



Workers in the urban “informal” food sector: innovative organizing strategies

The important role of the “informal” food sector (IFS) for the food security of the urban poor is well-documented (Drakakis-Smith, 1990; Lam, 1982; McGee and Yeung, 1977). Existing literature has contributed valuable information on the nature, operation and food safety aspects of food microenterprises, particularly street foods (Tinker, 1987, 1997; Yasmeen, various years).¹ Our knowledge of this diverse sector indicates that selling both raw and prepared foodstuffs in public spaces and in home-based retailing environments is an important livelihood, often for women. From a consumer’s standpoint, the sector can and often does provide nutritious low-cost food to a variety of urban residents, particularly in the large cities in developing countries. Street food facilities – one of the most prevalent and visible examples of the IFS – can also enhance the quality of urban public space when they are properly managed so as to mitigate conflicts with pedestrian and vehicular traffic and reduce

incidences of food contamination and related food-borne illnesses.

Several challenges are conventionally identified to make the IFS more viable, including the need for proactive dialogue with municipal authorities, legal recognition of the sector and improvements in food hygiene (Argenti, 2000). Recently, the need for access to microfinancing and social protection of this sector has come to the fore (Carr, Chen and Jhabvala, 1996; Cohen, Bhatt and Horn, 2000; Lund, Nicholson and Skinner, 2000; Lund and Srinivas, 2000; Vildoso, 2000). This article will argue that securing access to urban space – a highly coveted commodity in rapidly growing cities – is a political issue that is best addressed when food microentrepreneurs are well organized among themselves. Other improvements to the IFS, such as hygiene, can also take place with investments in the social capital of food vendors resulting from more effective dissemination of information. Examples of IFS workers creating

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¹ Readers are encouraged to consult Volume 17/18 (1996) of this journal, devoted to street foods. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/W3699T00.htm.

membership-based organizations in South and Southeast Asia are profiled in this article. First, however, an overview will highlight the salient features of this sector of the urban food system.

Importance of the “informal” food sector²

The “informal” sale of raw and prepared foods is a distinguishing feature of most cities in developing countries. It is important, first, to define “informal sector” (IS) – particularly with respect to food distribution. The term “informal” is sometimes inaccurate and many argue that other terms are more appropriate (McGee, 1996). The debate about the utility of the

Courtesy of Lijjat Pappad Cooperative



Members of Lijjat Pappad Cooperative in Mumbai (India) weighing dough before distribution to members for rolling and sun drying

authorities are concerned, these enterprises – particularly street foods, as they are present in public space – are viewed as part of an ambiguous legal and regulatory sphere; this results in contradictory policies and practices

(McGee *et al.*, 2001). In most cities, in order to manage the sector effectively, particularly with respect to traffic and hygiene issues, a proactive dialogue needs to be established among those earning their livelihood in the

The selling of both raw and prepared foodstuffs in public spaces, as well as in home-based retailing environments, is an important source of livelihood, especially for women

term is beyond the scope of this article.³ It is, nevertheless, important to realize that the term “informal” can sometimes be misleading because many microentrepreneurs are, in fact, legally recognized in some way and are sometimes members of organizations such as trading associations, cooperatives and unions. For practical purposes, the informal sector ... encompasses largely unrecognized, unrecorded and unregulated small-scale activities. It includes small enterprises with hired workers, household enterprises using family labour and the self-employed. Production processes characteristically rely on high levels of working capital as against fixed capital. Formal contracts between employers and employees or between buyers and sellers are rare and the often-invisible activities involved usually fall below, or outside, the fiscal net (ILO, 2000a).

The above category includes microenterprises such as food hawkers, household-based businesses, for example pickle-making and home-based catering, as well as independent service food providers such as cooks. As far as the municipal

being directed towards them. The following four sections will summarize the economic, gender, political and social/cultural importance of the informal food sector.

Economic impact

In many cities in developing countries, a significant percentage of the population is engaged in informal employment. This can be as high as 45 percent, in the case of Calcutta, or 50 percent, in Jakarta (Harper, 1996: 99). Much of this informal business involves the sale, processing and distribution of food. Therefore, the IFS as an income-generating activity is an important livelihood for urbanites but often does not figure in a country’s national accounts or in its official economic development policies. In times of economic crisis, city dwellers tend to resort to the informal sector for both employment and the purchase of goods and services, as the recent Asian downturn has shown (Yasmeen, 2001). This true “free market” therefore serves as the safety net economy when more formal structures break down

IFS, the municipal authorities and other local stakeholders such as the police and general public.

