

Cairo's street vendors and the contestation of public space

By CLUSTER (https://www.urbanafrica.net/?taxonomy_author=cluster) on 11 September 2015 Informality (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/theme/economy/informality/>), Urban politics (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/theme/governance/urban-politics/>) | Cairo (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/region/egypt/cairo/>)



In October 2011, CLUSTER began engaging the issue of street vendors in downtown streets and public spaces, developing strategies and proposals for pilot areas to address the needs and aspirations of multiple users and stakeholders. These constituencies include: shop owners, residents, developers, drivers, women's right groups, traffic and municipal authorities, heritage protection agencies, and the street vendors themselves. Four years later, while the issue of street vendors seems less current in public media and pressing in urban policies, it remains nevertheless at the heart of larger questions concerning the contestation and negotiation of public space in Cairo, thus relevant to both urban researchers, practitioners and policy makers.



(https://www.urbanafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Cluster_vendors_eviction.jpg)

Eviction of street vendors from Downtown Cairo on August 24th, 2014. Credit: CLUSTER.

CLUSTER traced this campaign through the media. We have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of articles beginning August 1, 2014, related to street vendors in the state-owned paper of record, al-Ahram, Egypt's largest circulating private daily paper, al-Masry al-Youm, as well as English-language news outlets. This analysis of both state-owned and private media has detailed the amplification of the rhetoric of the state surrounding a return to stability and order, as well as explored the media's role in promoting an ideology of the "civilized" city where street vendors are seen as having no place.


On the other end of the spectrum, we began analyzing and documenting the new street vendor market at Turgoman: exploring its successes, failures, and the inevitable innovations of this informal economy. A forthcoming publication from CLUSTER will present this analysis, including an overview of the legal framework under which street vendors operate in Egypt, media analysis of the eviction campaign, and an examination of the shifting balance of power that has played out in the past few years between street vendors and the state.


The issue of street vendors offers an opportunity to address larger questions concerning public space in Cairo. The square-meter footprint of a street vendor's stand may be viewed as a microcosm of larger claims to public space, at the intersection of competing interests and frames of reference. As a contested grey zone between private and public realms, the sidewalk is a space of contestation that is continually being re-negotiated. The *Street Vendors Initiative* takes the seemingly trivial issue of vendors encroaching on sidewalks of downtown to examine the battle over public space, between contested claims and competing narratives: where questions of "order", legitimacy and right may be investigated and tested.

CLUSTER (<http://clustercairo.org/>) — Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research — aims at establishing a critical space for urban discourse. CLUSTER engages critical theorization while being grounded in professional practice, negotiating the blurred boundaries between formal/institutional regulations and everyday urban informality.

Top photo: Eviction of street vendors from downtown Cairo on August 24th, 2014. Credit: Cluster.

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Following the January 25 revolution in 2011, the resultant “security vacuum” saw police withdraw from the streets, leading to a proliferation of street vendors beyond their traditional boundaries, typically in informal neighborhoods or surrounding existing markets, but extending also to the streets of downtown Cairo. After the revolution vendors who, prior to 2011 might peddle t-shirts from a lightweight 1×2 metre pallet and disappear into back alleys and buildings when police appeared, became a near permanent fixture on the sidewalks and streets of downtown: using pallets, racks and hangers to offer aisles-worth of clothing and goods. Emboldened by the lack of police presence, vendors extended into the streets, limiting automobile traffic at times to a single lane.



(https://www.urbanafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Cluster_vendors_header.jpg)

Street vendors occupy the space under 6th of October Bridge in downtown Cairo. Nagati and Stryker. *Archiving the City in Flux*. Cluster, 2013.

CLUSTER began documenting the condition and process of street vendors' use of streets and sidewalks in downtown Cairo, including their typology, uses, range of merchandise, boundaries and tools of demarcation. In addition we have been documenting the relationship between the vendors and shop fronts, on the one hand, and street and parking lanes, on the other. The documentation involved interviews with the various players in order to understand the complex socio-economic urban network governing this informal petty trade. In this context, we have been monitoring the multiple attempts by the local municipality to remove and relocate street vendors, documenting recurring confrontations, followed by a return to business as usual. In short, this mapping exercise aimed at unraveling and measuring the ordering principles underlying this seemingly chaotic phenomenon, as well as the tenuous relationship between vendors and state authorities.



In the early phase of this project, CLUSTER's research team proactively worked in collaboration with partner organizations to help street vendors to unionize. CLUSTER hosted a number of meetings with street vendors and related stakeholders, experimenting with physical models and other tools to spatially engage alternative designs for street profiles and scenarios for parking and street furniture that would mediate the competing interests over downtown sidewalks. This nascent organization of street vendors, and the collective bargaining power of their syndicate (although not without problems and power struggles of its own), is an important milestone in imagining the future of Egyptian cities. The direct representation of marginalized and informal economic actors, and their ability to demand an audience with the highest levels of government, point towards potential new means of organizing and administering the city.

While several governmental and police campaigns were undertaken to clear streets of vendors after 2011, these attempts were often irregular and ineffective. Beginning in July/August of 2014, however, the state began a targeted campaign to clear vendors from the streets of downtown. Press releases and statements from the Governorate and the Prime Minister's office warned of the impending eviction. A plan was announced proposing an alternative location for downtown vendors in the parking area surrounding the Turgoman Bus station near downtown. The 24th of August, 2014, in particular witnessed a **large-scale security operation**

(<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/109120/Egypt/Politics-/Cairos-street-vendors-left-weary-after-government-.aspx>) involving the Ministry of Interior (Police as well as Central Security Forces) and the Army to clear Downtown of street vendors, and relocate them to Turgoman Station. In the period since this mass eviction, Egypt has seen ministerial-level attention paid to the street vendor issue, with ongoing eviction events as well as efforts to "solve the street vendor problem" through the relocation of vendors to bounded market areas, with mixed results.