

Invisible livelihoods in the Global South: public space vendors' plight of making a living

This policy brief puts forward suggestions for local and national governments, and international organisations to ensure the right to work and find shared solutions to improve the lives of vendors in public space (aka 'street vendors'). Recommendations result from a research project in three cities in Latin America: Buenos Aires, Medellín and Rio de Janeiro in collaboration with popular economy workers' associations and syndicates. Documenting and analysing vendors' work activity in real-time, the research unearthed the highly skilful and organised nature of vendors' working practices and the civility and respect with which they conduct themselves. It unpacks the collective and state regulations that underlies vendors' practices, and how they serve to support and undermine them. Crucially, it shows the deficient work conditions that these workers are confronted with to maintain a daily living.

Background

Recent statistics show that 61% of the global workforce earn a living in the informal sector, with Latin America having one of the highest levels of informality. Informal workers, whilst often stigmatised and ignored, make a significant contribution to the global economy with circa 50% in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro and close to 60% in Medellín (ILO 2018).

Vending in public space (VPS) is a common economic activity in urban informal spaces in Latin America, including the cities included in this research – Buenos Aires, Medellín and Rio de Janeiro, with thousands of workers making a living in public spaces. VPS is a very dynamic livelihood strategy, with individuals moving in and out of this activity as a result of economic crises (e.g., Argentina) or population movement due to ongoing armed conflict (e.g., Medellín and Rio de Janeiro where vendors are situated in regions of enormous social conflict).

VPS is hard and heavy work, with repercussions to the health and well-being of vendors who work long shifts (typically 12 hours) under intense traffic, adverse weather conditions, ultraviolet radiation exposure and extreme temperatures, and are laden with heavy merchandise which they have to lift and carry. VPS is also incredibly diverse as far as the types of products and services provided, the timing and location when vending occurs, the scale of the working practice, the socio-demographics of the vendors, and the income that can be obtained.

At the international level, there are no labour standards regarding VPS. Regulations are local, often confusing and diverge from one locale to another, either from one country to another or from one city to another within the same country. Moreover, changes in local governments often result in changes in regulation, increasing the uncertainty and vulnerability faced by vendors to sustain a living.

Public vending: resourcefulness cut short

Vendors are incredibly resourceful. They display considerable adroitness, professionalism, and respectfulness in how they pitch products as they attempt to convert members of the public into prospective customers, how their work fills a gap in the market, and the securitisation role they often assume to protect people in public space. Vendors display incredible resourcefulness in enacting individual agency in the light of the structural conditions they inhabit.

At the same time, vendors suffer from acute pollution from traffic noise, emissions and the climate conditions of cities saturated by the sun. Those with licenses, have their 'official' working hours restricted and the number of licenses issued is far too small for the number of workers. Accessing licenses requires political representation and a social dialogue with the government and local businesses. Vendors experience anxiety about how to make a living, fear of continued displacement, and a constant state of watchfulness as they witness a range of criminal activities in public space. Such activities curtail their agency with potentially life-threatening consequences for their well-being.

Public vending in cities across Latin America

Medellín represents the least hostile of the contexts examined in this research. The planned implementation of Decree 042/0202/2022 allows public space vending and protects the rights of vendors and their livelihoods. It recommends that vendors should be given licences to work (Law 1988/

2019) and be encouraged to form work associations. While some licences have been granted and more have been promised by the Medellín Council, most of the registered vendors work without one. Public security officials do not appear to be sufficiently familiar with existing regulations, meaning that vendors thus continue to suffer from instability, insecurity, and persecution by the authorities. Recent changes in the local government have resulted in displacement campaigns and merchandise decommissioning.

Buenos Aires provides a middle-of-the-ground setting where policy interventions had varying effects. 'Street vending' is not illegal but it is not officially permitted. Typically, it constitutes a minor infraction. The Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular has managed to obtain local government credit for a few food vendors, such as loans to buy food carts. It also ensured supply of produce directly from factories, allowing vendors to cut the middleman, exercise agency and obtain a better economic return. In addition, vendors working on metropolitan train lines have managed to obtain identification cards with which they do not need to pay for a ticket to sell on trains or jump electrified lines.

Nonetheless, Buenos Aires represents a relatively hostile environment in terms of VPS where merchandise continues to be seized with concomitant negative livelihood repercussions for vendors, and bribes are often paid to the police. However, this does not safeguard vendors when the municipality orders the police to clear public spaces or local business owners complain about the presence of vendors impeding easy access to their shops or undercutting

them. This negative state of affairs is intensifying in the light of the new Argentinian government.

