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## THE STREET FOOD PROJECT: Using Research for Planning

Irene Tinker

### Abstract

*Planning that improves life chances of the poor in low-income countries is challenging and difficult. This article describes EPOC's Street Food Project as a possible model for using an action research project as a planning tool. The project involved participation of municipal officials, university staff, non-governmental organizations, and the vendors themselves in the design and interpretation of data collection. Implementation of proposals for improving the income of vendors and the safety of the food they sell is illustrated by the founding of the Street Food Vendors' Organization in Minia, Egypt. Policy implications of the nine country study, and of the Minia organization, emphasize the impact of carefully designed research.*

Policy research can be a powerful instrument for planners who wish to orchestrate change. The Street Food Project, coordinated by the Equity Policy Center in Washington, DC, focused on influencing prevailing street food vendor practices in developing countries. Health regulations and rules against congestion are widely used to justify frequent "street cleaning" with police or military using arrest, intimidation, or actual destruction of carts and stalls. Within hours the vendors reappear because the activity is a main source of income for many, and because street foods are consumed by a wide range of urban residents and visitors.

Findings of the Street Food Project underscore the critical role street food vending plays in the economy and diet of people in developing countries. Realizing that street foods could not be permanently abolished, many municipal governments have begun to address the issue. Similar to the shift in attitude toward "squatters," cities have altered their approach to food vendors from one of confrontation to cooperation. As with responses to the housing shortage, a single solution is not possible because it could not reflect the incredible variations of culture, food habits, and municipal constraints that characterize the sector. Nonetheless, models do exist that might be adapted to diverse situations.

This article focuses on events in Minia, Egypt, where a group of influential citizens and governmental officials formed a non-governmental organization (NGO) to work with the street food vendors. The idea for an NGO arose from participation in the Steering Committee for the

local study. The Committee formed to monitor the study and suggest possible interventions that would improve the income of street food vendors and/or improve food safety. The Organization for Development and Support of Street Food Vendors in the City of Minia provides a possible model for working with vendors in other cities in Egypt and, with considerable adaptation, in other countries. A review of the origins, methodology, and findings of the multi-country Street Food Project provides a context for the Minia case study.

### **EPOC's Street Food Project**

The Equity Policy Center (EPOC) was founded to influence policy and programs of development agencies and governments through conducting and disseminating original and compiled research through presentations, conferences, and publications. EPOC's objective is to ensure consideration of the special concerns of poor women in the design and implementation of all development programs with direct impacts.<sup>1</sup> Priority was first given to studying the economic activities in which women were already engaged, whether remunerated or not. In order to evaluate women's contributions to a sector or activity, both men's and women's roles must be presented. Where data do not exist, the sector itself has to be the basis for study.<sup>2</sup> As the development community turned its attention toward providing poor women with new income opportunities, often with limited success, it seemed obvious to study economic activities in which women were already engaged.<sup>3</sup>

### *Existing Research*

Two parallel, but distinct, sets of studies beginning in the early seventies focused on increasing income among the poor in developing countries. One set, initiated by the International Labor Organization (ILO) studied small-scale informal sector enterprises in order to locate new employment opportunities for labor. The other set looked at income generating activities of non-governmental organizations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The ILO began to realize that insufficient jobs were being created to absorb the rapidly growing populations in the developing countries and so launched a major comparative study of jobs available outside the formal sector in cities of the developing world (ILO 1972, Sethuraman 1981). An impressive number of studies were conducted, primarily by European academics, into the diverse activities that make up what they termed the informal sector. Attempts to analyze and define the sector sparked a decade-long debate about its permanence and its relationship to capitalism (Bromley 1978, Moser 1984, Richardson 1984). While the theoretical debate has faded, the basic question remains: does working in the informal sector exploit labor or provide opportunity for ambitious entrepreneurs (House 1984, House et al.

1993, Portes et al. 1986, van Gelder and Bijlmer 1989)? As multinational firms decentralize globally, encouraging smaller enterprises, sub-contracting, and home-based work, the distinctions between formal and informal have blurred (Portes et al. 1989). Particularly at the level of home production, the issue echoes the earlier debate: is this exploitation or opportunity (Beneria 1987, Prugl and Tinker 1993)?

Because microenterprises, that is family or individual enterprises, were presumed by the ILO to provide little additional employment, these tiny firms were seldom included in the country studies. Since women are most likely to be engaged in microenterprise activity, these studies effectively excluded most women entrepreneurs (Dignard and Havet 1987). Further, because the studies seldom utilized gender-disaggregated data to find out who was involved in small-scale informal sector activities, women's work, either as paid labor or as unpaid family labor, was masked. The changing definitions of productive work and time-budget studies are now beginning to document women's economic activities outside the formal sector (INSTRAW 1990, 1991; Tinker 1987; United Nations 1990).

