



The utterly unforeseen livelihood shock: COVID-19 and street vendor coping mechanisms in Hanoi, Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang

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Well before COVID-19, municipal governments in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos were enacting policies that made street vendor livelihoods increasingly challenging. Yet, vending continues to support tens of thousands of urban households in these three countries. Vendors are often rural-to-urban migrants lacking the formal education skills necessary to secure 'modern' urban employment, and despite ongoing government disapproval, vending provides a relatively low entry-cost opportunity for them to support their household's financial needs. Now add to this complex situation the livelihood shocks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as additional government restrictions across these three countries to mitigate the pandemic's impacts. Drawing on interviews with 61 street vendors in Hanoi, Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang, and rooted in conceptual discussions regarding urban livelihood shocks, we examine how street vendors, especially rural-to-urban migrants, experienced and responded to the 'first wave' of COVID-19, including additional government-imposed constraints on their livelihoods and mobility. We find that a diverse range of responses helped some—but not all—vendors overcome the initial shocks to their livelihoods and household responsibilities. Yet, we also note that the pandemic's onset altered urban-rural connections and mobility, with many vendors who turned to formerly dependable rural-urban ties for support facing unexpected barriers.

Keywords: street vendors, informal economy, Southeast Asia, urban livelihoods, COVID-19, livelihood shocks

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Introduction

Since the emergence of COVID-19, a growing body of scholarship has set out to interpret how the pandemic has impacted vulnerable inhabitants of cities in the Global South, particularly those employed in the informal economy (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020; Omobowale *et al.*, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2020; Azeez *et al.*, 2021). Such studies have indicated that, given their lack of social protection and economic security, informal economy workers have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including the impacts from government-implemented lockdowns and movement restrictions (Komin *et al.*, 2020; Unni, 2020; Bassier *et al.*, 2021). While some informal workers have continued to make a livelihood, albeit while often struggling in numerous ways, others have found their livelihoods completely stalled or banned, resulting in rapidly rising rates of poverty and food insecurity (Omobowale *et al.*, 2020). Such circumstances and inequities have also produced important health concerns for many informal workers that will have lasting impacts (WHO, 2020). Moreover, there is growing evidence that women informal workers have experienced the stresses of the pandemic most acutely, with the pandemic exacerbating existing gendered disparities (Chakraborty, 2020; Azeez *et al.*, 2021; Moussié, 2021).

Many scholars have therefore called for governments to strengthen social security measures including access to childcare, healthcare and economic support beyond those with formal employment (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020; Azeez *et al.*, 2021; Bassier *et al.*, 2021; Thakur *et al.*, 2021).

We seek to contribute to early findings regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on urban informal economy workers in the Global South, with a case study of the consequences for street vendor livelihoods in three Southeast Asian cities. Our aim is to better understand the livelihood impacts and coping strategies of rural-to-urban migrant street vendors during and immediately after the initial COVID-19 outbreak and associated lockdown measures in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos in early 2020. We have selected three cities with important street vendor populations but contrasting total resident numbers to locate our study, namely Hanoi, Vietnam (metropolitan area population 8 million, General Statistics Office Vietnam, 2019), Chiang Mai, Thailand (metropolitan area population 960 000, Department of Provincial Administration, 2019), and Luang Prabang, Laos (district population 90 000, JICA, 2016). Given a number of similarities in authoritarian political rule across these three countries at the moment, with a ‘flawed democracy’ in Thailand (EIU, 2020), and Vietnam and Lao PDR being one-party socialist states, we also wanted to compare political contexts, state responses and state-vendor relations. Our main focus is on rural-to-urban migrant street vendors as previous research in the region has noted that these vendors often—albeit not always—have more tenuous access to city streets for their livelihoods in comparison to long-term urban residents (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). Specifically, we ask: how did migrant street vendors in these three cities find their livelihoods impacted by both the pandemic’s first wave and government responses? What were the main coping strategies of these vendors? And have vendors experienced changes in rural-urban relations due, for example, to fears regarding more transient populations?

Next, we detail our methodology before outlining the conceptual framing for this study. This framework builds on the notion of ‘livelihood shocks’ from the livelihood literature. While much of this work to date has been based in rural settings in the Global South, we draw key ideas from both this literature and from a smaller corpus of research focusing on urban livelihood shocks. We also focus on recent work highlighting street vendor diversity, agency and tactics with a spotlight on our case study locales. This combination allows us to call attention to the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and changing government regulations on vendor livelihood options, and to tease apart vendor responses. We contextualize our study by briefly documenting the pandemic’s arrival in the three case study locales and the immediate political responses which led to restrictions on vendor mobility and trade in each city. We subsequently investigate the impacts on vendor livelihoods and their coping mechanisms, while documenting rising inequalities within street vendor populations. We consider how some vendors navigated state surveillance and control to continue trading, and the difficulties vendors simultaneously faced when attempting to access state support. We then interpret the changes in rural-urban mobilities and social acceptance in rural migrant-sending villages, before concluding with reflections on how local governments could better support vendor livelihoods in the current circumstances, and suggested avenues for future research.

Methodology

This research is based on 61 semi-structured interviews with street vendors: 31 in Hanoi; 20 in Chiang Mai; and 10 in Luang Prabang. In each case, over 70 per cent were migrant vendors (23 in Hanoi, 18 in Chiang Mai and seven in Luang Prabang), with

Table 1. Details of interviewees.

