

## Policy pointers

- Urban residents have different capacities to respond to change. Gender analysis offers a framework to understand the gendered adaptation processes and facilitates an exploration of individual adaptability built upon social relationships.
- Informal food systems are operated based on social, rather than economic, mechanisms such as a relationship of trust with producers and support from family and co-villagers. Through this, street vendors provide a diversity of vegetables and animal-source food to a wide range of customers from the income-poor to the wealthy.
- Without considering the social dynamics at play and the social inequality that exist in the system, urban planning and policy making may inadvertently support wealthy female vendors and many male vendors. Meanwhile, it may exclude those urban and rural poor smallholders who have already been pushed into the streets as a result of marginalisation through previous experiences of policy change.
- Rural and peri-urban agricultural development should be a critical dimension of urban policy making to address the city's underlying challenges.
- If the policy is intended to strengthen climate resilience of the poor, there is a need to address underlying political mechanisms that continue to marginalise women and poor men into informal systems.

# Building a resilient city for whom? Learning from street vendors' gendered responses to urbanisation in Hanoi

NOZOMI KAWARAZUKA

## Building a resilient city for whom?

In Hanoi, agricultural production and trading systems have changed since the macro-economic reform in the late 1980s, and the subsequent urbanisation of the city affected livelihoods of smallholders from both peri-urban and rural areas. However, the impacts of change are unevenly distributed among urban populations. Some smallholders took advantage of the socio-economic changes as great economic opportunity, while others had few options in their adaptation strategies. People's different responses to change then influence the city's social structures through processes such as urban-rural migration and the marginalisation of the poor in informal food systems. Drawing upon examples of street vendors in Hanoi, this study explores the different ways in which male and female street vendors respond to change and how their responses shape current informal food systems in Hanoi.

To explore this question we conducted in-depth-interviews with 50 street vendors (28 females, 13 males and nine couples) from eight different sites in four districts. Questions were structured by the theoretical frameworks drawn from critical social theory (Connell, 2009). Gender analysis, grounded in critical social theory, can explore the roles of gendered agency and gendered relationships in the processes of adaptation. While issues of access are often considered in relation to economic resources, gender analysis supports the concept of access that moves beyond economic notions to describe social relationships as a resource (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Social relations are highly gendered and negotiated through gendered agency, through which women negotiate with those who have greater access to resources and/or build mutual support relations with their family, co-villagers and friends. The present approach facilitates an exploration of individual adaptability built upon the institutions of family and village through gendered interdependent relationships.

## The diversity of street vendors: the gendered adaptation processes

In Hanoi, there is a strong tradition of purchasing fresh food from local markets instead of supermarkets. Although women dominate this sector, there is an increasing number of male vendors. The choices of agricultural produce, the locations where to sell and the scale of business are not simply driven by the financial capacity of vendors, but embedded within the gendered social networking available to those vendors. As a result, both men and women encounter different challenges in sustaining their activities in the face of policy and/or economic changes.

Female vendors often have limited assets, but their social network and connections allow them to access agricultural produce, secure a selling space on a pavement and build relationships with regular customers. They thereby sustain their activities and also mobilise unpaid labour from their family and ask support from co-villagers in times of need. While harassment by the police is a challenge for both male and female vendors, women tend to beg the police for mercy, whereas men do not negotiate and instead accept to pay a formal standard fine.

Men's vending activities tend to be more capital-based, and they hardly ask for support from peer vendors or family. This makes their activities vulnerable – in the sense that they depend heavily on their own capital and labour. With little support they have limited buffers to cope with shocks.

However, working independently without having regular customers and co-vendors, men are also adaptable to change in regulations such as the ban of vending activities on some streets since many of them can move to other streets and engage in their activities at any location.

Female vendors, in contrast, may be more able to cope with, and recover from, economic shocks since they have support and connections through which they could restart their business without capital. However, they have more difficulty in adapting to change in policies and regulations, because their business is operated and sustained by gendered social relationships grounded in a particular street or pavement, which considerably differs from the formal food trading systems.

There are a small number of successful female vendors, who have powerful male supporters and connections. They ensure a stable supply, secure a better quality of produce and sit in a better location. In turn, they are not only earning more income, but also having provisions to future change. Without considering the social dynamics at play and the social inequalities that exist in the system, urban planning and policy making may inadvertently support those wealthy female vendors and many male vendors, while excluding those urban and rural smallholders who have already been pushed into the streets as a result of marginalisation through previous experiences of socio-economic change.

