

## Street Vending - A Sustainable Livelihood Strategy for the urban poor?

Keywords: Street Vending, Varanasi, Informal Economy, Vulnerability, Sustainable Livelihood

### 1 Introduction - The informal economy

Due to massive rural-urban migration, many urban settlements in India are growing without control. Large numbers of people are moving to the cities searching for work and the hope for better livelihoods. The urban economy is not growing as fast as its population does so that many cities are characterised by massive underemployment and poverty. In the past, a wide spectrum of modernisation strategies and employment programmes did not result in the generation of sufficient job opportunities for the masses and the promises of an automatic “trickle-down-effect” were not fulfilled (Singh 1996, 15).



*Fig. 4.1: A Varanasi street vendor after preparing his cart in the morning (Brauneis 2015)*

The urban poor are usually neglected and ignored by the public authorities and have to come up with their own solutions to survive within the urban economy. Without any support from the state, the informal economy is providing employment, income and essential services and goods for the urban poor where formal employment and public services cannot meet local demands (Hemmer/Mannel 1988, 298). Low levels of education and skills can be reasons for not finding formal employment, but there are also a lot of workers who have the required skills but are not able to find a proper job within the formal economy. In addition, a high number of workers have lost their jobs in the wake of rationalising processes in large parts of the formal economy. All these people are trying to make their living through informal jobs (Bhowmik 2003, 1543).

Informal labour has been part of scientific discussions for decades. In 1972 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) defined the term “informal sector” for the first time. Accordingly, the sector was defined as small-scale, self-employed activities with a low level of organisation and technology with the main objective to generate at least a minimum of employment and income (Escher 1999, 658). Usually these are not properly recognised by the public authorities and bear numerous potentials and risks. On the one hand the access to informal activities is easy due to the lacking control of public authorities and the minimal necessary skills. On the other hand they lack any support or protection from the government and are usually not offering any sustainable solutions, but

only daily survival (Escher 1999, 658). The concept has been rethought in the last decade and nowadays the ILO is talking about an “informal economy” instead of an “informal sector” to make clear that there are not two strictly separable sectors. The focus has shifted from characteristics of enterprises to the nature of employment relationships. In this context, those employment relationships lacking formal contracts, worker benefits and social protection are categorised as part of the informal economy. The significance of the informal workforce in India is immense. It represents an estimated number of 370 million workers which accounts for 93 % of the total workforce and this proportion is even growing (Chen 2005, 10).

## **2 Research Framework**

### **2.1 Research objective**

The principal aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the street food vending business in Varanasi in particular and to stimulate the ongoing debate on working conditions in the informal economy. The main food markets and the importance of street vendors in the city’s food supply are analysed. Concerning the street vendors in particular the main research goals included the gathering of general socio-demographic characteristics and the classification of purchasing and selling strategies. By identifying these aspects the question can be addressed whether this part of the informal economy is an important livelihood strategy for many Varanasi citizens or whether it should rather be considered a niche strategy for a very specific group of people. Analysing the impact of informality and its political environment shall contribute to a better understanding of the situation. Another question that guided the research process was if street vending is able to provide a secure livelihood.

### **2.2 Methodological approach**

During a two weeks period of field research interviews with street vendors in different parts of the city were carried out. Almost every street vending business starts at one of the main food markets in Varanasi as the majority of the vendors are mobile petty traders. Hence, the initial contact points were exactly those markets. Participatory observations of interactions on the markets and exploratory interviews with wholesalers and street vendors served as an initial entry point to the field. The different characteristics of the markets were analysed, price fluctuations recorded and the range of products assessed. The exploratory interviews of street vendors at these markets provided a first impression about the organisation and logistics of their work. The important links between the street vendors and the wholesale markets became apparent. A questionnaire survey with a randomised choice of respondents at different places in the city provided the basis for analysis. The field survey started at the markets, and interviews were conducted while the street vendors purchased their products and prepared their carts. During these periods the respondents were very busy and so the questions had to be chosen with care. The questionnaire contained ten questions about socio-demographic situations and economic strategies. and sixty of those interviews were conducted at six different locations. In order to localise the coverage of the street vending business within the city an additional 100

short interviews were carried out asking about place of residence, living conditions, choice of markets and selling areas. These provide additional information about the ways and routes of the mobile petty trade in Varanasi. Finally, participant observations paired with a qualitative and biographical interview with a single street vendor and his household provided a deeper insight into the life of a Varanasi street vendor.