Rio de Janeiro is perhaps the most hostile environment of these cities with respect to police persecution and brutality. Although some forms of vending in public space (*Mate* and *Globo* beach vendors) have been declared as protected cultural practices and added to the city's register of intangible cultural property (UNESCO 2012), vendors cannot conduct their jobs with dignity or without fear of persecution. Municipal Law 1.876/1992, and Decree 29.881/2008 stipulate, among others, that vendors must have licences to sell in public space. The merchandise of vendors without a licence will be decommissioned and will not be returned unless vendors present proof of purchase within three days.

Yet even if vendors have licences, Rio's municipal government has confronted street commerce on several occasions, including questioning vendors' proof of purchase documentation. The use of state violence against vendors in public spaces is common, supposedly to end urban "disorder". While on the one hand the Brazilian government increasingly imposes a model of micro entrepreneurship to transform them into citizens, overall there is great absence of public policies for vendors' social inclusion.

Recommendations

Organisations such as the WIEGO and StreetNet International continue to lobby governments in the Global South to ensure that vendors are not criminalised to work for their right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families. Nevertheless, much work

remains to be done to understand and support their everyday struggles to sustain their livelihoods. VPS is an occupational cultural practice which should be defended and vindicated. It creates an opportunity to generate an income where there is none. It is high time it was protected and to bring justice to the thousands of workers who continuously contribute to their respective national economies despite being denied the right to work.

Specific recommendations include:

- Create an official register of vendors in public space in collaboration with workers' associations and syndicates with a view to creating occupational security and maintain health and safety standards.
- Legally secure vendors' use of public space to facilitate their stability and reduce their uncertainty. Support interventions, such as access to credit and financial training, may become irrelevant if vendors' right to sell in public space or at a particular public location has not been secured.
- Acknowledge that VPS is a prevalent cultural practice in Latin America that it helps to connect marginalised workers with one another, and mainstream society, part of its social fabric, and that public space constitutes vendors' workspace. In view of this, it is timely to consider the 'gaps' in the law that may – or may not – need to be addressed to support the recognition of traditional cultural expressions, protect vendors and ensure their livelihoods.
- Ensure local regulatory frameworks are understood by all stakeholders: vendors,

municipal officials, the police, local businesses, citizens as well as tourists and/or other visitors, and achieved through an effective publicising campaign.

- Consider the effectiveness of the provision of licences to work in fixed locations as they may not be the most appropriate mechanism to support vendors. Examples from the Uruguaiana Camelódromo, Lapa market (Rio de Janeiro) and Feria del Adoquín (Buenos Aires) show that many licensed vendors who lease shops merely used them as storage and, where possible set up stalls on the pavement as customers do not come into the market due to perceived security issues and/or fluctuations in tourism. Furthermore, the low wages typically earned by vendors mean that they often find it difficult to pay the rent for their stalls and desert them.
- Make equipment services available to vendors in support of their health and well-being, such as sun protective clothing, this includes hats, wrap around fitted sunglasses and where appropriate parasols, free access to toilets in commercial spaces, free medical tests at least once a year, offer relevant medical care, and – if their work requires water or electricity (e.g., food stalls) – refill and charging points are throughout the city centre.
- Offer training in digital skills with a view to maintaining their sustenance when they cannot work. Examples from fieldwork conducted in Buenos Aires show how some vendors set up Instagram profiles to sell their merchandise during COVID.

- Encourage entrepreneurial training to create and commercialise vendors' own products. Buenos Aires offers two exemplary cases of vendors' collective agency in this respect.
- Stop police violence and brutality and ensure mechanisms for reporting such incidents should be clear, transparent to all and regularly monitored.

Credits

This brief was written by Rosina Marquez-Reiter. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Centre for the Study of Global Development or The Open University.

Further reading

Márquez Reiter, Rosina, Elizabeth Manrique, and Marina Cantarutti. 2023. 'Toward a Multimodal Pragmatics Analysis of Ambulant Vending on a Buenos Aires Trainline'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 210 (June): 122–42.

Márquez Reiter, Rosina, and Elizabeth Manrique. in press. 'Keeping the pitch on track: spatiotemporal challenges in ambulant vending on a Buenos Aires trainline'. *Multilingua*

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