

CAIRO'S STREET VENDORS: A VITAL LINK

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN HOMER

Every morning Abou El Ezz Mahmoud wakes up at 5 a.m. and travels with his son by train from North Cairo to Zeitun market. He is a vendor of fruits and vegetables, one of more than 7700 vendors who sell everything from live chickens to plastic shoes in a multitude of squatter markets scattered throughout Cairo.

Abou El Ezz is the "sheikh" or leader of this market. He settles misunderstandings, organizes vendors, and deals with government inspectors. More than ever his work is cut out for him because Cairo's squatter markets—unauthorized markets set up on sites designated for other purposes—are under fire from urban authorities.

Recent changes in market legislation have resulted in city officials attempting to regulate and, in some cases, banish squatter markets. Market police complain that vendors with donkey carts compete with cars in the clogged streets. Health hazards are posed by unrefrigerated meats, lack of running water, and piles of garbage.

In response to increasing tension between city officials and vendors, the Social Research Centre of the American University in Cairo, with support from IDRC, undertook a two-year study of Cairo's squatter markets. The results showed that while squatter markets do contribute to the city's crowding and health problems they also provide essential food and services in a way that no established retail enterprise can.

The study also revealed that vendors and hawkers are not at the bottom of the economic ladder. Half of the peddlers earn from US\$1.65 to \$2.68 per day, which is more than the average income of university graduates in the public sector. Most consider vending a satisfying and stable occupation. Many have peddled goods for 10 to 20 years and more than half inherited the trade from their parents.

The study made it clear that in a city of 14 million people, with one of the highest population densities in the world, squatter markets and mobile hawkers will remain a vital link between producers and consumers. It urged that more detailed study be made of the city's squatter markets and that urban planners be sensitive to the needs of people like Abou El Ezz whose lives they are trying to order.

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