### 2.3 Analytical framework

To answer the questions why a street vendor has been choosing this business to provide a living for him and his household and whether street vending could act as a secure livelihood strategy the Sustainable Livelihood Framework was applied as the analytical framework. This holistic approach enables to analyse connections between the assets of street vendors, the institutional framework,

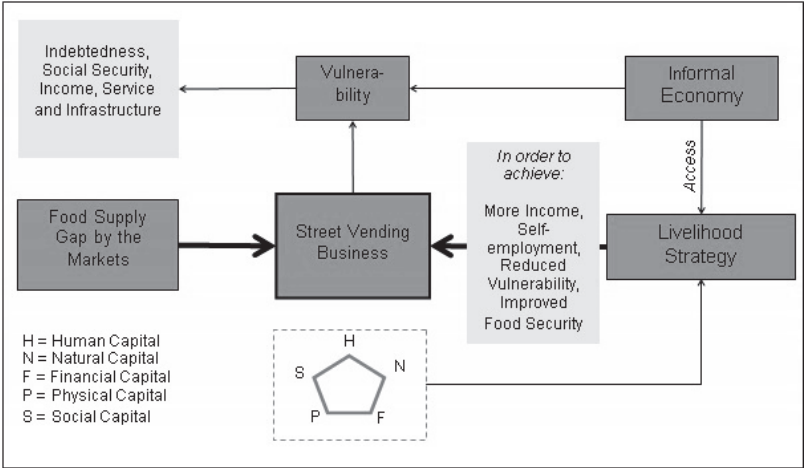


Fig. 4.2: Analytical framework (Source: own design, based on Rauch 2012, 338)

livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes (Rauch 2012, 338). The underlying assumption was that street vending itself is a livelihood strategy which is chosen in order to make for a sufficient and secure living. The modified analytical framework displayed in Figure 4.2 puts the street vendors with their respective capital endowments in the centre. Following Rauch (2012, 338) each individual has a specific allocation of human capital (knowledge, health, skills), natural capital (soil, water, vegetation), financial capital (savings, loans, other stating cash), physical capital (infrastructure, transportation, means of production) and social capital (social networks, social fall-back systems). However, the trader’s decision to work in this business is not solely based on his/her capital endowment. Additionally, economic demand for the business has to be persistent in order to make street vending an attractive livelihood strategy. Such demand can be induced by the insufficiency of other components of the Varanasi food supply chain. For instance, the food supply gaps by local markets may induce a street vendor to choose mobile petty trade as a livelihood strategy in order to achieve higher income and improved food security. The informal economy on the other hand provides access to such strategies. However, it also increases vulnerability risks for the street vendor with regard to social security, income safety and possible indebtedness.

### 3 Research Outcomes

#### 3.1 The Role and Importance of the Street Vending Business in Varanasi

For many Varanasi citizens fresh vegetables and fruits belong to the daily diet, making it necessary to provide a steady and affordable supply of these kinds of comestible goods. For that matter, there are three main food markets located in the north, in the south and in the city centre respectively. The Pahria Market in the north is the largest of the three and unlike the other two markets is owned by the government. Its main function is the large scale provision of local wholesalers with comestible goods for further distribution. Consequently, retail business with private costumers is rather unusual as they require much smaller trade volumes for their daily demand. The Sundarpur Market is located in the south of Varanasi in the corresponding area of Sundarpur. The Chanduaa Market can be found in the city center in the area of Chaitganj close to the Varanasi Junction. Compared to the Pahria Market the latter two markets mainly serve to supply the local population with less emphasis on the wholesale business. Still, depending on the food article, a significant share of the conducted transactions involves large quantities which raise the question of how individual daily demand is met. For the discussion of the informal economy and the local street vending business the markets of Sundarpur and Chanduaa are of great interest as they represent the points where the day-to-day business of many petty traders starts. Figure 4.3 shows the localisation of these two markets within Varanasi. The Pahria Market appeared to be of little importance for the street vending business because of its general focus on the wholesale business. Further discussion will therefore concentrate on the role of the Sundarpur Market and Chanduaa Market in the Varanasi food supply chain. Despite the possibility of retail business at those markets a vast number of the people living in Varanasi have to satisfy their own demand for fresh produce differently for two reasons. Firstly, the population is quite spread out so that not everyone lives within walking distance of the markets. Yet, taking different measures of transportation would lead to higher costs, which are unbearable for many people in Varanasi, especially the urban poor. Secondly, the markets carry on a wholesale business for specific food articles such as potatoes, tomatoes and onions. However, for the daily diet mostly smaller amounts are demanded by the customers. They often lack financial resources and means of transportation for bigger transactions. It therefore becomes apparent that the markets alone do not sufficiently serve the demand for fresh produce by the population. This observation shows that there must be other mechanisms at work when it comes to the local food supply. One such mechanism is the street vending business. Street vendors in Varanasi constitute for an integral part of the day-to-day food trading business, compensating for the excess supply provided by the wholesale markets with regard to the daily food demand of Varanasi citizens.



