

## Research Article

# Use and Appropriation of Urban Public Space for Street Vending in Kathmandu

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## I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

Street vending is a survival strategy for many urban poor with limited education and job skills to access formal job market. Street vendors not only contribute to economic activity and service provision but also add vitality to the street scape. They use public spaces such as sidewalks and junctions which are often the sites of conflict between the street vendors, pedestrian and vehicular traffic. In Nepalese context, despite several studies carried on street vending for its economic aspect, spatial dimension of street vending has not been given much attention. In this context, this research aims to examine how vendors of Kathmandu use and appropriate the public space for street vending. Using both quantitative and qualitative research approach, 150 vendor respondents were selected in addition to pedestrians (30), shopkeepers (20) and municipal officials (10). Direct observation of the use and appropriation of public space was made in three different case areas namely New Baneshwor, Ratnapark and Sundhara. Findings from the research showed that street vendors strategically locate themselves in the areas with a high volume of pedestrians. The research also revealed that street vendors maintain their line of occupation and manage their scarce vending space by the informal system without support from any organizations. The research concludes that the use and choice of location is determined by the flow of people, types of goods sold where as the urban public spaces are appropriated through complex negotiation process among themselves through the system of first possession, the shopkeepers and sometimes informally with public authorities.

**Keywords:** Street Vending, Street Vendors, Urban Public Space, Spatial Use

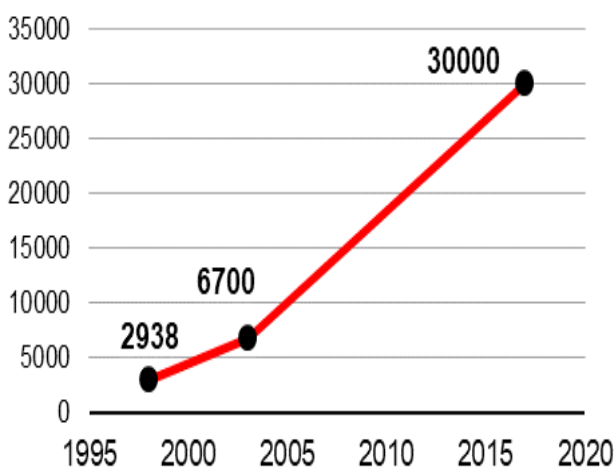
## Introduction

Urbanization has resulted in rapid population growth all over the world and Kathmandu is no exception. The urbanizing cities such as Kathmandu act as a magnet and thus attract a large number of immigrants. But, the city is unable to generate formal employment at the same rate of population growth. In case of Nepal, as per UNDP, the

formal sector can currently provide job opportunities to less than 10 percent of the employed labor force.<sup>1</sup> Also, most of the rural migrants lack required skills, knowledge and education to get a formal job and thus they are forced to get absorbed in the informal sector. The informal sector is characterized by ease of entry, the small scale of enterprises, family ownership, use of labor-intensive technology and reliance on indigenous resources. Within the informal

sector, street vending is one of the most visible aspects of informal activities where thousands of street vendors earn their living by selling goods on public spaces.<sup>2</sup> According to Sthapit (1998), there were about 47 pockets of street vendors in different locations of Kathmandu with an estimated 2,938 street vendors. Figure 1, clearly shows that the number of street vendors increased to over 6,700 in 2003 and in 2017 the number further reached to about 30,000 in Kathmandu. This clearly shows that street vending is thriving and growing, suggesting that it will not disappear. But, the dynamic growth of city population and the scale of physical development create new challenges for street vendors, who not only face changing political, economic and social contexts but also, increasing competition for urban public space.<sup>3</sup> Although, street vendors add vitality to the streetscape and contribute to economic activity, they also create an obstruction for the pedestrian as well as the vehicles.<sup>4</sup>

One of the intriguing aspects of street vending is how vendors actually use and appropriate the public spaces. Although, several studies were carried out considering economic aspects, there exists information gap regarding the spatial dimension of street vending. This is evident from the Governments more of a political decision-based approach in 2008 and again in 2014 to allow vending at ten designated areas for the management of street vending.<sup>5</sup> However, in the absence of clear understanding regarding the location, space allocation and related business potential, the approach by the Government had limited outcomes. Within this context, this research aims to examine how street vendors of Kathmandu use and appropriate the urban public space for street vending.



