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NAVIGATING VENDOR INFORMALITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN COLOMBO

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- Vendor, Manning Market

Introduction

In the midst of COVID-19 lock down, vendors operating from the Old Manning Market based in Pettah found themselves being relocated to Peliyagoda, to what was claimed to be a “modern marketplace for traders as well as customers” (UDA 2023). The displacement and relocation of these vendors did not stand in isolation; the early 2000’s saw the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) moving ‘informal’ street vendors off the street, in a bid to ‘cleanse’ the city and relocate them into alternate spaces to operate (Sevanatha 2003). Vendors operating outside the Fort railway station had their stalls dismantled overnight in 2008, with no notice of eviction (Kotalawala 2010). In 2018, street vendors operating in and around the Thotalanga area in North Colombo were relocated from the street into a newly built public market; the “Nagalagam Street Public Market”. Vendors selling cooked food (isso vadai and kottu) on Galle Face Green were threatened with eviction by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority in March 2024 citing concerns around food standards and public health (Alphonsus 2024). In May 2024, informal vendors operating down Bastian Mawatha in Pettah experienced their shops being bulldozed overnight by the UDA, with no notice of eviction given to them.

The justifications given to these relocations have centred around formalisation, beautification, cleansing (of the streets), sanitation or the provision of modern services for vendors. In the following sections, we argue that displacement and relocation of vendors should go beyond the provision of superficial improvements - whether that be infrastructure improvements or improvements to the built environment. Policy recommendations targeted at vendors should focus on support required by them, rather than improvements based on perceptions, gentrification or formalisation that on many occasions does not support the growth of their business.

This research brief builds on research undertaken for the Living Off-Grid food and Infrastructure

Collaboration (LOGIC 2024) and the Fruits and Vegetables for Sustainable and Healthy Diets initiative (FRESH) (CGIAR 2024). The research was conducted between January 2023 - May 2023 and July 2023 - October 2023. The methodology encompassed an ethnographic approach, which included multiple visits to markets, in-depth interviews with vendors and households who bought from these markets (including several follow up interviews), and an analysis of the infrastructure requirements at different points of the value chain in Colombo (Gooneratne 2024).

The making of world class markets

Located between Olcott Mawatha and Bastian Mawatha in Pettah, the Old Manning Market was well known for being the central hub of distribution for wholesale and retail agricultural produce. Whilst the market was only spread over 3.5 acres of land and had limited space for vendors and parking facilities for transportation vehicles, the Old Manning Market was located right in the heart of Pettah close to public transport routes such as the central bus stand and railway station . Being at the heart of Colombo meant that vendors had an endless supply of customers, be it those who lived in surrounding areas or those who would come into Pettah as part of their daily work commute. Their operating hours started from 3:00 AM where they would get fresh produce and attract wholesale buyers, and would continue until 8:00 PM where commuters, and local residents would keep frequenting their stalls. In the midst of COVID-19, vendors were told they would be relocated to the New Manning Market, located around 8 km away from their existing location.

Built at a cost of LKR 6.9 billion (ada derana 2020) under the purview of the Urban Development Authority, the New Manning Market situated near the Central Expressway was meant to have, “1192 shops, a large parking lot for 600 vehicles, restrooms for staff, medical facilities, banks, restaurants, cold rooms, hotels, and many more” (Melwa Steel 2023). This new marketplace was positioned as being a ‘modern’ market, with significant infrastructure improvements compared to the old marketplace. However, upon relocation vendors realised that the facilities they received were very different to what was promised.

A few kilometres away, street vendors down Ferguson Road in Thotalanga also experienced relocation in 2018, when they were moved into a newly built market

complex. Similar to the New Manning Market, the Nagalagam Street Public Market, which was newly built by the CMC, promised new infrastructural amenities for street vendors, and a space for them to sell and display their produce which would previously have been displayed on makeshift stands by the roadside.

The realities of world class markets

Four years on, at the New Manning Market, vendors are still waiting for the modern market that was promised to them. Plastered walls have yet to be painted, taps around the market are broken, there are overflowing drains, power failures, and dirty and broken toilets – a fraction of the infrastructural complaints that vendors must contend with.

