

Street Vending and Market Trading During the COVID-19 Crisis: Pathways of Impact and Recovery in Nine Cities



By Sarah Orleans Reed and Caroline Skinner

WIEGO Resource Documents

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank Ana Carolina Oganda and Ghida Ismail for their help with quantitative and qualitative data analysis and insights, respectively, and Jenna Harvey for her helpful comments.

Publication date: August 2023

ISBN: 978-92-95122-40-6

Please cite this publication as: Reed, Sarah Orleans and Caroline Skinner. 2023. Street Vending and Market Trading During the COVID-19 Crisis: Pathways of Impact and Recovery in Nine Cities . WIEGO Resource Document No. 38.

Published by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) A Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee – Company N°. 6273538, Registered Charity N°. 1143510

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Cover Photograph: Doris Barrientos has been selling vegetables for more than 15 years as an independent trader in a market in Lima, Peru. She lives with her three brothers, whose support she relied on through the COVID-19 crisis.
Photo Credit: Victor Mallqui

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This report draws on interviews with street vendors and market traders in nine cities – Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York, USA; and Pleven, Bulgaria – in mid-2020 and again with the same workers in mid-2021. Key points include:

Earnings: By mid-2021, while eight out of every 10 street vendors and market traders were back at work, average earnings had recovered to only 60% of pre-COVID-19 levels.

Decreased demand and increased prices of inputs: As restrictions were eased, reduced customer demand and lower purchasing power among their clientele converged with rising prices of stock and input, explaining reduced earnings.

Harassment: Over one-quarter of street vendors reported harassment by law enforcement officers between mid-2020 and mid-2021. Reports were particularly prevalent in Lima (80 per cent), Delhi (66 per cent), Ahmedabad (39 per cent), and Durban (28 per cent).

Food security: In mid-2021, 63% of respondents reported skipping meals or eating a low variety of foods in the past month, 32% of interviewees reported adult hunger and 25% child hunger in their households.

Street vendor organizations were a key source of support to their members, facilitating access to government support measures and initiating interventions to protect their members' health and well-being.

Recommendations include a call to “do no harm” – an end to punitive practices of ticketing, confiscation, and evictions – and to provide access to well-located workspaces with appropriate infrastructure and clear and fair regulations.

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Introduction

Across the Global South, street vendors and market traders are a significant source of employment, particularly for women. These traders provide essential goods and services, at convenient locations, often to consumers in poor urban communities. Household food security surveys consistently show that low-income households regularly source food from street vendors and market traders. These surveys also suggest that in many contexts the poorer the household, the more likely it is to source food from informal outlets.¹ (See the [African Food Security Urban Network](#); [Consuming Urban Poverty \(CUP\) project](#) and [Hungry Cities Partnership](#)). How did street vendors and market traders fare during the pandemic? Was their essential service role acknowledged? How did they reorient their work to minimize health risks? How did their organizations support them? What key inventions are needed to strengthen their livelihoods?

Over the COVID-19 period, WIEGO, working in collaboration with member-based organizations of workers and their allies, assessed the impact of the crisis on different groups of informal workers in 12 cities. Survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted in mid-2020 and again in mid-2021. Round 1 assessed the impact of the crisis in April 2020 and mid-2020 compared to February 2020, while Round 2 assessed how workers were experiencing COVID-19 resurgences and ongoing economic strains, and to what extent they had recovered. Interviews were conducted with street vendors and/or market traders in nine of the twelve cities – Ahmedabad and Delhi, India; Accra, Ghana; Durban, South Africa; Bangkok, Thailand; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York, USA; and Pleven, Bulgaria. This unique dataset allows insights to answer these questions.

Methodology

This report draws from interviews with just under 700 respondents, 508 of whom were interviewed in both 2020 and 2021.² Round 1 surveys were conducted in June and July 2020. Round 2 surveys were conducted from June to August 2021 in all study cities except Delhi and Ahmedabad, where they were conducted in September and October 2021 due to the severe Delta variant outbreak in India. The report also draws on in-depth interviews with workers and their organization leaders that were conducted from August to October 2021. (For details of the methods, see WIEGO, 2022: 6-8).

Table 1: Sample by city and gender

City	Total number of respondents Round 2	Percentage of respondents who were women
Accra	97	79
Ahmedabad	77	100
Bangkok	63	65
Delhi	75	37

¹ This is because their income is erratic; they often lack refrigeration and storage space; and they use public transport or taxis, which limits the amount of food that they can buy.

² 116 respondents were surveyed in Round 1 only and 70 were surveyed in Round 2 only.

Durban	151	63
Lima	67	61
Mexico City	58	57
New York	62	53
Pleven	46	33
Total	696	63

The samples were designed to reflect the key characteristics of the membership of the informal worker organizations partnering in the study: a purposive quota approach. The findings are thus indicative rather than representative of street vendors and market traders in each city. As is clear from Table 1, in Round 2 in all but Delhi and Pleven, more interviews were conducted with women than men traders. Appendix 2 contains street vendor and market trader statistics in cities for which data is available and suggests that women predominate in trading in all but Delhi. In Round 1 of the study, participants were asked about their place of birth. Just over 10 per cent of the total sample were born outside the country that they worked in, with most of these participants based in New York.

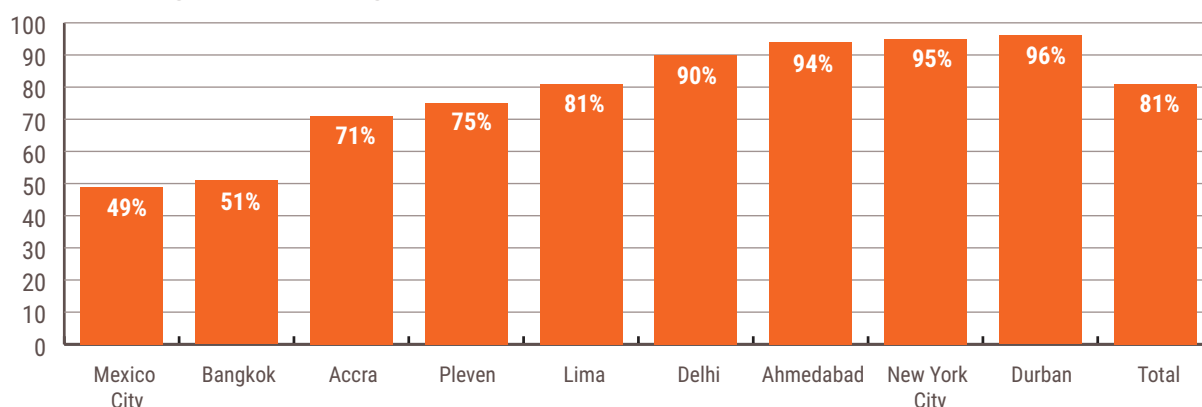
COVID-19 Restrictions and Vending Across the Nine Cities

Street vendors and market traders were particularly impacted by the multiple restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Varying perceptions of their roles emerged – on one end of the spectrum they were acknowledged as essential service workers while on the other framed as ‘vectors of disease.’³ In this section we reflect respondents’ reports on their ability to work in mid-2020 and again in mid-2021.

April 2020 restrictions and ability to work

Across the nine cities, the vast majority of workers interviewed in Round 1 (81 per cent) reported not being able to work in April 2020 – the period of heaviest restrictions. Unsurprisingly, the majority of those who were able to work (78 per cent) were food vendors. However, as is clear from Figure 1, there was significant variation in ability to work across the study cities.

Figure 1: Percentage of street and market traders unable to work, April 2020



³ See for example the Guardian article [‘Hubs of infection’: how Covid-19 spread through Latin America’s markets](#), 17 May, 2020.

In Mexico City and Bangkok, around one in every two respondents reported being able to operate in April 2020. In both cities, food vendors were allowed to operate. In Mexico City, while regulations stated that the *tianguis* (weekly markets) should be closed, these rules were not enforced. A vendor in Bangkok reflected:

We vendors consider ourselves fortunate. We compare ourselves to so many around us who have lost their jobs. At least we are still able to work.

In Accra and Plevan, small numbers of largely food vendors continued to work, but many reported very few customers. A female vendor in Accra said:

People are scared to buy cooked food from outside due to the idea that they will be infected by the virus and that they are better protected when they prepare their own foods. This has really affected my sales.