The US Agency for International Development funded a second set of studies to look at attempts by NGOs to set up income activities for poor women and men, primarily in urban areas (Ashe 1985, Farbman 1981). A distinct cleavage emerged between those NGOs offering the more traditional humanitarian aid and those economic-oriented groups more concerned with profit and growth. Proponents favoring the market approach designed minimalist credit programs that provided little advice or training. In contrast, those emphasizing the welfare viewpoint considered organizations comprised of the poor as "pre-entrepreneurial" and so argued the need for a broad range of services including, for example, training, health and nutrition education, family planning, and childcare. The high costs of welfare and the difficulties of replication have favored the adoption of the minimalist approach (Otero 1989; Tinker 1987, 1989; UNDP 1988).

Studies of micro-enterprise have concluded that the smaller the enterprise, the lower the income (Bijlmer 1989). It is here that women predominate. Explanations center on the family responsibilities of women that dictate shorter working hours. Further, in areas where income pooling is not typical, women must often trade in order to feed their families even when a husband is present.<sup>4</sup> Women also are less likely to have access to credit, to be literate, or to have an understanding of appropriate technologies (Berger 1990, Grown 1989, Tinker 1989).

A set of comparative evaluations of successful and replicable programs undertaken for the Ford Foundation concluded that programs supporting existing activities in the area, if not among the clientele, are the most likely to increase the income of the poor, at least in part be-

cause such an approach limits the need for new training or additional markets. Credit, this analysis notes, was not the only essential element in helping the poor; organizational leadership linked to powerful institutions protect the poor as they struggle to alter their status. Further, NGOs were not the only method of organizing the poor, not only for the welfarist tendencies but because the type of charismatic leader often heading NGOs finds it difficult to let go. Alternative types of organizations running successful ventures included a bank, a coop, and a government agency (Tendler 1987).

### *Studying Street-food Vendors*

The Street Foods Project provides a link between informal sector studies and donor efforts to improve the lives of the poor. The project compared a single sector of the informal economy in provincial cities in nine countries and carefully documented the roles of women, men, and children in all phases of making and selling foods on the street. In contrast, the ILO studies concentrated on small-scale enterprises and largely ignored gender analysis. The USAID series, while sensitive to gender differentiation, only collected data on interventions by NGOs that created new income activities. Thus the Street Food Project is unique: it focuses on existing activities by different family members, tries to influence government officials to change their policies toward street food vendors, and considers interventions that would improve the income of the vendors or enhance the quality and safety of the food sold.

Research findings of the project inform a broad spectrum of contemporary urban issues of concern within both the development and academic communities: the definition and permanence of the informal sector; survival strategies of poor urban women and men; the functioning and influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs); governmental responses to "illegal" informal sector activities; urban food distribution and consumption; and the nutritional value and safety of street foods. Policy implications of the project data have been widely disseminated and have not only altered policies of the municipalities observed but have also influenced both policies and research at such international agencies as FAO, ILO, IFPRI, and the UN Commission on Statistics. The action component of the project implied promotion of interventions at the community level through long-term support from locally active groups and concerned municipal officials. This article discusses the long term impact of efforts in Minia to improve the lives of the vendors and the food they sell.

*Major findings.* The data challenged assumptions held by both policy makers and scholars as to the importance of street foods as a source of income, on the one hand, and as a source of food on the other. In the provincial towns studied, income from street food enterprises surpassed the local minimum wage. The food sold represented

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at least twenty percent of the food budget in local households. Seasonal variations in the numbers of vendors selling street foods were found in all the cities, in some places caused by the agricultural cycle but elsewhere by religious holidays. Generally, the larger the town the more vendors per population.

Women's roles in selling street foods vary considerably around the world and are directly related to cultural attitudes toward women in the countries concerned. Women's involvement in the trade, even in countries where seclusion of women is practiced, is much higher than the number selling in public because women often prepare the food their husband's sell. Intrahousehold variations across the study with regard to cooperation in income activities were striking and unexpected (Tinker 1993). Overall, women tend to make less money selling foods than men do. While differential technology had some influence, the major reason seemed to be that women work fewer hours at selling because they almost all had domestic responsibilities as well. Where women dominate the trade as in Nigeria, Thailand, and Philippines, women also made more money than men. In the Philippines, successful women were often joined by their husbands; couples made the highest income because the men often became the buyers of raw materials, purchasing in bulk or in rural areas at prices lower than those available at small shops in town.

Another unexpected result was finding that two-thirds to three-quarters of street food establishments were located in the neighborhoods, not in the congested downtown, a finding with immediate policy implications. Also unexpected was the differential use by gender of new technologies and ingredients. As in other sectors, access to information and ideas was easier for men; women tended to make and sell more traditional foods. This finding had implications for income as well.