**Figure 1. Street Vendors in Nepal**

(Source: NEST, 2017)

## Literature Study

Use of streets and street like place by retail or wholesale for trading is Street vending. We are striving to add value for

shaping our city. So every effort to enhance functionality and quality with lower cost must be of great concern.<sup>6</sup>

Street vendor is lacking a permanent structure or build up area for their trading.

Street vendors greatly expand the range of places and times where goods and services can be provided, and sometimes they also offer goods and services which are not available in off-street locations.<sup>6</sup>

Brown (2006, 2010) argues that mobility and flexibility of temporary selling stalls regenerate an empty space to a lively one and the street vendors also have equal rights to the public space of the city. Urban public spaces refers to all the physical space and social relations that determine the use of that space within the non- private realm of cities.<sup>8</sup> It is a valuable resource for the urban working poor for their livelihood as well as their living.<sup>7</sup> However, the illegality stems from their occupation of public space, since they don't own or lease retail space and thus they are perceived as intruders and encroachers.<sup>9</sup> When the Government removes and relocate street vendors, either in the name of urban infrastructure development or for other reasons, they are not satisfied with the new places and end up returning to the space that they previously occupied.<sup>10</sup>

## Locational Attributes of Street Vending

The concentration or the distribution of the street vendors in every part of the city is not uniform.<sup>11</sup> It is important to understand why they choose the sites or locations to operate their business. They concentrate very heavily in a few locations, and those locations are typically the points with the highest levels of pedestrian and vehicular congestion.<sup>6</sup> Sharma (2007) explores that street vendors concentrate on the natural path where people traverse on a daily basis on their way to and from work or other business. According to Mitullah (2003), choosing a location with a lot of pedestrian traffic who wants what the vendor is selling is very important for a street vendor to sustain. Besides, customers also enjoy shopping and social interaction found in most vibrant public markets.<sup>12</sup>

## Allocation of Vending Space

The success of any vendor depends on finding a good spot from which to vend, and choice spots are highly coveted and scarce.<sup>13</sup> According to Kettles, the corners are more profitable due to increased visibility to potential customers. Moreover, he also explained the informal system adopted by the street vendors to select the vending spot based on the principle of first possession i.e. first come, first served. Out of two aspects of the principle, one aspect refers to the right of every vendor to use a space that he occupies first on any given day. However, the right expires at the end of the day, or even sooner when the vendor leaves the space. The second aspect refers to the right enjoyed by a

vendor selling from a place on the same place on a regular basis for several months, they become “established”.<sup>13</sup> If an established vendor arrives at his spot to find it occupied by an interloper, the interloper must move. Infact, the right to sell from a spot held by the established vendor is superior to that held by another vendor occupying the same spot first on a particular day. Although, street vendors are not the legitimate owners of their vending spots, but once they manage to peacefully occupy certain locations for a long period of time, they almost always claim themselves the de facto property owner of the urban public space.<sup>14</sup> Besides, after selling from one spot for several months, a vendor would probably learn what products sell best, at what prices, and at what times of the day or week. Moreover, when a vendor becomes established, he will also develop a reputation among potential customers.

