

WITHOUT COLLECTIVE EFFORTS, BANGKOK STREET VENDORS HAVE NO POWER

By Linda Vega



(1) *“There’s no support. They just want us to stop. They didn’t make any suggestions for relocation, none. They just said you need to stop, you’re breaking the law selling on the sidewalks.”* Nut, 55, a noodle vendor from the Sukhumvit Soi 38 market said these words when I asked him whether the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) had suggested other vending sites after ordering eviction.

(2) In May 2015, the BMA, local authority responsible for city planning and regulation of street vendors in Bangkok, ordered the shut down of the Sukhumvit Soi 38 street food market. The whole area will be transformed into an area reserved for high-rise condominiums. The Soi 38 night market became famous due to its diverse offer of cheap and delicious Thai food: *“I don’t know where to go. I don’t know where to get money. Even if we want to go elsewhere, no place will allow us to vend”* Nut said when I enquired about future employment options. For Nut, eviction means a loss of livelihood in a city with limited legal vending spots and increasing restrictions. The BMA has aimed to reduce vehicular and pedestrian congestion through restricting street vending. In theory, the BMA takes decisions for the benefit of the majority of its citizens. However, a few questions come to mind when thinking about street vendors as a minority of the urban informal economy: How do vendors cope with sudden regulatory changes? Who represents their interests and right to earn a living?

(3) The 2003 National Statistical Office estimated that there are between 250,000 and 380,000 hawkers and street vendors in Bangkok making the number of street vendors in Bangkok one of the largest among big Asian cities. However, the city’s street vendors are not unionised and there are no organisations representing their interests. In the past vendors have come together in order to protest or approach the BMA if they are threatened by eviction. Despite this, there have been no serious attempts to create a trade union or any other organisation who would advocate for their rights on a permanent basis. Their collective resistance is weak and potential for collective bargaining with the BMA appears limited.

(4) The lack of organisation is particularly critical for street vendors in Bangkok. This is because local street vending policies have changed according to the governor’s preferences and national needs to relieve unemployment. Decisions that impact street vending are generally unpredictable and vendors remain vulnerable to sudden regulatory changes. The latest local development plan called “Bangkok:

Vibrant of Asia” covering 2013 to 2032, aims to achieve a more beautiful, convenient and inclusive Bangkok. The plan makes no mention of street vending and use of public space. What should be expected when street vendors are not even acknowledged in local development plans? But rather, they are too often forcefully evicted due to BMA’s search of a more “developed”, orderly and cleaner Bangkok.

(5)The Sukhumvit Soi 38 market eviction is not an isolated case. For instance, vendors from the Sanam Luang area in 2011 and Klong Thom market area in 2014 were also evicted. In addition to these cases, in October 2014, the BMA limited street vending hours from to 7pm and 2am[iv] in the Silom area (located between the Nararom and Sala Daeng intersections). Teerapat, 39, a vendor of fried chicken affected by these new restrictions, said: *“In the past, we could sell whenever we liked. We could come and sell in the morning or in the afternoon. Now, when we come out this late, people are already going home and not looking for food”*. Due to these restrictions, Teerapat has decided to work part-time on his fruit farm located close to Bangkok. Earnings from selling fried chicken are no longer enough to sustain his family.

(6)Under the new restriction in the Silom area, the BMA has started to fine vendors who flout the new law and continue to sell during the day. Lower revenues have pushed Teerapat and others to organise and approach the government to discuss a potential extension of working hours. The vendors went to both the Prime Minister’s Office and Parliament to lodge official complaints. The government, however, did nothing to address their grievances. No official discussions took place and restrictions have continued. Without having reached their objectives, Teerapat shared his feeling of hopelessness about the situation: *“who wants to be part of this push if they know it’s going to lead to nothing? It’s just all talk, we don’t have any power.”*

(7)Street vendors should confront these urban challenges collectively. There is scope for creating a union or organisation that could represent vendors’ interests and stand up for their rights when their livelihoods are threatened. Good examples such as the Self- Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India demonstrate that it is feasible for informal workers to create collective resistance. Despite being initially unrecognised by the government of India, SEWA is now the largest trade union for informal workers in India. It is commonly believed that “union gives strength”. Effective organisation and representation of vendors could give vendors the necessary tools to face unpredictable regulatory changes in order to sustain their livelihoods.

(8)I asked Teerapat whether he would join an organisation that works with street vendors and he said: *“yes. All of us would join. If there is a way, we would join. We all want to find a solution”*. The current panorama is not promising, but it does not necessarily have to be this way. By uniting their forces, vendors could empower themselves to address these issues. Bangkok street vendors need to shift from individual to collective thinking, from reactive to proactive actions in order to strive for their interests.