors were over-crowded and obstructing the roads and sidewalks. The BMA was able to restore access to footpaths in some areas although there were occasional protests from vendors. In 1978, the BMA started a pilot project by coordinating with the police to set up a “City Police Unit” to monitor street vending. However, the economic recession in 1979 and 1982 compelled the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to support the return of street vending on footpaths (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration 1991).

1981-1992: Promotion of Petty-Enterprise, Self-Employment and Poverty Reduction

This period saw the return of strict monitoring. As in the past, there were exceptions, and vendors were allowed to sell in some areas. The BMA even allocated 164 selling areas in 1984, which were later revoked as BMA was deemed to have no authority on legal grounds to permit selling on footpaths. The “City Police Unit” was transformed into the City Law Enforcement Department (*Tesakit*) in 1986 and monitored street vending as one of its responsibilities.

This period also saw a shift in policy due to a change in leadership. From 1985 to 1992, the BMA compromised



with vendors on three conditions: cleanliness, safety and orderliness. Public space and pavements were classified into areas “strictly prohibiting” and “generally prohibiting” vending. In this period, vendors were asked to stop selling on Wednesdays to clean the selling areas. Major General Chamlong Srimuang (BMA Governor from 1985-1989 and 1989-1992) promulgated a policy that focused on convenient and safe co-existence between pedestrians, vehicular traffic and street vendors. The BMA also designated “special areas” where measures to monitor safety, cleanliness and orderliness were enforced. Vendors in 23,594 stalls were allowed to sell in these areas.

The 5th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986) regarded “petty enterprise” as a means to reduce poverty. In the following 6th Plan (1987-1991), there were various policies to promote petty enterprise. The Thai government’s attempt to encourage self-employment was first outlined in this Plan – the first time since the inception of the National Development Plans. Measures such as skills training, social protection and access to capital were introduced and implemented by the Department of Public Welfare, and the National Housing Authority.

Tipping Point: 1992 to 2004 – Boom and Bust

In the early 1990s, street vending was depicted as a “threat” to orderliness; “Bangkok as a city must be systemic, orderly, and livable”, said the BMA (1991: 47). As street vending was perceived to represent “underdevelopment”, the BMA aimed to reduce the number of street vendors from 1992 to 1996 before shifting to limit the increase of street vendors and officially prohibiting the preparation of food on the streets in the period from 1997 to 2001. Despite the direction set out in the Plan, however, street vending policies in Bangkok were dependent on the incumbent governor’s predilection (Tungkasamit 1995). The period saw the increase of street vendors though restrictions, with some leniency, were enforced. There were complaints of “special fees” collection by some city law enforcers:

In 2005, there were many cases of extortion by powerful gangsters for protection or permission fees from vendors. The Prime Minister took serious note of this problem, and in response, the BMA governor formed a committee to address the issue of extortion. The committee declared a policy to decrease the number of street vendors by 10 percent each year. BMA also prohibited any building owners from renting out space in front of buildings. With this, street vendors were no longer able to sell in prohibited areas, and these vendors were asked to contact the district offices that would designate alternative spaces to sell.

(Kusakabe 2006:15)

The early 1990s were a time of tremendous economic growth in Thailand with GDP in the double digits. There was a flourishing of vending in public spaces as a result of consumer demand and high levels of disposable income of Thai consumers. However, by 1997, the bubble had burst, and the economy tumbled. Ironically,

vending also came to the fore as those people without jobs, including former stockbrokers and other middle-class individuals, turned to the streets and other public spaces to eke out a living (Yasmeen 2001a).

In this period, two important bills concerning street vending were also enacted. The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E. 2535 (1992) authorized the BMA, with the approval of the Traffic Police Division, to designate public spaces for street vending. Figure 5 depicts a sign indicating one of these designated areas. The Traffic Police Division, which is under the Metropolitan Police Bureau, is in charge of the streets for vehicular traffic while the BMA looks after the sidewalks. The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E. 2535 (1992) authorized the BMA to designate areas prohibited from vending. Vending near bus stops and on pavements narrower than two metres was prohibited. From 1996 to 2000, measures on food sanitation were highly promulgated. From 2000 to 2004, the policy on cleaning days changed, and vendors were subsequently allowed to sell on Wednesdays.

The 4th BMA Plan (1992-1996) highlighted problems of disorderliness and thus aimed to reduce the number of street vendors in all districts. Nevertheless, measures regarding poverty alleviation in the same Plan focused on petty enterprise as a solution. The 5th BMA Plan (1997-2001) prohibited the increase of designated areas for vending.