### Stakeholders Perspective

According to Sharma (2007), “the citizens expect clear and safe access to civic space, the city authorities want the city to appear and develop like its first-world counterparts and the vendors want a legal and hassle-free right to operate their business”. Perhaps like no other citizen, the street vendor has become the focus of interaction of almost all city pressure groups - the municipality, police, politician, consumer, shop owners and vehicle owners.<sup>15</sup>

The pedestrian population makes streets and public spaces attractive vending zones and the vendors are naturally drawn to them.<sup>8</sup> Street vendors gravitate towards the congestion because that is where available demand is concentrated.<sup>6</sup> Since, vending takes up street space blocking pavement and parking space and causing further congestion for other road users, street vendors are also accused of over-use of the public space.<sup>3</sup> One of the most vocal critics of sidewalk vendors are the off-street retailers who have a head to head competition with the adjacent vendor. Vendors are also considered to obstruct the activities of off-street businesses as they capture customers before they enter a formal retail shop and also block the view of stores.<sup>4</sup> However, sidewalk vendors avoid selling from places adjacent to merchants selling the same products. Instead, vendors set up in locations that are complementary to neighboring fixed business.<sup>16</sup>

The cluster attracts more suppliers and customers than a single firm could achieve alone resulting into creation of favorable market.

Agglomeration in a few locations usually increases turnover for three main reasons. Firstly, the concentration of vendors become known and attract more customers; secondly, more on-street business may forestall and block easy entry to nearby off-street businesses; and lastly street vendors increase pedestrian and vehicular congestion,

slowing everyone down and enabling them to spend more time looking at merchandise and receiving sales pitches.<sup>6</sup> “Agglomeration” is perceived as a good thing, might be converted in “hyper agglomeration” with a feeling of loss of business due to congestions. Labour productivity is always a problem due to better site management in Nepal.<sup>18</sup> However, Capacity is not an issue based on A class construction company in Nepal.<sup>19</sup> So it might be the issue in regular market like construction site because on hyper agglomeration.

Hence, the desire of every seller who faces expert buyers is to be near his competitors and render his wares easily comparable to theirs.

It is a regular problem of conflict between street vendors and municipal authorities in virtually every major town around the globe.<sup>14</sup>

It can be argued that both the Municipal authority as well as vendors have right from their own place and position. Usually, street vendors spread their wares on the pavement and sometimes on the street, causing great inconvenience to the pedestrians and vehicles. Conflicts arise between urban authorities trying to keep their cities clean and the vendors who need space for their activities. The city keeps evicting the vendors, who keep returning to do business, which leads to the vendors and the city being trapped in a continual vicious cycle.<sup>9</sup> Different innovative planning interventions have been adopted in different cities to provide space for street vendors such as the use of incidental (or left-over) space, market allocation through planning legislation and space sharing over time.

### Research Setting

Three street vending areas i.e. New Baneshwor, Sundhara, and Ratnapark of the Kathmandu Metropolitan City were purposefully selected and studied to demonstrate different kinds of street vending phenomenon. These are the busiest markets of the capital and are all situated in the heart of the city where a large number of street vendors sell a variety of goods. Further, these three places have become the stage for daily activities, where vendors set up their mats at strategic locations along the streets and organize their goods in the most efficient and appealing way possible. Nevertheless, sidewalk vending in these areas has been the subject of a number of newspaper articles. In all the study locations, the formal shops co-exist with the informal street vendors. Interestingly, the use of the public space in the study areas by the vendors shows a distinct temporal dimension (Table I). For example, corner of Ratnapark which is occupied by vendors selling tea in the morning is occupied by a vendor selling cigarettes in the daytime, and the very space is transformed into outdoor dining area serving sekuwa (barbecue) with seating in the evening.

Table 1. Street Occupancy

Items	Morning (7–8 a.m.)			Daytime (1-2 p.m.)			Evening (7–8 p.m.)		
	N	R	S	N	R	S	N	R	S
Fruits, vegetables	28	0	1	1	0	8	99	0	3
Food items	2	11	1	6	27	9	18	30	9
Clothing	1	1	2	8	2	18	113	114	174
Accessory	2	3	2	5	3	6	24	49	40
Books	0	0	3	0	1	1	1	0	3
Electronic	0	5	0	1	9	1	5	19	12
Services	3	6	4	6	3	0	5	0	0
Others	0	3	2	0	3	3	12	7	17
Total	36	29	15	27	48	46	277	219	258

