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Street Vendor Struggles: Maintaining a Livelihood Through the COVID-19 Lockdown in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Introduction

Vietnam's first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 22 January 2020, with a second wave taking hold from July 2020. The Vietnamese government's initial mitigation strategies included a mandatory quarantine for travelers from COVID-19-affected countries and a strong public health campaign (Ivic, 2020). On 19 March, after a rise in cases, Hanoi People's Committee advised all residents to self-isolate at home until the month's end (Reuters, 2020). This preceded a national lockdown from 1 to 23 April 2020 following Directive 16, which temporarily closed all but essential services, resulting in rapid unemployment increases in both formal and informal sectors (Trần Oanh, 2020).

One of the informal sector groups hit hard by the pandemic and Directive 16 was Hanoi's migrant street vendors (VOA News, 2020). Street vending supports thousands of households in Hanoi and the surrounding hinterland, with those involved – predominantly women – often being rural-to-urban migrants who lack the formal education skills to secure 'modern' urban employment. They are drawn to the city due to opportunities to contribute to their broader household livelihoods, especially to pay for farming inputs and children's school fees. Yet, prior to COVID-19, these street vendors were already facing tough conditions, with a 2008 street vending ban covering 62 streets and 48 public spaces in Hanoi's urban core, curtailing access to favorable trading sites (Turner and Schoenberger, 2012). Directive 16 then halted their work completely, at least in theory.

This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with 31 street vendors in Hanoi completed between May and July 2020 as COVID-19 restrictions relating to the first wave were lifting and before the second wave hit. Twenty-seven of the respondents were migrant vendors, while four were long-term Hanoi residents. We focus predominantly on migrant vendors here, given their already precarious situation on the city's streets, with responses from long-term resident vendors used for comparisons. Of our respondents, 28 were women, representative of street vendors in Hanoi as a whole (and across Vietnam). Our findings are also underscored by long-term research with Hanoi street vendors since 1999. Conceptually, we take an intersectional approach to urban informal livelihoods and inequality, analyzing how the interlaced axes of migrant woman or man, low socio-economic class, and informal worker created specific inequalities and/or barriers for individuals attempting to maintain urban livelihoods during this pandemic. Media articles have repeatedly reported that this virus does not discriminate – 'we are all in the same boat' – yet our work quickly reveals that this paints a false illusion of equality during times of livelihood shocks and crisis.

Initial impacts

The majority of Hanoi's itinerant street vendors are women migrants who rely on bicycles, poles, or baskets to ply their wares. The minority are fixed-stall vendors, typically long-term residents, for whom vending is often a means to stay busy in retirement and supplement small pensions (Turner and Schoenberger, 2012; Jensen and Peppard, 2003). Despite some migrant vendors residing in Hanoi for over a decade, they are often ostracized by authorities and 'native residents' as 'uneducated country-people' and 'outsiders'. When COVID-19 hit, most fixed-stall vendors paused their trading, using their state pensions or support from family members if they were able to tide them over. A few continued selling in front of their houses, especially those deemed to provide essential food-items including meat and vegetables. In contrast, migrant street vendors revealed that the initial impacts from COVID-19 included rapidly rising financial burdens and social stigma.

Rising financial burdens for migrant vendors

Although many itinerant vendors left the city to seek refuge in their hometowns before the April 2020 lockdown began in Hanoi (detailed later on; see also Banerjee and Das, Volume 2), a small proportion remained and tried to make ends meet (Pham Nga and Phan Diep, 2020). During lockdown, itinerant street vendors could be observed searching for customers, thus violating the government directive unless selling meat or vegetables (Hoàng Vũ and Quang Minh, 2020). As one woman who continued to sell fruit noted:

The *Công an* [public security officials]¹ told me, 'You kind of people never follow the rules!' But I told him, 'It's not that I don't observe the rules, but since I've bought all these fruit, I have to sell them ... My children don't want

me to be out here selling on the street either.' I always think that those policemen, with their power, always see us as worthless people.

Another vendor, who initially stopped vending, noted that she had no longer been able to afford to obey Directive 16, despite risking her health and facing prosecution:

I restarted selling about two weeks before they lifted the lockdown. We ran out of money so I had no choice [...] The first few days [during lockdown], I was very afraid of the police, afraid of getting caught or fined. But I had to ignore it and go ahead, I had to go out making money for us to eat. (Lan, sticky-rice seller)

Vendors also noted that they had to trade longer hours post-lockdown as fewer residents were on the city's streets and business was far slower. Huong, a fruit vendor explained: 'Usually, when it's easy to sell, I head home early, but this year I only go back when it's already very late. Now it's common that I only manage to sell everything around midnight.'

The financial burdens of lockdown, slow business post-lockdown, and the prospects of another lockdown were extremely stressful for the itinerant vendor we interviewed. Concerns over access to basic necessities such as food was a recurring theme, with Ha, a vendor from neighboring Vinh Phúc Province, emphasizing: 'I was worried that if the pandemic had continued [...] if it was like in other countries, then we would die, *really*, die of hunger if people could not work.'

The main coping mechanism vendors initiated in response to reduced incomes was to cut back on expenses, including food and other essential items. Yen, a vendor selling clothes, explained:

I already cut back a lot on our spending, like skipping breakfasts or eating the leftovers from the night before...

It's difficult with money now, I have to save most of what I make for my kids; to pay their tuition. We're having only plain rice with salt and sesame now.

When these restrictions were inadequate, some sought loans from private money lenders, resulting in high interest rates and additional stress. Van, selling clothes itinerantly detailed: 'We had to borrow some money; others had to borrow from the black credit market. It's difficult to borrow from relatives, because everyone is equally poor, so many have to go to the black market.'

