

Cooking or Cooked: The Future of Singapore's Hawker Culture

Introduction

Singapore prides itself on its world-renowned hawker culture, inscribing it on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Yet, decades of culinary expertise are at risk of fading, as experienced hawkers gradually retire, and fewer new hawkers join the scene.

This paper will first examine the two main problems faced by the hawker industry, namely, the diminishing profit margins and low replacement rates of hawkers in the industry. In doing so, the various factors that contribute to the narrow profit margins and low replacement rates will also be explored. Secondly, the case study will analyse the four main policy approaches that the Singapore government has implemented. The case will situate the policy approaches based on its purpose, stakeholder, and time horizon. Lastly, the case will evaluate and critique the efficacy of the policy in addressing the multifaceted nature of the problem.

At its core, this paper serves as an example of how even a comprehensive suite of policies will not be able to effectively resolve a problem if the underlying issue of culture and people's mindset are not changed. Perhaps, there is a limit in terms of public policy and more needs to be done to influence and shift the ingrained mindsets of citizens. Only then will there truly be a sustainable solution to the problem.

Background

The role of hawker centres

Cleanliness and control

The issue of a declining hawker culture in Singapore is a recent one. In the 1950s, there was an oversupply of hawkers, where the number of hawkers surged to as many as 26,000.¹ These thousands of hawkers resulted in widespread disease outbreaks like cholera and typhoid given their improper sanitation and unregulated hygiene practices.² Hawking was thus seen by both the colonial administration and then the newly independent government as a nuisance that had to be regulated.

¹ Andrew Tam, "Singapore Hawker Centers: Origins, Identity, Authenticity, and Distinction", *Gastronomica* 17, no. 1 (2017): 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26362418>.

² Azhar Ghani, "A Recipe for Success: How Singapore Hawker Centres Came to Be", Institute of Policy Studies, May 1, 2011, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ag_history-of-hawkers_010511.pdf.

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After the independence of Singapore, the government relocated hawkers to state-built food centres, or “hawker centres”, to impose order and hygiene onto store owners.³ Licences were given to some 18,000 hawkers, with the rest being outlawed.⁴ Hawker centres became a place for the government to oversee regulated food selling.

Cheap food for the masses

While hawking is fundamentally the running of a business with the goal of profit maximising, the services that hawkers provide has been seen to also serve the ancillary public function of addressing the need for cheap and convenient food.⁵ Today, hawker centres are also seen as a social safety net, offering affordable meals to the masses.⁶

Multiculturalism

The modern hawker centre has assumed greater roles beyond the provision of food. The importance of hawker centres has been reinforced by acknowledging the crucial role they play in enhancing community interactions and strengthening the social fabric.⁷ In the context of a multicultural nation like Singapore, hawker centres have over the years become a means to unify racially diverse people by providing a common Singaporean identity.⁸ By serving the food of different cultures all within the same location, hawker centres have become markers of Singapore as a multicultural state.⁹

Dying hawker culture

The numerous important roles that hawkers play have highlighted the importance of their survival in Singapore. However, recent statistics have revealed a worrying trend in the hawking industry. The median age for hawkers stands at 60 years old, just three years shy of the country's minimum retirement age of 63.¹⁰ With many of them expected to retire in the coming decade, the hawking industry is set to become a sunset industry unless these hawkers can find successors. Meanwhile, studies show that approximately 87% of Singaporeans

³ Tam, “Singapore Hawker Centers”, 45.

⁴ Ibid. 45.

⁵ Ghani, “A Recipe for Success”.

⁶ Ravi Menon, “Economic Thinking and Practice in Singapore”, *Ethos* 11, August 2012, Civil Service College Singapore, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-11/economic-thinking-and-practice-in-singapore/>.

⁷ Parliament of Singapore, “Committee of Supply – Head L (Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment)”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, March 1, 2023.

⁸ Tam, “Singapore Hawker Centers”, 45.

⁹ “Hawker Culture in Singapore, Community Dining and Culinary Practices in a Multicultural Urban Context”, United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/hawker-culture-in-singapore-community-dining-and-culinary-practices-in-a-multicultural-urban-context-01568>.

¹⁰ Parliament of Singapore, “Take-Up Rates for Digitalisation, Productivity and Succession Schemes for Hawkers in Past Three Years”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, October 5, 2021.

indicate that they do not want to become hawkers.¹¹ As a result, it has become imperative to consider the issue of sustaining the hawker trade.¹²

Importance post COVID-19

The declining hawker culture has gained renewed relevance in the post COVID-19 era given that many hawkers were severely affected by pandemic restrictions. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, no dining-in was allowed and hawkers could only sell takeaways.¹³ As a result, hawkers lost up to 50% of their business.¹⁴ This drew attention to the vulnerability of the hawker industry which comprised a largely older workforce that earned narrow profit margins.

As the world returned to normalcy, these vulnerabilities continue to remain unresolved. To make matters worse, hawkers continue to face new challenges due to inflationary pressures and rising cost of goods.

Problem

Low profit margins in the industry

Rising cost of goods

In 2018, a CNA documentary found that hawkers only make approximately \$0.30 profit from a \$3.50 plate of chicken rice.¹⁵ By such an estimate, hawkers have to sell approximately 563 plates per day to earn the median gross monthly income of Singaporean workers which was \$5,070 in 2023.¹⁶ More recently, a 2020 National Environment Agency (NEA) workgroup report found that hawker stalls had been suffering from declining profit margins.¹⁷ Following the COVID-19 epidemic and major geopolitical events that have disrupted supply chains, the shrinking profit margins have gained renewed relevance.¹⁸

¹¹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup on Sustaining the Hawker Trade Report*, November 24, 2020, 12, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/workgroup-on-sustaining-hawker-trade-report-24112020.pdf>.

