

# 'Peasants in the cities' play a useful role

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In many cities in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in the Third World, a significant proportion of the demand for goods and services is met not by shops and supermarkets, but by hawkers and vendors — the often colourful street traders who are a familiar sight in most major cities.

In situations where urban unemployment and underemployment are a social problem and the tide of rural-urban inflow continues unabated, hawking and vending often provide viable occupations for many less skilled and educated people. They are also effective as final distributors of certain commodities, notably vegetables and unprocessed foods.

There is another side to this story, however. Many see the hawkers and vendors as a problem group, obstructing both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, creating unhygienic conditions, and posing unfair competition to legitimate merchants in shops and other businesses.

Both viewpoints obviously contain some truth, but they tend to be based on opinion rather than fact. For in spite of their historical and contemporary importance, little was known until recently about hawkers and vendors, the nature and role of their activities, even their numbers.

In an attempt to better understand the hawker and vendor phenomenon in Southeast Asia, the IDRC supported a multi-country comparative study focusing on six cities in three countries. These were: Jakarta and Bandung in Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca in Malaysia, and Manila and Baguio in the Philippines. The study also expanded on data and experience gained in earlier researches in Singapore and Hong Kong, some of which was contributed by the coordinator of the Centre-supported study, T.G. McGee.

The study was aimed primarily at understanding the role of hawkers in the marketing system in each of the cities. It entailed both an enumeration of the total numbers and types of hawkers in each city, as well as detailed studies of a cross-section of individual hawkers and vendors.

It was estimated that the total number of hawkers ranged widely, from a low of 765 in Baguio, to a high of 50,000 in Jakarta. This wide range reflects in part the very large differences in the size of population of the cities under study. It is accounted for, too, by the varying roles hawkers play in each urban distribution system.

The figures are only estimates — the enumeration in Jakarta, for instance, was based mainly on areas of hawker concentration, leaving most of the small groups and itinerant hawkers unaccounted for. But the data collected in these surveys, together with similar survey findings in Hong Kong and Singapore, do shed considerable light on the hawker situation in these cities.

The findings on the hawkers' personal characteristics strengthen the view that hawking is a "refuge" occupation. Most hawkers have received up to six years of education, and are predominantly male, with the exception of the Philippine cities, where the majority of hawkers are women.

One of the stereotypes of hawking is that it provides an entry into city life for rural in-migrants, who often arrive in the cities lacking in education, special skills, and capital. Hawking and vending provide them with a living, it was said. Surprisingly, only Jakarta really fits this stereotype, according to the study. In all the other cities surveyed, a large proportion of the hawker population consists of native-born city residents who have been hawking for many years.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, where internal migration is much more controlled, the hawker community is well entrenched. Almost 61 percent of Hong Kong hawkers, for example, have been in business for over 10 years. Most had never worked at any other job. A large number of those interviewed indicated that they had taken to hawking for negative reasons (such as lack of other job opportunities). But a significant proportion cited positive reasons, and some successful Singapore hawkers even said they would encourage their children to continue the family business.

Hawkers operate in different fashions, and sell a variety of goods and services. Some move from place to place to sell their wares and services. Others operate from fixed locations. The survey findings indicate that the majority of hawkers fall into the static or semi-static categories, selling a wide range of goods from processed and prepared food to non-food items. Many have a regular clientele.

Most of the hawker units (80 to 90 percent) are individually or family owned. Family and kinship bonds are fully utilized in the economic operation of these businesses, so that regular paid assistants are seldom employed. The hawkers may or may not pay a licence fee to the city government. The daily incomes of most hawkers are small, with two-thirds falling in the marginal and



Photo: D. van Praagh

sub-marginal categories. They usually work long and irregular hours.

The value of an individual hawker's stock is generally low — a large stock requires capital, and there is also the risk of confiscation if he or she infringes upon the rules, or is unlicensed. Most of the goods sold are obtained within the city, and very few originate outside of the country.

Many of these features are typical of a pre-capitalistic peasant mode of operation. No wonder that hawkers have been referred to as "peasants in the cities". However, hawkers do perform a useful service in the urban community by keeping the cost of living down with their cheaper goods and services through lower overheads. The profession also provides gainful employment where job opportunities are limited, and offers a training ground for the development of entrepreneurial skills.

