



## Open Letter

Respectfully Inform: Prime Minister, Mr. Prayut Chan Ocha

Copy inform:

Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister, General Prawit Wongsuwan

Deputy Prime Minister on Economic Ministers, Mr. Somkid Jatusripitak

Minister of Tourism and Sports, Mr. Weerasak Kowsurat

Ministry of Commerce, Mr. Sonthirat Sonthijirawong

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration made the destructive policy, "Returning the Footpath to the People" (2014 to present), for the following given reasons: street vendors cause traffic jams, block the sidewalks, cause dirtiness, provide unhygienic street food, and because of the municipality's desire to improve the city's landscape. The cancellation of 451 designated vending areas has commenced, and plans to cancel the remaining 232 designated vending areas are in process. The most recent area to ban vending was Khao San Road, one of the iconic markets (Khaosan Road and Yaowarat) which the Government had previously declared it would spare for tourism.

The Municipality of Bangkok has provided a list of available markets for relocated street vendors, but because of the expensive rent which vendors cannot afford to pay, and because most of the alternative markets have no foot traffic and no customers, vendors have not been able to trade in those areas, resulting in economic losses. This is the most devastating policy that has been announced; the majority of vendors have been vending for decades and sudden cancellation has led to job loss, lack of income or declining income, and the inability to pay loans or installments — including loans from government projects. Many have to rely on

savings. Moreover, it also affects the vendors' families: students have been withdrawn from school and family members are scattered.<sup>1</sup> Many people suffered from stress which affected their health, mental health, and some have died.

It is estimated that there were more than 240,000 street vendors in Bangkok. The research of Assoc. Prof. Narumon Niratorn of Thammasat University in 2016 found that the sales from hawker stalls in Bangkok were about 1,000-3,00 baht (approximately 30 – 90 USD) per day. Calculated at a sales volume of 1,000 baht a day for 22 days a month, one year's turnover in the street vending sector is worth no less than 60 billion baht (approximately 1.96 Billion USD) a year. Once the policy on banning street vending has been enforced, more than 200,000 traders will lose their livelihoods as unemployed workers, struggling to survive.

Street vendors provide services for most office workers, government employees, and students, as well as for the working poor. A 2016 survey of Bangkok consumers found that 87 per cent purchase from street vendors and 65 per cent purchased three times or more per week. Sixty per cent of consumers who purchase every day from vendors earn less than 9,000 baht per month. Research shows that white-collar workers also rely on the convenience of street vendors, in part because of their long commutes and work hours.

One study projected consumers could spend 357 baht more per month on prepared meals, since street food meals are 16.5 per cent cheaper than food courts, shop houses, or small restaurants.

Global research demonstrates that vendors play an important role in neighbourhood economies. In many of Bangkok's neighbourhoods (Ramkhamhang, Talat Saphan Song, Bang Khun Tian, Huay Kwang), vendors were the first businesses to arrive. They created a safe, commercial environment where more formal enterprises could develop and thrive. Far from competing with formal businesses, they attract customers to come shop in the area.

The recent evictions in Bangkok have also had a negative impact on local business. In Ramkamhaeng Market, store proprietors report that the number of customers has dropped severely since the eviction of vendors in 2017. They estimate that sales volume has declined by

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<sup>1</sup> Some vendors have had to withdraw their children from school in Bangkok and send them to live with grandparents outside of the city. Some have moved their vending locations or taken on other work in places far from their home and family

50-80 per cent, and that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of shops in the areas have closed. Most shops have reduced their opening hours, and one store owner reported that he was forced to terminate four employees. Business owners around Sukhumvit Soi 11 likewise complain that the number of visitors has plummeted since the disappearance of the Sukhumvit Night Market. Rows of shops along Soi 11 have closed or relocated; one local business owner reports that many shops have already shut down. Thirty businesses have signed a petition to the District Office asking that vendors be permitted to return. At the former site of Pak Klong Flower Market, store owners report that their business has declined by 70 per cent as a result of the vendor evictions in 2016.

In these areas, shop owners felt that they were living hand-to-mouth, hoping that the vendors would come back to attract the customers again. As one business owner described, *“Before I thought that this was the problem of the street vendors. But now I know that the street vendors’ problem is my problem too.”*

Furthermore, this anti-street vending policy has had an effect on consumers and tourists, who relied on food and service from street vendors, including food processing groups and product distribution all over the country. It can be said that this policy has resulted in the reduction of funds circulating in the grassroots economy.

Recently Singapore's bid to get UN recognition for its street food has sparked a cross-border culinary clash; citizens of Malaysia have long promoted their own street food as well — which shares many similarities with Singapore's. While Thailand, is internationally recognized as number one in the Street Food industry, the city is creating its own tragedy by banning its famous street food stalls.

*“The Network of Thai Vendors for Sustainable Development”* was formed in 2017. It has 7,500 street food vendor members from 25 districts in Bangkok. The Network’s objective is to provide support and solidarity to vendors and to protect their rights by filing complaints to the Office of the Prime Minister (PMO), the Bangkok Metropolis Administration office, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Damrongdhama Center, the Member of the Bangkok Council, the Member of the National Legislative Assembly, and the Administrative Court. Despite that, the vendors’ problems have not been resolved. Many concerned parties understand that this problem is not a legal issue but rather the product of a government policy that excludes the grassroots economy.

The street vendor network is aware that Prime Minister Prayut Chan Ocha pays significant attention to the development of the country's economy, taking poverty alleviation into account and reduction of social inequality. The network would therefore like to ask the Prime Minister to help the vendors of the Bangkok metropolis as a matter of urgency.

- **Short-Term demand:** that the Government and BMA review their policy and return the street vendors to their previous locations in all designated vending areas within seven days. The vendors would then be able to earn a living during the period until a new law on street vending can be enforced.
- **Mid-Term demand:** That recognition be given for the rights of vendors to earn their livelihoods and to participate in decision-making related to management of public space and vending by establishing a stakeholder committee, comprised of representatives of the Network of Thai Vendors, BMA (city law department), customer network, academics, and other organizations. The Committee will oversee development of a street vending strategy for Bangkok that does not evict street vendors but, for instance, addresses cleanliness, stall regulation, vendor regulations, and proper tax payment.
- **Long-Term demand:** That the Government and the Bangkok office enact Legislation on Street Vending in order to organize the vendors in the long run, and to prevent a change of policy which would affect the livelihoods of honest people.

Yours Respectfully

Rewat Chobtham

President of The Network of Thai Street Vendors for Sustainable development

September 4, 2018