Gender relations

Recognizing the significant contribution of the informal sector is of crucial importance for gender relations because women’s work is disproportionately located within this sphere compared to that of men. Much of women’s work is therefore invisible to policy-makers, who do not see the informal contribution in most official documentation. This explains why, for example, Philippine statistics indicate that, on average, fewer than 60 percent of adult

² This section is adapted from the author’s discussion paper prepared for the Regional Seminar on Feeding Asian Cities, held in Bangkok from 27 to 30 November 2000. The original discussion paper is available at www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/agricult/ags/AGSM/SADA/Asia/Index.htm.

³ Those interested in pursuing the debate on the informal sector are encouraged to consult a special issue of *Regional Development Dialogue* (17:1, 1996). Another good recent exposé on relevant informal sector debates is Radcliffe Public Policy Center (Harvard) and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, *Rethinking the informal economy: a dialogue between academics and activists, International perspectives on work and the economy*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2000.

women are “economically active” (ILO, 2000b). In fact, Philippine statistics tend to underreport women’s extensive involvement in informal employment in *sari-sari* stores (small, dry-goods shops selling food and other household items) and as food vendors (Etemadi, 1998: 4). Again, in times of economic crisis, men are drawn in greater

defined street food vending in particular as undesirable and have made this type of activity illegal in an attempt to eradicate the sector altogether. Fortunately, a more conciliatory approach has developed of late in recognition of the fact that it makes more sense to regulate and manage the sector than eliminate it. This more cooperative approach

in someone’s home) as opposed to the growing presence of “factory cooking”. Many urbanites value their street foods, home-based catering networks, neighbourhood markets, mobile vendors and home-made condiments that can be purchased easily in any large Third World city. An example of tourist interest in street foods is evidenced

The informal sector needs proactive dialogue with municipal authorities, legal recognition and improvements in food hygiene, access to credit and social protection

numbers into informal activities, sometimes altering traditional gender patterns within the sector. Data gaps related to the IFS in general often result in inappropriate municipal policies being formed.

Political considerations

Some IFS activities – particularly street foods – can be well organized and quite militant. Some vendors’ organizations define their political alliances in direct opposition to the municipal authorities whereas others have a more conciliatory approach, depending on the history of their relationship with local government. Traditionally, the municipal authorities have

often results in the elimination of bribery, protection rackets and other corrupt practices that can plague the IFS in urban areas, and in significant cost savings and improved services for vendors, and an increase in municipal revenue (S.M. Syed, Chief Executive, Karachi Municipal Corporation, 2000, personal communication).

Social and cultural issues

Wherever food is concerned, we are not only dealing with a topic of economic importance but also one that is of cultural and social significance. The informal food sector is a transactional sphere where one can obtain “home-cooked” food (and often it is cooked

by the publication of the colourful guide entitled *Thai Hawker Food* (Pranom, 1993). If it is properly managed, a healthy street food sector also improves street life because it helps to stimulate pedestrian traffic rather than automobile-oriented thoroughfares that are devoid of people.

Organizing the informal food sector

In this section, case studies of innovative organizing strategies involving the IFS in South and Southeast Asia are presented. Several well-known examples from India are profiled, followed by further examples from the Philippines and Thailand drawn from empirical research in Southeast Asia.