	Total interviewee numbers	Sex		Age Group			Place of Origin		Ethnicity [†]
		Men	Women	<30	30-60	>60	Migrant Vendor	From the City	Lowland / upland ethnic groups
Hanoi	31	3	28	2	24	5	23	8	100% Kinh or other lowland groups
Chiang Mai	20	11	9	1	14	5	18	2	80% ethnic Thai or other lowland groups; 20% upland ethnic minorities
Luang Prabang	10	1	9	2	7	1	7	3	60% ethnic Lao; 40% ethnic minority Khmu

[†] While acknowledging the limitations of this approach, we have grouped ethnicity by upland/lowland groups because—when street vendors are being targeted along ethnic lines in these locales—this tends to be an important axis of discrimination for differential access to state support (Turner & Oswin, 2015).

city-born vendors included to identify any notable differences (Table 1). This paper focuses on migrant vendor experiences during the first wave of the pandemic and its immediate aftermath, with interviews completed during May–July 2020 after restrictions related to the first wave of COVID-19 were lifted in each city and before the second wave began.

Interviewees were active vendors selling any types of goods and were approached in public spaces in the downtown areas of each city. Interview questions related to both their own activities, and those of vendors whom they knew who had stopped vending due to the pandemic. Themes covered length of time vending, impacts—economic, social, health—of the pandemic, coping mechanisms and thoughts on government policies. Vendors were interviewed in Vietnamese, Thai or Lao, and were given a small monetary token of appreciation after the interview was complete. The data were coded following a set of *a priori* themes that the three authors developed in relation to the aim of the project and interview questions (Cope, 2021). We also searched for original *a posteriori* themes that emerged, either in one locale or, after a first round of coding, across more than one locale. The data analysis and resultant analytic themes were cross-checked and discussed by the three authors for additional rigour via researcher triangulation (Baxter & Eyles, 1997).

Conceptual debates around livelihood shocks

We adopt a livelihood approach in order to investigate the shocks that both COVID-19 and subsequent government restrictions have caused for street vendors and their ability to make a living. This approach also brings attention to the complexity of coping mechanisms that street vendors have drawn upon to attempt to maintain an income. In brief, the livelihood framework encompasses three main factors: ‘the assets, the activities and the access that determine the living gained by the individual or household’ (Ellis, 2000: 27). Importantly, the framework is sensitive to how political, cultural and

socio-economic contexts directly impact all such factors (Chambers & Conway, 1991). As such, state directives, organizations, institutions and markets can enable or restrain an individual's ability to secure their livelihood (Ellis, 2000). For example, state directives to stay at home following a rise in COVID-19 cases directly impact the ability of street vendors to undertake their daily trade activities. While there are a range of livelihood considerations beyond these core elements, as well as critiques, they are well covered elsewhere and we do not reiterate those discussions here (see Scoones, 1998; Bebbington, 1999; de Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Ellis, 2000; Hapke & Ayyankaril, 2004; Kanji *et al.*, 2005; Eakin *et al.*, 2006; Griffin, 2020). Instead, we focus more specifically on the shocks that urban livelihoods can face, and recent debates concerning street vending livelihoods, diversity and agency in our case study locales.

To date, the majority of work drawing on the livelihood approach has tended to be located in rural contexts of the Global South, yet the livelihoods approach is highly applicable to urban contexts as well (Rakodi, 2002; Staples, 2007). There are also important linkages and continuities between the two 'realms', with rural-urban migrants maintaining important relations to their households and livelihood activities in rural areas (cf. Bebbington, 2000; Rigg, 2006; Oberhauser, 2016). Nonetheless, scholars have noted that the forms of vulnerabilities that urban-based individuals and households encounter are often quite different from those of rural-based livelihoods. These include more specific shocks and trends in relation to paid labour for urban residents (Rigg *et al.*, 2014; Chen *et al.*, 2016). The capital assets that are of key importance are also frequently different in urban sites, with land as a natural capital sometimes being of lesser importance (for example if one is renting urban accommodation), while financial capital and different forms of social and human capitals might become more central to livelihood options. Access to assets can sometimes be more 'functional' or 'bureaucratic' in urban settings than in rural areas (such as rental agreements and labour contracts), while there is often closer proximity to public and private agencies in urban areas that can result in different access to institutions and processes, but also to increased surveillance (Rakodi, 2002; Mosiane, 2011).

Important contributions have also examined key shocks that can disrupt urban livelihoods. First, the impacts of economic and political crises on urban livelihoods can be substantial, with such instability often contributing to a loss of income and rising food insecurity among other difficulties (Kimani-Murage *et al.*, 2014; Edeoghon & Ordia, 2018; Lwanga-Ntale & Owino, 2020). Second, natural disasters and extreme climate events can increase urban vulnerability by, for example, damaging the infrastructure on which livelihoods are dependent (Dalu & Shackleton, 2018; Nop & Thornton, 2019), exacerbating health hazards (Romero-Lankao *et al.*, 2016; Pandey *et al.*, 2018), interrupting food production and supply chains (Akampumuza & Matsuda, 2017; McQuaid *et al.*, 2018), and generating water shortages (Kalra, 2020). Health-related shocks in urban locales, including chronic and acute illness, can also lead to income losses and livelihood insecurity (Pryer *et al.*, 2005; Weyer *et al.*, 2016). Most recently, COVID-19 and government responses to it, have presented major shocks to urban livelihoods across the Global South, as noted in our introduction.