Fig. 4.3: Trading area of the street vendors in contrast to the markets (Source: own design, N = 100)

To illustrate this interpretation, Figure 4.3 additionally shows the dimension of the street vendors' distribution area in correlation to the market where they initially bought their trading goods. It seems that comestible goods are distributed within extensive areas in the vicinity of the markets. In that sense, they function as intermediaries between markets

and private customers while breaking down the wholesale offers of the markets to meet local demand for smaller quantities. Also, they surmount the problem of increased transportation costs on the individual level by implicitly increasing the reach of the markets themselves. Overall, it can be concluded that street vendors represent an important part of the Varanasi food supply chain for a large segment of the resident population.

### 3.2 Characteristics of Varanasi Street Vendors - A Local Survey

In order to illustrate the importance of street vending businesses as livelihood strategies for a large number of Varanasi citizens the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with 60 local street vendors provide important insights. The examination of socio-demographic and economic characteristics as well as general market entrance requirements shows the functioning of the informal economy in practice.

#### 3.2.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Street Vendors

In general, the street vending business demands good levels of physical fitness. The vendors purchase up to 200 kg of fresh produce at the markets and move them around in their equally heavy carts, often for time periods of eight hours or more. Accordingly, enquiries have revealed that the business is dominated by young and middle-aged men. Female street vendors mostly work in the evening, selling the remaining products that their husbands, brothers or sons did not manage to sell during the day. Still, they represent a minority among the street vendors. Additionally, the interviews showed that about three quarters of all vendors are younger than 45 years with 59% being aged between 25 and 44 years (Fig. 4.4). Nevertheless, people of all age groups can be found among the petty traders showing its relevance throughout the whole life cycle of respective Varanasi citizens. Even teenagers own their private cart, younger children support their parents working stationary at the end of the day and sometimes the elderly of the family still have to contribute to the family income by working as street vendors.