At the national level, in the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996), petty traders were listed as one of the six groups of poorest people that the government singled out for special attention. However, research indicated that despite the government’s efforts to encourage the improvement of livelihoods of the less privileged through petty enterprise, its programs and initiatives were inaccessible to many people due to difficulty for applicants to meet the criteria. The 8th National



Figure 5: A sign indicating a public space designated for street vending, as ratified by The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E. 2535 (1992) authorized the BMA, with the approval of the Traffic Police Division.

Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) focused on economic security at the household level.

Petty enterprise was used to respond to the economic downturn in 1997. The government provided grants amounting to 4,000 baht to the less privileged, which were to be used as seed money. In addition, funds were earmarked from the World Bank and Miyazawa loans under the Social Investment Fund to support petty enterprises through occupational groups and savings groups in the community.

The number of fines and arrests of vendors who violated the Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E. 2535 (1992) in this period is depicted in table 2. Article 20 of the Act prohibited preparation of food on the street and selling in non-designated areas.

During this period, vendors in some areas started to organize into self-help groups, which tried to solve the problems of access to selling spaces. An example is the vendors in the Saphan Soong area, who were evicted from the premises formerly rented to them by the National Housing Authority (NHA) in 1997 due to complaints lodged by the businesses in the areas.

Turn of the Century: New Policies and Approaches

The period after 2000 saw a clear paradigm shift in employment policy. Petty trade, which had been regarded as a “means to reduce poverty” since the 5th Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986), was “repositioned” as “a means for economic self-reliance” in the 9th Plan (2002-2006). Policies to promote self-employment were clearly stated. Policies to promote community and small enterprise were clearly outlined in the BMA Plans and

National Economic and Social Development Plans. The purposes were to create income-generating activities for self-reliance and to expand the micro-level ventures into small and medium scale ventures. Policy measures included skills training and credit provision.

An explicit policy to “limit” the number of street vendors was no longer in the BMA Plan though the BMA still focused on the city’s “clean environment and orderliness.” In 2002, the Regulation of Bangkok Metropolis on Selling in Public Spaces B.E.2545 (2002) was enacted. It provided guidelines for food vendors, who were required to have municipal authorization to sell. The regulation also stipulated guidelines for food sellers such as dress code, personal hygiene, and care for cooking utensils. Regulations for mobile and fixed vendors were slightly different. However, the law was not strictly enforced.

Under the newly enacted law of 2002, Governor Samak Suntaravej (2000-2004) proposed a measure that accommodated street vending in which vendors were required to pay cleaning fees. The Governor also introduced a mobile dishwasher for vendors in Chinatown.

The establishment of the People’s Bank Project under the supervision of the Government Savings Bank was a significant step in support of petty enterprises. Put into effect on 25 June 2001, the Project offers a monthly interest rate of one per cent for an initial loan of 15,000 baht. The term of first loan was 13 months. The credit limit was increased to 50,000 baht in 2002, and the repayment period was extended to 37 months.

This period also saw the implementation of an important social protection measure, the Universal Coverage Scheme (2002). Workers in the informal sector, including street vendors, who were not previously covered by any health care scheme, became entitled to the universal health care coverage. The scheme was the result of a

BOX 1:

Policy and Procedure Regarding Street Vendors

- Vendors can sell at spots arranged by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) everyday without having to pay any fees, but for cleaning service of the footpath on which they put their stalls, as provided by the BMA Municipal Statute on Fees B.E. 2543 (2000).
- Should any vendors be required to pay fees besides the cleaning service, they should notify the Governor, or the Office of Municipality, or the BMA’s complaint centre.
- All vendors must strictly observe regulations issued by the BMA, cleaning and putting away stalls after selling.

The BMA procedures to regulate vendors include: 1) survey and regulate the vendors, only those who have been practicing this trade are allowed to continue their occupation; 2) colour spray is used to draw the lines for specified areas, each of which is well numbered; 3) create identity cards for vendors, or ask from other vendors, to establish if a particular vendor always comes to use the vendor space; put up signs that specify durations of street vending.

The BMA started to enforce the BMA regulation regarding the collection of fee for cleaning footpath used by street vendors. Officers from the Department of Sanitation and Environment of each district were assigned to collect the cleaning fee. Every 15 days, the fee is collected for 150 baht per one square metre per month with a receipt given to vendor (Daily News Online 2001).