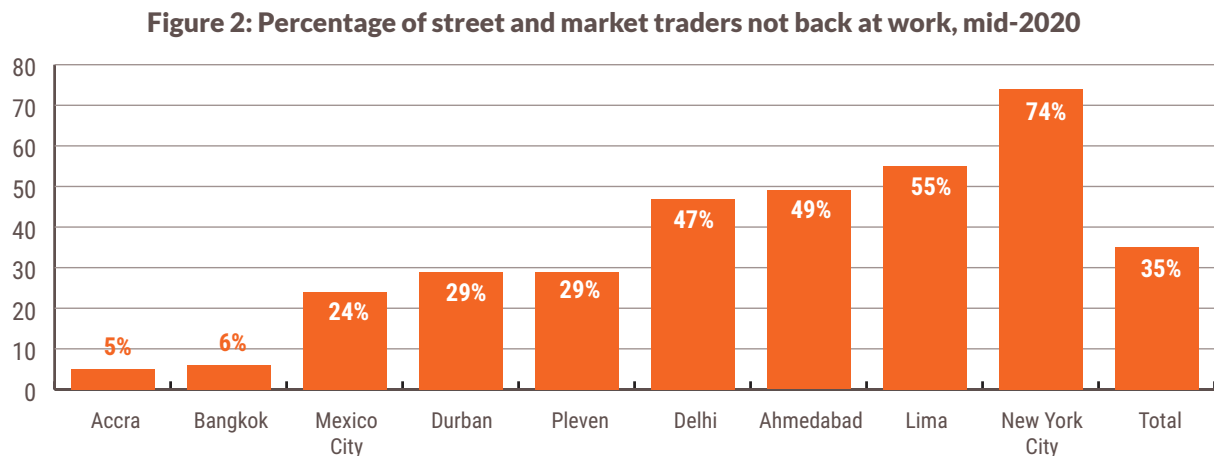
The vast majority of street vendors and market traders in Lima, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Durban did not work in April and reported that this was because they were not permitted to. There were particularly strict lockdown measures in Peru, India and South Africa. In Lima, street traders and market vendors were labelled as “vectors” of COVID-19, and this was used to justify closing markets and stopping street trade. According to vendor leaders, mayors across Lima hired new law enforcement officers to enforce the lockdown measures. In India and South Africa, soldiers were deployed to enforce lockdown regulations.

In New York City, while 95 per cent of those interviewed did not work in April, the primary concern was health issues. Sixty-nine per cent reported they did not work due to fear of being exposed to the virus and 39 per cent said they did not work due to being ill, some presumably with COVID-19.

In India and South Africa, informal worker organizations and their allies lobbied their national governments to recognize informal food vendors as essential workers. In early April, due to pressure from the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), the Indian Urban Affairs Ministry issued an advisory that allowed vendors selling groceries, fruits and vegetables to operate (Government of India, 2020). At the same time in South Africa, civil society advocacy efforts secured the recognition of informal food trade as an essential service (Government of South Africa, 2020). In both cases these advisories were subject to municipal requirements. The Indian advisory stated that food vendors could work “subject to the restrictions imposed by the district authorities” and limited to those vendors with government identifications (Majithia 2020). In South Africa, the national regulations were subject to municipal authorization and permits. Of the food vendors interviewed, 90 per cent in India and 95 per cent in Durban reported not working in April.⁴ In Durban, the council limited the number of permits and was slow to issue them but also closed key markets, saying that this was for sanitation reasons. The inner-city fresh produce market – the Early Morning Market – was closed for three months (Interview, director, Asiye eTafuleni).

⁴ In Peru, by contrast, national regulations included reference to food distribution but without mentioning vendors. Marchiori and Prandini Assis (2021) argue that this ambiguity allowed local governments in Lima to apply stay-at-home orders and crack down on food vendors’ work.

These figures should be read alongside whether vendors were back at work three to four months later, reflected in Figure 2. By mid-2020, 35 per cent of vendors across the cities reported not being back at work. Again there is considerable differentiation by city. The majority of vendors in Accra, Bangkok and Mexico City were working and just over seven in every 10 were back at work in Durban and Plevan. This is in contrast to street and market traders in the two Indian cities and in Lima, where one in every two or fewer were back at work.



In Lima, workers reported that in May 2020 the authorities demolished the La Victoria after telling traders they were going to disinfect it. One woman affected by the La Victoria eviction said:

They practically stole all our things...We were beaten down and they beat us down even more. We were left in the air, with nothing.

Another vendor leader reported that, in most districts, municipal officials were confiscating vendors' carts and tricycles and destroying them.⁵

The enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions was notably violent in Indian cities. Descriptions of police beatings or destruction of equipment were common in both Ahmedabad and Delhi. Many women vendors described suffering police violence when attempting to sell fresh produce. A leader from the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad described receiving a photograph from a vendor of his swollen leg, after he was beaten by police while delivering vegetables under a municipality-approved programme.

In Durban, the rise in punitive enforcement was noted by many interviewees. A trader told of how his assistant was arrested and all his goods were confiscated when police saw he had cigarettes in his cupboard (the sale of cigarettes was prohibited during South Africa's early lockdowns). He explained, "It really hurt me a lot. We are here to make a living. We are not robbing anyone on the street." He went on, "I decided not to open a [legal] case because it would be so draining for me, and I'll end up losing my time for trading." The data suggest that the experience was particularly brutal for migrant workers who are foreign nationals and feared harassment for immigration-related issues

⁵ See Coletto, Jaber and Vanhellemont, 2021 for more information on market closures in Lima.

as well as for vending. A vendor who was unable to obtain a permit said he had stopped selling on the weekends due to severe police harassment, but he and other vendors still occupied the space to ensure others did not take it.

In New York City, 74 per cent of respondents reported not being back at work in mid-2020, for reasons such as the poor business environment, concerns about COVID-19 infection, and health problems (including mental health). A 55-year-old woman described suffering from crippling depression and anxiety about the virus and its impacts in her home country, which prevented her from working.

Mid-2020 to mid-2021: New restrictions in multiple waves of COVID-19

One year later, when interviews were conducted again, across the sample 84 per cent of vendors and traders interviewed had returned to work. Of the 16 per cent who reported having left trading entirely, the majority were in Durban (51 per cent), and 66 per cent of them were women.

Although the most severe lockdowns had ended by mid-2020, city-wide restrictions during subsequent waves of COVID-19 severely hindered vendors throughout the next year. Most interviewees reported work was significantly disrupted at some point in the previous year due to pandemic-related restrictions, most of which were now being enacted at the city or district rather than national level. Vendors described conditions of instability and volatility, because of uncertainty about when a new surge in infections could prompt the closure of markets and restrictions on street trading. Many vendors complained that the curfews prevented them from working at peak hours.

Prior to COVID-19, New York City's complex vending regulatory system and the resulting vendor uncertainty and harassment were well documented (Devlin, 2011, Tucker and Devlin, 2019). Two persistent issues for vendors – the cap on the number of permits for food vendors and New York Police Department (NYPD) harassment – shifted in this period. In January 2021, after more than a decade of advocacy, the New York City Council passed a new law that added 4,000 new street food vending permits (Devlin, 2021). In addition, the administration formally reassigned the role of vending enforcement from the NYPD to the Department of Consumer and Worker Protections. Interviewees reported a respite in harassment, but by mid-2021 one in every four traders reported that they had been harassed by police or other agencies. For example, a fruit vendor said in May 2020 that officials in the parks department had confiscated her goods and disbursed them to passers-by, “like Santa Claus”. She stopped working as a vendor after this happened again. There were many reports of vendors changing location and hours to avoid enforcement officials. The Street Vendor Project reported that vendors were being issued fines as high as USD1,000 per violation. A woman food vendor explained:

The big fear for vendors is we don't know who the authority is that is going to inspect ... we don't know what authority is going to come, not having a specialized permit, they would arrive and take our things as they have always done.

In Mexico City, vendors faced new regulations when the state entered “red” code in December 2020. *Tinguistas* during this period were permitted to sell only essential goods. A vendor leader pointed out that large formal retailers could continue selling all products. Subsequent restrictions in 2021 were imposed at district level and could result

in the closure of individual markets. Nevertheless, restrictions in Mexico City generally remained less constraining, resulting in better economic conditions for vendors. As a sweet vendor described, “The truth is that in my case, we were really lucky, we have continued operating normally except a few times when authorities told us that we couldn’t set up, but these occasions have been few.” He noted that the main requirements were related to health and safety measures, which he and his fellow traders were glad to abide by.

In Lima, society-wide restrictions extended beyond the period of most other cities. Though the government lifted full social isolation measures in July 2020, mobility restrictions on older people and children remained. The government imposed a full lockdown for all of February 2021, though this time it made exceptions for vendors with permits selling essential goods. Most vendor leaders reported severe limitations on their ability to work even after major restrictions ended. As one trader described:

They confiscated the vendors’ merchandise at curfew time at night. They also destroyed vendors’ fixed stands without any notice. In the past, they would warn vendors to leave and take their things with them. This time they took school supplies, books, games. The fine is higher than the cost of the merchandise.