Lack of public transport

When vendors moved to Peliyagoda, from central Colombo the fringes of Colombo, vendors immediately noted that the market was not the modern market that they expected it to be. Within days of their arrival, they immediately started to realise the serious shortcomings of the market, all of which were raised to the UDA who were now managing the market. One of the most significant problems which is still evident today is the fall in customers and consequent demand for produce. Whilst it boasts a much bigger parking space, it's completely cut-off from any form of public transport, resulting in anyone wanting to access the market having to rely on private means of transportation. Vendors spoke about how this isolation of the market has resulted in a reduction in customers coming to the market. As one vendor noted,

“The Old Manning Market was a much smaller space, but I had so much business that I would get a supply of vegetables and stack them to the height of the ceiling. Now I don't even bother getting as much as I don't have the demand for it as it is not in the city centre.”

Despite raising this problem multiple times to the UDA, and the UDA promising to provide a public transport route to the market, this hasn't materialised. At the time the research was conducted, With the compounding effects of the economic crisis and families cutting back

on food, the fall in consumption was impacting vendors more than ever. A vendor noted,

“In the old market we would operate until 8:00 PM at night. Look at the time now, it's 11:00 AM and vendors are going home because we know there won't be any business after this.”

Lack of space

Prior to moving to the New Manning Market, vendors were promised 12 x 12-foot stalls. However, upon relocation they realised that the stalls that were initially promised to them were further subdivided, resulting in each vendor being allocated a 6 x 12-foot stall. They were also asked to share plug sockets, making it difficult to conduct their business as vendors need easy access to plug sockets to use their electronic scales. As one vendor noted,

“Despite how much you may love your neighbour, you are still going to fight if they come into your land. The same thing has happened here – we are fighting with our fellow vendors for this limited space so that we can both conduct our business.”

Lack of storage space

At the New Manning Market, vegetable vendors were given overhead storage spaces for them to use. However, as the original stall sizes were subdivided after completion – vendors found themselves having to share this space with the other vendor sharing their stall. This made it even more difficult for vendors to manage their operations, as they had much less storage space than was initially promised to them.

Fruit vendors were not given any storage space and many have resorted to making modifications to the stall, bearing the expense themselves, to keep their produce safe overnight. These modifications include the creation of steel or wrought iron structures around their stalls that could be locked when vendors are not around.