## Methodology

The research was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methodology within the pragmatic paradigm. The quantitative method used correlational strategy in which questionnaire survey was carried out in three case areas. Using sample determination calculation developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a total of 150 (population 754) vendors were selected considering 0.08 error margin at 95 % confidence level.

$$\text{Sample size (n)} = \frac{\chi^2 * N * (1-P)}{ME^2 (N-1) + (\chi^2 * P * (1-P))}$$

Where,

- n = required sample size
- $\chi$  = Chi square (confidence level at 1 degree of freedom)
- N = Population size
- ME = Desired Marginal error

New Baneshwor; 82% in Ratnapark; 86% in Sundhara) are involved in vending only during the evenings after the duty of municipal police. Despite harassment and confiscation of goods by the municipality, there are vendors even carrying out their work whole day. The local people usually shop vegetables during morning and evening to prepare their meals, and thus this has created extra demand for vendors during these times of a day. Likewise, Figure 3 illustrates that more than 80% of street vendors in all three places are located along the sidewalk while about 4% of the street vendors in New Baneshwor sell outside the formal shop. Shop owners give space for putting up mats in front of their shops in the agreement that vendors will not sell the goods that the shop owners are selling in the shop. Similarly, Figure 4, presents that the majority of vendors i.e. 75% are stationary in nature while less than 25% are

Table 2. Sample Distribution

	Total Street vendors	20%	KMC Officials	Pedestrian	Shop keepers
New Baneshwor	277	55		10	8
Ratnapark	219	44		10	6
Sundhara	258	51		10	6
Total	754	150	10	30	20

The samples were distributed proportionately in three case study areas. Likewise, convenient and purposive sampling method was used to interview pedestrian and shopkeepers respectively (see Table II below). Using SPSS (Version 20), the survey data were then analyzed and compared in terms of time, location, goods type, space occupation and mobility. The findings from survey was discussed with the qualitative information collected through direct observation of the street vending in case areas.

## Data set and Analysis

Figure 2, clearly shows that most of the vendors (58 %

mobile. Usually, the vendors selling belts in Sundhara and fruits in New Baneshwor are mobile. The mobile vendors sell the goods whole day and are mostly of smaller age groups. They are physically active and can easily run away when the municipal police chase them.

The space occupied by each vending unit is governed by two main factors, type of goods and availability of space with respect to a number of vendors in a given vending center. Competition and lack of space lead vendors to spill out their goods substantially onto the street to attract customers. Out of the three-study areas, the street vendors in New



Baneshwor and Ratnapark occupy an area as large as 40 Sq. ft or more which is presented in Figure 5 below. The majority of vendors in Sundhara occupy a smaller area of 10-19 Sq. ft. Vendors selling different type of commodities occupy different area. Following this, Figure6 illustrates the relation between the space occupied and the type of goods sold. It clearly shows that street vendors selling clothes, fruits and vegetables, food items occupy the largest area while vendors selling the accessories and providing service occupy a smaller area. In addition, vendors selling on the box also occupy less while mobile vendors become a part of the crowd.