Eighty per cent of interviewees reported experiencing policy harassment, the highest of any city. A trader leader noted:

During this pandemic, if you think about the treatment towards people, it has brought out the worst. With regard to street commerce, every day there are attacks against vendors in the press. The press encourages the police and the mayors to evict vendors. And if there is no government contingency plan to relocate street vendors, this won’t happen. Street vendors have to leave. They keep leaving, but the hunger and the need to work is strong. I understand that people are afraid of getting infected because vendors are at their door selling, but we have become inhumane. People pour water on vendors and try to make them leave with sticks.

In Durban, three in every 10 interviewees reported being harassed by the police. Non-profit organization Asiye eTafuleni noted a rise in punitive behaviour and state violence from the local government. They noted that, even though strict restrictions had not been implemented in the country since early 2020, frontline officials – perhaps emboldened by the earlier restrictions – continued to harass and mete out punishments, including evictions and confiscations of goods. A market trader said:

The main issue has been unlawful confiscation and harassment of informal workers which was at its peak in July and August 2021. People were getting fines they couldn’t afford and even if they made sales they had to use that money to try and get back their goods which were confiscated.

In response to a deadly new wave of COVID-19 in India, in Delhi a lockdown was instituted from mid-April to 31 May 2021, closing off public spaces to vendors. A male vendor explained:

Our work has been badly impacted. We used to earn enough to sustain our family without even taking any loan but now the situation has changed. We have to think twice before spending a single penny. We hope our work starts again as usual.

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) similarly closed all wholesale markets except those selling fruit and vegetables. At the end of May, the AMC allowed pushcart and street vendors plus small shops to operate from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. These operation hours were gradually extended. A woman street vendor said, “Business is not occurring as expected. Hence, we are going through a financial crisis.”

In Bangkok, where the first two waves of the virus were contained with comparatively low numbers of infections and deaths, a much deadlier third wave resulted in widespread restrictions and closures from April 2021. This included the shuttering of several important wholesale markets where vendors purchase their goods, as well as curfews for local markets. While interviewees reported lower levels of police harassment than prior to COVID-19,⁶ they argued that previous evictions had made them more vulnerable. One food vendor explained:

In my old location I sold about 100 pork knuckles per day. When I was relocated to this private market that is not well located I sold around 50. During the COVID-19 my sales went down by another half – about 25 pork knuckles per day I have had to start earlier and stay later, extend my selling hours. The money I earn is still much less.

This had larger economic repercussions, as he was forced to retrench one of his two assistants. Selling in privately owned markets also meant higher rental fees.

In Plevan, at the time of the interview, street vendors reported working the same number of days and working hours as pre-COVID-19; however, the majority reported that they experienced extended periods where they had been unable to work over the past year. This was largely due to government restrictions.

In contrast to other cities in the study, Accra did not impose strict COVID-19 prevention measures in 2021. While market traders and street vendors were largely back at work, kayayei – itinerant traders who trade goods from containers balanced on their heads – reported working on average three days less per week than they were before the crisis. For street vendors, market traders and kayayei, who work in and around markets, a drop off in customer demand was cited as the principal obstacle to working and earning. This was reported as an obstacle by 98 per cent of kayayei, 90 per cent of street vendors and 79 per cent of market traders.

Health and Safety Challenges

Street vendors and market traders experienced their own health challenges, but also at their workplaces.

Fear of COVID-19 infection was a major barrier to work for street vendors and market traders. Among vendors or traders who stopped working at least one month between

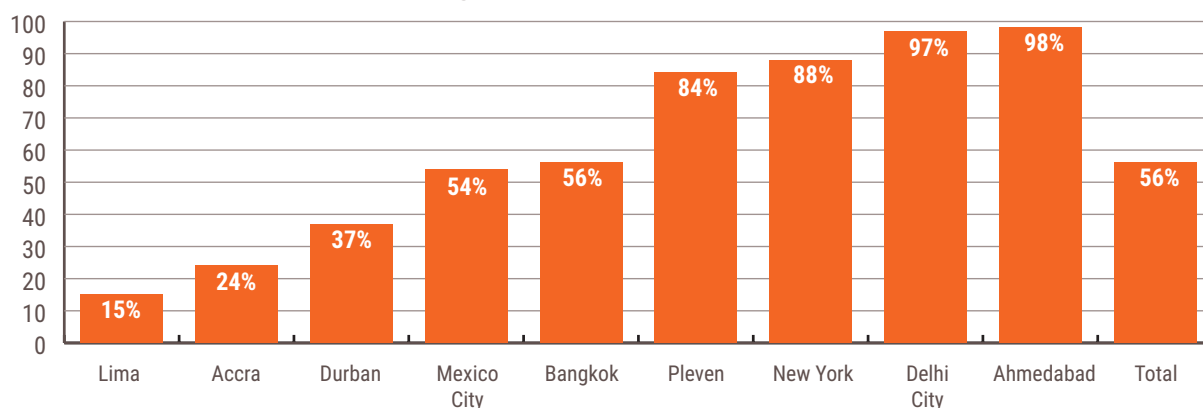
⁶ Since 2014, the Bangkok Municipal authorities have systematically reduced the number of vending sites and vendors. Registered vendors were reduced by half between 2014 and 2016 alone, and the number of locations where trading was permitted has been reduced from 773 (2011) to 171. See Bangkok Post 2023 and Reed <https://www.wiego.org/publications/vending-public-space-case-bangkok>.

mid-2020 and mid-2021, 29 per cent reported that health concerns contributed to their inability to work. This included fear of infection, actual COVID-19 infection and chronic health issues. By mid-2021, just under one in every five interviewees reported having tested positive for COVID-19. This was especially high in Lima (53 per cent) and Durban (31 per cent). A woman trader in Lima said that long-COVID-19 symptoms had severely hindered traders' ability to work, and even to escape harassment:

Now they get too agitated when they walk, go out or want to run, for example when the serenazgo (municipal police) chases them, they grab their pack to run and they ... get tired, their situation is not normal like before.

The figure below shows the percentage of interviewees who had been or were planning to be vaccinated. Again this shows considerable variation by city and reflects the availability and accessibility of vaccinations in the country at the time (for more on this issue see Braham, 2022).

Figure 3: Percentage of street and market traders vaccinated or planning to be vaccinated by city, mid-2021



With respect to health and safety at work, across cities, respondents provided examples of how they had invested in and implemented measures, both individually and collectively, to prevent contracting and spreading COVID-19. In both points in time, nearly all respondents reported using at least one form of personal protective equipment (PPE) at work. The vast majority – 94 per cent – had paid for these themselves. Often, these investments were the basis of negotiations for returning to work, but they also helped vendors feel safer for themselves and their customers.

A Bangkok street vendor described how, in response to local authority requirements, vendors in her area had used ropes to create a single entrance and limited the number of buyers who could enter at any one time. Vendors purchased a temperature scanner that they used to take customers' temperatures, and they asked all customers to wear masks. All stalls had hand sanitizer. Similarly, in Mexico City, a leader described his organization's regimented system for maintaining health and safety, including insisting on the use of PPE, erecting plastic structures to separate vendors from customers, regular cleaning and sanitization and checking of vendors' temperatures. In Ahmedabad, SEWA organizers described how they negotiated with the AMC to allow the reopening of Bhadra Fort Market by agreeing to adhere to a range of risk-reduction measures – mask wearing, social distancing, hand sanitizing, etc. Vendors or their organizations generally covered the cost of implementing these measures.

In Delhi and Durban, vendors worked with urban designers to reduce risks. In Delhi, SEWA and Janpahal worked with WIEGO's Delhi Focal Cities team and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Social Design Collaborative, and City Sabha. In Durban, trader leaders were supported by Asiye eTafuleni. These teams provided basic infrastructure, especially wash stations; spatially redesigned trading areas; instituted social distancing measures; and engaged with local authorities. In Delhi, three pilots experimented with a range of physical distancing layouts, measures and techniques for both vendors and their customers. These were systematized into a manual for [safe trading in times of COVID-19](#) that was disseminated across the city and beyond. In Durban, traders met regularly to discuss solutions to minimize risk and then invited city officials to engage (see Majithia et al 2022 for details.)

Yet, there were also limitations on how vendors and traders could promote health and safety in the absence of crucial sanitation infrastructure. Only 45 per cent of respondents reported having access to running water at their work sites in mid-2021. Access was the highest in Accra (93 per cent) and Pleven (84 per cent), and lowest in Delhi (9 per cent) and Durban (19 per cent).

Vendors and traders have long suffered from portrayals as being a health hazard, and in many cities the pandemic exacerbated this stigma. As described above, vendors in Lima endured a media and government narrative depicting them as “vectors of disease”, which was used to justify market closures and evictions. And in Durban, a street vendor argued:

This pandemic has killed our business. Customers don't trust us anymore. They prefer buying at formal retail shops because of this pandemic.

