

Markets Matter: Market Vendor Views on Security and Social Inclusion in Honiara, Solomon Islands

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There is increasing recognition of the need for initiatives aimed at sustainable livelihoods and inclusive economic development to pay more attention to security issues (e.g. Craig and Porter 2017). Vendors at community urban food markets in Melanesian cities are working in places that are unlicensed and have limited formal security but are essential to urban food supply and livelihoods. This In Brief examines governance and security issues in three of Honiara's community markets at Henderson, Fishing Village and White River. They are located on roadsides and unregulated by authorities, in contrast to the Honiara Central Market (HCM) which is housed in a market building and run by the Honiara City Council. This is the third In Brief in the [Markets Matter series](#) that provide short overviews of key findings from a research project on the socio-economic value, opportunities and challenges facing community markets. The research was conducted in partnership with UN Women and funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. The study involved 189 vendors — 84% women.

'Safe' market spaces

The security, social inclusion and development nexus in the informal sector is often neglected by national and local government policy frameworks. First, community markets mostly function at the margins of formal economic systems and do not generate government revenue, so remain a low priority for scarce public expenditure. There is little, if any, provision of formal security or governance. Second, the role of women and community markets in building social relationships and contributing to security often sit in the 'shadows' of social consciousness, a particular form of rendering women's experiences invisible (Nordstrom 1999). Third, externally initiated interventions to secure peace and stability, particularly in Solomon Islands, mostly focus on formal processes and institutions (state building), with less recognition of community-based arrangements (SIG 2017). The markets' lack of legal standing means the threat of closure

by government adds to livelihood insecurity and vendor reluctance to engage politically.

Vendors viewed each food market as a community space, with a strong sense of ownership and connection between themselves and the locality. Markets were run by networks of community residents. Typically, those setting the rules for the market lived in the vicinity and were also market vendors or clients. In the fee-paying markets of White River and Fishing Village, fees were paid mainly to landowners with title to market land and/or land abutting the market. Non-locals who sold produce in the markets abided by the rules with few transgressions and had relations with the community at the market site either through kin, church or other relationships (such as paying for services including water, sanitation or accommodation, or gifting produce). These relationships went beyond the economic: the vendor–community exchanges (in-kind or monetary) also created mutual obligations and cooperation with informal governance.

Satisfaction with market governance and safety was high. For example, 62% of Fishing Village respondents had no concerns about either security or market governance and those with concerns mostly focused on traffic safety. At Henderson, all vendors came from local communities, and only 11% had concerns, mainly related to evening drinking. A larger number (68%) of vendors at the White River food market had concerns, primarily about drinking (45%) and 'bullying' (24%), related to arguments about space and fees which were not consistently administered. This market is not as strongly embedded in the local community and vendor security is a greater concern. White River vendors stressed the market was safe 'during market hours', but at night alcohol and drug sales led to disturbances. This contrasts with HCM which is known anecdotally as a place for petty crime (theft) and violence, and does not strongly embody community relations.

While market security is often seen as a gendered issue primarily affecting women, in our surveys concerns about safety were evenly divided between men and women; most

remarked that the close proximity of, and relationship with, local communities made them feel secure. This is unlike the HCM where social networks are weak; a 2013 study of Savo Island vendors found that women were more concerned than men about theft, sexual harassment and intimidation (Georgeou et al. 2015).

'Black' and 'green' markets

Our research focused on trade of fresh produce — primarily fruit, vegetables and fish — but not 'illegal' or 'unhealthy' products, such as marijuana, home-made alcohol (*kwaso*) or betel nut which are sold in separate areas. There was no evidence that legal and illegal products were sold in the same stall or zone. *Kwaso* is produced and sold in large quantities in White River and Fishing Village markets but in different zones, often managed by different people, with segregation locally enforced. Drunken men causing disturbances and destroying property (for example breaking market tables at night) was a concern across markets. In Fishing Village market, the community's cooperative organised 'security officers' to help police these incidents and excluded 'unhealthy' products within the main market area; these measures were to enhance security for vendors but also reduced negative attention by authorities who could close the market down. At Henderson market, the close proximity of a police station and the local settlement was seen as a good deterrent against drunken people causing market havoc.

In contrast, White River market lacks strong cooperative organisation and community oversight, and also is situated in an area known for illegal trade and low police presence, so more vendors had security concerns. During daytime marketing hours with community members all around, most felt safe but not at night, when black market trade is more common and community controls fewer. Some vendors felt that market management could be improved — from security to waste management — with stronger community and vendor governance and collaboration, but mechanisms to convene the market community and organise were weak. None argued for government management of markets, rather most wanted recognition of market legitimacy, and support for service provision and evening security.

Markets, ethnicity and social inclusion

Tensions between ethnic groups are seen in the HCM, but this appears not to be the case for the informal markets of our study. People from different ethnic backgrounds reside in White River and Henderson (often through intermarriage), and are vendors. At Fishing Village, local communities are mainly Malaitan (north)

but host vendors are from many ethnic backgrounds. None expressed concerns about ethnic discrimination.

These ethnically inclusive spaces, dominated by women traders, are sites of women's agency, community cooperation and social inclusion. Current conditions in community markets build on historical traditions — for example, during the Tensions (1998–2003) the mobility of women was restricted but exceptions were made for female market vendors who operated markets and barter exchanges across enemy (ethnic) lines at White River and other locations around Honiara. An acknowledged deficiency of post-conflict interventions was the failure to incorporate women's roles in establishing secure places into formal peace and development processes (SIG 2017).

While there are security concerns, many community markets have established cooperative community relationships and locally-provided safe spaces. Donor or government interventions would do well to support these relationships, while working to recognise markets as legitimate through by-law changes, or where market places generate public hazards, help to secure more recognised trading spaces given the contribution these markets make to urban vitality, food security, livelihoods and community.

Notes on authors

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