Source: Lazo 2006

number of factors, one of which was strong civil society mobilization (Nirathron 2013).

2003 saw the introduction of a more accommodating measure when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra introduced an “assets-capitalization” measure. Street vendors could use permits for use of public spaces as collateral to take loans from government banks.

Studies confirmed that street vendors benefited from the People’s Bank project (Chokemoh et al. 2006). The UCS also improved workers’ access to necessary health services (Evans et al. 2012). The assets-capitalization measure was implemented, for example, in Chonburi province, where the Government Savings Bank approved loans to 380 vendors (<http://www.manager.co.th/Local/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9490000057065>)

Despite the more accommodating policy, there were arrests of vendors who violated Article 20 of the Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992).

2004 Onward: Credit, Social Protection and Collective Action

From 2004 to 2008 and from 2009 to the present, the two governors of Bangkok were from the Democrat Party. Policies on street vending have accommodated the integration between the monitoring of orderliness, cleanliness and the city environment as well as poverty alleviation. Monitoring of street vending still observes the two important bills, which were passed in 1992.

There have been both positive and negative developments associated with attempts to “balance” the policies regarding the environment of the city and poverty alleviation. On the positive side, cleaning fees were reduced from 150 to 100 baht per square metre.



Figure 6: Illegal vending is characterized by designs that are easily and quickly packed and put away. This type of street vending is called *bair ga din* in Thai. *Bair* means “to spread,” *ga* is the colloquial form for “and”, and *din* means “ground”.

Cleaning days were reduced to two days per month. Furthermore, the number of areas officially designated for vending increased from 494 in 2004 to 667 in 2008.

An interesting development on the monitoring of street vending took place in 2011. The BMA started a campaign known as “Street Vending: Charms of the City.” Initially, five pilot projects were launched in five areas that were well known for their commodities. Orderliness was the key of the campaign. In some areas, such as Ratchaprasong, which is a shopping district, business enterprises also collaborated. In 2012, the BMA and the Metropolitan Police Bureau came to accept that street vending would not disappear from Bangkok and that orderliness was essential for the co-

existence of street vending and the public. City Law Enforcement officers (*Tesakit*) were instructed to strictly enforce the laws in problematic areas. This resulted in a series of protests. There continued to be arrests of vendors who violated Article 20 of the Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E.2535 (1992). The number of fines and arrests depicted in table 2 are testimony of the strong presence of street vendors. Nevertheless, according to the City Law Enforcement officers, many vendors who sell in the non-designated areas are able to continue to sell due to their connection with local politicians and influential persons in the areas. The proportional representation or the party-list system of election also influences the policy on vendors because it helps elect to office representatives that are sympathetic to the vendors’ cause. As a result of the campaign, as of December 2013, designated trading areas had increased to some 726. Box 1 describes how these spaces are officially accessed and managed.

The Soi Convent case study reports of the use of the same procedures as those outlined in box 1 and also provides examples of illegal vending characterized by designs that are easily and quickly packed and put away (figure 6).

This type of street vending is called bair ga din in Thai. (Bair means “to spread,” ga is the colloquial form for “and”, and din means “ground,” hence, bair ga din are stalls with products displayed on the ground.) This kind of vending is the least permanent and is often carried out by those who have not gained permission to trade on the street. The temporality of their stalls, therefore, besides serving for the ease of mobility, also serves for the quick evasion from city officers as they quickly wrap their goods in their cloth or plastic sheet.

(Sernsukskul and Suksakulchai 2011).

At the national level, the People's Bank Project increased its credit limit to 100,000 baht and 200,000 baht in 2009 and 2011 respectively. The repayment period was subsequently extended to 60 months and 96 months. The number of borrowers in the BMA increased from 64,569 persons in 2009 to 78,335 persons in 2013. This period also saw the implementation of social protection schemes such as the non-contributory allowance for the elderly (2009) and the social insurance scheme (2011). Like the Universal Coverage Scheme, the social insurance scheme was the result of continuous campaigns to establish social protection to protect workers from insecurity. However, the small number of insured persons in the social insurance scheme has been a cause for concern as it signifies the small number of persons who are insured against contingencies (Nirathron 2013).

The recent period has also witnessed the increase of middle-class Thai street vendors and migrant vendors. Figure 7, taken on Silom Road, depicts the contrast as it expresses itself in the urban landscape. As remarked on by the officers from the City Law Enforcement Department, Bangkok streets have also become “spheres of economic opportunity” for middle-class people and for poor migrants from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and even China. The situation is seen as threatening to Thai vendors regardless of their economic status.