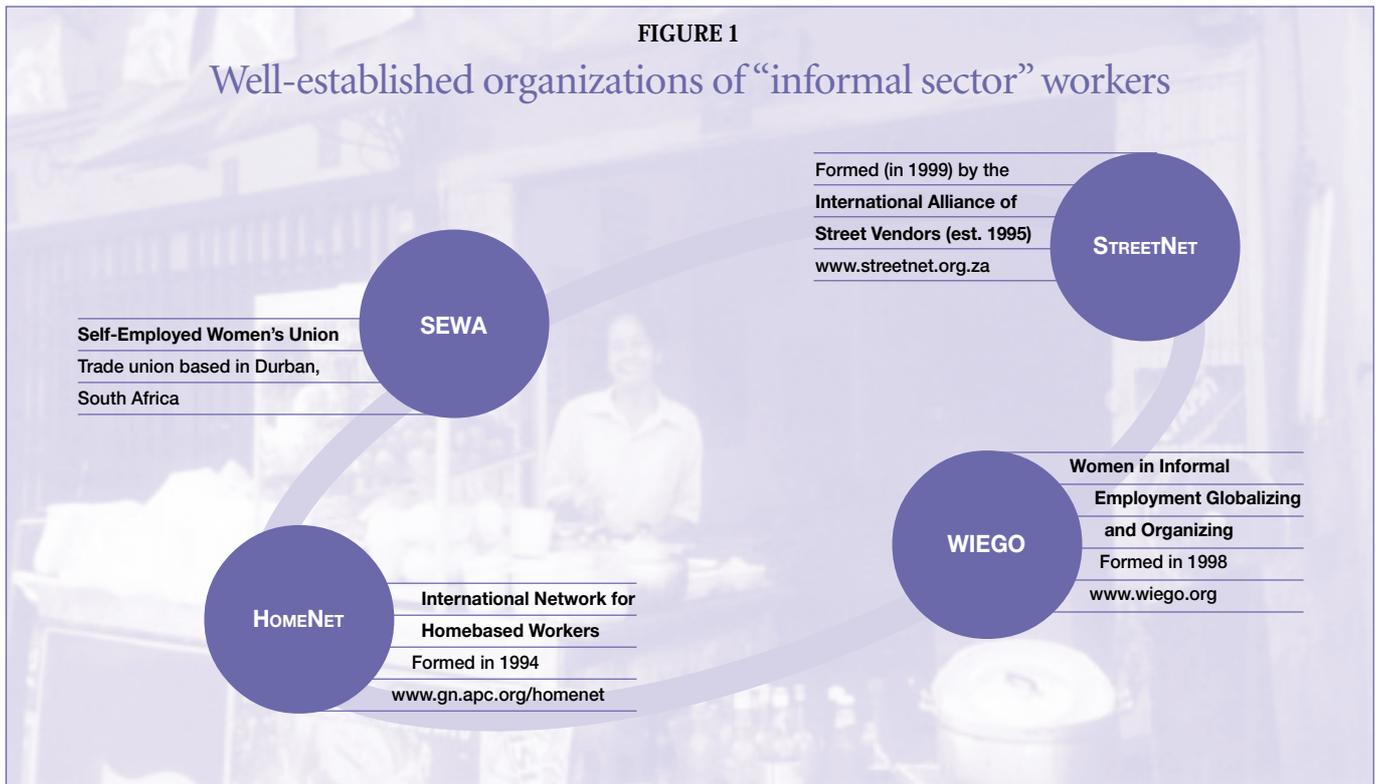
*Thai anthropologist
Kamonrat Sa-Ngeam buys
sweets from a vendor in the
Victory Monument Area,
Bangkok*



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FIGURE 1

Well-established organizations of “informal sector” workers



Documented examples

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad in India is perhaps the best-known example of a membership-based organization of informal sector microentrepreneurs and

legislative and judicial bodies has had an impact all over India. SEWA spurred the establishment of the National Alliance of Street Vendors in India (NASVI) in 1998, which lobbies for the rights and well-being of all street vendors in the country.

groups and their allies in civil society organizations, international agencies, and academic institutions (www.wiego.org).

The above organizations, including SEWA, are not exclusively concerned with microentrepreneurs in the food sector,

Women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, thus much of women's work is invisible to policy-makers

workers (see for example, Appell, 1996; Rose, 1992). SEWA modified the conventional concept of a trade union to include self-employed and contracted labourers, who are traditionally shunned by labour unions. The Association has an extensive Web site (www.sewa.org) and is well known internationally as a result of voluminous documentation published in India and abroad and the relentless networking of its founder, labour lawyer Ela Bhatt. SEWA is well-entrenched in its home state of Gujarat, where it comprises more than 200 000 members, but the organization's frequent lobbying of both state and national

A number of organizations outside the subcontinent have been either inspired or cofounded by SEWA (see Figure 1). These include:

- the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) in Durban, South Africa;
- StreetNet – an international alliance of street vendors (www.streetnet.org.za);
- HomeNet – an international alliance of home-based workers (www.gn.apc.org/homenet);
- “Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing” (WIEGO), a global research and policy-making network involving the aforementioned

although the preparation and sale of foodstuffs is one of the primary activities of their members. It is therefore useful to refer to food-centred organizations of microentrepreneurs that are not as well-known as SEWA and its offspring. One example might be advances in Indian dairying – which continues to take place in peri-urban areas and relies on the integration of traditional milk producers (mostly women with one or two cows) into cooperatives combined with modern chilling and distribution methods (Doornbos and Nair, 1990; Kurien, 1997). Another might be the example of the Lijjat

Pappad Cooperative (www.lijjat.com), based in Mumbai, where 40 000 women member-producers continue to hand roll their *pappad*⁴ but with vertical integration of all phases of production and collective ownership of marketing and distribution, both domestically and internationally.