In Ahmedabad, while a vaccine drive targeting vegetable vendors was helpful in protecting vendors, it was also stigmatizing as it labelled them “super spreaders.”⁷ Respondents frequently expressed frustration about this portrayal, particularly given their investments in health and safety infrastructure, and the consensus that open-air activities were far safer than indoor. A street vendor leader in Mexico City noted the contradictions:

We know that these [stigmas] had no content, no scientific support since we operate in an open space. In addition to that, we traders, with our own resources as an organization, looked for ways to protect ourselves and our customers, because we were in a clear dilemma – if we didn't go out to work, we wouldn't have the resources to survive.

Earnings, Food Insecurity, and Coping

Survey findings suggest that street vendors and market traders experienced severe reductions in earnings and food security and had to rely on survival strategies with negative short- and long-term consequences for households.

⁷ See, for example, Economic Times – [COVID-19: Over 11,000 'super-spreaders' vaccinated in Ahmedabad under special drive](#), 29 June 2021.

Earnings

Across the sample, the median earnings of vendors and traders in April 2020 was zero. By mid-2020, earnings had recovered, at the median, to only 27 per cent of the pre-COVID-19 earnings. A year on, while eight out of every 10 vendors and traders were back at work, earnings, at the median, had recovered to only 60 per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings. Yet the level of recovery was uneven. As reflected in Figure 4, across the sample, by mid-2021, 39 per cent of respondents had made a full or near-full recovery, with earnings of over 90 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings. On the other end of the spectrum, 33 per cent of vendors and traders reported earning one-quarter or less of their pre-COVID-19 earnings.

Figure 4: Distribution of mid-2021 earnings as a percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings

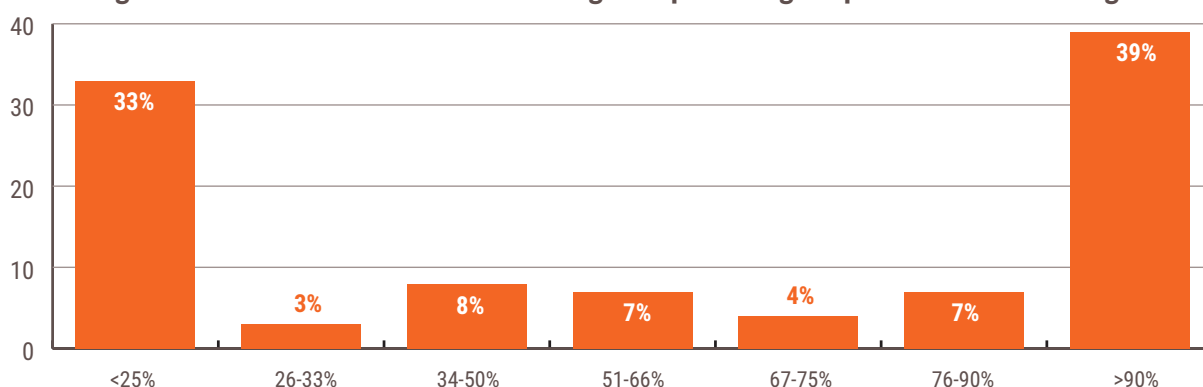
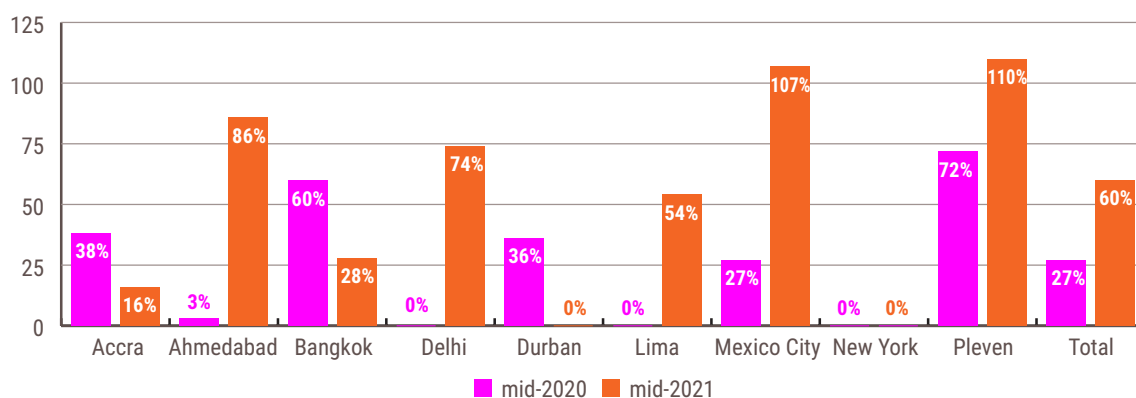


Figure 5 reflects the median earnings by city and shows a strong variation in the recovery by location.

Figure 5: Median percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings in 2020 and 2021 by city, for vendors/market traders⁸



Earnings in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Mexico City, and Pleven had improved considerably, even surpassing pre-COVID-19 earnings in Mexico City and Pleven. The rebounds in earnings in Ahmedabad and Delhi are attributable to the Diwali festival in India, and in Pleven to the start of the summer tourist season in Bulgaria. Thus, they do not necessarily represent sustained improvements in the business environment. In Mexico City, the return to pre-COVID-19 levels reflects the comparatively relaxed restrictions.

⁸ The figures presented here may not precisely match median percentages presented in the Round 2 city fact sheets because the fact sheets use uncorrected data from Round 2 and/or present street vendors and market traders separately.

In several cities, earnings had actually declined between the first period of reopening in mid-2020 and the second survey period – mid-2021. In Bangkok and Durban, this reflected renewed pandemic restrictions at the time of interviews. In the case of Durban, it is also linked to the eruption of political protests and riots, which negatively affected many traders. The drop in earnings between 2020 and 2021 in Accra is due to the significant price increases due to inflation and decline in customer purchasing power. Recovery in Lima was limited to roughly half of pre-COVID-19 earnings, while in New York, so many vendors still had low or no earnings that the median remained at zero in both years.

Gender and types of products sold also affected earnings recovery. Vendors selling food had recovered more than those selling non-food goods (71 per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings for food versus 64 per cent for non-food, at the median). For male vendors, earnings recovered to 70 per cent of pre-pandemic earnings by mid-2021, compared to only 55 per cent for women. In Delhi, Mexico City, and Plevn, pre-COVID-19 earnings gaps between women and men widened over the course of the pandemic.

Food insecurity

The reduction in earnings had knock-on effects on food security. In mid-2021, 63 per cent of respondents reported skipping meals or eating a low variety of foods in the last month, 32 per cent of interviewees reported adult hunger in their households in the last month, and 25 per cent of respondents with children in their homes reported child hunger.

The survey figures were backed up by stories of workers rationing their meals or eating foods of lower quality. A SEWA organizer in Ahmedabad noted that “many vendors are eating diluted daal, thin rotis and eating rotis with chutney sometimes”, while a woman trader in Accra said:

I have no husband. I am a single parent living with my children. When I sell, we use the sales for food. If I don't make any sales, we have to find other means to eat. We have reduced the quantity of food and just manage with the little we have If you should see where I live and how I live you will understand that I am really suffering. I have no support from anywhere. I am the only one holding the family.

The rising prices of food impacted not only profits, but also food security within workers' own households. A woman street vendor in Durban explained:

The food prices have gone up... When it gets to the end of the month and there is no food, they call me, and there is nothing I can do because I also do not have money. There are four people at home, my child, my mother, my uncle and my sister. They are all not working.