*Long term impact.* From the beginning, the Street Foods study focused on changing policies in each city in an effort to put an end to the frequent "street cleaning" sweeps by the police or army. Of equal importance was adapting health regulations so that vendors would be able to observe food safety requirements that were set at a reasonable standard and so could obtain licenses expeditiously. By including authorities in the advisory committee, most officials were convinced of the street food trade's economic importance and the critical role vendors play in feeding urban dwellers. The question was how to change not only the regulations, but the actions of both police and vendors.

A second part of this action research project was to identify interventions that could improve the income of the vendors or the safety of the food sold. Several examples are illustrative: In Minia the local committee reformed itself into an NGO to work with vendors. The mayor in Ilo-Ilo had plans to provide clean water and tables in side-

streets for vendors. A nurse at the university had been running nutritional and safety training programs for vendors in Ile-Ife and hoped to extend these efforts throughout the city. In Thailand, Chonburi has become a suburb of rapidly growing Bangkok; the study is being utilized as part of current efforts to deal with vendors as the metropolis modernizes.

The next sections describe the case study of Minia and evaluates the impact of the Street Food Vendors Organization for the street food trade. The final section will address the possible applicability of this model to other areas.

### **Street Food Vendors Organization of Minia**

The City of Minia (population 179,000) is located along the Nile River in Upper Egypt. Government offices and the modern commercial center stretch along one side of the major north-south boulevard, separated from the river on the other side by a series of well-tended public parks and private clubs. Several old mosques with distinct slender minarets mark the older commercial part town to the south where decaying villas give way to rows of shops interspersed with schools and hospitals. Surrounding these areas, and spilling across the canal to the west, are the apartments, housing projects, and squatter areas where the bulk of the population lives. Distances are not great, so the town does not support a motorized taxi service: horse carriages are the alternative to buses or walking.

#### *Street Foods in Minia*

The largest number of street food vendors cluster in the low income southern section of town providing food and snacks to school children, hospital visitors, and fellow workers throughout the day. Intercity bus stops are particularly popular for vending in the western extension. Vendors around the government buildings emphasize sandwiches for early morning through noon. Evening vendors are clustered along the commercial streets, often adding to the congestion (inspectors don't work at night, they say).

In 1985, the Social Planning Analysis and Administration Consultants (SPAAC) of Cairo found that Minia had 784 vending enterprises employing 1348 vendors of whom 11 percent were women. These vendors offered the public over 70 types of food and beverages. Each establishment served an average of 60 customers per day meaning that some 47,000 people ate food on the street every day! By far the most popular foods, accounting for a third of all sales, were the typically Egyptian *foul* and *tamaya*, both using dried beans as the major ingredient. *Tamaya*, which is deep fried on order, also uses quantities of oil. Both foods are eaten at all times of the day but less in the evening, by themselves or in sandwiches made with Egyptian flat bread, accompanied by eggplant or pickles. Other sandwich fillings include

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meats—especially liver paste, eggs, or fried vegetables. These mixed sandwiches were sold by nearly a quarter of the vendors; thus sandwiches plus *foul* and *tamaya* were the foods sold by over half of all street food vendors in 1985. Today just over half the members of SFVO sell these items which are basics in the Egyptian diet.

Substantial meals were offered by 18 percent of the vendors in 1985; these included kebabs, grilled chicken and fish, as well as *kushary*, an Egyptian favorite that mixes rice, macaroni and black lentils with fried onions and hot tomato sauce. A wide variety of snacks, predominantly industrially pre-packaged chips, cookies, and candy—but including yoghurt, cheese, nuts, and grilled corn—were sold by one-quarter of the vendors. Sweets and pastries accounted for 8 percent, and are sold by over a quarter of the SFVO members.

Bottled soft drinks dominated the beverages available and accounted for 75 percent of the total in 1985: health restrictions on locally produced drinks have accelerated this shift to cold soft drinks. Tea is widely sold, often at stalls that allow customers to smoke a water pipe as they drink. A few vendors sell sugar-cane juice, cocoa, and seasonal fruit juices.

*Regulations.* Much of this food is sold illegally according to national regulations passed in 1967-8.<sup>5</sup> Cooked meats, fish, vegetables, macaroni, and salads are prohibited. Thus most sandwiches, including those based on *foul* and *tamaya* should not be sold. Enforcement appears to be particularly stringent against *kushary* sellers, perhaps because this item, along with sweets, is considered a luxury item and so should retain higher health standards than basic foods such as *tamaya* and *foul*. It is illegal to squeeze sugar cane or fruits on the street, but also illegal to sell fresh juices or milk. Ice cream selling is illegal if the production unit is not licensed; thus selling home made ice cream is forbidden.