The Cebu City United Vendors' Association

Vendors in Cebu City in the Philippines have formed associations – sometimes cooperatives – and federated to form Cebu City United Vendors' Association (CCUVA). CCUVA was founded in 1984 and now includes 63 member organizations (see Table 1). The umbrella association represents approximately 7 000 members. It is difficult to classify the member organizations according to goods sold as the groupings are based on geographical location with the exception of the ambulant vendors' associations. However, most associations within CCUVA are of vendors selling food and non-food items.

For several years, CCUVA has been engaging in dialogue with the City of Cebu. The association clearly has become a stakeholder to reckon with in Cebuano politics and even at the national level. CCUVA is clearly perceived by the media as a legitimate urban stakeholder with contributions to make regarding proposed legislation, electoral candidates and a host of other issues ranging from theft from stalls to electricity deregulation (Abellana, 2001; Cabotaje and Varquez, 2001). The Association also produced a documentary film in September 2000 entitled “Street Trader *Ako, May Dangal*” (I am a street trader, I have dignity), which was shown at a consultation with city councillors in an attempt to gain legal recognition of vendors in the city (P.Z. Sanchez, 2001, personal communication).

How associations are formed

Although more research is clearly needed, my own enquiries indicate that vendors'

associations are often formed in response to impending real estate development. In the case of the Fuente Osmeña Barbecue Vendors' Association, a local businessperson intended to redevelop the land occupied by the vendors to create a “barbecue palace”. This resulted in the food vendors banding together in an attempt to preserve their livelihood. While they achieved temporary success, recent communications from Cebu suggest that a clear ordinance is still required to allow the barbecue vendors to purchase the land on which their businesses are currently located (P.Z. Sanchez, 2001, personal communication).

Legal issues and challenges

CCUVA recognizes that vendors who are located outside the public market are clearly the most in need of organization as

they lack formal access to stalls from which to sell their goods and often obstruct pedestrian and vehicular traffic resulting in conflict with municipal officials. Their selling spaces are therefore classified as illegal and vendors are often asked to relocate or their stalls are simply demolished because they are seen as encroaching on public space. At the same time, however, many of the vendors occupying the footpaths pay a daily fee to the municipality, for which they are given a receipt. This practice, known as *arcabala* in Cebuano, renders ambiguous the status of sidewalk vendors as encroachers because it can be argued that they are tenants. In Cebu, the urban economy is sufficiently viable to sustain ongoing construction. Property has therefore become a very valuable commodity, and access to space is