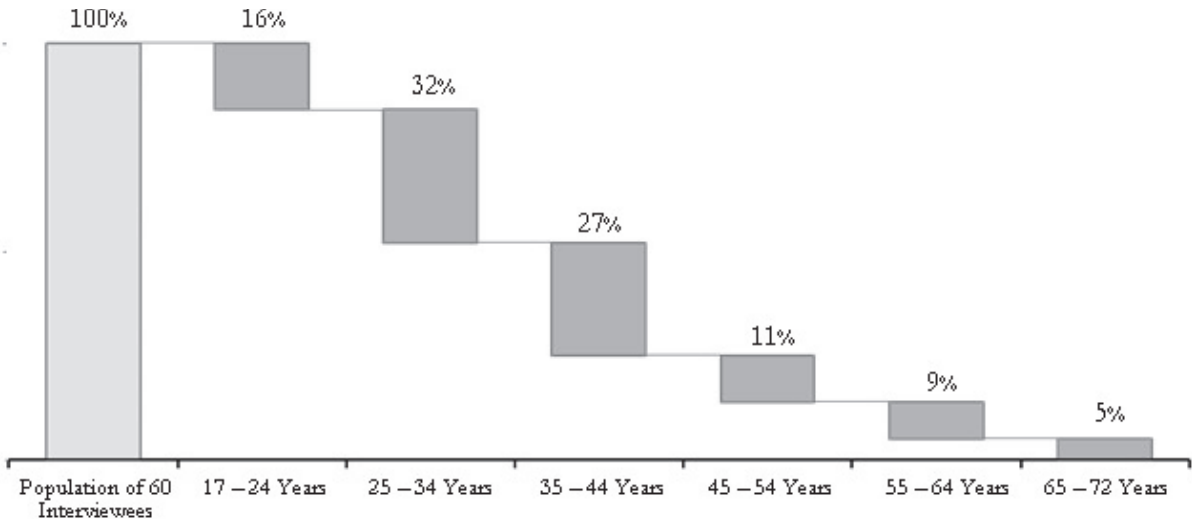


Fig. 4.4: Shares of age groups of Varanasi street vendors in years (Source: own design, N = 60)  
 Note: The age groups are categorized in ten-year intervals. For the youngest and oldest group the lowest and highest reported ages respectively, mark the interval limit.

Concerning educational attainments it has become clear from the responses that the street vending business does not require any formal education. Although 65% could verify some kind of school education, 35% claimed to be illiterate. The average years of schooling in the study sample amounts to 8.5 years which considering a nationwide average of 4.4 years in 2013<sup>13</sup> indicates that the answers to this particular question should be treated with care. Thirdly, interviews show that mobile petty trade appears to be quite promising for migrant workers in Varanasi; 42% of interlocutors migrated for economic purposes to Varanasi and started working in the street vending business. With regard to the remaining 58% it was found that many petty traders inherited the business of their parents implying rather low intergenerational social mobility in the street vending business. Additional results reveal that the informal economy is neither dominated by any religious group nor specific caste, further broadening the spectrum of possible participants. However, the more profitable wholesale activities in the food sector of Varanasi are dominated by the social group referring to themselves as *sunkar*.

Overall, it can be stated that the socio-demographic characteristics of Varanasi street vendors are very diverse. People with many different backgrounds and people of all age groups work in this segment of the urban informal economy. Hence, it appears to be a livelihood strategy for a large share of the Varanasi population.

### 3.2.2 Economic Characteristics of Street Vendors

Similarly to the socio-demographic diversity of mobile petty traders in Varanasi, survey findings show a variety of applied business models. The street vending business is highly competitive and every participant has to find his/her specific niche market and sales strategy in order to sustain a successful business. Individual sales strategies depend on the choice of products. Whereas some street vendors offer a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables in order to reach more customers, others narrow their product selection in order to gain purchasing price advantages. Mobility patterns play an important role in the determination of the sales strategy too. Table 4.1 displays a classification of observed mobility patterns of street vendors in Varanasi. It becomes apparent that the petty traders differ widely in terms of their degree of mobility that is determined by individual socio-demographic characteristics. For instance, new market entrants and the physically fit tend to exhibit more mobility throughout their day-to-day practices, walking along more or less fixed routes for the whole day trying to reach as many different customers as possible. More established vendors who managed to acquire some kind of customer base during their business career focus on supplying their goods to their individual customer network. Most of the mobile or semi-mobile traders become stationary in the afternoon and early evening sometimes receiving support by family members. Elderly and physically challenged petty traders show much less mobility as they try to sell their products at one particular spot or by changing their position from time to time during the day.

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2013): Human Development Reports: Mean years of schooling (of adults) (years). <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/mean-years-schooling-adults-years#footnote> (Date 21.06.2015).

Tab. 4.1: Classification of street vendors' mobility patterns (Source: own design)

| Type           | Characteristic  | Mainly done by                        |
|----------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Mobile         | The street vendors keep moving the whole day and make short stops at hot spots such as temples and street junctions                                     | Beginners, youngsters, physically fit |
| Semi-mobile    | The street vendors focus on building and maintaining individual customer networks. They mostly sell their product at the doorstep to familiar customers | Established vendors of all age groups |
| Semi-permanent | The street vendors serve certain localities. They only commute between few places. The knowledge of profitable hot spots is necessary                   | Elderly, physically challenged        |
| Permanent      | The street vendors are visiting one selling point and remain there during the day   | Woman, elderly, physically impaired   |