### Box 1: Gendered social relations as a resource

Hoa, 60, from Nam Dinh province, has been sitting on the same pavement for more than 20 years to sell more than 40 varieties of vegetables. Hoa describes the life in her home village as miserable. Typhoons and floods always affect agriculture in her village, and there are few cash crops that could lead the village's economic growth. Response to unstable weather conditions is not impromptu, and villagers have rather solid social ties through which rural-urban migration works well to cope with uncertainty and change in their agricultural-based livelihoods. There are some vendors who sell shoes, clothes and fruits around her, and all of them come from the same village, occupying the same part of the street for the past 25 years. The villagers' support system accumulated through a long history of rural-urban migration protects her business. The pavement is a place where she can sustain her relations with her rural village, which is a foundation of her social identity and social relationships. Currently, 70 per cent of her customers are regular customers whom she allows to buy her vegetables on credit. She has no intention to move from here – not because she does not have enough money to pay for a legal place, but because of her relations with the society and the customers that serve as the foundation for her security.

## The pro-poor informal food systems

Street vendors provide benefits to a wide range of city consumers including the low-income population. Vendors offer a variety of fresh agricultural produce that is directly delivered by smallholders living in peri-urban and rural areas. They often diversify targeted consumers among socio-economic groups offering different services and products to secure profits. For example, some vendors provide a higher quality produce and home delivery services to the high-income and middle-class population. Female vendors often allow their (low-income) customers to buy their produce on credit, facilitating poor people's daily access to micronutrient-rich meat/fish and vegetables. Poor people focus on producing and/or selling local vegetables and poultry that are tolerant to cold or heat as well as to diseases, while better-off households with a significant economic capacity invest in a high climate-risk fruits and livestock, providing a stable supply of food to city residents. Moreover, vendors have various strategies to minimise food waste and loss of profit. Some vendors sell unpopular parts of meat/fish, or the leftover low-value vegetables and fruits, at low prices in low-income residential areas. Otherwise they sell these items at the end of the business day to local street food courts at the lowest price.

These pro-poor systems are based on social, rather than economic, mechanisms, such as trust between producers and vendors and between vendors and consumers, as well as unpaid labour and support by family and co-villagers. Supermarkets would have difficulty subsuming these existing pro-poor systems. In this respect, street vendors and urban residents are partly interdependent

upon each other in an informal trading system. City development policy, including climate adaptation, requires understanding underlying challenges that push the poor into informal systems and their coping mechanisms within the systems.

## Urban planning and rural agriculture

The activities of street vendors are an outcome of gendered responses to wider political and economic changes and challenges induced by macro-economic reforms. Without addressing the issues of agricultural development in both peri-urban and rural areas, policymakers will not be able to address the challenges the cities are now facing, such as how to control the growth of temporary residents from rural areas and how to continue feeding a growing urban population. In the context of Hanoi, understanding the impact of the city's change should include understanding its indirect impacts on agriculture and subsequent influences on poor smallholders and poor urban consumers who depend upon each other through informal food trading systems.

## Integrating gender: implications for climate resilience for the poor

By introducing the concept of gender studies drawn from critical social theory to understandings of the diverse processes of adaptation and their consequences, our study provides key information that is relevant for developing city resilience strategies and implementing resilience-building initiatives at a city level. Qualitative gender analysis reveals the diversity and differences among urban residents, illuminating more nuanced processes of

### Box 2: The diversity among street vendors

Lụa, 50, sells green vegetables grown on her small plot of land. She started this business after the vast majority of her family's land was taken by the development agency to build new villas under the state's urban policy. The compensation fees quickly ran out since her husband started drinking, playing cards and gambling. She grows inexpensive green vegetables, since they require little input and the crop cycle is short. Diêu's family's land was also taken by a development agency but her husband invested the compensation fees in guava production. She sells 60kg of guava per day on the streets of Hanoi. She accessed this market through her sister who lives in the area. Diêu invests her profit in her children's education and gives some money to her mother to support her later life.

adaptation – something that the probability and inferential statistics of quantitative analysis cannot offer. This study shows that street vendors are active agents who respond to change differently and that their behaviours are highly gendered based on socially expected gender roles and conjugal and co-worker relationships. This indicates that adaptation is not only a gendered process, but is also context-specific.

The insights from gender analysis offer implications for climate resilience for the poor. Informal systems may help women with limited financial assets cope with potential climate-related shocks, since the ability to respond to change is not simply determined by economic capacity in informal systems – which may be one significant reason why

they remain in informal systems. On the other hand, this system also creates gender-based marginalisation and hierarchy which materialise in different ways than those in formal systems. Poor people's capacity to respond to change cannot be assessed in the same way as that of those who are in the formal system; and if the policy is intended to strengthen the resilience of the poor, there is a need to address underlying political mechanisms that continue to marginalise women and poor men in informal systems. Gender analysis thus enables us to see social power and gendered agency play out in the processes of adaptation, which is an important first-step for policymakers to take into account how the subsequent response of vulnerable people to the changes then affects urban structures.

### Aim of Series:

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**Collaborators:**  
International Potato Center (CIP) and International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Hanoi, Vietnam

### Author

Nozomi Kawarazuka, International Potato Center (CIP) and International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Hanoi, Vietnam

### Contact

[N.Kawarazuka@cgiar.org](mailto:N.Kawarazuka@cgiar.org)

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80-86 Gray's Inn Road,  
London WC1X 8NH, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399



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