TABLE 1

Affiliate organizations of CCUVA

Assorted Dried Fish Vendors' Association	Osmeña Boulevard Vendors' Sagangs Group
Assorted Vendors' Organization	Pelaez & P. Del Rosario Vendors' Association
Calderon Dollar Association	Pier Area Vendors' Association
Calderon Watch & Jewellery Repair & Gold Plating Association	B. Rodriquez Vendors' Association
Carcar Stall Owners' Association	Quezon Association
Cebu Association of Laborers, Inc.	Redemptorist Church Sidewalk Vendors' Association
Cebu Butchers' Association	Santo Niño Assorted Vendors' Assn.
Cebu City Muslim Traders' & Vendors' Association, Inc.	Santo Niño Sidewalk Vendors' Assn.
Carbon Integrated Fish & Chicken Association	Cebu Downtown Sidewalk Vendors' Association, Inc.
City Central School, Abellana & Cebu College of Arts & Trade Association	Sidewalk Vendors' Association Zone I
F. Escaño Vendors' Association	Sidewalk Vendors' Association Zone II
F. Gonsales Carton Vendors' Association	Sidewalk Vendors' Association Zone III
Fish & Meat Vendors' Association	Sidewalk Vendors' Association Zone IV
Freedom Park United Vendors' Association	Southern Island Medical Center Vendors' Association
Fuente Osmeña Barbecue Vendors' Association	SSS Sidewalk Vendors' Association
Guadalupe Livelihood Center, Inc.	Tabako Vendors' Association
Juan Luna Sharpers' Association	Tabo Sa Banay Vendors' Association – II
Laborers & Vendors' Association	Tabunok Sidewalk Vendors' Association
Landing Area Vendors' Organization	Tobacco Sidewalk Vendors' Association
Leon Kilat Ambulant Vendors' Association	United Ambulant Vendors' Association
Llorente Fruit Vendors' Association	United Calderon & Progreso Vendors' Association – A
Lower Salinas Vendors' Association	United Calderon & Progreso Vendors' Association – B
Mabolo Sidewalk Vendors' Association	United Vendors' Organization of Carbon Market
Mabolo United Vendors' Association	Uptown Vendors' Association
Magallanes Leon Kilat Vendors' Association	Vegetables Ambulant Vendors' Association
Mandaue United Sidewalk Vendors' Association	Visayan Electric Ambulant Vendors' Association
Muslim Traders Vendors Association	Warwick Barracks Sidewalk Vendors' Association
North Reclamation Sidewalk Vendors' Association	

Note: seven new associations have joined CCUVA since 1998 but their names have not yet been made available to the author.

Source: CCUVA documentation (unpublished).

A vendor sells Thai coffee from a traditional cart in the Victory Monument Area, Bangkok



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the predominant issue facing sidewalk vendors. Many of CCUVA's mobilization efforts are geared towards securing access to space by employing a strategy of forming associations that are valid under Philippine law. In conjunction with the national "Coalition for the recognition and empowerment of street traders" (CREST), an effort is being made to ensure that Executive Order 452 guaranteeing security of tenure of the workplaces for street traders, is upheld by all Philippine cities and local authorities.

CCUVA, and many of its constituent organizations, were registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) of the Philippines in 1996. Registration with the Commission is one of the first indicators of institutionalization and confers a legal status to the members of CCUVA. As Table 1 shows, many of the organizations affiliated to CCUVA are, like the federation itself, incorporated. The majority of the members of CCUVA's constituent associations are women, reflecting the fact that women dominate small-scale trade in the Philippines. Women members occupy a prominent leadership

position in the organization; 17 of the 34 members of the CCUVA's "Council of Presidents" (or Board of Directors) are women (F.C. "Imok" Rupinta, Chair, Cebu City United Vendors' Association, 1998, personal communication).

On 29 November 1998, CCUVA held its seventh convention and Election of Officers. This one-day event included special "messages of solidarity" conferred by the Mayor, as well as two city councillors and a representative of the President's staff. While this engagement with municipal authorities is encouraging, it is clear that many tensions remain between the objectives of the Cebu City municipal government and CCUVA regarding policies and procedures related to street vending. The City reached compromises with vendors over the use of public space as evidenced by the Mayor signing a covenant of cooperation with CCUVA in July 2000 (Campaña, 2001). The Cebu Regional Trial Court later dismissed the legal validity of this covenant and upheld City Ordinance 1186 which, despite not being consistently enforced, outlaws street vending. In addition to the lack of coordination and cooperation among municipal government

agencies, this awkward legal status results in the demolition of vendors' stalls (or threats to do so) even after compromises have been reached.

CCUVA members participate frequently and vociferously in "mobilizations" (i.e. demonstrations) with other community-based groups in the city. In recent years, the group has boosted its membership and refined its strategies to engage with, rather than simply confront, the municipal authorities and legal system in order to have its members recognized. In all, CCUVA could be considered a model for vendors in other Southeast Asian cities who are, for the most part, in need of organization at the grassroots level.

CCUVA's specific plans include:

- engaging in policy development and advocacy activities to support legislative and executive measure to address street vendors' problems;
- organizing, strengthening and coalition-building among street vendor organizations (including nationally);
- facilitating the access of street vendors to credit and social security services;
- developing support systems for child street vendors⁵ (Alolod, 1998: 8).

The extent to which CCUVA will work in conjunction with street vendor organizations internationally is as yet unclear.