Social burden and stigma

As COVID-19 cases rose, the nature of migrant vendors' routines – being mobile and interacting with numerous people on a daily basis – caused them to be perceived by the public, media, and authorities as potential risks to public health. Media reports with titles such as 'COVID-19 transmission risks among street vendors and beggars in Hanoi' (VTV24, 2020) stoked these fears. Even after the initial lockdown was lifted, many found they were unable to sell enough to get by. As reported in the media, one vendor noted: 'Now, because of the disease people shoo me away like a plague when they see me' (Pham Nga and Phan Diep, 2020).

The situation was not necessarily better for vendors who returned to the countryside before the April lockdown. Linh, an itinerant vendor selling pineapples in Hanoi for four years reported: 'People at our hometown treated us differently because we came back from Hanoi, so they were afraid and avoided us.' If vendors had been renting accommodation in a 'hotspot' neighborhood, where a COVID-19 breakout had been reported, their situation was even more complex: 'Back at the village, we experienced outright discrimination. Because they heard we were back from Bạch Mai hospital [a COVID-19 hotspot], they treated us

differently. They thought we'd already contracted the virus' (Mai, fruit vendor).

Rising inequalities

The onset of the pandemic and subsequent government regulations created new inequalities along two divisions; first, within Hanoi's itinerant vending population, and second, between vendors and other urban workers.

New inequalities within itinerant vending sector

Vendors noted that those who sold certain items fared better than others immediately prior to, during, and after the initial lockdown. While limited numbers of itinerant vendors stayed to vend during the lockdown period, those selling meat and vegetables could at least attempt to make a livelihood, compared to others selling 'non-essential items' who were chased and fined heavily by *Công an*. Yet, as noted earlier, social stigma and a general lack of street life made this period tough even for essential-goods sellers. Moreover, with a general rise in unemployment and uncertainty, Hanoi residents cut back on non-essential purchases leaving vendors selling fruit, flowers, clothes, and religious items in a particularly precarious situation. Flower vendor Hue explained: 'If there'd been no COVID, people would have attended more [religious] ceremonies, festivals, like usual at the beginning of the year. So they'd buy more flowers as offerings. But this year, religious events were banned so people didn't buy many flowers.' Not surprisingly, vendors who usually targeted tourists or who supplied tourist cafés also faced stagnant sales: 'If tourists were still around, cafés would buy more from me, pineapples, avocados – to make juice to serve their guests... Before, when the tourists were still around, I could also sell to the tourists, but now they're not here, so I lose lots of customers' (Linh, fruit vendor).

Further inequalities compared to other urban workforce sectors

To support those negatively impacted by the April lockdown, the Vietnamese government adopted Resolution 42, a VND62,000 billion stimulus package to provide financial support for those who lost their income, including '*lao động tự do*' or informal sector workers (Trần Oanh, 2020). To be eligible, individuals had to have official documents from both their current and origin places of residence, and proof of low or no income. These criteria made it extremely difficult for informal workers to gain financial support, as the majority had no labor contracts to provide proof of income and struggled to obtain city temporary residence certificates (Di Lâm, 2020). Such regulations resulted in cases such as that of Vinh Tuy Ward in Hanoi, where 4,000 workers were identified as requiring aid, but only 47 proved to be eligible. Moreover, street vendors selling food only qualified if they held a valid business registration and food safety certification; since few did, they were immediately disqualified from receiving aid (Lan Phuong and Tat Dinh, 2020).

Vendors were frustrated at not being able to claim financial support, yet many noted that due to long-standing corruption they were not surprised they were deemed ineligible. Lan, a sticky-rice vendor explained:

We're lost with the procedure and paperwork. Even with proper temporary residence registration here in Hanoi, it mightn't be enough. Only when you know someone who can 'guide' you through this process [for a bribe] might you get something.

The media reported that in response to criticisms regarding the lack of support for informal workers, the government-sponsored Fatherland Front Committee organized provisions for poor households (Trần Oanh, 2020). Local philanthropists

also set up ‘rice ATMs’ in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi to provide 24/7 access to food for those who are unable to provide for their families following the nationwide lockdown (Duong, 2020). However, only a few of our interviewees knew of these initiatives, and only two had accessed the ‘rice ATMs’.

Conclusion

Globally, it is estimated that almost 1.6 billion informal economy workers have had their livelihoods severely impacted by pandemic lockdown measures (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020; see also Brooks, Chapter 5). This has certainly been the case in Hanoi, and in other Asian cities, where we are also tracking developments. In Hanoi, itinerant vendors – both women and men – have experienced sharp income declines, with many reporting cuts of half to two thirds of their pre-pandemic incomes, placing them in impossible financial situations (Pham Nga and Phan Diep, 2020; interviews). Facing gloomy trading scenarios, new social stigmas, and rising inequalities, a number of vendors who initially returned to Hanoi post-lockdown eventually departed again for their hometowns, abandoning their vending livelihoods and losing the incomes this had provided for family expenses. Yet, others were more resilient and, at times, defiant of government restrictions (see Thai et al, Volume Three). As one fresh-fruit vendor noted, ‘After all, they still have to allow us to make a living and to survive, right? There are still many poor people in Vietnam, so if they’re strict with us all the time, how will we make a living? In Vietnam, it’s impossible to get rid of street vendors like us.’ Whether public support and demand for street vendor goods will continue in this new climate is uncertain. Yet, Hanoi’s street vendors have been the target of numerous government restrictions in the past and still ply the city’s streets. With their history of resilience and adaptability, one can only hope that this livelihood option remains available for those directly reliant upon it, not only in Hanoi, but across the Global South.

Note

- ¹ The *Công an* or *Công an phường* enforce government regulations, including Directive 16 and the 2008 Street Vending Ban, at the smallest official spatial unit of urban administration, the ward (*phường*).

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