In other places, such as Nong Chok, vendors have formed a self-help group that works on community welfare. Vendors in Saphan Soong were also able to start a savings group in 2006. The savings group registered as a cooperative in the same year in order to obtain the legal status necessary to sign a contract with the NHA to operate a market. However, there continues to be conflict between the vendors and the NHA.

Conclusion: Lessons for Other Contexts and for Bangkok

Compared to street vending in other cities, Bangkok's experience might be seen as rather exemplary – one that marries culture, creativity, cleanliness and entrepreneurialism with selling modes of every possible type and location and the offering of a great variety of goods and

services. However, as the preceding illustration of historical and policy development has shown, these gains have been hard won and have involved negotiating with local authorities, disconnects between policy and implementation, and competing views on the function and value-added of street vending in a growing yet fragile urban context. The exact role that vendors themselves have played overall in developing this policy – as opposed the local and national policymakers – is unclear and may require further research. Evidence in this brief points to the key role that the BMA Governor

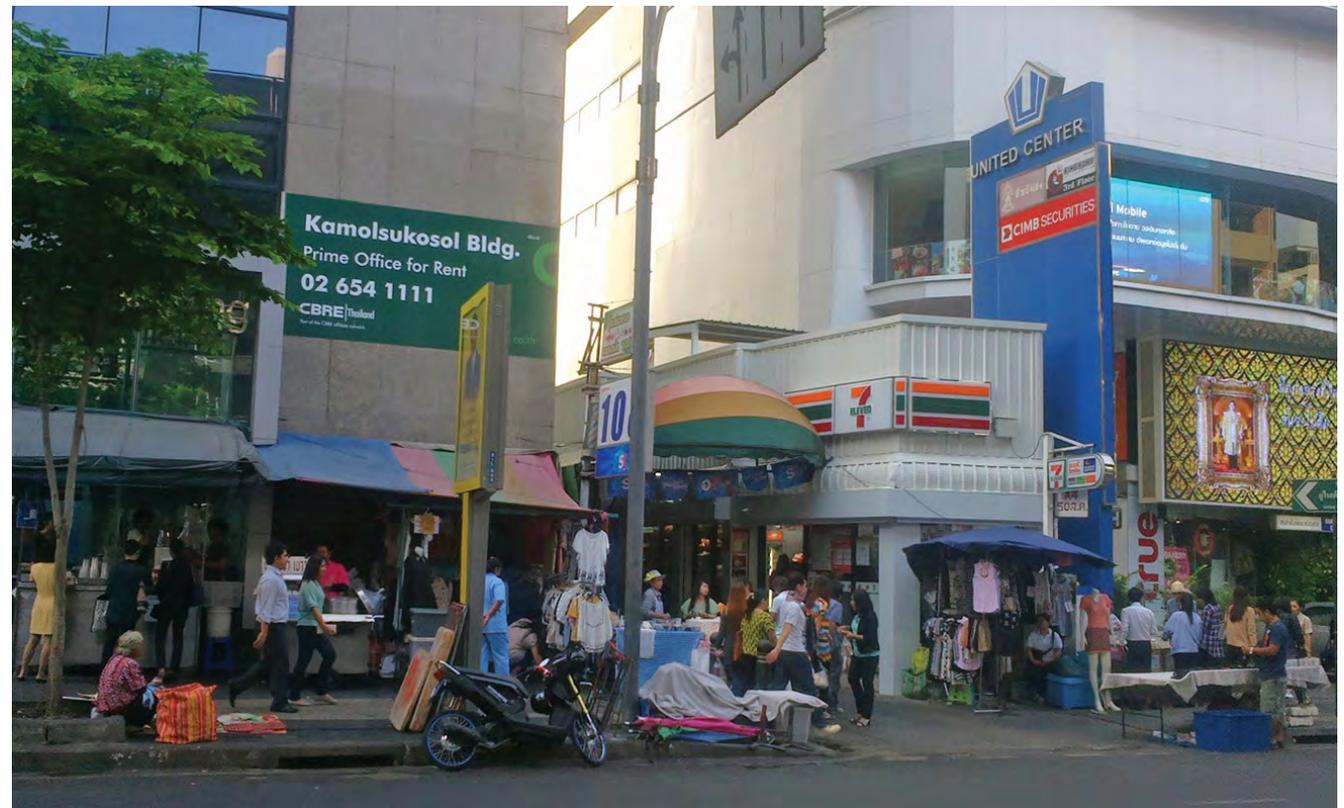


Figure 7: Here, a photo of Silom road which illustrates the contrast between a modern cityscape and traditional streetvending coexisting side by side.

has typically played in setting both policy and practice regarding street vending.