The Victory Monument Area of Bangkok

Field research in the Victory Monument Area (VMA) of Bangkok has been conducted since 1992. The VMA is a central part of Bangkok known for its great number and variety of street food vending establishments. More than three-quarters of the food vendors in the city are women, many of them migrants from the impoverished northeast of Thailand (Angkarb, 2000; Yasmeen, 1992-2001).

⁵ Child labour associated with street food vending in Southeast Asia ranges from the mostly acceptable practice of schoolchildren helping in the family business in their spare time to the undesirable situation of children forced to labour long hours to contribute to the family income. CCUVA's position on child street vendors appears to be one that tries to support these most vulnerable agents in the urban food system.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's policy towards hawking

Since 1992, the policies of the local state towards street vending have changed. Hutabarat (1994: 3-6) documents the difficulties encountered by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) in the early 1990s with respect to attempts to regulate street foods. "Every time the authorities attempt to gain control of sidewalk peddling, they are forced to back off as a result of the outcry from vendors" (ibid., 3). Indeed, in 1993 Bangkok newspapers carried stories about the BMA and, later, the Ministry of the Interior "cracking down" on street vendors (*Bangkok Post*, 1993a, 1993b). Until 1994, when a new municipal policy was introduced, many of the food vendors who sold in the VMA openly explained how they bribed the municipal police on a regular basis for access to their current location. For example, vendors recounted how they paid the *tesakit* – a special branch of the municipal police dealing with traffic issues – 100 baht per month as "rent" (in cash, without a receipt) for the space for their stall. As part of the new policy in late 1994, certain areas of the street were designated as spaces for vending. Normally, the spaces where vending was permitted corresponded to areas where there were already vendors present, hence serving

to restrict the proliferation of stalls spatially. The changing policies of the BMA towards street-based hawking are referred to as *jut phon pan*, or "selling tolerated," which is written on signs demarcating the spaces where vending is permitted. Use of the "exempt" space is contingent upon the vendors having obtained identification cards from the district office, for which they need to provide proof of a clean bill of health. Sanitary inspectors also make regular visits to food stalls to take samples to check for food-borne illnesses and make recommendations on hygienic food preparation practices.

Jut phon pan areas continue to be identified by a pictogram of a shoulder pole with hanging baskets. This phrase translates roughly as a space where selling is *tolerated*, with the implication is that some restrictions apply. *Jut* translates as "point" but the meaning of *phon pan* is less clear. Haas (1964) translates it as "to ease the situation". Following years of tensions between vendors and the *tesakit*, the BMA designated parts of major streets as "vendor friendly" thereby easing tensions over the use of public space for food vending. Further research into the intricacies of the municipal policies and their enforcement in Bangkok is needed.

In an interview, the director of the *tesakit* explained that street vending was primarily viewed as a traffic and health problem (S.

Chalee, Municipal Police Department, Bangkok, 1994, personal communication). The director had visited Hong Kong and Singapore in order to compare situations and policies. The *jut phon pan* solution was designed following these observations and significantly differs in its view of public space compared to the more severe measures imposed by Singapore. Singapore's "solution" to the hawking "problem" has been one of the most comprehensive in the world (Lee, 1992; Ng, 1993). All street food vendors, both mobile and stationary, were forced to relocate according to the government's specifications. To what extent Singapore might be viewed as a model for other cities is a matter requiring further study and debate.

Self-help groups and services for food vendors

Vendors' organizations do exist in Bangkok, as is evidenced by the ability to organize protests and demonstrations when there are attempts to introduce municipal policies. The best-organized vendors are located in the vicinity of the wholesale market, *Pakkhlong Talad*, and there are also associations of vendors selling a variety of goods, including food, on busy thoroughfares such as Silom Road (L. Rakawin, Coordinator, HomeNet Thailand, 2000, personal communication).

"Tip" sells in a soi (lane) in the Victory Monument Area, Bangkok. Her small eatery sells various types of "custom-made" food



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The food vendors interviewed in the VMA, however, are not involved in any association. In December 2000, informal discussions about the possible establishment of a “self-help group” among women food vendors were held with Thai anthropologist, Kamonrat Sa-Ngeam and me. There was

interest loans of up to baht 15 000 are available to microentrepreneurs on condition that they seek a government or private sector official as a guarantor. Thaksin’s new microfinance policy is also accompanied by a microinsurance scheme (Kamol, 2001; S.N. Kamonrat, 2001,

- recognized legally and on a wider political scale by the state at various levels;
- supported through microfinancing and social protection such as microinsurance;
- involved in making the decisions that affect their lives through a democratic, accountable, multi-stakeholder framework.