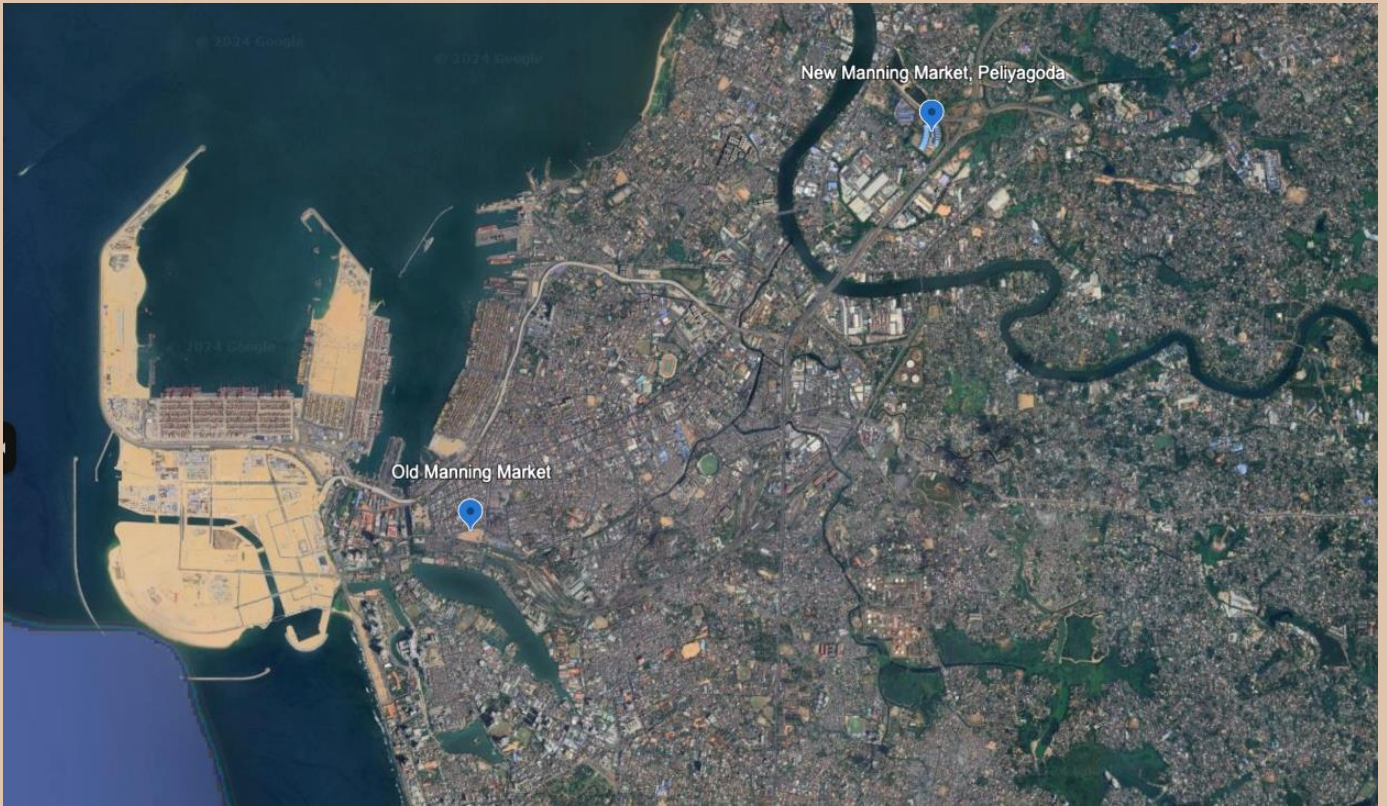


Image 1: Map of the relocation of Manning Market



Image 2: Vendors selling from the floor of New Manning Market

Reduction in business

As noted previously, many vendors have noted a fall in demand since their relocation to the New Manning Market. Whilst this compounded fall in demand has impacted revenues of these vendors, they are cognisant of the impacts further upstream the supply chain. For farmers who used to supply predominantly to vendors in Manning Market, this reduction in demand has resulted in vendors buying less from them as well. A vendor at Manning Market firmly believes that the farmers are now suffering the reduction of demand at New Manning Market,

“They [the UDA] have broken our business and have taken away jobs by moving us here. We support so many of the farming community through our business here, so when we don’t do well it impacts them as well”.

Given the lack of demand, vendors who were previously offered spaces in these markets have now moved back onto the roadside, as the demand on the road is much more than what they get inside the market. The market is now partially occupied, with many empty stalls.

Implications

The experience of these vendors are part of an ongoing dispossession of informality - both housing and workers - under the guise of modernity and aestheticisation by the UDA in a bid to build a world class city (Colombo Urban Lab 2024).

Despite promising greater infrastructural amenities and modern facilities, both markets have failed to work in the interest of the vendors. Vendors are complaining that whilst they were asked for input when the market was being built, none of their requests have come to fruition. An overfocus on the aesthetics of the market, rather than the functionality of it – is reflected in the experiences and the dissatisfaction amongst vendors. For example, when the New Manning Market was being built, there was a focused effort to make the roof of the market an ‘iconic landmark’ (The Island 2020), rather than putting in place requirements made by vendors who would be occupying the space.



Image 3: Empty stalls at the Nagalagam Public Market



Image 4: Steel structures made by vendors at New Manning Market

This focus on infrastructure and modernity is not unique to Sri Lanka alone. Globally, infrastructure and its development has long been linked to visions of modernity. The modern infrastructural ideal, as termed by Graham and Marvin (2001), reflects the universal and uniform infrastructure coverage by a single network, representing a vision of universal, equitable infrastructure provision that aims to integrate urban space and reduce social inequalities. As Lawhon et al., (2018) noted, the modern infrastructure ideal was a reflection of the post-colonial era thinking, where there was a “belief that the modern infrastructure ideal was both desirable and achievable.”

However, these infrastructure ideals are hardly representative of the realities of the Global South, and scholarship is reflective of this too – positioning alternatives to the modern infrastructure ideal. Many of which can be found relevant to street vendors in Colombo and how they access infrastructure in the lack of formal grid connectivity.

As Silver (2014) argues, the lens of incremental, allows us to understand how urban residents are able to access new infrastructural worlds through the adjustment of resources, the reshaping of materialities – resulting in infrastructures that can be considered to be in a state of flux, giving residents the agency to address unequal urban conditions. This can be seen through street vendors who store water in bottles to wash fresh produce due to the lack of formal grid connections or through the street vendors that rely on solar powered lamps due to the lack of an electricity connection.

We also see how street vendors stack energy (Lawhon et al. 2023) to make up for inabilities in access to the formal grid which includes using a combination of public street lamps, solar powered lamps and lights from formal shops to conduct their business in the evening.

