foods since the 1990s. These projects have resulted in a number of conferences and publications, including guides to nutrition for families and school children (e.g. FAO, 2004b).

Workplace health and safety considerations for vendors

The most evident health and safety risks for vendors include traffic accidents, breathing in vehicle exhaust fumes, fatigue due to long hours and potential exposure to crime. They are often poorly informed on the risks to which they are exposed, and when aware of them, do not know how to reduce them. Informal sector workers often work in open spaces or in locations with heavy traffic. These problems are compounded by the lack of access to sanitary installations, drinking water, electricity and garbage disposal. Like health problems for consumers, these issues could be resolved if municipal authorities would assist rather than harass IFS workers. An integrated approach for improved quality and safety of street foods has to be developed in order to train, supervise, monitor and guide the food vendors and improve their food-handling practices (Dardano, 2003). Fortunately, there are many successful case studies documenting such initiatives.

Where do the foods come from in the informal food sector?

To date, there is little research on the IFS in rural areas. Several participants in the e-conference pointed out its importance to small farmers and forest producers, especially those who produce local products for local markets. Fishers are also involved in the informal sector. Local producers can provide food more sustainably than global industrial food products that often have to be shipped long distances. Indigenous and local foods also provide food diversity and can be more nutritious than value-added processed foods often imported from more developed countries at a great expense.

Many participants also pointed out the importance of using the IFS to promote the sale and consumption

of local products, which are often more nutritious than imported industrial food products. In addition to increasing food diversity and nutrition for urban consumers, such promotion would also provide increased income for local producers, which would also slow down migration to urban areas. Reduced transport costs, especially compared to the import of global industrial foods, would also contribute to sustainable development.

Ethnicity in the informal food sector

There is little research on the ethnic dimensions of the IFS (e.g. Nirathron, 2005; Lloyd-Evans and Potter, 2002). Nonetheless, the behaviour of market actors and consumers are influenced by the different mentalities or social logics of different ethnic groups (Devautour, 1997). This is especially important in the IFS, since food consumption varies tremendously between ethnic and cultural groups.

Further study of social relations needs to be done to address issues of equity between ethnic groups. In some countries, members of subordinate minorities have trouble getting access to markets. In Taiwan, for example, members of indigenous Austronesian groups report that markets occasionally charge aborigines more than Taiwanese of Chinese origin to rent stalls (Simon, 2004: 101). Members of ethnic groups may help each other out in the markets, creating networks that can exclude other market groups. In looking at ethnic networks in United Republic of Tanzania, Lugalla (1997: 425), it may be suggested that policies should re-examine social relations so that promoting the sector does not merely strengthen the existing processes of inequality, exploitation and exclusion. This is an important issue for future research.

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"If [the] informal economy constitutes a non-substitutable net of social and economical exchange, what has to be stressed, indeed, is that the sector has to be recognized as a properly working part of a de facto market. This would allow government authorities to involve themselves in a participatory process in order to overcome "de facto" problematic situations by trying to approach a scenario in which those activities will be recognized by law".

E. Cassarino, cited in Macchi, 2006: 12