In addition to diverse business models, Varanasi street vendors also differ in their financial endowments during their day-to-day practices. The investment pattern displayed in Figure 4.5 shows a variety of daily investments in fresh produce by the traders, ranging from below 1,000 Rupees up to over 3,000 Rupees per day. Yet, a significant share of the vendors in the study sample invests between 1,500 Rupees and 3,000 Rupees for their daily trading goods. Accordingly, profits range between 100 Rupees and somewhat over 400 Rupees per day as is evident from the profit diagram (top right). An analysis of collected micro data reveals that irrespective of the chosen sales strategy almost all street vendors yield a return of roughly 10%. However, the numbers should be taken with some caution as information about profits and income is difficult to come by anywhere. Limiting problems of personal interviews such as response heaping are widely known (Holbrook et al. 2014, 1) and may affect the validity of interpretations. Nonetheless, it can be stated that the applied business strategies do not exert crucial influence on the profitability of the street vendors' day-to-day practices. Additionally, the choice of sales strategy does not seem to impact the work load of mobile petty traders in Varanasi to a large extent (Fig. 4.5, bottom left). A majority of 75% works between eight and twelve hours per day. Lastly, it should be noted that the street vending business is not only a livelihood strategy for the petty traders themselves, but is of great importance for close relatives and household members as well. The dependency pattern in Figure 4.5 (bottom right) shows that all participants in the survey have relatives depending on the street vending business. An analysis of risks and threats imposed by the business therefore involves a larger population than the study sample might initially imply.



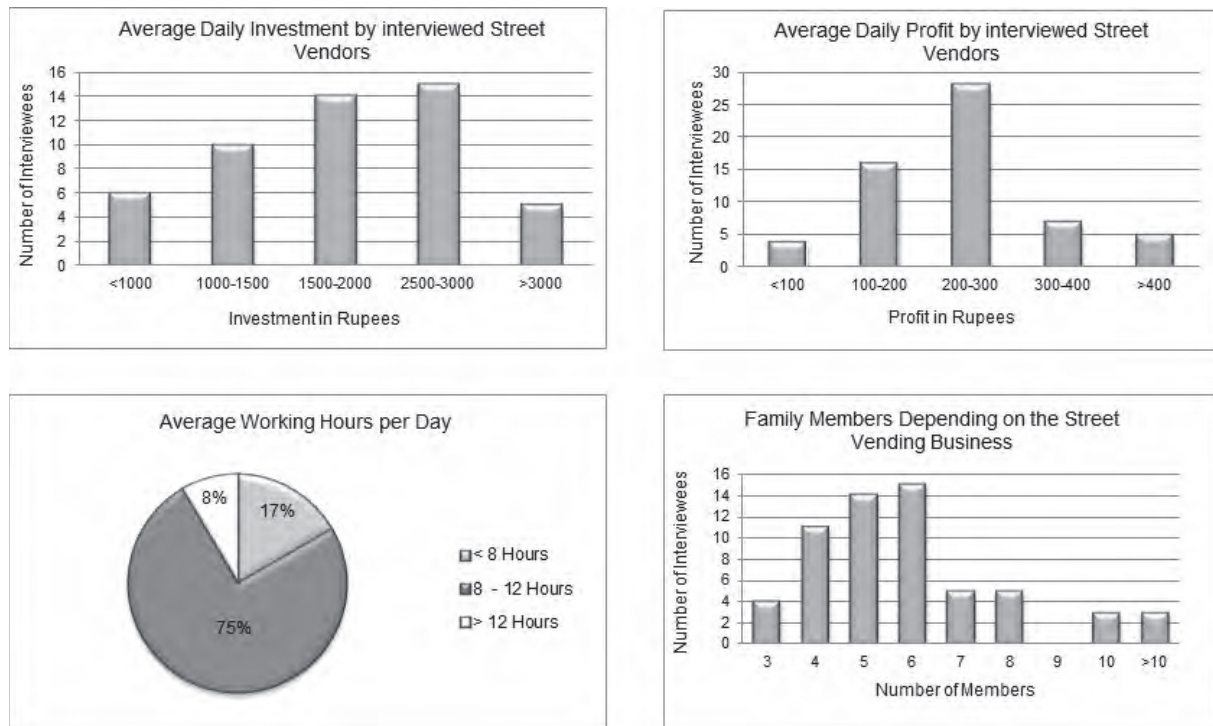


Fig. 4.5: Economic Characteristics of Street Vendors (Source: own design, N = 60)