The condition of the carts and cooking utensils, as well as the type of food, is under the purview of local health authorities. Fresh pastries must be kept in glass cases; dry sweets must be properly packaged and, like ice cream, must come from licensed producers. Inspectors rarely visit homes to observe conditions of production but have been known to confiscate ice cream vendors' carts if they cannot prove their ice cream is from a licensed source. Since few carts are truly mobile, regulations govern the location as well. Obtaining permission to place a cart on a corner regularly is much easier than obtaining rights to a permanent kiosk despite the fact that many "mobile" carts have secured access to water and electric connections. Lack of access to clean water for washing hands and dishes was found to be the major health problem in the multi-country EPOC Street Food Study (See Tinker 1987a and 1987b); stationary carts and kiosks can hook up to city water.



To obtain a permit, all vendors must submit, and keep up to date, a health certificate stating that they are free from communicable or parasitic diseases and do not have a serious skin infection. A certificate indicating the individual is free from criminal activity must also be submitted; released prisoners must wait five years before receiving this certificate.

Given this myriad of regulations, many open to interpretation, it is no wonder that harassment occurs or that the vendors have traditionally seen inspectors and police as the enemy. Since over half the foods sold are illegal under one or another of these regulations, vendors are forced to ignore regulations to make a living. In particular, many vendors obtain licenses for selling legal foods such as tea or sweets or *tamaya*, then sell other foods.

*Family enterprise.* Although street vending requires long hours of preparation and selling, individual earnings were about one-third higher than the formal sector minimum wage. Not surprisingly, vending was the main source of income for 70 percent of the male vendors and 55 percent of the female vendors; nine out of ten of these families have no other source of income. More than half of the women vendors were widowed or had husbands who could not work. The average vendor household at the time was 6.5 persons; and many women became vendors to supplement their husband's low wages.

Indeed, street food enterprises in Minia are frequently a family effort with 14 percent of spouses of male vendors and 17 percent of the spouses of female vendors assisting in actual vending. In addition, family members assist in the buying and preparation of ingredients with women almost invariably washing utensils each day. The economic contribution of family members is not considered a cost as none of the women and only a few of the men, usually sons, were paid.

*Organizing the vendors.* When SPAAC presented the research findings to the Governor of Minia Province, the Steering Committee, and community development experts at a one-day workshop in February 1986, the group was unanimous in its decision to seek ways to mobilize local resources to support the sector. But first, the vendors needed some sort of organization to represent them. Under the highly regulated Egyptian laws, vendors could organize themselves in a trade union or a cooperative. But where would leadership come from? Vendors were interviewed; groups of vendors met at the Islamic Youth Center. They were excited about possibilities of improved dialogue with government but they noted their long hours and lack of resources available; unlike other working sectors, no national groups or unions for vendors exist. In contrast, most of the 14,000 registered non-governmental organizations in Egypt are formed for charitable purposes by middle class or educated people wishing to work with the less fortunate.

nate who are not on their boards. None of these models seemed to fit the need.

After a year of debate, the Steering Committee, which had been expanded to include one vendor, conceived an innovative solution. They established the Organization for Development and Support of Street Food Vendors in the City of Minia, generally called the Street Food Vendors Organization (SFVO), as an NGO with a Board of Directors composed of both middle class persons<sup>6</sup> and vendors. The balance between these two groups would change gradually through the yearly electoral process and could eventually become a Board of vendors only. In the interim the "influentials" could continue to act as advocates for the vendors to government and funders. The by-laws also specify additional ex-officio members representing the university, youth, the Ministry of Supply, and the Governor's office.<sup>7</sup>

*Members.* By the end of 1992 the number of members had reached 529. Unexpectedly, nearly one-third of the members are women, 169, compared to 360 men. This percentage was considerably higher than reflected in the 1985 data, which found 11 percent of the primary vendors were women or that 17 percent of the vending enterprises included women. The discrepancy reflects the sector's family nature.

Interviews with vendors underscore the cooperative aspect of the activity and illustrate the fluidity of these microentrepreneurs. Member lists record some 50 couples who work together usually, but not always, at the same stall. Some examples help illustrate this point: Dalal took over the sandwich enterprise after her husband was injured; he now sells tea and offers a waterpipe just up the street from her stall. Raget and her daughter used to assist Raget's husband Yehia in selling sandwiches from an improvised shop crowded in among the many other enterprises in a vacant lot on the corner of a major intersection in the western commercial area. Recently she became the major food vendor after her husband began to sell the antiques he buys in Cairo from the same stall; Raget's daughter sells soap from a separate table set next to them, but continues to help her mother when she herself is not busy.