Focusing more specifically on street vending, this informal livelihood offers millions of urban residents in the Global South a way to make a living (Recio & Gomez, 2013; Yotsumoto, 2013; Truong, 2018). Scholarship analysing the livelihoods of street vendors has highlighted the financial insecurities and poor working conditions many vendors encounter. Scholars also document the numerous vulnerabilities that street vendors face, including their exclusion from specific urban spaces, as local governments

frequently take a standpoint that vendors are ‘out of place’ in modernising cityscapes. This approach further marginalizes vendors, blaming them for a range of concerns, from unsanitary conditions to traffic congestion (Cross, 2000; Bhowmik, 2005; Yatmo, 2008; Walsh, 2010). Moreover, as municipal governments strive for ‘new spatialities and temporalities’ (Sassen, 2000: 215), vendors—especially itinerant traders—are repeatedly labelled as a form of slow mobility that is illegitimate and in need of being restricted or eliminated (Leshkovich, 2005). As a result, vendors frequently face harassment from police and municipal officials who may forbid them from vending, fine them or seize their goods (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012; Batréau & Bonnet, 2016; Boonjubun, 2017).

While it is important to acknowledge the crucial role street vending plays as an informal livelihood activity that members of marginalized populations undertake for survival-level earnings, scholars are also raising awareness that cities in the Global South can be home to important diversity amongst street vendors. Indeed, focusing on our three case study countries in Southeast Asia, the complexity and variety of the individuals involved quickly becomes apparent.¹ In Bangkok for example, one finds an important number of middle-class entrepreneurs—often with college degrees or who had professional careers before the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997—turning their hand to street vending (Maneepong & Walsh, 2013; Nirathron & Yasmeeen, 2019). Motivations can also vary widely, with Truong (2018) finding in Hanoi that some individuals prefer the independence this form of self-employment provides, compared to prior employment in the formal sector. Vending is also a means for women to supplement their household income while providing the flexibility for childcare and other reproductive labour, as noted by Maneepong and Walsh (2013) regarding vendors in Bangkok. In Hanoi, the flexibility vending provides has been found to be particularly important for many migrant vendors who return to their family farm for seasonal agricultural work (Jensen & Peppard, 2003; Agergaard & Thao, 2011; see also Luong, 2018).

Vendors use innovative and often subtle tactics to maintain their ability to trade on the city’s streets and resist local authorities. These tactics might include working around officials’ policing timetables, pleading ignorance or poverty, or gaining the help of local residents to hide their goods, as found with Hanoi’s itinerant vending population (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012; see also Koh, 2006; Eidse *et al.*, 2016). In Bangkok, Trupp (2015) found migrant ethnic minority Akha women vendors drawing on everyday mobility to hide from state authorities or move their trade to different locations quickly when faced with state restrictions, among other tactics (see also Trupp & Sunanta, 2017). All told, an urban livelihood conceptual lens, with due attention paid to street vendor diversity, agency and tactics, allows us to better investigate the impacts of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic—an extraordinary unforeseen livelihood shock—on migrant street vendors, and their coping strategies in Hanoi, Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang.

Country contexts: lockdowns and (theoretical) financial aid

As Grundy-Warr and Shaun Lin (2020: 494) remark of the COVID-19 pandemic: ‘The ways authorities respond to the virus produces new geographies’. This has certainly been the case for street vending geographies in our three case study locales. Vietnam’s first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 22 January 2020, introducing the country’s first wave, with the second wave taking hold from 11 July. The Vietnamese government’s

initial mitigation strategies included mandatory quarantine for travellers from COVID-19 affected countries and those in contact with a COVID-19 positive individual, and a strong public health campaign (Ivic, 2020). On 19 March, with rising cases, Hanoi People's Committee advised all residents to self-isolate at home until the month's end, and interprovincial buses were halted country-wide on 30 March (*Bangkok Post*, 2020). This preceded a national lockdown from 1–23 April (Directive 16) that temporarily closed all but essential services and resulted in rising unemployment across both formal and informal sectors (*Thanh Niên*, 2020).² In April 2020, the Vietnamese government also rolled out Resolution 42, a VND 62 000 billion [USD 2.5 million] stimulus package providing direct cash support for workers who had lost their income due to the pandemic, including 'lao động tự do' or informal workers—at least in theory (*Thanh Niên*, 2020; *Kinh tế Đô thị*, 2020).

On 13 January 2020, a week before Vietnam, Thailand reported its first COVID-19 case. With early and cautious preventative measures, transmissions remained low through January and February. Thailand's greatest case surge of its first wave occurred in March 2020, with Thailand's Prime Minister declaring a State of Emergency from 26 March, subsequently implementing a nationwide lockdown on most businesses and all interprovincial travel, and a daily 8pm–4am curfew (*Khao Sod*, 2020). Interprovincial travel resumed on 1 June, while the curfew ended on 15 June and businesses slowly reopened thereafter (*Thai Enquirer*, 2020; *TAT Newsroom*, 2020).³ The Thai state was roundly critiqued for its initial lockdown restrictions, with ensuing hunger and mental health crises causing nearly as many deaths by suicide as the virus itself (*The Diplomat*, 2020). While a large-scale government assistance aid package (THB 5000/month [USD 160] for three months for most recipients) appeased many critics, as lockdown measures were lifted, anti-government protests rose nationwide, both COVID-19 related and beyond (*Prachatai*, 2020).