### 3.2.3 Entrance Barriers of the Street Vending Market

The market entrance barriers are supposed to reveal important hindrances for street vending contributions to the livelihoods of many Varanasi citizens. Easy market entrance increases its attractiveness for possible participants, thereby also increasing competitiveness and the vulnerability of market actors. Based on the work of on Etzoldt and Bohle (2009, 16) who analysed the street food business in Dhaka, Bangladesh<sup>14</sup>, six findings that have distinct implications for the entrance barriers to the street vending market in Varanasi can be found:

1. The physical aspect of the street vendors' work requires physical capability.
2. The business does require limited financial capital. Market entrees can buy a basic cart for about 4.000 Rupees which opens up the market to locals and migrant workers alike.
3. Accordingly the vending equipment is in most cases owned by the traders themselves and they do not have to cope with on-going costs such as rents and interest payments.
4. Street vendors are self-employed and often receive help by their close relatives who also depend on the income generated by the business.
5. The business does not require any formal education. Naturally, basic arithmetic skills are beneficial, but most skills can be learned on the job.
6. The demand for fresh products requests a rapid turnover of the trading goods. This implies low short term investments, so that the costs are kept at a glance.

<sup>14</sup> Etzoldt and Bohle (2009: 16) state that „an analysis of the street food system can provide important insights into the dynamic relation of formal and informal interaction in Dhaka and beyond.” Their methodological approach directly involves the analysis of market entrance barriers which is why their work provides a useful foundation for our discussion.

It becomes apparent that the market has low entrance barriers. Put differently, it can be stated that the street vending market does not require any huge endowment with specific kinds of capital. New market entrees need cash to buy a cart and the first batch of trading goods. In terms of human capital, new market entrees need to be physically fit in order to move around the heavy loads. They do neither have the in-depth knowledge of profitable hotspots nor do they have a customer base which they can rely on, basically forcing them to apply a very mobile mobility pattern as suggested in Table 4.1. Endowments with physical and social capital are no precondition to enter the market, although they benefit the profitability of the business itself. Customer networks and better trading equipment open up new sales strategies increasing the flexibility of the respective street vendors. Overall, the street vending market is anything but a closed shop. Starting a new business is quite easy which opens up the mobile petty trade as a livelihood strategy for a large segment of the population.

**3.3 Vulnerability within the Street Vending Business**

The analysis of the street vending business in Varanasi is an impressive proof of the immense absorptive capacity of the informal economy. Previously it was shown how informality enables a wide range of people to make a living in an economy which is essential to the urban economy and therefore guarantees a constant flow of customers. Despite these advantages it has become apparent that working in this business is not creating a secure environment for those who rely on it and bears a lot of risks and threats. Street vendors in Varanasi suffer from a highly vulnerable situation which will be elaborated in line with a discussion about vulnerability as influenced by internal and external factors (Fig. 4.6).



Fig. 4.6: Vulnerability of street vendors (Source: own design)

Potential external shocks like illnesses, necessary and unexpected financial burdens or low daily profits can always occur and catapults the vendor and his family into a challenging situation. The analysis of the economic profile showed that the vendors are able to make a meagre living, but no real savings as their daily profit varies between 100 and 400 rupees on which up to ten, sometimes even more, household members depend. The age structure of workers active in the business showed that the households depend on every possible income. The financial vulnerability is immense. The vendors usually lack any kind of security which would protect them in times of financial demands. The total lack of any supportive measures of the government is a clear disadvantage of the work in the informal economy and leaves the vendor completely dependent on his individual support network.