Income data on the members has not been collected but the 1985 sample survey found that the average vendor had an income 37 percent higher than the legal minimum wage. Sandwiches and *kushary* enterprises are the most profitable. That survey also found that female vendors generally had a lower income and also worked shorter hours than male vendors. Despite the apparently good income, there has been a reluctance of the organization to increase membership dues. In 1986 vendors paid only LE. 1. per year; today the membership fee is LE. 3. per year, less than \$US. 1. Many observers argue that such a low fee reflects a welfare approach, inappropriate for a self-sustaining empowerment group.

In terms of education, the 1985 survey found that almost all, 93 percent, of the women vendors but only 53 percent of the men vendors were illiterate. Of all the vendors who have ever taken out loans from the SFVO, slightly more than half were illiterate but 16 percent had completed high school; nearly one third of these loans were to women.

### *Advocacy*

The major obstacle for street food vendors around the world is harassment from police or health inspectors or, in some cities, protectionist gangs who expect frequent payoffs. Simply forming the SFVO has greatly reduced this problem by providing legitimacy to the sector. From the beginning of the study, SPAAC met with governmental officials and with the Governor to explain the rationale of the project. An additional problem in Minia has been the availability of the ingredients for street foods, especially beans and oil. At first the shortages of oil and sugar were caused by government allocations, a fact that resulted in the ex-officio Board member from the Ministry of Supply. Today, the shift to a market economy has also created shortages that require interventions that are described below. The extreme differences between the vendors and government officials required that an intermediary act as advocate for the vendors. As part of its technical assistance to SFVO, SPAAC played this role, organizing meetings with key officials and members of the City Council both in their offices and at Board meetings. Subsequently Board members have been active in such advocacy activities in Minia and in Cairo as well.

*Addressing harassment.* Harassment previously came both from the police and from health inspectors. One health inspector, now on the Board, indicates that his attitudes have turned around 180 degrees! Along with the two other health officials on the Board, he participated in training sessions for the vendors and argued for flexible application of rules.

The municipal police force<sup>8</sup> charged with enforcing regulations concerning vendors has been less forthcoming. No officer has been willing to serve on either the Steering Committee or the Board. However, a representative attended the June 1988 Board meeting and promised cooperation in arranging meetings in each municipal subdivision between the local officials and vendors in each area so that standards could be agreed upon that would minimize future harassment. Laws restricting the sale of specific types of food continue to be fairly rigidly enforced, as noted below. But the recognition the SFVO has received from the Governor by such visible acts as attending the official opening of the SFVO office helps protect the vendors from undue pressure. Overall, the self-esteem of vendors has been greatly enhanced both by organizational contacts and from the attention the vendors receive from visitors and press.

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*Provisions.* Selling street foods can be a very exasperating activity when the basic ingredients of street food production are scarce or not available. Potential solutions to this problem have changed over time as the government has moved toward a free market. When the SFVO was first being formed, insufficient quotas for flour, oil, and sugar forced vendors to limit their production or else to buy these ingredients at the much higher "tourist" price. For example, the monthly quota for oil allocated to each vendor lasted no more than two days; then the vendors had to buy at the much higher unsubsidized prices. As a result of an appeal by the SFVO, the Under-Secretary of the State Ministry of Provision increased monthly allocations of oil for vendors in Minia at a time when quotas were dropping elsewhere in the country!

Bread for sandwiches was also difficult for vendors to procure. Even if they arrived at the bakery at 5:00 am, there was always a line, and often the number of loaves sold to any one person would be limited. As a result of the advocacy efforts, vendors were assigned to specific bakeries and assured of a stable supply of bread.

Securing good quality beans for *foul* and *tamaya* continues to be difficult. Before, vendors had insufficient funds to buy in quantity and were often forced to buy remnants at the end of the week; not surprisingly, many early loans went to the purchase of beans. Today, markets are in flux and supplies are often meager as farmers send their products to more populous areas. This practice has also affected the major producer of oil in Minia, resulting in an appeal for help to the Governor who can no longer control, but may possibly influence, local businessmen.

### *Services*

These advocacy efforts on behalf of the vendors means that today most are able to conduct their trade without undue harassment. They must still observe government regulations, find ingredients, and have money to run their enterprises. The SFVO has addressed these concerns through a variety of projects initiated both by the Board and by vendors themselves.

*Rotating credit fund.* The most popular service offered by the SFVO is their loan program. Set up as a revolving credit fund in June 1988 with capital from the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), 40 loans were made in the first two months, mostly to buy supplies. As of December 31, 1992, 725 loans had been made, 499 to men and 228 to women. Loans are offered at an interest rate of 2 percent per month. Costs for bank and administration charges and a possible penalty fee are taken out of the amount loaned. If the vendor repays on time, the penalty fee is returned. Loans are granted for cash or for supplies direct from the warehouse, and for either four, eight, or twelve months. The maximum

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loan has now been raised from LE. 800 to LE. 1000 (equivalent to 1992 US rates of \$303.)