Interviewees noted how restrictions on their work affected wider food security. A vendor leader in Lima argued that the Mayor's decision to evict vendors contributed to food insecurity, saying, “vendors are solutions for food security especially in times of need”. In Bangkok, a food vendor observed that, “without street vendors, customers have to go to malls and convenience stores which are more expensive. With street vendors and street canteens, they can afford food.” Many vendors reported losing their perishable food stocks during lockdowns, when many households faced hunger. A woman street

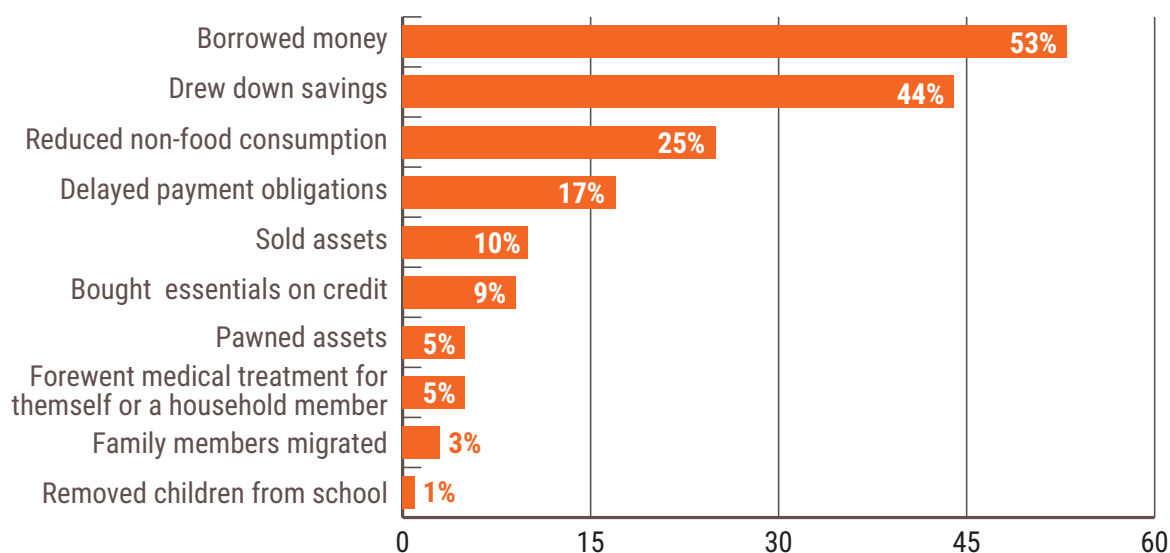
vendor in Accra, for example, said, “my stock was destroyed by rodents when we went on the long lockdown. Although I sold essential goods, I wasn’t allowed to trade, so when we resumed all my stock had been destroyed.”

Some notable exceptions demonstrate how local authorities can work with informal worker organizations to secure food security. In late April 2020, SEWA together with the AMC launched the “Vegetable on Wheels” programme. Through this initiative, fresh-produce vendors were able to visit wholesale markets in the early morning, and to ride with rickshaw drivers to sell their produce to customers at various stops on a specific route (Chen 2020). In New York, the Street Vendor Project partnered with elected officials and 80 vendor members to provide 35,000 meals to community members between 2020 and 2021.

Coping and survival strategies

Beyond reducing food consumption, vendors’ and traders’ households employed a variety of coping strategies to survive the crisis. As reflected in Figure 6, these included asset-depleting strategies like borrowing money, drawing down savings, delaying payment obligations, and selling or pawning assets.

Figure 6: Coping mechanisms undertaken between mid-2020 and mid-2021 (% of sample)



By mid-2021, 85 per cent of vendors or traders had drawn down on their savings, borrowed money, or both. Of those vendors and traders who drew down savings since the beginning of the crisis, 96 per cent had not been able to replace them by mid-2021. Traders lamented the loss of their savings, which in many cases had taken years to accumulate. A female vendor in New York said, “The savings that were there will never come back,” while a male vendor in Lima expressed, “It’s like starting from scratch: the savings are gone.”

Loans were needed for a variety of purposes: meeting basic needs, paying medical bills, and getting back to work. A vendor organizer in Ahmedabad said that women vendors whose families fell ill from the virus had debts ranging from INR25,000 to INR50,000. In New York, a woman vendor described owing USD10,000 in rent, on top of medical bills for her husband’s cancer treatment.

While sources of borrowing included formal lenders as well as friends and family, one in every five respondents reported borrowing from an informal lender. A vendor leader in Lima said that these lenders demand anywhere from 7 per cent to 15 per cent interest, daily. In Bangkok, a trader leader said loans were charged at a monthly interest rate of 20 per cent and advised her members against taking them, saying “it’s better to starve”. Some interviewees connected the punitive actions of governments and their experience of deprivation. A woman vendor from Lima lamented that:

With so much harassment and eviction, we are only getting deeper and deeper into debt There is not a day that goes by that they don’t take us away as if we were stealing. The authorities have their backs turned to our needs.

Business Challenges: Demand, Supply and Capital

Even as restrictions eased during periods of low infection, the street-vending sector remained in a deep slump. This section describes how reduced customer demand and lower purchasing power among their clientele converged with rising prices of inputs, increasing competition from other vendors, and constrained access to capital. It also discusses vendors and traders’ attempts to adapt their livelihoods and the limits of these strategies.

Reduced demand and issues with supply

Close to three-quarters (71 per cent) of actively working vendors/traders reported decreased sales compared with mid-2020. Workers in all cities highlighted this phenomenon of waning demand. In Delhi, a beverage vendor working in what had been a tourist area said that vendors were making between 400 to 500 rupees per day, compared to 2,000 to 3,000 in the pre-COVID-19 period. In October 2021, a clothing vendor who sells outside a metro station said that her work had not significantly improved following India’s deadly second wave from April to June. A trader providing sewing services in Accra said that her customers “don’t buy new things for themselves”. She went on, “They rather make alterations on old clothes.”

Depressed demand was particularly acute for merchandise vendors, since consumers generally reduced their consumption of non-food goods first. Echoing numerous traders, a woman pinafore vendor in Durban noted that with the cancellation of weddings, funerals and other events, she had few sales. She said, “people are focused on buying food”. A vendor in Bangkok said, “clothing vending is over”. He observed that on most days no sales were made. Workers in several cities explained that customers still avoided markets due to health concerns. In Bangkok, Delhi, Plevn, and New York City, the drop in demand for merchandise also reflected the drop in tourism, on which many merchandise vendors rely.

In explaining the reduction in consumer spending, vendors frequently painted a picture of communities in economic depression. A cooked-food vendor, who lives in a working-class suburb of Bangkok, described how the closure of garment factories left many of

his former customers with no income. He said that some had returned to their home province, while others attempted to become vendors themselves. Similarly, a trader in Accra said:

What has made trading also difficult is that a lot of people have lost their jobs and are just staying at home and not getting jobs. If they go [to seek jobs], they are told that no offers are available. So people are not able to buy like before.

Vendors and traders experienced supply-side challenges from two related sources: inability to access inputs from their normal suppliers, due to restrictions and closures, and rising prices due to inflation. Fifty-five per cent of interviewees reported increased difficulty in accessing stocks compared to mid-2020 and 67 per cent reported that the price of stocks had increased compared to mid-2020.

Many vendors cited specific examples of price increases for key inputs. A vendor leader in Accra reported that a bag of maize had increased from GHC250 to GHC450 in just one year. A chicken vendor in Lima complained that tomatoes had risen to 5 soles per kilo, and that chickens were now 9 soles: “The rice, the oil, all of it is expensive, and people buy little,” she said. In Ahmedabad, SEWA organizers reported that the price of vegetables had doubled during the crisis, as had the items used in festivals – clay oil lamps and decorations.

In Bangkok, the rising price of goods was compounded by the closure of wholesale markets where most vendors source their goods. This forced vendors to purchase products from more expensive sources: “When the big market like Bangkapi market was closed, we were greatly impacted as we had to go to Makro⁹ to buy goods at a higher price, causing our costs to be higher,” said a merchandise vendor. In Durban, looting of many formal shops and wholesalers during protests in mid-2021 had further contributed to rising prices.

In addition to these demand and supply issues, interviewees in all cities except Pleven reported increased pressure from new traders – often those who had lost formal and informal jobs. A woman fruit vendor in New York explained:

For ice cream, you used to find 4 or 5 vendors. Now you find 15 or 20 people selling the same thing you are selling. Mangoes, watermelons are sold in the park, cucumbers, all that stuff used to be scarce in the summer – not now.

In Lima, vendors identified new competition from a variety of sources. This included new, young vendors who were not self-employed but employees for larger business owners. Many also described competition from migrant workers from Venezuela, who had occupied vending areas vacated during the lockdown.

Attitudes towards the new vendors varied. Bangkok vendor leaders described encouraging and advising new vendors on how and what to sell. The fruit vendor in New York expressed appreciation for the increased variety of produce available in her neighbourhood, empathy for new vendors, but also concern about what this meant for individual vendors’ sales. In Durban, however, traders said that new competition was

⁹ A multinational wholesale formal retail outlet.

negatively affecting relationships: “Now we are looking each other in the eye, because nobody has money. If one customer comes, we all want that same customer.” In Lima, respondents generally expressed resentment or fear towards new migrant vendors.

Dynamics around newcomers revealed shifts in local governance dynamics. In Delhi, a vendor leader described how police allowed vendors to return only if they could pay bribes. This means that some better-off, new vendors have taken the place of vendors who were present before the pandemic. Vendors in Lima felt that the willingness of officials to tolerate new vendors – in areas from which long-term, registered vendors had been removed – suggested informal agreements and payments. A cooked-food trader said:

Vendors sustain the police, because the money they pay doesn't really go into the coffers, it's their gain. It's not that they don't want vendors; what they want is that there are vendors to meet their quotas.