Laos reported its first two cases on 24 March 2020, the last ASEAN member state to confirm COVID-19 infections. The government quickly enacted a national lockdown on 30 March, including a strict stay-at-home order. The lockdown also involved the closing of international and interprovincial borders, the shutdown of most businesses, and a ban on gatherings (*The Laotian Times*, 2020a). Due to low infection rates and no reported deaths, Laos began to ease these measures on 18 May 2020, permitting domestic travel, restaurants and other service-based businesses to operate, and schools to re-open in phases (*The Laotian Times*, 2020b). With the last of the 19 recorded patients discharged from hospital and no new cases for 59 days, Laos 'declared victory' over COVID-19 on 11 June, 2020 (*The Laotian Times*, 2020c).⁴ A flailing economy has been a major concern for Laos since the pandemic's first wave, with significant losses from international remittances and tourism (*Vientiane Times*, 2020; *XinhuaNet*, 2020). The new geographies of street vending resulting from these measures, are analysed next.

Street vending shocks, coping strategies and negotiations

Immediate financial impacts and coping strategies

As lockdown measures were installed, migrant street vendors experienced sharp drops in income, and had to quickly adopt coping strategies that ranged from reducing food consumption to relying on family or informal money lenders for cash. Those continuing to vend worried about their health, while others paused or gave up vending completely and returned to their rural hometowns; we return to these latter cases after considering those who remained in the cities.

In Hanoi, although many itinerant vendors had sought refuge in their hometowns before the initial lockdown began, a small number remained and tried to make ends meet. During lockdown, vendors selling ‘essential goods’, namely meat and vegetables, were permitted on the city’s streets, but all others were in direct violation of Directive 16 (*Thanh Niên*, 2020). Hien,⁵ an interviewee who continued to sell fruit—considered non-essential—explained:

The *Công an* [public security officials]⁶ told me ‘you kind of people never follow the rules!’ But I told him ‘It’s not that I don’t observe the rules, but since I’ve bought all these fruit, I have to sell them’...My children don’t want me to be out here selling on the street either. Those *Công an*, with all their power, always see us as worthless people (pers. comm., Hanoi, June 2020).

Other Hanoi vendors detailed how, after a brief pause, they resumed selling due to urgent cash needs. While risking their health and facing stiff fines, they reasoned:

There was little I could do to avoid contact with customers. I still had to talk to them ...I knew I put my health at stake going out vending during lockdown, but we were having a tough time living without enough money. So, it was my only choice (Yen, sticky rice vendor, pers. comm., Hanoi, June 2020).

A combination of the financial burden of lockdown, reduced sales during the post-lockdown period following the first wave, and fears of subsequent restrictions had all migrant vendors extremely worried, with many reporting that their incomes had halved (Figure 1). In turn, their main coping mechanism had been to reduce expenses, including food and other essentials. Lan, selling sticky-rice cakes, explained: ‘We’ve had to tighten our belts... We only spend on absolutely necessary things now and only have instant noodles for breakfast’. When these measures became inadequate, some had turned to family for loans, but as Cuc, a clothes vendor noted: ‘It’s difficult to find people willing to lend you money—even if they do, I’d worry whether I’d be able to



Figure 1. Hanoi street vendors trying to sell goods while the city’s shops were closed during the first lockdown.

Source: Binh N. Nguyen, June 2020.

pay them back'. Alternatively, a few vendors had taken out loans with private money lenders, resulting in additional stress regarding high interest rates.

Chiang Mai vendors, like those in Hanoi, also experienced large income drops. Dumpling seller Ang explained: 'It's slowly going downhill. It went down slowly and then it fell completely with the lockdown... People kept disappearing so my income disappeared too'. Interviewees estimated income declines of between 20–60 per cent of pre-COVID-19 levels, a slightly broader range than the drops reported in Hanoi. A number of Chiang Mai vendors noted that they had no option but to continue vending, despite health anxieties. Broom vendor Chokchai reported: 'I'm scared. I feel scared. If it happens to me [catching the virus], I would panic. But if I don't sell, I won't have money. So I have to deal with it and just do it'. Ang, continuing from above, added that despite such concerns, vending was essential for his family to eat: 'I was terrified. But I was also scared not to come sell. If I didn't, I wouldn't have any food to eat. Where the hell else was I going to get food to eat?' (Figure 2).

As an immediate coping mechanism, half the Chiang Mai interviewees had reduced their daily food expenditures, while others had cut their vending inventories. Thanglek explained: 'Before the virus, my husband and I invested around THB 3000 [USD 96] a day and made THB 5000 [USD 160] a day. But now, we only invest THB 1000 and make THB 2000... We've lost lots of income'. Vendors added that such drastic income cuts meant they could no longer afford to send remittances to family in their rural hometowns.



Figure 2. A lone street vendor on what is usually a very busy street in central Chiang Mai. Source: Jennifer Langill, June 2020.

While most Hanoi vendors were unable to reduce sale prices due to minimal profit margins already, a third of Chiang Mai interviewees mentioned discounting their goods. Ice cream seller Sailom explained: 'I discount because people don't have money, and it's difficult to find customers... Most businesses and shopping malls have shut down, most people have lost their jobs'. Fah, selling fruit, similarly noted: 'I had to think about the buyers too. They didn't have much money. Before, most people had full-time salaries, but during the lockdown most only got 50 per cent of their salaries'.