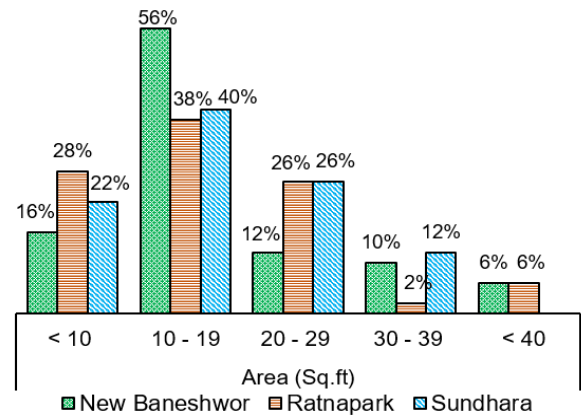


Figure 5. Area occupied by street vendors

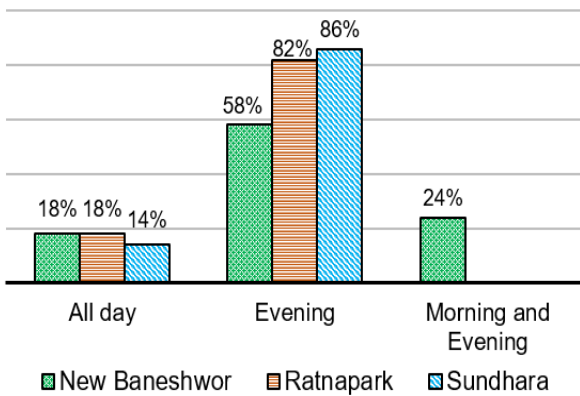


Figure 2. Time of vending

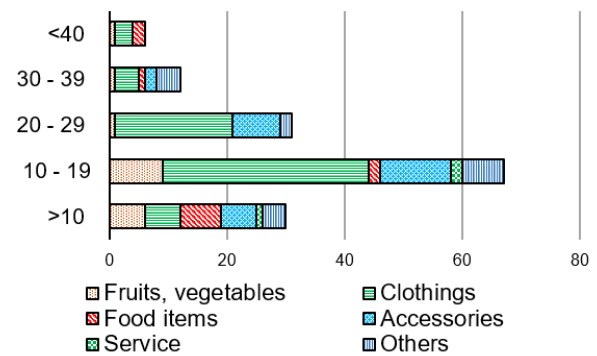


Figure 6. Space occupied and goods type

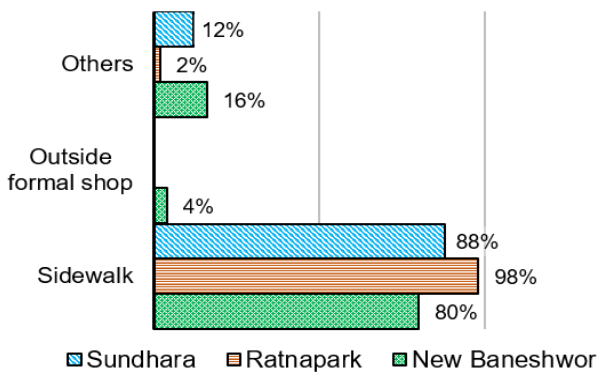


Figure 3. Location of street vendors

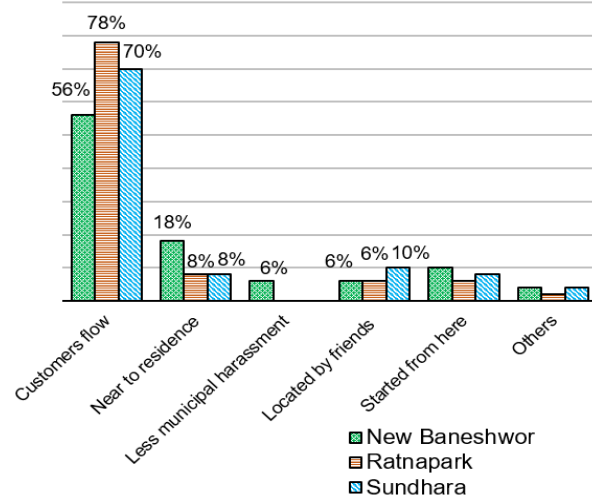


Figure 7. Reason for choosing a location

The vendors do not locate themselves randomly. Figure 7, highlights that more than 55% of street vendors have selected the vending location due to the presence of a high volume of customers. The pedestrians are the potential customer and hence they find a good opportunity of selling their goods. High pedestrian traffic and proximity to the offices and colleges makes an ideal spot for food vendors to congregate. In New Baneshwor and Ratnapark, the fast food vendors are located towards the street where the width of the sidewalk is relatively large. The space