Higher prices and costs, limited demand and increased competition have combined to squeeze vendors' profit margins. A vendor selling chicken in Lima said that she purchases chickens at 8.50 soles and sells them for 9.50 soles, with a profit of only one sole. But she cannot raise her prices, “because the competition outside would rather make 0.50 cents. They sell it cheaper”. Vendor organizers in Ahmedabad reported that vendors in the city could not charge higher prices since the customers were “struggling, working-class people”. A New York food-cart vendor explained, “If I sell the hotdog to the construction workers for three dollars for example, he's not gonna take it And if I keep selling the hotdog at the same price, I'll be losing.”

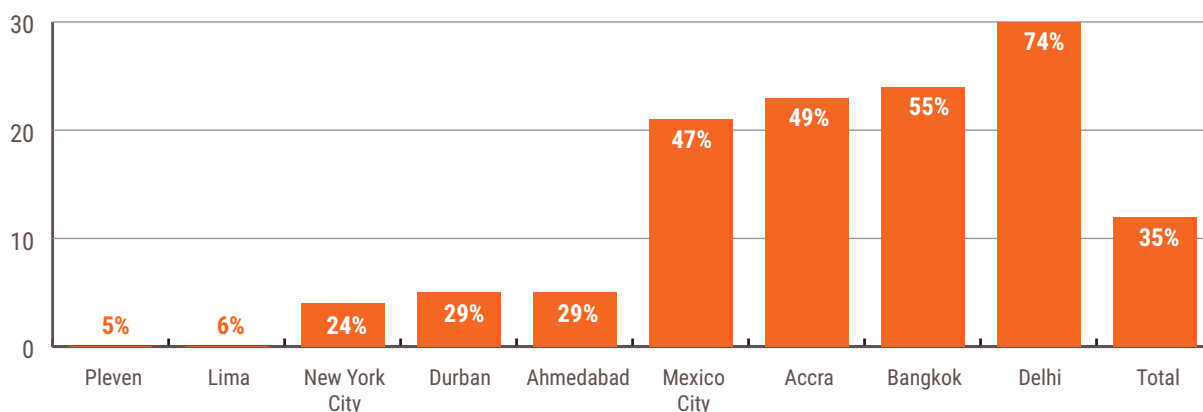
Across the sample, only 49 per cent had raised their selling prices over the same period, and 30 per cent had in fact reduced their selling prices.

Challenges in accessing capital

When survey respondents were asked what their sector needed from the government, the most common answer was access to capital. The need for capital, especially to resume work, was more pronounced among vendors and traders, compared to domestic workers, home-based workers, and waste pickers (WIEGO, 2022). Some traders had lost their stock at the beginning of the crisis, due to perishability or confiscations. A beverage vendor in Delhi, for example, said he had invested INR18,000 in cold drinks immediately before the crisis. By the time he was allowed to trade again they had reached their expiry date. A clothing vendor in Lima, whose goods were destroyed in the La Victoria market eviction, said she had lost between SOL7,000 and SOL8,000 worth of newly purchased products.

In several cities, government loans were, in theory, available. As is reflected in Figure 7, by mid-2021, only 12 per cent of street vendors and market traders interviewed reported receiving government loans.

Figure 7: Percentage of street vendors and market traders reporting access to a government loan by city, mid-2021



The requirement for vendors to register and provide documentation created barriers to access. For example, in South Africa, the Department of Small Business Development provided a 50 per cent loan and 50 per cent grant of between ZAR7,000 and ZAR10,000. Accessing this required registration with national tax and social security institutions. By mid-2021, only 5 per cent of market traders and 4 per cent of street vendors in Durban reported having received a government loan. Many respondents noted that they could return to sell only after borrowing from informal lenders.

Some loans were even targeted at street vendors and market traders. In May 2020, India's central government announced a once-off loan of INR10,000 for street vendors. By mid-2021, 30 per cent of vendors in Delhi but only 5 per cent of vendors in Ahmedabad reported having received a government loan, with administrative issues again being cited as a barrier. Those who had received the loan reported positive impacts. A woman clothing vendor in Delhi, for example, noted how it had helped her restart her business. She said she aimed to pay all her instalments timeously, hoping it would make her eligible for another loan. A beverage vendor, however, said INR10,000 was too little to restart. As he described:

Maybe a vegetable vendor can run their operations [with INR10,000], but in the market if the vendor is selling anything else – clothes or chole bature, or wood toys, confectionery or cosmetics – that cannot be purchased with 10,000.

In Bangkok, a comparatively high 24 per cent of vendors had received a government loan. Those who had not managed to access these loans said it was because they did not have the right paperwork and/or collateral or guarantors. In some cases they had received loans from the government prior to COVID-19, which they were unable to pay back once the pandemic began. In Accra, the timing of the pandemic coincided with the closure of several microfinance institutions, which some vendors and traders had relied on.

Livelihood adaptations and barriers

Traders took a variety of measures to adapt their business to pandemic conditions. A common adaptation strategy was to change products sold. Some traders started selling PPE like masks and sanitizer. Many merchandise traders started to sell food instead. Some respondents said they took on another type of work such as delivery, home repair or maintenance, home-based work, or domestic work. Men were more likely than

women to adopt a second livelihood, possibly reflecting unequal access to capital and a lower level of flexibility among women vendors given household responsibilities.

Several barriers made successful livelihood adaptation the exception rather than the rule. Limited access to capital played a key role; as one trader in Accra stated, “for now we do not even have the money to vary what we sell”. Like other workers, vendors selling different goods were still contending with low demand and high market saturation, which their entrance exacerbated. New entrants into unfamiliar sectors also lacked business experience: a street vendor leader in Bangkok said most new vendors failed due to lack of trade acumen and knowledge of customer preferences.

Many faced the same barriers to adaptation as in non-crisis moments, related to age, education and access. In Plevn, some younger workers could use Facebook to sell their products, but older workers struggled with this platform. Non-vending opportunities were scarce and intimidating for workers who had little other experience. As a woman trader in Durban put it:

There are no job opportunities. I am 40 years old, where could I get another job? Who would hire me at this age? I just need to hold on to what I have right now and make it work.

Organizing, Negotiations and Evictions

COVID-19 represented an unprecedented challenge for worker organizations. They faced both the desperate and immediate needs of their members but also uncharted practice and policy challenges. This section explores how organizations reacted to the crisis, and how the crisis affected organizational dynamics. It also discusses their approaches to local negotiations – both the successes and frustrations. It concludes by highlighting how uncertainty still haunts the sector, driven in part by pervasive evictions.

Organizing and organizational dynamics

Informal worker organizations across the cities and sectors included in the study mobilized to support their members with material relief, and by channelling access to government relief programmes and vaccinations. As described in Section 3, vendor and trader organizations focused particularly on securing workplace health and safety for their members.

In cities, including Mexico City and Bangkok, vendor leaders described a context of strong solidarity and mutual aid. A vendor leader in Mexico City noted:

We are very supportive of each other. Even when the situation was very difficult and sales were very bad, we went back to bartering, to exchanging food for other types of items: for shoes, for a blouse, for a pair of trousers We helped each other. When a comrade doesn't have enough money to buy medicine, first the organization has to respond.

A vendor leader in Bangkok similarly explained how members and other community members looked after the clothing vendors when they were prohibited from selling during the first lockdown: “We won't leave our friends to starve to death.” Solidarity,

however, was not universal. In Accra and Durban, some respondents spoke of enhanced tensions and competition. A woman trader in Accra explained:

The levels of trust and solidarity have reduced ...the love has also reduced. If you are in difficulty and you ask for support from a fellow trader, they won't give it to you. They lament back to you that they have not made any sales and so do not have money to help.

The ways in which the pandemic affected trader organizations also varied. Some leaders reported that the pandemic strengthened their organizations and collective action among members, especially if they were able to capitalize on digital organizing. A vendor leader in Delhi said that his organization had grown from around 50 members prior to the pandemic, to 500 by the time of interview in late 2021. He attributed the growth to the organization's support to members during the pandemic, and strong organizing practices.

When COVID began, many street vendors didn't have a ration card or didn't have proof of residence in Delhi, and therefore were not getting rations. When our organization started looking into this matter, many vendors joined our organization. After having these new members, we had to spread awareness among them; that was very easy for us because many of our meetings were on Zoom.

A vendor leader in Bangkok said that the pandemic had strengthened vendors' relationships with workers from other sectors, through the Federation of Informal Workers of Thailand.

Our network is tighter knit now because we have online meetings rather than face-to-face meetings, which require more time to commute etc. The more we meet, the more we understand each other.