Vendors in Chiang Mai had turned to informal loans more frequently than in Hanoi, where family had been the main source of cash injections instead. Chiang Mai vendors explained that black market loans came with exorbitant interest rates, usually 20 per cent, and sometimes incurred threats of physical violence. Some had borrowed informally before the pandemic, and then found themselves in strife during the first lockdown. For Korn, this had caused a worrying debt spiral:

I don't owe the bank money, but I owe money outside the system that I borrowed before the virus. The government told money lenders to suspend loan repayments, but that doesn't apply to people outside the system, so I have to pay back every day. I had to borrow money from my friend to pay them. If you don't pay them back, they hurt you (pers. comm., Chiang Mai, June 2020).

Luang Prabang appeared to experience the strictest street vending restrictions during lockdown, with people barred from leaving their houses and police patrolling city streets to make sure no vending occurred. Banana vendor Wan explained that during lockdown: 'I didn't come [to] sell because police were driving around. They didn't let people come out to sell... They drove around the streets to make sure nobody was selling'. Phetmanee, selling barbecued meats, confirmed: 'The police gave the order from the government to the village heads. Everyone had to stay home. They put up barriers between villages to block anyone from going in or out. They blocked everything'.⁷ Yet, even when the restrictions slowly began to relax again, customers remained scarce (Figure 3).

Not surprisingly, vendors in Luang Prabang also noted important income drops, with reducing food consumption among their main coping strategies. Jai detailed: 'During the virus, I was so scared it caused me headaches. I had to ration my food... Some days I just ate vegetables, grew morning glory, collected cabbage. Eat to survive, not to die'. One vendor, Noina, had sold her jewelry, while confirming she knew of others forced to do the same:

I had to sell my gold. I sold 2 *baht*.⁸ I sold everything...I bought it for K 7 million [USD 778] per *baht*, and sold it for K 5 million [USD 556]. They took advantage of me. I had no money to buy food so I had to sell it...We were hungry...There was only one gold shop open and it wasn't the one that I bought the gold from, so they gave me a bad price (pers. comm., Luang Prabang, June 2020).

There was seemingly less reliance on informal lenders or the black-market among Luang Prabang vendors than in Chiang Mai or Hanoi, with interviewees noting that nobody would lend to them anyway or that they were too scared of being unable to make loan repayments.

New inequalities amongst vendors

In Hanoi, those selling items deemed non-essential were chased and heavily fined by *Công an*, while reduced numbers of potential customers on the city's streets created

challenges even for essential goods sellers. Additionally, due to rising unemployment and economic uncertainty, Hanoi residents reduced non-essential purchases, leaving vendors selling items such as fruit, flowers and clothes in a particularly perilous situation. Fruit vendor Ha explained: 'It's nice to have fruit to eat, to snack on, but it's not something that you must have daily, so people cut back a lot'. Flower vendors also noted a reduction of sales since religious ceremonies were either banned or scaled back significantly, a situation also reported in Luang Prabang. Predictably, vendors linked to the tourist sector fared particularly poorly: 'Before [the pandemic], each café on my route bought 10 large fruit and sold them in two to three days [in drinks], but now it takes them 10 days to sell fewer than 10 fruit. They have fewer customers and it affects my business'.

In Chiang Mai, more food vendors traded throughout the lockdown than in Hanoi, while garnering less suspicion from local authorities. Thanglek, selling fruit, noted: 'There weren't any laws for me. They just wanted people to be safe and wear a mask. They didn't force us [to close] because we are selling food to eat, not alcohol'. Nonetheless, just over half the Chiang Mai interviewees noted a drop in sales linked to the stagnating tourism sector, while a further quarter had previously relied upon local tourism-linked workers. When these workplaces (such as massage parlours and restaurants) closed, workers cut spending or returned to their hometowns. Fah added: 'It was



Figure 3. When allowed to operate again, vendors at Luang Prabang's touristic night market saw few customers.

Source: Research assistant, June 2020, used with permission.

a chain reaction...Most of the time, my customers are Thai workers from hotels, restaurants, places like that. But they reduced their expenses; they spent less than before'.

A UNESCO World Heritage Town, Luang Prabang's street vending sector was devastated by the loss of international tourism, with most vendors having to alter their strategies. Paradon, selling scarves and other textiles, explained how he shifted focus from international tourists to locals: 'In March, I didn't even make K 1 million [USD 111]. I didn't sell at all because there weren't any foreigners and I rely on tourists; Luang Prabang relies on tourists. When we lost the tourists, I had to rely on Lao customers' (see Figure 3).

In Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang, the pandemic also perpetuated inequalities along ethnic lines, as food vendors tend to be from the ethnic majority Thai and Lao groups, while those selling tourist souvenirs are often ethnic minorities, such as Akha or Hmong. In comparison, in Hanoi, vendors are overwhelmingly Kinh (Vietnamese ethnic majority), with this impact along ethnic lines not being prominent.

Navigating surveillance and control

Responses by local authorities overseeing street vending activities were mixed across the three locales. Long before COVID-19, iterative bans on street vending and campaigns to 'declutter' Hanoi's streets of vendors had already reduced access to a number of favourable trading sites as well as vendors' trading rights (Turner *et al.*, 2020). The *Công an* were thus fairly relentless in their pursuit of itinerant vendors even before the pandemic and notorious for collecting under-the-table fees and bribes from vendors. Ly, selling fruit, remarked that *Công an* strategies following the lockdown remained unchanged: 'Now that we're back selling, the police are also back chasing us on the street. They don't take their breaks... They chase, we run, then they chase again... You know, the police, they always hate us poor people'.