It would be inaccurate to depict street vending as exclusively the purview of the urban poor. Middle class vendors have clearly made their mark in Bangkok over the decades, particularly in recent years. In addition, vendors from neighboring countries are becoming part of the scene. This may well call for a different regulatory approach going forward that touches on sensitive issues like taxation, sanitation, hygiene and environmental issues. In terms of collective action, Thai vendors' organizations themselves may consider looking to the strategies used by their comrades in other countries to guide their collective action (Lazo 2006, various WIEGO publications). For example, even relatively poor vendors in the Philippines have registered with the securities and exchange commission and run for public office in order to advance their own cause (Yasmeen 2001b). This formalization of vendor operations might also assist local authorities to more effectively and appropriately regulate such activities in the public interest.

Furthermore, like in some Indian cities, there has finally been state recognition of "natural markets" in various urban locations. This has involved some violence though likely less frequently and intensely than in other parts of the world. Thai culture – which combines respect for authority, compassion for the underprivileged, and love of convenience – is also very open, accommodating and less restrictive than neighboring regions as evidenced by the Thai dictum *mai pen rai*, loosely translated as "never mind". However, the culture is also traditionally respectful of authority, which may have resulted in less collective action than in other contexts though this may well be changing. The recent political uprisings are rather unusual historically but may represent the strength and growth of strong civic movements and perhaps even a profound sea change in the nature of the Thai politi-

cal system. Furthermore, particularly with respect to the involvement of women in commerce in public places, the gender aspect has influenced the nature and extent of goods and services sold on the street such as food, jewelry, and clothing. However, such social mores are deep-seated and not easily transferable to other contexts.

The recent growth in collective action in Bangkok might be seen as an opportunity for further development that builds from the uniqueness and the changing landscape to assure that street vending remains an opportunity for a variety of individuals, particularly the poor, as an incubator for new entrepreneurs in an inclusive city.

Bangkok and the Vision of an Inclusive City

The historical development of how the BMA has dealt with the issues of street vending is a testimony of the municipal administration's understanding of street vending's economic importance and of a certain regard for its cultural aspect even if this is rarely explicitly mentioned in the policies. The increase of designated areas for vending in the past 15 years has shown that the BMA has been aware of how public space is important to the economic security of the people and to the changes in employment paradigms.

There are eight conclusions that might be drawn and factor into planning and implementation going forward and that might also be useful for other contexts:

- 1. Explicitly recognizing the culture and history and importance of vending as central to the vibrancy of the urban environment.** The case of Bangkok points to the creativity and potential for small-scale commercial activity.
- 2. Replicating some of the Thai schemes for credit and social protection.** While the impact of these relatively new policies on vendors is not yet fully known, the progressive nature of these measures is relatively unusual in other contexts.
- 3. Replication and enforcement of progressive laws and regulations, in particular those pertaining to the licensing and location of vendors and sanitation measures.** This is to foster, given growing tension, the long-term co-existence between street vendors, local authorities and pedestrians.
- 4. Challenges associated with growing disparities should be taken into consideration.** Poor vendors should be empowered in order to strengthen their competitive advantage. This will enable them to compete with middle-class vendors who are equipped with greater knowledge and capital.
- 5. Support for vendors who have the potential to expand their business.** This will not only address the potential of some vendors, but also show responsiveness to the changing employment paradigm and the strengthening of the grass-roots economy as indicated in the national policy.
- 6. Address the growing presence of illegal migrants.** The presence of undocumented migrant vendors is a growing phenomenon. This issue will need to be addressed in an enlightened and progressive manner.
- 7. Acknowledge and involve grass-roots organizations.** Given their growing presence in the urban environment, the ability of vendors to organize to advocate for the rights of vendors is something to be further studied, monitored and encouraged going forward. Grass-roots organizations should be

particularly involved in the policy-making and site-allocation process.

8. **Rights and responsibilities of vendors.** Being part of inclusive city also means that street vendors not only advocate for their rights but also are ready to participate and contribute as citizens through adherence to existing policies and procedures.

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