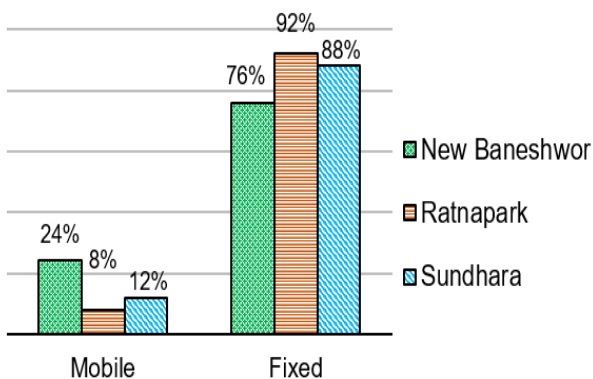


Figure 4. Feature of location

around the tree is predominantly occupied by the street food vendors in New Baneshwor while in Ratnapark, food vendors occupy the junction.

Street vendors use an informal system for managing the scarce space available for vending. Out of surveyed vendors, 64.7% claimed to have friendly relation with other vendors and they also support each other's claim to space. At a close look, the vendors seem to be organized maintaining a line of occupation based on mutual understanding with each other in the absence of a formal uniting organization. Earlier, the vendors in Ratnapark also adopted a system of allocating space of 5 feet for each vendor. Most of the vendors have been trading in the same space for many years and the vendors claim their right to the space. In New Baneshwor, space has been arranged in the different section based on seniority. i.e., the oldest vendors occupy the center while the new ones are located towards the road. Figure 8, below shows that more than 68% of street vendors are established vendors whereas very few new vendors allocate space based on the principle of first possession. The temporary vendors are looking for some quick cash on the sidewalk and are not interested in developing a more valuable long-term vending enterprise. Sometimes, there is also spatial competition between the established and a new vendor. Established vendors claim that they have the right over the place, where they have been establishing stalls for many years. Interestingly, in Sundhara a different system of space allocation was observed i.e. by counting the number of tiles. Space is allocated based on the yellow tile of the sidewalk which is 1ft by 1ft which is presented in Table III below. Based on the observation, the cloth vendors occupy greater number of tiles while the vendors selling electronic goods occupy the less numbers of tiles.

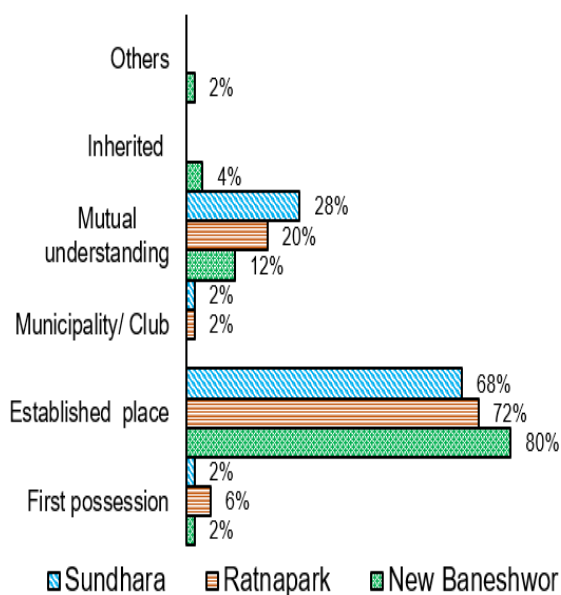


Figure 8.Space allocation

Table 3.Tiles Occupied By Street Vendors In Sundhara

Items sold	Number of tiles
Fruits and vegetables	2-5
Food items	3-8
Clothes	6-10
Accessories	4-7
Electronic Goods	2-4
Others	3-6

Agglomeration of economies can be clearly observed in Figure 9, as the street vendors selling similar merchandise are clustered together in certain stretches. Vendors selling objects of everyday domestic use like vegetables, flowers, fruits, etc. tend to congregate near a place with high residential density. Based on direct observation, it is observed that vendors stayed elbow to elbow in some stretches while vendors were free in some other areas. Although clustering of similar activities seems to be competitive for them, but the vendors have taken it positively and found that clustering has ultimately benefited them. Similarly, customers also get goods at cheaper price due to the competition between the vendors. Hence, the customers tend to go to areas where they see clustering of activities. For example, the cloth vendors are clustered near the junction while the vegetable vendors are clustered towards the northern area that is close to the residential areas.