While previous research has detailed how some vendors use 'identity management' to negotiate with *Công an*, citing their positions as war veterans or elderly poor women to encourage officials to 'go easy' on them (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012), we found similar tactics being employed during the pandemic. Fruit vendor Thu explained: 'A few days ago, some *Công an* stopped me. I pleaded that I only had some vegetables to sell and I had stayed home for three months because of COVID. I didn't have enough money to pay a fine so they let me go'.

In contrast to Hanoi authorities, the *teskit* (เทศกิจ, street vendor officials) in Chiang Mai tended to grant more leniency towards vendors during the pandemic's first wave than normal, allowing trade outside of curfew hours. Ang, introduced above, elucidated:

Usually the *teskit* confiscate vendors' goods and give them fines. They write you a ticket...I've been there before. They took my [cooking] gas tank away, took my umbrella. They take it away and then you have to go pay the fine at their station. But if they came now, I wouldn't have any money to pay the fines. Where would I get money to pay? They've been more lenient. They've come to check a bit, but they haven't fined me for anything (pers. comm., Chiang Mai, June 2020).

Korn, who had also experienced numerous previous run-ins with the *teskit*, added: 'They're not as strict as before. If they see me, they'll give me a warning but they won't take my stuff as quickly because they know the economy is bad. They talk to me nicer and give me a warning now. But before, they didn't talk, just walked over and took everything... Before was—ugh!'

In contrast, with a zero-tolerance policy during the lockdown in Luang Prabang, negotiating with authorities was not an option for interviewees there. They did, however, experience more freedom after the initial lockdown than vendors in Hanoi or Chiang Mai, with few trading restrictions.

Attempting to access state support

Of the three cities, vendors in Chiang Mai were most likely to gain government financial support, those in Hanoi were sometimes eligible 'in theory' but seldom received support, while there was no state aid for any Lao workers during the first wave.

In Hanoi, eligibility conditions to obtain official support required registration at both one's current and original places of residence, and proof of either one's income being below the regional poverty line or no income at all. These rules were particularly difficult for informal workers, with few holding labour contracts or certificates for their temporary city residence. Moreover, street vendors selling cooked food were only eligible for government support if they held a business registration and food safety certificate, which few did. While upset by the bureaucracy limiting their access to financial support, interviewees were not particularly surprised, noting that accessing any government support is always buried in '*dấu đỏ*' or 'red stamps' and accompanied by long-standing corruption. As Mai, a migrant vendor, detailed:

You have to get various kinds of papers, like your temporary residence registration, then all kinds of stamps. It's just too complicated...You might even have to pass some money under the table to get those stamps on your documents...It's too difficult for us to have these 'connections' with local officials here (pers. comm., Hanoi, June 2020).

Nonetheless, responding to criticisms regarding the lack of support for informal workers, the government-sponsored Vietnam Fatherland Front initiated food packages for poor households (*Kinh tế Đô thị*, 2020). Local philanthropists also established 'rice ATMs' in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to provide food for those in need (*Reuters*, 2020). However, few interviewees knew of these initiatives, and only two had accessed 'rice ATMs'.

In Thailand, few people were eligible for the initial government assistance package in April 2020, causing widespread criticism, however the second iteration in May that year was expanded significantly, with many able to receive THB 5000 [USD160] per month for three months. Accessing these funds was not straightforward, however, with many vendors relying on adult children to help them apply. Sunchai, selling textiles, explained: 'The government helped me with THB 5000. My wife got it too. I don't know how hard it was to get, I let my kids get it for me... All I had to do was wait one month'. However, for others like banana vendor Seepaa, the process was much more challenging: 'Ugh, it was so hard to apply for it. I asked somebody to help me because I didn't know how to do it. It was really difficult. It took me two months'.

Relying on food donations also seemed more prevalent in Chiang Mai than in Hanoi or Luang Prabang, with a quarter of Chiang Mai interviewees having accessed such support. Sunchai explained:

In the morning, I'd go wait in line for rice or food. I wasn't stressed. Sometimes I got money from generous people; they'd hand out THB 20, THB 50 or THB 100. I lined up at 4 a.m. every day for a month. I went everywhere they were giving away food and got lots of rice. During that time, I didn't really use my money, I just got free food (pers. comm., Chiang Mai, June 2020).

In contrast to Vietnam and Thailand, the Lao government provided no financial support. Although there were announcements of loan suspensions and discounted utilities, no interviewees nor media reports confirmed that these had transpired during the first wave. Instead, vendors relied on subsistence production or family members, with some also selling assets like jewelry, as noted earlier.

Covid-19 impacts on vendor rural-urban mobility and social relations

Two themes stood out in street vendor interviews regarding how the shock of the pandemic's onset altered urban-rural connections, mobility and livelihood vulnerabilities. First, many rural-to-urban migrant vendors experienced heightened anxiety regarding whether and when to return to their rural hometowns, especially in the cases of Hanoi and Chiang Mai. Second, some vendors noted a new social stigmatization upon their return home, especially for those traveling from the largest city, Hanoi.

Mobility anxieties

The majority of Hanoi itinerant vendors left the city before the first lockdown fearing that they would otherwise be unable to return home when public transportation was restricted, and not knowing how long the lockdown might last. Fruit vendor Mai explained: 'We returned home even before the lockdown. There were still buses and coaches going home then. If we'd returned a bit later, there'd possibly have been no more buses'. Indeed, as the final buses left Hanoi, the situation became increasingly perilous, as Hue recounted:

When I went to Giáp Bát station, all the buses were fully packed. It was absolute chaos. If I'd waited a bit longer, there'd have been no more buses heading home. I had to push inside a bus, though there wasn't even space for standing on one foot. I started to scream to the driver 'save me, you have to save me' so eventually they let me go with them (pers. comm., Hanoi, June 2020).