### **3.3.1 Depending on Street Vending - The Case of Loku Bind and his Family**

The case study of a street vending household exemplifies many of the survey findings. Loku Bind is the head of the household who grew up in Jaunpur, a rural district 60 km north from Varanasi. Today he lives in the Durgakund District in central Varanasi. His household share a small house with three of his cousins and their respective families. One of his cousins works as a street vendor too, while the others work as an ice cream sellers and a tailor. All in all sixteen people (the four cousins, three of their wives, the mother of one of the cousins, and their eight children) are living in the tiny house which is split into four flats and made of stone. The flats are not all the same, but all are split into two parts. One room is mainly used to store things like the bicycle or unsold vegetables. The other room is some kind of a living room where the family sleeps and cooks. Loku, his wife and their four children share a room which is barely ten square meters in size and a wooden bed which is not even two meters wide. The house is the property of the family and they do not have to pay rent. Loku's father had worked as a street vendor and Loku helped him when he was a child. When he got married he started his own business at the age of twenty. Due to his low level of education he saw no real choice but following his father's business as it was the only way of earning money he knew. His human, social and financial capital as well as the easy access to the business let him to choose this profession. He is working as a street vendor for more than fifteen years now and does not see any alternative due to his lack of professionalism. He works six days a week and makes an average profit of 300 - 400 Rupees per day on which the six family members solely depend. The share of income which does not have to be reinvested is spent on food and the education of the children. At the end of the day Loku is not able to make any savings from his earnings, a fact which leads to his extreme financial vulnerability as one of the main problems faced by most of the street vendors. Some years ago one of his sons broke his foot. The necessary medical treatment of 72.000 Rupees had to be paid by the family. This amount of money is equal to the profit of 200 days of work. This situation was solved with the help of family members and friends who lend money without asking for high rates of interest. The family's social capital gave way to procure financial capital and to overcome this emergency situation. This case shows the high importance of social capital which can reduce the vulnerability of informal work. Without this support the family would have been forced to take a credit from a moneylender and pay a high rate of interest.

The missing support from governmental institutions is a striking disadvantage of the informal economy. There have been calls for effective policies improving the situation of millions of workers who depend on informal incomes and are left in their miserable situation. These aspects are addressed through a discussion on policy-making in India with regard to street vending.

### **3.4 Policy**

The necessity of improving the situation of street vendors has been highlighted by activists, NGOs and scientists for decades. The Government of India reacted by appointing a National Task Force on Street Vendors. This Task Force prepared the "Draft National Policy on Street Vendors" which was published by the Ministry of Urban Development and

Poverty Alleviation in 2003 (Bhowmik 2003, 1543ff.). This national policy was regarded as a landmark for the urban informal economy as it gave hope for legal recognition and improving working conditions for those who are making their living in this business. It demands that the role which street vendors play in economy and society must find recognition. Hawking should be properly regulated and street vendors should be part of urban planning. The policy criticises the license system which should legalise street vending but is not improving the vendors' situation in reality. Instead, the policy recommends a simple registration of street vendors. It also supports the idea of hawking and no-hawking zones but strengthens the vendors' rights to participate in the decision-making. Another objective is to promote workers organisations which would be the basis of credit, social security and insurance programmes (Bhowmik 2003, 1543-1546).

The research policy network WIEGO developed a working policy framework which should increase the visibility and voice of the informal workforce worldwide (Chen 2005, 8). This framework strengthens the necessity of insurance coverage as protection against illnesses, disability or old age. It also highlights the necessity of workers' organisation and their representation in policy-making and rule-setting. Policy-making must be participatory and inclusive, involving informal workers and their organisations and as many different stakeholders as possible. There will not be any successful policy without including all relevant stakeholders (Chen 2005, 8-9).

The fieldwork among street vendors showed that none of these progressive ideas were implemented in Varanasi. More than a decade after the publication of the national policy, street vendors are still suffering from harassment by the authorities. Nearly every single vendor reported about negative experiences with policemen acting disrespectful and even taking from the vendor's products without paying. There is no organisation which would represent the interests of these workers. Services from the government which would support street vendors are totally missing and their activities are not regulated or legalised. The license system which was already criticised in the policy of 2003 is still in practice and still not working properly.

#### **4 Mobile vending: insecure livelihoods without public support**

The study proved that the street vending business represents a livelihood strategy for a large share of the population with different socio-economic backgrounds and works as an entry point for those who do not find formal employment. Street vending is easily accessible and does not require insurmountable preconditions. However, it also became clear that the street vending business is very insecure and exposed to high vulnerability conditions. The financial vulnerability seems to be the most urgent problem for most street vendors as the income usually does not exceed the costs of daily survival. It was also proved that the street vendors play a primary role within the city's society and economy as they offer a service which is in every day demand by the broad population all over the city. Therefore street vending plays an important role for urban food security.

Unfortunately mobile trade does not find any recognition by the authorities. The vendors are still totally neglected or even harassed, while their business is continuously illegalised.

Governmental attempts to improve the working and living conditions of street vendors in India have not resulted in sustainably satisfying solutions. The license system which in reality is not working at all and hence does not contribute to a legalisation process is still the latest governmental attempt to solve the situation. Any attempts to find solutions by including the vendors in some kind of participatory process such as discussions about hawking- and no-hawking-zones are completely missing in Varanasi.

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