Many urbanites value their street foods, home-based catering networks, neighbourhood markets, mobile vendors and home-made condiments that can be purchased easily in any large Third World city

serious interest in forming a local group to engage in microfinance schemes, and in obtaining training on how to negotiate access to vending spaces. Some of the food vendors in the VMA were forced to relocate in February 2001 following the demolition of their low-rise place of residence/business to make way for a high-rise building. As such, they can be viewed as casualties of Thailand’s recovery from the economic crisis.

A number of occupational health and safety issues related to food vending would be more adequately addressed if vendors in the VMA were organized and therefore in a more economically and spatially secure position. The interest in organizing such a group makes clear that exchanges among developing countries to diffuse the experiences of SEWA, CCUVA and other groups are needed to facilitate the creation of similar food vendors’ organizations where they are needed. It is also essential that IFS workers in the VMA become more aware of and ensconced in Thai civil society organizations, such as the nationally recognized Assembly of the Poor, on condition that they have the necessary time and resources to do so.

In late June 2001, newly elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced the nationwide launch of the “People’s Bank”, also known as “Bank for the Poor” (*krongkarn thanakarn phu prachachon*). This scheme, to be operated by the Savings Bank of Thailand, provides microfinancing for people wanting to start a small enterprise such as a food vending establishment. Low-

personal communication). For Thai urban food vendors, this project is a first step towards improving their living and working conditions and social capital.

Conclusion: conceptual and policy issues

The best way to promote the interests of the IFS is to facilitate the creation of membership-based organizations comprised of food vendors and others who gain their livelihood from the preparation and sale of food in cities. Although more research may be needed on the various ways in which these nascent organizations function, generally speaking, more associations like SEWA, SEWU and CCUVA are needed in developing countries to act as collective voices for people in the IFS. Such organizations can help IFS workers to access financing, social protection and, most of all, secure and affordable spaces in which to conduct business. Viable membership-based organizations – by clearly defining the IFS as a legitimate urban stakeholder – facilitate, rather than hinder, negotiation with municipal authorities for the establishment of progressive policies towards food vending. Progressive municipal policies and programmes try to create enabling environments for food microenterprises. An example is the *jut phon pan* system introduced in Bangkok in 1994.

Microentrepreneurs in the food sector, if organized, can and should be:

- valued by society at large for their economic, social and cultural role;

Finally, there is a need for conceptually innovative participatory action research, with an emphasis on the policies and programmes needed at the neighbourhood, city, regional, national and international scales. Such research and praxis can facilitate the diffusion of strategic information and result in the creation of transparent, accountable and democratic membership-based organizations that represent the interests of the urban IFS.

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Workers in the urban “informal” food sector: innovative organizing strategies

Creating strong membership-based organizations for informal food sector (IFS) workers is key to improving their ability to lobby municipal authorities in order to promote the interests of this sector. Strategies that organize the IFS result in enhanced social capital, which facilitates access to financing, training resources and – most important in the case of rapidly growing cities – secure tenure of good selling spaces. In this article, the IFS is defined and its importance outlined, and examples of innovative organizing strategies developed by IFS workers and microentrepreneurs are described: these include widely known and well-documented cases in India and elsewhere as well as other, lesser known, cases in the Philippines and Thailand for which the author draws on her own empirical research.

In the Philippines, members of the umbrella organization Cebu City United Vendors’ Association have registered their associations with the Securities and Exchange Commission and have engaged in proactive dialogue with the city’s mayor and municipal administration.

In Bangkok, a progressive urban policy towards street food vending has been in place since 1994, granting a number of vendors more secure access to urban space. Despite these progressive municipal policies, IFS microentrepreneurs in many parts of Bangkok remain in need of the types of organization found in CEBU and the examples profiled in India and other countries. More cooperation among nascent IFS organizations is needed to facilitate networking and, in turn, local institutional strengthening. Strong membership-based organizations can lead to IFS workers being valued by society, recognized by the state at various levels, supported through financing and training, and involved in making the decisions that affect their lives.