Generally speaking, hawkers and vendors are found at places of high population concentration, such as markets, cinemas and other public places. However, the surveys also revealed distinct ecological niches in the cities where the hawkers operate to cater to a consumer market not otherwise adequately served by the regular city distribution system. Hawkers enhance their viability by maintaining spatial and temporal mobility. The system of travelling night markets in Singapore attests to the hawkers' ability to identify gaps in consumer demands and respond to changes in market conditions over time. In the surveys, 40 to 50 percent of the hawkers lived within ten minutes' walk from work to reduce travel time and cost. The customers, most of whom are regular, are mainly from the immediate neighbourhood. These patterns of restricted trade area, neighbourhood clientele, and regular patronage likewise emerge strongly in Hong Kong and Singapore, where attempts to relocate hawker operations by a distance of a few

blocks have resulted in sharp declines or even failures in business. This negative effect of policy intervention is exemplified in the case of the raw food hawkers in Hong Kong who have articulated well to the neighbourhood daily needs on account of a poorly developed system of public markets in the urban area. Similarly, the resiting of the Wednesday Orchard Road night market in Singapore to the present Tanglin Road site less than a mile away has caused business to decline.

It should not be assumed from the above that the hawkers are a homogeneous section of the urban community; it must rather be emphasized that hawkers are in fact a highly heterogeneous group. Just as economic conditions in Southeast Asian countries vary widely, the hawker situation reflects and is inextricably tied to the stage of economic development of a country, and differs markedly in the countries under study. Although many stories portray hawkers as having made a fortune in their business, they constitute, by and large, a low-income stratum of the urban population. Government policies directed at hawkers would necessarily have to be different in each country and, in fact, in each city within a country.

Indeed, hawker policies pursued by the various city governments do diverge substantially, depending on developmental priorities and levels of economic growth. The recent experience of Hong Kong and Singapore is relevant here. In a condition of labour surplus in the immediate postwar years, both Hong Kong and Singapore saw a rapid increase in the number of hawkers. The official policy towards hawkers then was negative, but arrests, jail sentences, and stiff fines failed to provide a solution. Gradually, as economic progress was made the problem receded and the administrators adopted a correspondingly more positive attitude towards the hawkers by providing the space and environment for them

to operate.

This policy is being pursued slowly in Hong Kong, but the recent decision by Singapore to resite all hawkers in the Republic in permanent and sanitary hawker centres is the culmination of this policy. Both recently, however, experienced a labour shortage, and policies have been formulated to check the growth of the hawker sector in order to redirect available manpower to industries. Thus, in Hong Kong industrialists and their spokesmen have suggested policies designed to speed the entry of hawkers into the proletariat. Similarly, since 1969, able-bodied individuals below the age of 40 in Singapore have been prohibited from obtaining a licence for hawking.

Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia appears to have adopted a most positive and benign policy towards hawkers. Hawking or petty trading is seen by the Malaysian authorities as an avenue through which the *bumiputra* (indigenous population, i.e., Malays) can participate in the hitherto immigrant-dominated marketing sector. This policy is consistent with the objective of restructuring the Malaysian society by assisting the Malays economically, a major policy goal of the Second Malaysian Plan (1971-75). Consequently, institutions such as the Mara Institute of Technology offer courses in commerce which can be of use to petty traders, and loans on easy credit terms to hawkers.

In other surveyed cities, official attitudes towards hawkers generally tend to be negative. In Manila and Jakarta, for example, hawkers are constantly removed, though to no visible effect. Their useful services notwithstanding, the hawkers pose a great problem because of their large numbers, but with many more pressing issues that primate cities like Manila have to contend with, the hawker problem is relegated to low priority. However, a re-assessment of developmental priorities, which at present tend to favour the modern sector with more visible developmental returns, seems warranted. The need to develop the traditional sector appears to deserve more official attention than is presently given. □



Photo: Roberta Borg

Opposite: hawkers provide a cheap source of fresh vegetables for city dwellers. Above: street market in Kuala Lumpur — blessing or blight?

Y.M. Yeung is co-author with T.G. McGee of *Hawkers in Southeast Asia — Planning for the Bazaar Economy*, recently published by the IDRC. Details on p.23.