An important proportion of Chiang Mai vendors returned to their rural villages, but not to the same extent as for Hanoi. Those who returned did so because they believed the health risks were far less and it was cheaper to 'sit out' the pandemic there than in the city. Thanglek summarized:

I went home because the risk at home was really low. It was like 0.1 percent because it's a rural area. There was no virus there and strangers weren't allowed in the village, they didn't let people in. The expenses there are much cheaper. Everything in Chiang Mai you have to pay-pay-pay, buy-buy-buy. But at home you can collect vegetables to eat from the forest (pers. comm., Chiang Mai, June 2020).

Nonetheless, in common with vendors in Hanoi, when and how to return to their hometowns were key concerns for Chiang Mai's vendors, with public transport and interprovincial travel halted nationwide. Vendors were also worried about having to quarantine upon arrival, and that if they returned home, they couldn't then commute back to trade in Chiang Mai. Food vendor Nathavut explained: 'I didn't go anywhere. I was scared of getting quarantined. If I went [home], I would have had to quarantine for 14 days, then come back and quarantine here for 14 days. I wouldn't get to do anything for an entire month'.

In Luang Prabang, many rural-to-urban migrants rushed home before the lockdown began. Yet unlike in Hanoi and Chiang Mai where notable numbers of vendors had

returned by May 2020, Luang Prabang interviewees noted that a high proportion of the vendors previously trading in the city had remained in rural villages. This was explained to be predominantly due to fears of being unable to successfully resume trading and cover rental costs, particularly as international tourism has yet to resume.

The sudden directives that halted or drastically restricted interprovincial movement had significant ramifications for vendor livelihoods and wellbeing, raising important questions about who gets to be mobile under lockdown. The social stratification between informal economy workers compared to middle-class residents resulted in vendors having far more difficult experiences returning to their hometowns due to their greater reliance on public transport. While restrictions to mobility have been deemed essential for preventing transmission of the virus, it is important that governments acknowledge the degree of shock this causes for informal livelihoods, further deepening structural inequalities if appropriate social support is not available.

Social stigmatization

For Hanoi itinerant vendors returning to their hometowns, the situation was not necessarily as rosy as anticipated. Fruit vendor Hoa detailed: 'People back home were scared that since we went around selling in Hanoi, we might have the virus and spread it around the village'. Vendors with rental accommodation in a city neighbourhood that had experienced a COVID-19 breakout faced an even more complex situation. According to Ly, a fruit vendor: 'Back in the village, we experienced outright discrimination. Because they heard that we were back from near Bạch Mai hospital [a COVID-19 hotspot], they treated us differently. They thought we'd already contracted the virus'.⁹ Once in their hometown, some vendors felt obliged to self-quarantine to avoid neighbours' disapproval. One interviewee, Chi, explained that due to social pressure 'I didn't dare go outside or visit other people's houses since villagers said that I'd come back from Hanoi where the pandemic was more widespread'. For Hanoi vendors who returned to their hometowns, the pandemic thus appeared to alter their position in rural communities from being individuals often considered courageous risk-takers, seeking new opportunities in the city to support their families, to becoming 'the risk' themselves and a potential health threat for rural residents, increasing anxieties and fears for both groups.

For Chiang Mai vendors, the social stigmatization of returning home appeared less common, with vendors noting that villagers were more apt to share food and other goods and 'help each other out' than in the city. However, vendors crossing provincial borders to return home had to quarantine and other villagers then tended to keep well away. Sunchai recounted his experience quarantining at home in Chiang Rai Province with his wife: 'The hardest thing for me was that we had to stay at home, just the two of us. We couldn't go see other people. We didn't talk to them and they didn't talk to us. I understood them. I had just come from another province so they didn't talk to us at all'. Notably, Luang Prabang vendors who returned to rural hometowns faced few concerns from fellow villagers, perhaps because of the low transmission rates in Laos at that time.

Another finding worth highlighting was that while many vendors were anxious about responses and acceptance in their hometowns, there was limited pressure from hometown *recipients* for vendors to maintain remittances at pre-pandemic levels. Although vendors often continued vending to meet their own expectations in this regard, those in hometowns appeared to be well aware of the pandemic-related obstacles facing urban vendors, and accordingly placed limited stress on them to continue providing previous remittance amounts.

Conclusions

The first COVID-19 wave and the subsequent lockdowns noticeably impacted vendor livelihood decision-making and mobility patterns in Hanoi, Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang. Moreover, in all three sites we heard of street vendors deciding the time had come to discontinue vending and return to their hometowns indefinitely. Generally, we found that Luang Prabang vendors remained more integrated into their village rhythms and economies, perhaps due to far lower urbanization rates in Laos compared to neighbouring Vietnam and Thailand, as well as the lower COVID-19 transmission rates. Conversely, in Hanoi and Chiang Mai, vendors who remained in the cities reiterated that they had continued vending due to their household's financial needs since opportunities to acquire cash in their hometowns or villages were insufficient and because of the disapproval and social stigma they were afraid of facing back home due to possible infection. This is an interesting contrast to findings following previous regional economic downturns, when return migration to rural villages was reported as a social-safety net, such as after the 1997–99 economic crisis (World Bank, 1998; Silvey & Elmhirst, 2003). In the context of the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rural hometown appeared tenuous in its ability to fulfill this role for many of our interviewees. The shock of the pandemic therefore provides evidence of new types of barriers that can arise between rural and urban spheres, interrupting the fluidity and social ties between these domains observed in previous livelihood research (cf. Bebbington, 2000; Rigg, 2006; Oberhauser, 2016). This raises new questions regarding the limitations of rural-urban connections in sustaining urban livelihoods during specific shocks and crises, warranting further investigation.