SFVO staff visit loan applicants both at their place of sale and at home, since much of the food is processed there. Cleanliness of operation as well as character reference is important in assessing whether to grant the loan. An average of thirty requests are filed each month and only about two refused. Staff approved applications go to the Board for final agreement. Repayment must be done at the Cairo Bank, a requirement meant to familiarize the vendors with the formal banking operation. Because the bank is a thirty minute walk from the office, many vendors come there to repay. As a courtesy, Khalid deposits for those who are sick or disabled or insistent. Between a quarter and a half of all vendors now pay at the office.

The default rate has been consistently low, but recent cases indicate that several of the more sophisticated members are questioning the interest rate or refusing to repay their second or third loan. They have learned enough about the SFVO to know that the revolving fund was given free to the organization and they wonder why they also cannot have money without cost or as a gift.

SFVO is reluctant to go to court, not only because the staff try to be responsive to crises in a vendor's life, but also because it costs LE 50. for a lawyer. Omer hadn't paid in four months because he was still paying medical bills for his leg injury. The injury was so severe that he had to sell his *kushary* cart. But with LE 25. from the Sandoug (see below) and a loan of LE 320. he had bought a new cart once he was able to work. He came into the office dressed in jacket and tie to successfully request rescheduling of his payments.

Credit needs of vendors are clearly not limited to their productive activities, so many use the loans for other purposes. Vendors do not have the collateral to obtain a bank loan, and unlike most other countries, there are no moneylenders in Egypt today.<sup>9</sup> The staff is considering offering social loans at a higher interest rate as an additional service.<sup>10</sup> The Islamic restrictions on the taking of *fida* or interest appears to be of little import; technically the cost of a loan is called an administrative fee.

**Warehouse.** In response to the volatility in the market as Egypt moves toward a market economy, the SFVO set up a warehouse in March 1993 to sell items used by its members. These include ingredients for street foods, beverages such as tea and cocoa, and both hand and dishwashing soap. The store operates on a 6 percent profit margin, a level that covers the costs of running the warehouse. Savings from bulk purchases reduce prices for the vendors who often use loans in cash or kind to cover their purchases. The staff is now trying to develop a credit card system that would save the vendors the effort of applying for a loan and repaying at the bank.

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*Health issues.* Many of the government regulations about street foods are meant to ensure safe and nutritious food for the customer. One of the first activities of the SFVO was to being training programs for vendors to improve their food handling and sanitation practices and to warn the vendors about the hazards of using additives, such as red dye, in their products. The health officials on the Board assisted in developing a training course for the vendors. The first session was held during Ramadan in early 1988 with the Governor of Minia greeting the participants. In the field, health officials gave advice to vendors and tested foods for safety rather than automatically shutting down vendors selling "prohibited" foods such as *kushary*, fruit juices, and pastries. Certificates are awarded vendors who attend health training seminars held for 2 hours in the early morning over 5 days. In 1989, a video tape to be used to educate members about sanitation and safe food practices was prepared. Many of the vendors who were interviewed found this training very helpful.

Most vendors were more concerned about the required health certificate than about receiving training in food safety. Hosni sells *bellila* (wheat porridge) in the early mornings at the railroad station; his wife prepares the food at home each day. She would like to increase their income of LE 3. per day by selling *zallabia* from his cart. Hosni is licensed but complained about the time spent obtaining the physical check-ups and does not want to subject his wife to such an ordeal. In response to such complaints, the SFVO has arranged for its members to receive all health services at reduced prices at two local clinics run by NGOs.

*Crisis fund.* Health insurance coverage is tied to social insurance schemes in Egypt and vendors without permanent place of work are not eligible.<sup>11</sup> The only pension/social insurance scheme available to vendors was set up to cover war widows and provides only tiny benefits. However, if vendors could qualify as a self-employed businesses, then their pay-in of Egyptian pounds would result in a significant pension. Those part-time vendors who are employed by the government, a figure reported at 40 percent in the original study, received coverage through their place of work; spouses of such employees are also covered. Full-time vendors with no working spouse lack coverage. The SFVO has been lobbying to change the law; Haga Fatma is now taking the issue to the media in hopes of providing broad coverage to informal sector workers of all types.

Meanwhile, on their own initiative, members of the SFVO set up their own crisis fund, the *Sandoug el Zamalah*, drawing on traditional concepts of group responsibility. Six vendors, representing the different areas of the city but including all the elected vendor Board members, sit on the Governing Board of the Sandoug along with the officers of

the SFVO. Started in April 1988 with 16 members, the fund had 367 members in January 1993, nearly 70 percent of all SFVO members.

So successful has the Sandoug become, that most SFVO members now expect gifts in time of crisis, whether they are paid up members of the Sandoug or not. Vendors and Board members are now debating whether the Sandoug should continue with separate membership or whether paying into this fund should be required of all SFVO members.

