



ISDSI CHIANG MAI URBAN SUSTAINABILITY STUDENT STUDY: FALL, 2009

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TITLE: Organic vs. Non-Organic Markets

REPORT

Our approach to analyzing the sustainability of foods in Chiang Mai was to compare and contrast an organic (Doi Kham Project) and non-organic market (Tom Payom) located approximately a half-kilometer from each other. We chose markets in the same vicinity to eliminate extraneous variables (geographic bias, socioeconomic bias, etc.). Time of day was kept consistent throughout both observations (9:25-10:25 AM). We chose to focus on three factors: the number of people purchasing product, what type of product was purchased, and the price of product. In order to analyze consumer flow, we recorded the number of buyers within a section of the market specific to fruits, vegetables, raw meat, or precooked foods. We made observations in six separate ten minute intervals, in which we recorded approximate age, sex, ethnicity, and product purchases of the consumer. We also recorded the prices of the products from both markets for comparison. We sought to answer whether more people go to organic markets, and what factors may have affected their choice. We hypothesized that more people would purchase items at Tom Payom due to its ease of accessibility, greater variety of product, and generally lower prices.

Overall, the markets were strikingly different. Tom Payom was easily visible from the street, with four clearly labeled entrances. It was sprawling, sweltering, and dirty, offering a vast variety of produce, meat, clothes, and household items. In contrast, Doi Kham was tucked away behind the wall on the corner of Chiang Mai University. It was a modest, air-conditioned building and offered only seasonal organic produce, with raw vegetables, fruits, natural spices, coffee, and hygiene products that were prepackaged and already priced. The market was a Royal Project of Thailand, in that it received government aid to support the selling of organic produce, as well as the education of the people about where the produce came from.

We found that the organic market had generally higher prices than the non-organic market. During the one hour observation period, 56 people purchased produce at Tom Payom, while 31 people made purchases at Doi Kham. Customers at Tom Payom mostly bought fruit, whereas vegetables were the most commonly bought item at Doi Kham.

Our data indicates that more people shop at Tom Payom in comparison to Doi Kham, drawing primarily from a consumer base of middle-aged Thai women. Our assumption is that there are many factors that may have influenced their choice. The ease of accessibility, greater overall size and variety of product, and cheaper average prices may have caused more people to shop at Tom Payom. Assuming that organic food is more sustainable than non-organic food due to the way in which it's produced, and because fewer people are shopping at organic markets, Chiang Mai's food system is not as sustainable as it could be. Though we found that organic food is available in Chiang Mai, it's priced a little higher than non-organic food, and the variety is much more limited than non-organic markets. These factors may contribute to a weaker, more selective customer base.

One way in which Chiang Mai could become more sustainable is to better advertise organic markets. In addition, organic markets could carry a wider variety of product to help draw more consumers. Due to time constraints, we were only able to observe one organic market, and it would be beneficial to attend more markets in the future, as well as conduct interviews to gain a more holistic understanding of the markets and how they operate.