Les travailleurs du secteur alimentaire urbain «informel» et leurs stratégies d’organisation novatrices

La création d’organisations s’appuyant sur la participation active de leurs adhérents, les travailleurs du secteur alimentaire informel, est un élément déterminant d’une meilleure capacité de ces travailleurs à influencer les autorités municipales de manière à promouvoir les intérêts de ce secteur. Les stratégies d’organisation du secteur alimentaire informel permettent de mettre en valeur le capital social, ce qui a pour effet de faciliter l’accès au financement, ainsi que la formation des ressources humaines et – facteur décisif dans le cas des villes à croissance rapide – de garantir la détention d’espaces de vente de qualité. Cet article définit le secteur alimentaire informel et en décrit l’importance, tout en donnant des exemples de stratégies d’organisation novatrices élaborées par les travailleurs et par les microentrepreneurs du secteur: l’article illustre des cas largement connus et bien documentés d’initiatives concernant l’Inde, mais aussi des situations moins connues intéressant les Philippines et la Thaïlande, pour lesquelles l’auteur puise dans ses propres recherches à caractère empirique.

Aux Philippines, les membres de l’organisation mère Cebu City United Vendors’ Association ont inscrit leur organisme auprès de la Securities and Exchange Commission et ont engagé un dialogue dynamique avec le maire de la ville et avec l’administration municipale.

À Bangkok, les autorités municipales pratiquent depuis 1994, à l’égard des aliments vendus sur la voie publique, une politique d’ouverture accordant à un certain nombre de vendeurs un accès mieux garanti à l’espace urbain. Malgré ces politiques progressistes, les microentrepreneurs du secteur alimentaire informel, opérant dans de nombreux quartiers de Bangkok, restent tributaires d’organisations comme celles de Cebu ou de celles évoquées dans les exemples concernant l’Inde et d’autres pays. Il conviendra d’intensifier la coopération Sud-Sud entre les organisations naissantes du secteur alimentaire informel afin de favoriser la constitution de réseaux et, par un effet retour, le renforcement des institutions locales. La constitution d’organisations basées sur un corps d’adhérents déterminés est de nature à rehausser le statut des travailleurs du secteur alimentaire informel aux yeux de la société, à en encourager la reconnaissance par les différents niveaux de représentation étatique, à leur faire obtenir un appui sous forme de financement et de formation, et à les impliquer dans les décisions qui affectent leur vie.

Los trabajadores en el sector alimentario urbano «informal»: estrategias innovadoras de organización

La creación de organizaciones sólidas de trabajadores del sector alimentario informal, basadas en el asociacionismo resulta fundamental para mejorar su capacidad de presión sobre las autoridades municipales para que atiendan los intereses de ese sector. Las estrategias de organización del sector alimentario informal tienen por finalidad mejorar el capital social, lo que facilita el acceso a financiación, a los recursos de capacitación y –lo que es más importante en el caso de las ciudades de crecimiento rápido– a la segura ocupación de los espacios de venta de productos. En el presente artículo, se define el sector alimentario informal y se esboza su importancia, y también se describen ejemplos de estrategias innovadoras de organización desarrolladas por los trabajadores y microempresarios de dicho sector, entre ellos, los casos ampliamente divulgados y bien documentados de la India y otros países, así como otros menos conocidos de Filipinas y Tailandia para los que la autora recurre a una investigación empírica propia.

En Filipinas, los miembros de la organización coordinadora de la ciudad de Cebu, United Vendors' Association, han inscrito sus asociaciones en el registro de la Comisión de Bolsa y Valores y han iniciado un diálogo activo con el alcalde y con la administración municipal de la ciudad.

En Bangkok desde 1994 se practica una política urbana progresista hacia la venta ambulante de alimentos, que garantiza a una serie de vendedores un acceso más seguro al espacio urbano. Pese a estas políticas municipales progresistas, los microempresarios del sector alimentario informal de muchas partes de Bangkok continúan necesitando un tipo de organización como la de CEBU y las descritas en los ejemplos de la India y otros países. Se requiere una mayor cooperación Sur-Sur entre organizaciones incipientes del sector alimentario informal que facilite la creación de redes y, a su vez, el fortalecimiento de las instituciones en el ámbito local. Unas organizaciones sólidas, basadas en el asociacionismo, pueden hacer que la sociedad valore a los trabajadores del sector alimentario informal, que el Estado los reconozca en diversos ámbitos, que obtengan apoyo en las esferas de la financiación y la capacitación, y que participen en la adopción de las decisiones que afectan a sus vidas.