

Contested Spaces and Circuits of Mobile Trade in Southeast Asia

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Discussant: Carol Warren, Murdoch University, Perth; Gerben Nooteboom (UvA).

In this panel, we discuss the contested spaces and circuits of mobile trade in (perishable) foodstuff, including fish, vegetables and fruit in Southeast Asia. All over Southeast Asia, mobile traders – often on motorbikes – are a common sight. These traders link relatively remote and poor rural consumers to regional centres and sites of production, providing necessities which are otherwise difficult to obtain to large parts of the population. We aim to discuss – using a comparative perspective – the importance of this trade, both for the communities they serve, as for the traders themselves.

We note that mobile traders are regular, efficient, predictable, and able to deliver on a daily or weekly basis. For millions of lower income consumers, they provide fresh necessities at home. The mobile trader combines the extremely mobile with the static; the timely with the incidental; the perishable with freshness; and the ‘structural’ with freedom and ad hoc household decisions. They are efficient brokers and petty entrepreneurs, make money as a trader, yet save costs for households. They are often risk takers, providing goods on credit, are flexible in their portions and operate largely beyond state control.

Despite these observations, we also note that mobile traders are often equated with tradition, and with economic backwardness, obscuring the importance of these traders in providing reliable access to basic foodstuff. There is a lack of studies into mobile food traders. Who are these traders, and what do they trade? How important are they, for example, for the nutritional security of rural poor? Moreover, how do they provide, with their mobile trade, in their livelihoods? How do their activities fit into imagined career trajectories, and how do trading futures look like? Which regulatory frameworks are at stake, and how do traders navigate an ever-changing landscape of technological change, government regulations, quality controls, competition, taste, and social mobility?

Together, these questions make visible the sophisticated mechanisms underlying mobile trade and the vital role petty trade plays in rural Southeast Asia. To address them, we aim at bringing together a number of scholars working on mobile food trade in Southeast Asia. We invite papers on mobile trade and particularly on trade in (perishable) food, fish or fruit in all Southeast Asian Regions. This workshop aims to publish a special issue journal or edited volume.