For vendors, infrastructure goes beyond the physical alone. The work of Simone (2004) explores the concept of people as infrastructure, which is deeply embedded in the social relations in order to get access to basic services, often which are inaccessible to the informal or the urban poor. We see how street vendors rely on others to look after their stall when they are unable to be there, and share resources such as water, electricity and space. These infrastructure elements are as

important to the running of their business, if not more, as formal grid connections are.

As we've highlighted, street vendors often access infrastructure services through diverse methods, such as using public facilities, relying on others, or combining options like rechargeable lamps with relying on lights from neighbouring shops. Whilst these range of methods may be perceived as a hindrance to street vendors, on many occasions it suits them better than formal grid connections as it allows them to conduct their business in the manner in which suits them, as it removes the risk of expensive grid connections and being tied down to a fixed location. As such, moving vendors into modern spaces with better infrastructure connectivity is not always in the best interest of their business operations.

Research conducted as part of the FRESH initiative highlights the role that street vendors or informal vendors play in the food environment – to make food accessible and affordable to working class poor communities (Colombo Urban Lab and Institute of Development Studies 2023). Despite previous interventions to help improve their built environment or giving them access to formal grid infrastructure – none of these have truly helped their business grow, and in many instances, hampered their operations. Vendors in Thotalanga moved out of the market and back onto the street, and vendors at the New Manning Market would much prefer to go back to their old place of operation, despite smaller facilities with less infrastructure as it has an enabling environment for vendors to grow their business.

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Policy priorities

As the Government of Sri Lanka launches the 'Clean Sri Lanka' initiative aimed at "uplifting society to greater heights through a social, environmental, and ethical revival" (President's Office 2025), there have been claims that street vendors will be prohibited from conducting their business. However, it is reassuring to see Minister of Health and Mass Media, Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa, refute claims that street vendors would be evicted under the programme (Financial Times 2025). Our research has highlighted the crucial role street vendors play in the value chain by making food affordable and accessible to low-income communities. Therefore, we advocate for stronger support and protection for these vendors.

To make meaningful strides in improving the livelihoods of vendors, we need to look beyond aesthetics and formalisation. As we have argued, infrastructure connectivity or modern aesthetics is not always the gold standard for vendors. Often, the various ways in which they navigate access to infrastructure helps enable their business rather than hamper it.

Moving away from formalisation, support for informal vendors should consider a variety of support mechanisms.

Recognition of street vendors: Street vendors play a key role in the food environment of a neighbourhood by making produce affordable and accessible to communities. Greater recognition of their services and importance by local authorities are needed to ensure that risks such as eviction and violence by law enforcement officers are minimised, to allow them to conduct their business. This recognition could also go hand in hand with better support services offered to vendors by local authorities which could include training and workshops on food safety and financial management.

Financing options to help vendors grow their business: Vendors often rely on the informal credit market to grow their business, often undertaking high interest loans to survive the day-to-day, and falling into cycles of debt. Improving access to affordable financial solutions would enable vendors to sustain and grow their business more sustainably.

Greater investment in public infrastructure: Given that street vendors rely on public infrastructure to conduct their business, more investment in public infrastructure could help vendors conduct their business with ease. This could be in the form of more public bathrooms, public water taps, improving roads, spaces for shelter and better street light coverage.

Participatory urban planning: Our research has shown how markets have been built for vendors with promises made to vendors of better infrastructure and business opportunities. However, vendors are often not consulted during the planning process nor are their opinions reflected in the built environment, as was seen with the experience of vendors in the New Manning Market. It is essential to include vendors in the design phase of new markets or areas built to situate vendors to ensure that the functionality of the space is aligned to what vendors require. After new spaces have been created, it is important to build-in feedback mechanisms to ensure that any grievances of vendors can be captured and addressed, to ensure the smooth functioning of their operations.

Ensuring that business advice available to vendors is accessible and can be utilised: Building on the work of Lewis et al. (2024) regarding business advice for vendors, we recommend that such advice be tailored to meet vendors' specific needs, rather than being driven by the quantity of advice provided to achieve organisational targets. This approach would make advice more relevant and would encourage more vendors to seek advice, as it would be more valuable for them. In addition to this, given that vendors often rely on informal advice from family members, it is essential that campaigns are conducted to normalise the process of seeking advice from institutions. This will play a role in ensuring that advice received is accurate and reflective of their needs at the stage of the business they are in.

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