Not all organizations were able to transition to online organizing. In Accra, several leaders said that the pandemic hindered their ability to meet and collect dues and that this diminished the enthusiasm for organizing and collective action. In Lima, leaders reported that their organizations' membership shrank due to illness, death and the fact that members returned to rural areas or left the sector altogether or for other types of work. Leaders said that many members had become uncontactable.

Negotiations successes and frustrations

Despite challenges, worker organizations in all cities played a crucial role in advocacy during the pandemic. Aside from the early negotiations around essential-worker status, the most common form of negotiation was around vendors' workplaces and their ability to return. These processes typically occurred on a highly local (sometimes market-by-market) basis, with local authorities. Even in Lima, where vendors faced some of the most oppressive conditions, worker leaders shared that there were positive cases in some districts, where vendors were not evicted but rather given hours and other parameters as to when and how they could sell – or where more sympathetic police warned vendors before conducting raids on trading areas.

As described in Section 3, many negotiations revolved around vendor organizations' ability to demonstrate robust health and safety protocols. In Pleven, leaders of the Bulgarian Trade Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers secured agreement

from the City Council to create an affordable, well-located retail space for street vendors and home-based workers. For a small fee, members of the union can use the space for exhibitions, fairs, festivals and other cultural events. Those selling certain local souvenirs are exempt from paying fees. As previously noted, in New York, vendors in early 2021 won a decade-long political struggle to legalize their work when the city passed legislation to raise the number of available food permits. The victory followed a strategy by the Street Vendor Project to raise the visibility of vendors through public actions and social media and build relationships with progressive politicians, including during the pandemic (Devlin 2021).

In other cases, organizations had to contend with greater hostility from the state. In Ahmedabad, vendors encountered regular violence in the district of Bapunagar, an area that housed close to 300 vendors. A SEWA organizer explained that “whenever the vendors started to sell, the police van would come and just start beating these vendors with batons”. SEWA submitted complaints to the police and AMC. When the violence continued, they deployed a team of SEWA leaders to monitor the area. In New York, when the developer Related Companies attempted to displace vendors by installing tree planters at Hudson Yards, Street Vendor Project leaders and members would physically remove the planter so that a vendor could retrieve his space (Ricciulli, 2021).

In spite of some successes, leaders shared frustration with unwillingness of governments – at city, state and national levels – to engage. While some leaders described being dismissed or ignored, others said that governments deferred decisions, cancelled meetings, or stopped returning calls after initial engagements. A vendor in Lima complained, “We try to get them to listen to us, but no, it’s all a lie, nobody listens to us. All these months we go to the municipality and have nothing to show for it.” Another leader from Lima expressed frustration that the Ministry of Economy had ignored her organization’s requests to reopen vending mesas – a dialogue space they once had where vendors met regularly with government officials to work on governance issues (see Abizaid and Oganda, 2022, for details on the period of participatory governance in Lima).

In Bangkok, vendor leaders described approaching the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) through multiple channels to negotiate for a return to their pre-eviction workspaces. This included working through allies in the Parliament, the Ministry of Labour, the National Health Security Office and academic institutions. These approaches had not elicited any meaningful engagement or action from BMA, even after several years. In Mexico City, vendor leaders confirmed the difficulty of reaching authorities during the pandemic, who insisted that all contact “must take place by phone, by WhatsApp, and nothing else”. One lamented that the pandemic had also removed vendors’ primary tool for gaining the state’s attention – mass demonstrations.

Uncertainty, evictions and taxation

When discussing future prospects, vendors and traders frequently shared feelings of uncertainty stemming from a variety of sources: the virus, the economy, and government policy. A market trader in Durban gave a sense of an enduring crisis:

Things are not back to normal. I doubt that things will actually go back to normal. Our economy is going up and down – factories open today and they close tomorrow, some people have started trading and others have stopped working.

Many respondents pointed to government actions that seemed aimed at permanently displacing them. The Delhi Municipal Corporation, for example, announced it would start its vendor census, a process mandated under India's 2014 Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act. They planned to conduct the count, even though many vendors were not operating and would therefore be excluded from future registration. Even in places where traders had returned to work, the census process did not secure their livelihoods. In the New Friends Colony, for example, vendors were removed from their site shortly after the census to make way for a new development. A vendor explained that:

The Municipal Corporation is saying that 'now that we have done the survey, you get out'. That's the biggest irony. First of all they haven't even finished the survey, and now they'll take five to six years to make the vending area. How will people survive?

In Accra, enforcement was generally more lenient during the first year of the pandemic. In February 2021, however, the Accra Metropolitan Authority initiated a "Clean your Frontage" campaign that resulted in the largest and most violent street trader eviction campaign in recent history. This was despite the President's commitment to including traders in his election campaign. Street traders have long endured periodic evictions, often following elections and/or the festive season. This campaign was part of the new Mayor's promise to make Accra the "cleanest city" in her first 100 days – a response to sanitation and middle-class concerns.

A key player in displacements is big business. Developers prompted the displacement at Hudson Yards in New York and New Friends Colony in Delhi, described above. Local activists and researchers in Bangkok point to the role of property developers and formal retailers in street vendor evictions in the city before, during and after the pandemic. A vendor leader in Bangkok pointed out that the formal convenience store chain 7-11 has increasingly started to stock street food equivalences. He noted:

The government is pro-formal business – the giant capitalists. I think ... it is big businesses that prevent vendors from selling. Every ten blocks or so, you will see a convenience store. The convenience stores are growing, street vendors are dying.

Other leaders highlighted the policy advantages afforded to large, formal firms. A leader in Mexico City compared the restrictions placed on vendors, who were prevented from selling non-essential goods, to those of big retailers: "Who had more need, the Wal-Mart

Corporation, or a *tianguista* in Mexico City?” In Lima, vendors criticized the government for providing workers with only marginal relief funds for survival, compared to the large concessions enjoyed by formal businesses.

They should have given us an economic incentive to generate income to be able to work, but with 600 soles what are you going to do? On the other hand, it gives billions to the big companies. I don't know what kind of economists they have as advisers, when we as consumers pay direct taxes to the state while there are companies that evade taxes.

Tax and austerity measures were additional concerns for leadership. As the health crisis receded, governments turned their attention to fiscal pressures in its wake, trying to both limit spending and recoup revenue. This has resulted in a new focus on taxing informal workers. In Mexico City, the state introduced the “régimen simplificado de confianza” aimed at broadening the tax base by capturing informal-sector workers (Bloomberg, 2021). In Ghana, the government announced in early 2021 that all national identification numbers would become tax identification numbers, also in an effort to widen the tax net from the “informal sector” (Teiko, 2021). In 2022, it passed an “e-levy” of 1.5 per cent on electronic transactions, on which most informal workers rely. Subsequent research has shown this to be highly regressive (Anyidoho, et al, 2022).

Reducing Risks and Enhancing Resilience

As self-employed workers, during normal times, street vendors and market traders bear the risks of their work, with limited access to the social or legal protections afforded to formal workers. Rather, many primarily experience the punitive arm of the state, which penalizes their work through harassment, fines, confiscations, and evictions. What this report has shown is that this imbalance was exacerbated during COVID-19. Vendors bore the health and business risks of the pandemic with limited support – and in many cities faced intensified persecution.

Drawing on demands expressed in the survey, city research teams worked with trader leaders to develop city-specific recommendations.¹⁰ This section briefly synthesizes trader demands and recommendations across cities.¹¹

In the first round of the study, the urgent call was for the safe reopening of markets and street trading sites and help with protective equipment and sanitizers. The research findings show that traders largely provided their own PPE, with little help from the state. Trader organizations initiated innovations in redesigning trading layouts and other measures to protect their own and their customers' health. This again shows how traders understand the economics of their businesses and are the source of solutions, reinforcing the longstanding call for participatory urban planning and design.

The health crisis also spotlighted the lack of appropriate infrastructure, with many pointing out that they did not have access to vital water and sanitation at their trading

¹⁰ See appendix 3 for links to the city reports.

¹¹ For a summary of recommendations from all worker groups from round 1 of the study, see [Informal Worker Demands - 12-City Study](#).

sites. This reinforces the related longstanding call for appropriate infrastructure – water, sanitation, paving and drainage – but also trader-specific infrastructure, notably shelter and storage. As the health crisis has receded, many traders have faced new crises – flooding in Durban, Accra and Bangkok, and extreme heat in Delhi. Trader resilience would be greatly enhanced if local authorities prioritized the provision of appropriate, co-designed infrastructure.

Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the rise in punitive practices in many of the study cities resulted in trader removals and relocations. Unsurprisingly, many interviewees highlighted the importance of safe, secure but also appropriately located places of work. In relocations, authorities often ignore the importance of proximity to customers for traders. A woman street vendor in Lima captured this in saying, “it is important that we be located in a place where there is a commercial flow and we can sell”. She added, “They should give us a place to work peacefully, not for free. We can pay but we need to work in peace to save and be able to live with dignity.” In Bangkok, vendors emphasized the need to return to the spaces where they worked before the government’s eviction campaigns that started in 2014. Leaders in both Bangkok and Lima expressed scepticism of private markets promoted by government officials, which are often poorly located and have high costs associated with rent, utilities and services.