Unfortunately, since the interviews that inform this paper, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos have all experienced additional and more serious COVID-19 waves, with street vendors facing restrictions once again. Follow-up studies of street vendor experiences of the pandemic will help to determine the degree to which vendors and their livelihoods have been able to remain resilient and their specific coping strategies. Including more participants in future research may also deepen our understandings of the heterogeneity, as well as often interlocking forms, of social difference known to exist within street vendor populations (Trupp & Sunanta, 2017; Turner *et al.*, 2020), and how they have been (re)shaped by the pandemic. Our findings reveal numerous commonalities in the impacts of and responses to the pandemic's first wave, but also important differences in the pandemic's consequences due to political context, links to rural hometowns and ethnicity. While we have indicated that the pandemic has differentially impacted street vendors, and the new inequalities that are emerging, future research scrutinizing this further—across migrant status but also gender, ethnicities and generations—would be valuable. This should also incorporate research in migrant home villages to grasp the complexity of reactions towards return migrants during and following the pandemic, as well as the experiences of former street vendors who chose to remain in their home villages indefinitely. As David Harvey (*Jacobin*, 2020: 10) has noted, COVID-19 has 'all the characteristics of a class, gendered and racialized pandemic'. Both a longitudinal and an intersectional lens is needed to investigate where and how COVID-19 has impacted informal economy livelihoods in different settings across the Global South.

All told, while the pandemic has already created considerable livelihood shocks for vendors in these three Southeast Asian cities, it is too soon to assess the longer term adaptation processes that these individuals might adopt for their street-based

livelihoods. At this stage, attempts to predict how the pandemic will continue to transform the livelihoods of vendors would be premature. However, our findings from the initial crisis point to an important need to streamline access to emergency funds for members of the informal economy rather than heighten their marginalization during times of shock (Bassier *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, the Lao and Vietnamese state apparatuses appear to have a lot to learn, and could draw lessons from Thailand for some possible ways forward, a reflection that some Lao vendors made themselves, being well aware of the Thai situation. Whether the response in Thailand was an attempt by the current contested government to try to gain favour with certain segments of the population is of course up for debate.

Looking longer term, we would encourage governments, funding agencies and NGOs to take this opportunity to pause and reconsider how migrant street vendors could best be supported in their pursuit of livelihoods in urban locales, while also acknowledging the important role they have played in allowing urban residents access to essential items during a global crisis, especially with regards to food provisioning (cf. Hayden, 2021). We have yet to see recognition of this sort in the local media. Intriguingly, early reports from China noted that municipal governments were encouraging street vendors in at least 27 different cities as a way to boost economic recovery and reduce unemployment, albeit perhaps as something of a stop-gap measure (Song, 2020). Another broad change caused by the pandemic is the increasing recognition that dining and shopping in the open-air is safer than in enclosed spaces. COVID-19 thus could provide an opportunity for planners and city officials to rethink their priorities for city sidewalks and urban space use, potentially creating more equitable and just cities (cf. Allison *et al.*, 2021). However, we are not very optimistic that the governments of Vietnam, Thailand or Laos will use the pandemic as an opportunity to reflect upon how urban growth could be made more sustainable and fruitful for such inhabitants. Given the prior track records of these governments after previous economic shocks, and their continued quest for modernization (rather than alternative, more inclusive development), we surmise that migrant street vendors will likely face numerous ongoing and new challenges in the months and years to come.

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Endnotes

- 1 As research on urban street vending in these three countries continues to grow, this review is intended to be indicative of the diversity of findings, not exhaustive. Nonetheless, we were not able to find any academic literature on street vending in Laos to date.
- 2 Vietnam had no recorded COVID-19 deaths until July, 2020. Despite Vietnam's success at keeping the virus at bay throughout 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, the number of COVID-19 cases has more than tripled since then, with the death rate standing at 55 in early June 2021 (WHO, 2021a).
- 3 Thailand maintained low case numbers through 2020, with the second wave taking hold sharply in December 2020. As of June 2021, with over 1400 deaths, the Emergency Decree

- remained in effect, and the government had implemented multiple rounds of restrictions following the first wave of the pandemic (WHO, 2021b).
- 4 However, a new case was reported on 27 July 2020. As of early June 2021, Laos had reported 3 deaths, and just under 2000 confirmed cases (WHO, 2021c).
 - 5 All participant names are gender appropriate pseudonyms.
 - 6 The *Công an* enforce government regulations at the ward (*phường*) level, the smallest official spatial unit of urban administration in Vietnam.
 - 7 Blockades were in place between rural villages, from which a few vendors commuted, but also within Luang Prabang, dividing the city's 58 administrative units, also called villages.
 - 8 A gold weight measurement unit used in Laos and Thailand. One *baht* is 14.7 grams.
 - 9 Vietnam's health authorities have been swift to communicate pandemic-related data with real-time alerts, and patients' locations and travel histories are regularly circulated via text messages, social media and contact-tracing phone applications. However, concerns over patients' data and privacy have been expressed, more so at the pandemic's onset.

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