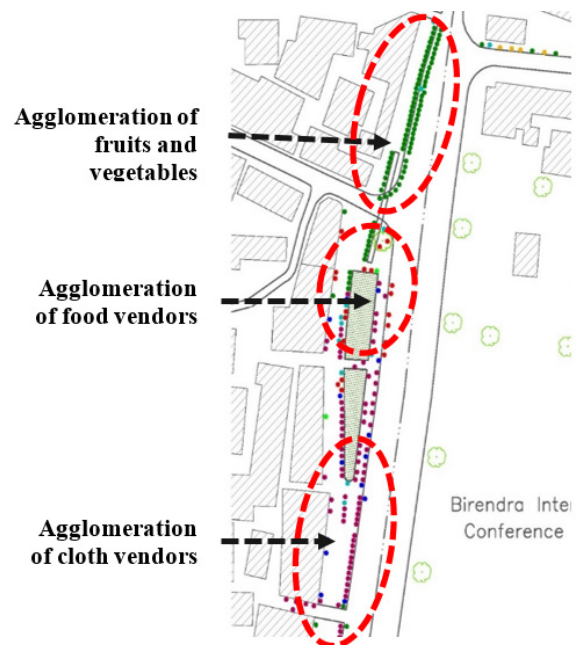


Figure 9.Agglomeration of vendors in New Baneshwor

The responsible body for controlling and managing public places and pavement is the KMC, which works under the Local Self Governance Act that prohibits street vendors

from occupying the narrow roads and alleys. Metropolitan police try to detain vendors from the urban public space, while the vendors claim that it is their right to work and earn for their livelihoods. According to 74 % of vendors, the municipal authority try captures their goods if they sell during the duty hours of the municipal police. Although municipal police strictly do not allow any kind of vending activities, but they purposely overlook the elderly vendors and differently able ones. In April 2014, in order to address the concerns of street vendors, the government had designated 10 vending zones such as northern stretch of Narayanhiti Museum, Bagmati Corridor, Dhobikhola Corridor, Bir Hospital-Mahabouddha stretch and southern stretch of Exhibition Road, etc. on certain time and days of the week. The government had also proposed 4x5 feet area for each vendor, which was later protested by the street vendors with a demand that different vending activity requires different area.

### Findings and Discussions

Street vendors choose their locations for a variety of reasons. It is important to understand the strategies involved in selecting the locations to operate their enterprise. As per the observation and interviews, visibility and flow of customers is the major determining factor in the selection of a location by the street vendors. The strategies of selecting the space get physical dimension with types of goods they sell and availability of space. Generally, the clothes seller occupies a larger area.

Street vendors use an informal system of space management without negotiation with any agencies. The vendors have occupied their respective space in agreement with each other and they maintain a line of occupation and are organized. In the course of time, a vendor becomes established and starts to claim for their space without any legal basis. Although, a new vendor can use the space in the absence of an established vendor, but the new vendor must leave the space as soon as the established vendor arrives. In this regard, the street vendors manage the scarce vending space with mutual agreement. Furthermore, the sidewalk is shared between different users at different times of the day. The amount of space used by the vendor fluctuates over a course of the day.

### Conclusion

From the study of three vending locations, the research concludes that street vendors in Kathmandu tend to concentrate on areas with high traffic such as commercial centers, public transportation and also on areas with high residential densities. The use and choice of the space is determined by the flow of people, location, types of goods sold and availability of space. In addition, the spaces are appropriated through complex negotiation process among

themselves through the system of first possession, with the shopkeepers and sometimes informally with public authorities.

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