Strongly linked to the demand for secure working space was the demand for the government to “do no harm” – to stop evictions, fines and other forms of harassment, particularly during a time of severe economic downturn and material deprivation. Delhi trader leaders, for example, called for a stop to evictions of street vendors, as is mandated by the Street Vendor Act, and an end to harassment of street vendors by police and municipal officials. In Durban, there was a call to amend discriminatory laws¹² and harassment that hinders recovery for market traders and street vendors.

The study found alarming levels of food insecurity. Unsurprisingly, many interviewees called for food and cash grants to meet basic needs, many noting the need for financial support simply to pay debt instalments. Some asked for relief for utility bills, rent or tuition. Vendors in New York emphasized the need for rent relief. A woman vendor said:

I am worried about my rent. If the government can take care of the rent, I will take a deep breath and worry less so I can go back to work.

Respondents across all cities cited the need for access to financial support from the government to restock and restart their businesses adequately, as well as to pay off the debt incurred over the worst periods of the crisis. Respondents were divided as to whether loans, rather than grants, were an appropriate form of support, given the extent of the crisis. A Delhi beverage vendor said:

My request to the government is to not give this to us as a loan – give it as a relief donation. These are unusual times. You have got to look at our condition.

Others emphasized that any loans must be zero-interest or very low interest. In Accra, a market trader suggested that the government programme should have included

¹² The municipality has still to amend its street trading bylaws in line with a 2014 High Court ruling that found the confiscation of goods to be unconstitutional.

a small grant for the lowest earners, an interest-free loan for middle-earners, and a low-interest loan for the larger businesses. In Mexico City, a vendor selling sweets felt that the loan schemes would have a better chance of reaching the workers who really needed them if they were channelled through worker organizations, rather than government offices or banks.

Many noted the disproportionate support offered to formal players. Referring to a stimulus programme for formal small and medium enterprises, a woman street vendor in Lima said:

I need economic support: a low-interest loan. Why is there no Reactiva for the little guys? We are the ones who need it most because most of us are without capital.

Respondents made the case that stimulus programmes targeting informal traders contribute to national economic recovery. A street vendor leader in Mexico City argued:

We do not want them to give us anything as a gift. We want them to support us so that we can continue producing, working and generating jobs, which is what we do. The government itself does not understand that, if they activate us, the small businesses, the internal economy is activated, the economy that moves here, not the economy of the big transnational or globalized chains, no, the internal economy.

Further, the pandemic period spotlighted the extent to which workers in informal employment – both wage employment and the self-employed – lack social protection. There is impetus to address these gaps in the social protection system. Interviewees had country-specific suggestions. For example, in Ghana it was noted that the Ministry of Health should remove financial and administrative barriers to registering for the National Health Insurance System. In Thailand, worker leaders called on the Ministry of Labour to extend benefits to informal workers to be equal to those of formal workers and requested informal economy worker representation in the Social Security Office. In South Africa, trader leaders called for the modest Social Relief of Distress grant to be converted into a permanent basic-income grant set at a level that ensures food security.

Finally, many workers noted that governments should come to the worksites of street vendors and market traders, listen and learn about their working conditions, and look for opportunities to work in partnerships. This echoes StreetNet International's rallying call, "nothing for us, without us". Systematically addressing these demands for a sector that provides employment and enhances food security is critical to ensuring resilience in the face of future crises.

Appendix 1: Organizations and Researchers Involved in the Study

	Partner and collaborating organizations	Researchers
Accra	Greater Accra Markets Association (GAMA), Informal Hawkers and Vendors of Ghana (IHVAG)	Owusu Boampong, Kweku Kyere, Lydia Boateng-Pobee
Ahmedabad	Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), SEWA's Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women, and grassroots researchers from the SEWA Union	SEWA Academy Team: Namrata Bali, Bansari Buha, Archana Dave, Jignasa Dave, Basanti Khanayat, Shanta Koshti, Gita Naila, Jayshree Panchal, Ramesh Parmar, Jasu Rathod, Khyati Shah SEWA Union Team: Rashim Bedi, Anjana Koshti, Mayuri Baldevbhai Parmar, Niruben Ashokbhai Parmar, Mumtaz Shaikh, Rekhaben Vaghela
Bangkok	Federation of Informal Workers of Thailand (FIT), HomeNet Thailand, Jaravee Association for the Conservation of Thai Massage	Pakavadee Boonkacha, Punjaree Duangngoeng, Jantana Ekeurmanee, Puttinee Gopatta, Wanida Kotcharsarn, Wichaya Komin, Puttinee Kophatta, Boonsom Namsonboon, Walee Naksuwan, Indira Oonjaoban, Kantarose Pinthong, Borvorn Subsing, Poonsap Tulaphan
Delhi	Delhi Roundtable of Waste Pickers (DRT), Janpahal, SEWA Delhi	Malavika Narayan, Avi Maijithia, Shalini Sinha, Ankit Jha, Aamir Sherwani Khan
Durban	Asiye eTafuleni	Richard Dobson, Sarah Heneck, Misiwe Maphumulo, Sithulisile Moyo, Patrick Ndlovu
Lima	Asociación La Parada, Central Única de Autoempleados de La Victoria, Rumbo a la Formalización (CETRAFOR), Confederación de Instituciones de Ambulantes y Afines de la Región Lima y Callao (CONFIAR); Federación Nacional de Recicladores del Perú (FENAREP), Federación Nacional de Vendedores de Diarios, Revistas y Loterías del Perú (FENVENDRELPE), Frente Nacional de Recicladores Ambientalistas del Perú (FRENARA), Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Trabajadoras del Hogar (I PROFOTH), Red Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Autoempleados (RENATTA), Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar del Perú (SINTRAHOGARP), Sindicato de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar de Lima (SINTTRAHOL)	Edith Anampa, Themis Castellano, Guillermo Perez, Carmen Roca
Mexico City	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar (SINACTRAHO), Trabajadores Voluntarios y Desempleados de la Ciudad de México (TVDCM), Unión de Aseadores de Calzado de la Ciudad de México (UACCM)	Jesús Bedoya, Yuleina Carmona, Tania Espinosa, Erick Serna Luna, Natalia Torres
New York	Street Vendor Project	Mohamed Attia, Charla Beauvais, Stefany Cielos, Chicago Crosby, Taylor Green, Luo Guannan, Chris Hartmann, Christine Hegel, Ana Hernandez, Rafi Islam, Beki Kabanzira, Zulfa Kaid, Sari Kisilevsky, Clay Martin, Kelly Martinez, Nasif Mia, Rosa Mite, Ling Ren, Talia Salas, Camila Salvagno, Nora Swift, Husam Zaid, Irlanda Zea Marino
Pleven	The Bulgarian Trade Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers (UNITY)	Svetla Ilieva, Plamena Tsonova, Cvetelina Velichkova, Violeta Zlateva

Appendix 2: Street Vendor and Market Trader Statistics

	Date of survey	Country	Total	Women	Men
Mexico	2019	Total	5.2	7.1	3.9
		Urban	6.0	7.2	5.0
		Mexico City	8.7	10.2	7.6
Peru	2015	Urban Peru outside of Lima	12.4	19.5	6.4
		Lima	9.2	14.1	5.2
Ghana	2015	Total	20.7	32.1	7.5
		Urban	28.7	43.3	10.8
		Accra	28.0	43.0	10.4
South Africa	2018	8 major metros	3.0	4.0	3.0
		Durban	3.0	3.0	3.0
India	2017-8	Total	2.6	1.1	3.0
		Urban	4.2	2.3	4.7
		Delhi	2.7	1.3	3.0
Thailand	2017	Total	4.5	5.5	3.7
		Urban	5.7	6.8	4.7
		Bangkok	5.9	7.2	4.8

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Appendix 3: Resources and References

WIEGO COVID-19 crisis study resources:

Global Reports:

- WIEGO. 2022. [Covid-19 and Informal Work in 11 Cities: Recovery Pathways Amidst Continued Crisis](#). WIEGO Working Paper No. 43. Manchester, UK: WIEGO

City Reports:

- [Accra Report Round 2](#)
- [Ahmedabad Report Round 2](#)
- [Bangkok Report Round 2](#)
- [Delhi Report Round 2](#)
- [Durban Report Round 2](#)
- [Pleven Report Round 2](#)
- [Lima Report Round 2](#)
- [Mexico City Report Round 2](#)
- [New York City Report Round 2](#)

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About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.