**Carts.** Attractiveness of the city to tourists has been a major factor in the attitude of city authorities toward street food vendors. Vendors in areas frequented by visitors are more carefully scrutinized than those in the working class areas of the town. Officials do acknowledge that vendors give life and character to the streets. A SFVO committee decided to hold a contest among students in the University Art Department to come up with carts that would be both attractive and functional. Many designs were rejected by the vendors as too expensive: wood that needed painting yearly and was too heavy to move; two tanks of water, one for clean and the other for waste water, made even the aluminum carts difficult to manage.

The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives agreed to assist in funding ten model carts that includes a water tank on top with a hose that runs into a basin in the cart. The carts cost LE. 1745. and may be purchased on installment over three years after paying 10 percent down. Despite the cost, there is a waiting list for the carts. In addition, a retrofitting project for older carts is being planned for sale to the less well off vendors.

In January 1993, ten of these new carts were being tested throughout the city, and modifications were still being made. Because of the regulations, the carts must be mobile, but most of the model carts seem to be permanently anchored in desirable areas. Their gleaming white exterior symbolizes cleanliness. But the new carts, like the older types, are not designed for processing or cooking foods. Vendors who deep-fry the *tamaya* or *zallabia* keep the hot oil kettle to one side. A single cart design is clearly not adaptive to the many types of street food vendors.

**Kiosks.** Kiosks are permanent but lightly built structures appointed with water and electrical outlets. Many cities encourage non-mobile vendors to convert to kiosks or three-walled shop houses for health and sanitary reasons. In fact, many street food vendors, in Minia and elsewhere, produce and sell their wares from permanent but illegal shacks/tents/buildings that often shelter tables and chairs for their customers.

In Minia, official kiosks would be able to sell foods legally, such as *kushary*, now prohibited to mobile vendors. The kiosks could be attractively designed and would be large enough to allow food process-

ing to take place inside, adding to the aesthetic appeal. Further, a fixed address automatically makes the entrepreneur eligible for social insurance. In 1988, the SFVO received tentative approval to set up ten kiosk units, each housing five vendors, in scattered sites around the city. Each unit would be 10 meters long and 2.5 meters wide and would be supplied with electricity, water, and sewerage.

The SFVO planned to build the kiosks and rent them to vendors, especially the unemployed educated children of current members.<sup>12</sup> Funding has not yet been secured, but the Catholic Relief Service is now considering erecting a pilot unit near the new railroad station. Vendors currently selling in the area would be given priority for renting these kiosks.

### Replicating the Model

Empowerment of the poor through organizing has long been the litany of political or social activists. Organizing workers in the informal sector by setting up a non-governmental organization is what makes the SFVO unusual. The Catholic Relief Services which contributed funds for several of the SFVO activities, has been so impressed with the approach that it plans to replicate the SFVO in Sohag, a town further south along the Nile. The Canada Fund is utilizing this approach in organizing weavers on a border town with Sudan. SPAAC plans a study of two slum areas of Cairo in hopes of finding vendors and influentials willing to organize a street food vendor NGO.

Of course there are problems and disagreements among members and staff of the SFVO, and between the organization and its funders. Most are generic, characteristic of groups trying something new in countries where NGOs are kept under tight control. The SFVO with its new organizational approaches to instigating social change symbolizes innovation in process but inevitably creates tensions among members and staff. Finally, social change takes time, and short funding cycles of donors push for speedy, and often unrealistic, results. Perhaps the most nagging demand from donors is for institutional self-sufficiency. A balance between dependency and independence is difficult to achieve, but while donors necessarily push toward self-sufficiency, too much pressure often becomes self-defeating.

Regarding the SFVO, services such as the loan fund or the warehouse should largely pay for themselves, but staff and organizational costs may need long term subsidies. Alternative sources of subsidy should be sought, perhaps by seeking government subvention for services rendered or involving local businessmen as "big brothers." Utilizing vendors, staff, and Board members as consultants for expansion of the SFVO to other cities would enhance both the Minia organization and the speed of replication. A federation of organized informal sector workers might be a long term goal to enhance their ability to advocate



changes in laws regulating social insurance and NGOs. But activities peripheral to the goals and objectives of the street food vendors, literacy classes, health clinics, childcare, income generating training, should not be attempted. Other NGOs or the government already offer these services.

### Summation

The Street Food Vendors Association of Minia presents an exciting model for organizing the working poor in developing countries, particularly the informal sector workers. Using a variation of the local non-governmental organization, the SFVO has created a Board of influentials and vendors who together have addressed government harassment, provided critical services for vendors, and continue to lobby government for recognition of their trade.

