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THE CHALLENGES FACED BY INFORMAL FRESH PRODUCE VENDORS IN PORT MORESBY

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Key Points

- The informal economy consists of a large portion of fresh produce sellers.
- Fresh produce vendors play an important role in contributing to the food security of urban areas.
- Fresh produce vendors face several challenges in conducting their everyday business.
- The National Capital District Commission and market authorities need to ensure that serviced markets are provided in the suburbs to provide a conducive environment for market users; that is, vendors and customers.

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By Evelyn Malala

The demand for fresh produce in Port Moresby is ever increasing as the population increases. This demand is mostly met by the informal sector through fresh produce sales in marketplaces. The demand for fresh produce in Port Moresby 10 years ago was estimated at 167,000 tonnes annually with 60 percent of this being supplied by the informal fresh produce vendors (Bonney et al., 2012).

Fresh produce vendors or sellers are part of the informal economy. They sell mostly root vegetables, greens, and fruits in planned and unplanned markets in specific locations or on the streets or roadsides. Fresh produce sellers contribute to the food security of the urban communities they are in by selling cheap, nutritious fresh produce to residents. They are also located closer to residential areas which allows for ease of access by customers and are the main source of fresh food. Most vendor households benefit from the income generated from this and they also consume most of the unsold food.

This paper is based on a small survey that was carried out in the suburban markets of Port Moresby (Waigani, Tokarara, Gerehu and Rainbow). It outlines the main types of sellers, the challenges faced by vendors in these markets and provide suggestions for a way forward to address these challenges.

Types of sellers

Today, marketplace vendors are mostly resellers, meaning they buy from producer-sellers or wholesalers and then resell at the market. However, this is a recent phenomenon which was not common in the past. Historically, producer-sellers were the ones that dominated the marketplaces (Sharp, 2021). These days, producer-sellers are still common, but in large urban centers like Port Moresby, resellers are the dominant vendors.

The types of fresh produce sellers in urban areas are:

- Producer-sellers plant and sell only their own crops. These are local vendors who bring in produce from the villages to sell or settlers that grow mostly leafy greens on state land and sell. For instance, vendors at the Apo market in Waigani who grow vegetables on vacant state land and sell only their own produce.

- Retail sellers buy in bulk at wholesale markets and sell in suburban markets, streets, and villages. Retailers are the most common sellers in urban areas by mostly migrants from other provinces as they do not have land to grow crops.
- Both producer and retail sellers include those who produce their own crops and sell. They also buy from wholesalers to resell crops they do not grow themselves or when their produce is not ready for harvest, they engage in resale of produce. An example would be sellers at the Apo market who grow some of their own greens on state land, but they also buy other produce (like fruits and coconuts) and resell.
- Selling for others – These vendors sell for their family or others mostly from the village. Family members from the village send produce from the seller's garden but also from other family members' gardens. The vendor secures a market stall and continues to sell.

Most vendors sell in the markets to cater for everyday needs of their families, especially their children's schooling needs (fees, uniforms, books, bus fare, lunch etc...).

Challenges faced by sellers

Fresh produce vendors in urban areas face many challenges in conducting their day-to-day transactions. Those who sell in unplanned marketplaces operate in more precarious conditions due to the absence of facilities and services. Some of the main challenges are briefly outlined below.

- **Retail sellers:** sale of rotten/ unripe produce sold by wholesalers. The most common issue raised by retail sellers was that when buying in bulk (wholesale) at Gordons market, the produce sold to them is usually rotten or unripe. For example, a seller from Waigani market mentioned that whenever she buys coconuts, the wholesalers usually put very small/ unripe or rotten coconuts at the bottom of the bags and sell to her. It is usually when she is about to resell and checks the bag that she finds about this, by then it is too late to return or exchange the produce. This results in vendors making a loss.

- **Unplanned markets:** poor or no market infrastructure and facilities. Vendors at unplanned markets experience the challenge of not having proper infrastructure and facilities like stalls, seats and sanitation and hygiene facilities. For example, vendors at the Apo market in Waigani do not have proper stalls to sell and sometimes when it rains, they do not make sales, this affects their revenue flow. They also do not have access to running water to water their green crops, and toilet facilities. The same goes to vendors at the Rainbow market which is also an unplanned market.
- **Theft of unsold produce:** Vendors in planned markets sometimes store unsold produce overnight in the markets to sell on the following day. They reported incidences of stealing of their produce and market authorities are not effective in addressing these issues.
- **Lack of demand:** Most vendors raised the issue of lack of demand and not having enough customers. This is especially the case for those vendors selling in the outskirts suburbs. Usually there is not a lot of customers during the day due to the heat. It gets busy only in the afternoons when it is cooler, and when people finish from work. Vendors in designated or planned markets expressed that most customers buy from those selling outside of the designated market. For example, in Gerehu there are vendors that sell outside the market and near the bus stop. Customers often get off the buses, buy from the sellers at the bus stop and do not walk to the marketplace so those vendors sitting at the designated market do not get to sell their produce at all. Vendors at the Apo market also mentioned that because the market is not situated along a bus route, they depend on customers coming by vehicles and not pedestrians as it is quite far to reach by foot.

Strategies to address the challenges

The following strategies are recommended to address the challenges faced by fresh produce vendors.

- **Wholesale of produce to be aggregated**

Wholesale of fresh food should be established as an aggregate business and closely monitored to ensure that produce of good quality is sold. This will eliminate the sale of unripe or rotten produce to resellers. National Capital District Commission (NCDC) should make sure that wholesale market facilities are established for fresh produce in addition to Gerehu market which already caters for produce coming from the Highlands. If similar arrangements are done to fresh

produce from within Central Province and Gulf, it will help to prevent overcrowding and improve the quality of produce sold in markets through close monitoring and supervision.

- **Establishing more designated marketplaces**

Proper planning and establishment of market infrastructure and facilities of unplanned markets should be considered where feasible. This would mean more vendors would have access to market stalls and seats and hygiene facilities. Proper planning is important for marketplaces to be effective places of business for all users bearing in mind: location, basic infrastructure and safety and security (Iwong, 2019).

- **Security should be improved in marketplaces**

Market authorities should step up in recruiting and training honest and reliable individuals to watch over marketplaces. This way the incidences of theft of stored produce can be reduced.

- **All sellers to sell at designated marketplace**

The issue of few customers at marketplaces can be resolved by making sure that all vendors sell at designated marketplace. Public health, food hygiene and handling awareness activities need to be done by NCDC and key stakeholders and emphasise the importance of selling in planned markets with access to services. That way we have all the customers coming to the marketplace to buy produce.

- **Vendor consultation and engagement to improve markets**

The responsible market authorities should hold frequent meetings with the sellers and listen to their concerns and act accordingly to address vendor concerns. Also, strategies mentioned by Kopel to improve marketplaces should be considered and implemented such as employing dedicated and skilled market workers, maintaining safety and security, improving revenue generation strategies and encouraging women representation in market governance (Kopel, 2021).

Conclusion

Fresh produce vendors are an important part of the informal economy and important drivers of food security in urban areas. Producer-seller and resellers not only provide a healthy nutritious dietary option for their families and urban dwellers but also have a source of income which supports their household. These vendors, however, experience challenges in their day-to-day transactions. To ensure that these transactions happen efficiently and effectively, market authorities should listen to the concerns of vendors and effectively address these challenges.

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