

Criminalisation of street vendors | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi March 21, 2022

Street vendors, the vast majority of which constitute migrants in search of opportunities, lead a life of precarity

the writer is a research fellow at the pakistan institute of development economics he tweets [abbasmoosvi](#)

The writer is a Research Fellow at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. He tweets [@AbbasMoosvi](#)

With gradual industrialisation, countries in the Global South have experienced rapidly expanding informal economies, characterised by spontaneity, low levels of regulation, long work hours, and perpetual improvisation. Street vendors are front and centre of this process. In Pakistan, little to no attention has been paid to this crucial trade from a policy perspective — something that the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics has recently sought to address.

Cities are engines of growth, centres of cultural exchange, and sources of entertainment and recreation to people from all walks of life. In Pakistan, urban management/planning seems to have remained largely unchanged from the top-down, exclusionary, and decontextualised approach characteristic of colonial yesteryears. The ubiquity of gated housing societies, all-too-frequent ‘anti-encroachment’ drives, and infrastructural arrangements conceived of predominantly to facilitate private motor vehicles (rather than people) are just a few cases in point.

For street vendors, the vast majority of which constitute migrants from rural areas in search of economic opportunities, this has meant a life of precarity — with the threat of violence, intimidation, and harassment rising in direct proportion to the affluence of the regions they find themselves in. At a broad level, this is indicative of the privatisation of what was once public space. Tradesmen are generally perceived as ‘rude’, ‘filthy’, ‘dangerous’, contributing to ‘congestion’, and so on: all justifications advanced by elite interests, prompting authorities to clamp down, destroy stalls, and confiscate equipment.

This strategy has never succeeded in precluding vendors. The reason for that is not exactly perseverance on their part, although that is undoubtedly present, but simple economics: vendors bridge gaps in the market. They offer durable goods and services at affordable rates that citizens choose to purchase. Over time, a plethora of information, activities, incentives and stakeholders amalgamate into this ecosystem: engaging with one another for mutual benefit. Arbitrarily deciding upon a ‘policy’, in other words, without involving the actual players in this complex trade, is always bound to be a recipe for disaster.

In 2020, researchers at PIDE conducted a survey of street vendors in Islamabad’s G-9 Markaz in which everything from origins and living arrangements to demographics and operational strategy were documented. It was discovered that over 90% were migrants from poor, rural backgrounds; most were between the ages of 18-50; around 3 in 10 were completely illiterate; and the majority lived in close proximity to their workplace.

Most concerning was that the vast majority of respondents claimed to have been evicted at some point in the past, an event that took up to three weeks to fully recover from. What’s more, not a

single vendor had formal approval — in the form of a licence or authorisation from city authorities — to operate. A fair number of them were functioning on the basis of monthly fees paid to shopkeepers in exchange for informal permissions to be stationed outside of their property, the dependence on whom made them privy to stress and physical illnesses which they could hardly afford medical interventions for.

PIDE has been closely working with the government, city authorities, and the Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad since March of 2021 — a joint venture under the umbrella of the Ehsaas Street Hawkers' Initiative, to facilitate the street vending trade, formalised through an MoU and draft legislation to demarcate the specific role of city authorities, NGOs, vendor associations, and more. This has blossomed into the Ehsaas Rehriiban program, which as of January 2022 covered a total of 177 vendors and generated Rs3.5 million in licence fees, Rs17.5 million in capital investment, and Rs11.5 million in cart loans — among other successes.

These are important initial steps in what will undoubtedly be a long and arduous mission to transform cities into vibrant, inclusive spaces that place ordinary people at their forefront rather than bowing to the whims of a small propertied class. The war on our enterprising urban poor must end.

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