The street food vendors themselves have clearly benefited from having the Street Food Vendors Organization in the city. Self-esteem has been increased; vendors value the feeling of belonging as they had never been a part of a group before. Harassment from the police has largely disappeared; health inspectors work with vendors to help them provide safe and nutritious food. While obtaining ingredients in a timely manner is still a problem, caused now by free market forces instead of resulting from government allocation, the credit program and the warehouse have reduced costs by allowing bulk buying. New carts provide a water tank so that vendors can clean plates and utensils more easily. Fewer hassles and less cost are involved in obtaining the required annual health check-ups at the NGO clinics where members can also go for regular medical treatment. Planners should look to this innovative organizational model as a way of empowering the working poor. Use of policy research as an instrument of change should be included among the tools available for social change.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>EPOC, which I founded in 1978, is located in Washington, DC. In contrast to the International Center for Research on Women, which I founded in 1976, EPOC emphasizes policy and implementation and focuses on gender roles. EPOC has critiqued development programs for their exclusion of women in such fields as agriculture: production and extension, both rural and urban; work: microenterprise, credit, home-based work, small industry, discrimination in the formal sector; health and family planning; energy: cookstoves, social forestry, biogas; education: literacy, professional training, informal. EPOC also has published on bureaucratic responses to including women's issues in training and implementation, on women in the UN and its world conferences, and on women organizing.

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- <sup>2</sup>Emphasis on work, as opposed to nurturing roles or domestic production, was a reaction to early development programs that saw women solely as mothers. For the history of the field of women in development, see Tinker 1990.
- <sup>3</sup>An early response of the development community in its effort to assist poor women was the creation of income generating activities too often based on middle class assumptions about women's work: that women everywhere have been trained in sewing and weaving. Women's groups were formed to produce handicrafts or clothing without concern for demand, quality control, or marketing channels. Middle class organizers, whether local individuals or foreign organizations, subsidized the income of the poor women both by direct payments but by carrying goods to market or buying them themselves. Once the subsidies are withdrawn, the women are often worse off than before having become dependent on the income and altered their other activities in order to do the work. See D. Jain 1980; I. Tinker 1987.
- <sup>4</sup>The issue of separate budgets, which reflects the most complete separation of male and female household responsibilities, is particularly striking in Africa. Economists predilection to treat the household as a single unit has obscured intrahousehold differences and is has been widely criticized by feminists; see Folbre 1986. Cases studies of how household income is used may be found in Dwyer & Bruce 1988. Chapters by Amartya Sen and Benjamin Senauer in my *Persistent Inequalities* present new ways economists are looking at the household. Most recent commentary emphasizes life cycle household strategies as yet another component in intrahousehold dynamics (Rakodi 1991).
- <sup>5</sup>Ministry of Housing and Utilities Decree 635/1968 regulates standards for carts and utensils used in street food vending; Decree 707/1968 lists foods "street peddlers" are forbidden to sell. Decree 97/1967 of the Ministry of Health relates to the health of the vendors themselves.
- <sup>6</sup>Some Egyptians object to this term and point out that in Minia the non-vendor members of the Board are either retired or present government employees who are poorly paid. Education and social position are more indicative of their influence.
- <sup>7</sup>The youth and university representatives have both subsequently resigned from the Board and have not been replaced. The Board can designate additional ex-officio members if it wishes.
- <sup>8</sup>Egypt has a variety of specialized police forces; those concerned with public order on streets are called *Shorta el Marafiq*, usually translated as Utilities Police.
- <sup>9</sup>Large landholders and Jewish merchants offered credit before the revolution but Islamic prohibitions against cash moneylenders seems to have prevented the existence of usurious moneylenders found in much of Asia.
- <sup>10</sup>One of the most successful banking schemes for the poor, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, specifically builds social and emergency loans into their borrowing regulations. A percentage of each loan goes into an account controlled by the borrowers circle. They can decide to whom, at and what rate, to grant a loan for illness, marriage, etc. In addition, a fund is created to repay defaulted debts.
- <sup>11</sup>Today there are three types of social insurance or pension programs in Egypt. The original program covered salaried employees. Self-employed

businessmen were then covered under Law 108 if they worked at an address and could produce a card showing they had paid taxes. In both cases, the employee contributes to the fund; the payout is reasonable because it includes government contributions as well. Only under President Sadat was a small widows pension established under Law 112 which is open to anyone. Vendors use this program which is inexpensive but has very low payments.

<sup>12</sup>Until 1990, the Egyptian government guaranteed employment of education young women and men. With overloaded bureaucracies and workers returning from the Gulf, the government had to seek alternatives. A social fund to assist young graduates to become entrepreneurs has been established. Some members fear that middle-class graduates might try to take over the kiosk idea and compete with present vendors. Offering places to children of vendors, who undoubtedly helped their parents while young, is popular among the members.

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