¹² National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup*, 12.

¹³ "Circuit Breaker To Minimise Further Spread Of Covid-19", Ministry of Health Singapore, April 3, 2020, <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-11/economic-thinking-and-practice-in-singapore/>.

¹⁴ Nabilah Awang, "'We'd Try to Endure': Hawkers See Business Plunge by Up To 50% Due to Covid-19 Outbreak", *Today*, February 22, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/wed-try-endure-hawkers-see-business-plunge-50-due-covid-19-outbreak>.

¹⁵ CNA Insider, "Saving The Hawker Trade | Talking Point | CNA Insider", YouTube, November 21, 2018, video, 3:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW9wMa0Jl4s&t=6s>.

¹⁶ "Summary Table: Income", Ministry of Manpower Singapore, November 30, 2023, <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/pages/income-summary-table.aspx>.

¹⁷ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup*, 13.

¹⁸ Parliament of Singapore, "Additional Financial Aid for Hawkers Affected Due to Their Proximity to COVID-19 Clusters", *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, Vol. 95, July 7, 2021; Khieng Yuit Chor et al., "Why You Can Expect to Pay More for Food in Singapore with Ukraine Crisis and Inflation Woes", *The Straits Times*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-you-can-expect-to-pay-more-for-food-in-singapore#:~:text=Food%20importers%20and%20manufacturers%20here,supply%20disruptions%20and%20higher%20prices>.

A significant factor of the shrinking margins can be attributed to the rising costs of goods and labour. From 2015 to 2019, the MAS Core Inflation averaged at 1.1% per annum.¹⁹ However, in 2022, the MAS Core Inflation increased by 4.1% while consumer prices rose by 6.1% compared to the previous year.²⁰

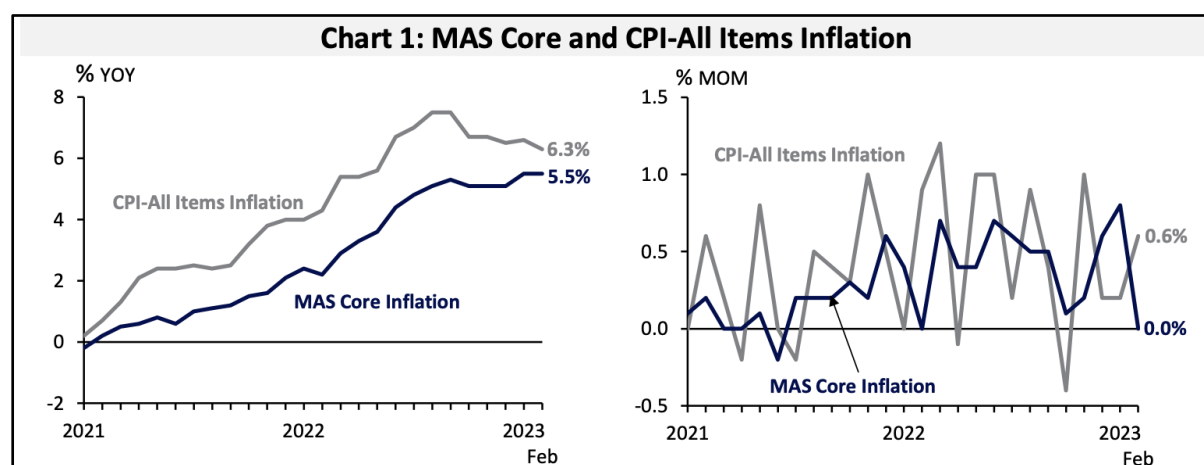


Figure 1: Consumer price developments, January 2021-February 2023²¹

The outbreak of recent geopolitical events is only likely to continue adding to these inflationary pressures. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022 has had a key impact on Singapore's energy cost given that most of Singapore's energy is imported.²² According to Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry, "inflationary pressures are likely to rise further in the near term, especially through an increase in the prices of oil-related items in the first instance".²³ Meanwhile, food prices had jumped 20.7% year-on-year in February 2022, led by rising costs of vegetable oils and dairy products of which Russia and Ukraine are vital suppliers of.²⁴

Viewed in the context where raw material costs account for 59% of a hawker stall's operating costs, these inflationary pressures contribute significantly to the diminishing profit margin of hawkers.²⁵

¹⁹ "How Has Inflation Evolved in Singapore?", Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/monetary-policy/economics-edu-inflation/inflation/how-has-inflation-evolved-in-singapore#:~:text=2015-2020%3A%20Slower%20growth%20and,per%20annum%20over%202015%2D19>.

²⁰ "Inflation was High in 2022. Here's Why.", Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/monetary-policy/economics-edu-inflation/inflation/inflation-was-high-in-2022>.

²¹ Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), *Consumer Price Developments in February 2023*, March 23, 2023, 1, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/-/media/mas/epg/cpd/2023/inflation202302.pdf>.

²² Parliament of Singapore, "Debate on Annual Budget Statement", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, February 28, 2022.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Amanda Lee and Kolette Lim, "Hawkers Mull Over Raising Food Prices as Russia-Ukraine Crisis Adds to Cost Burden", *The Straits Times*, 14 March, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/consumer/hawkers-mull-over-raising-food-prices-as-russia-ukraine-crisis-adds-to-cost-burden>.

²⁵ Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), *Feature Article: Examining The Cost Drivers Of Hawker Food Prices*, May 26, 2015, 42, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Resources/feature-articles/2015/Examining-The-Cost-Drivers-of-Hawker-Food-Prices>.

Rising cost of manpower and other miscellaneous costs

According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, manpower costs make up 17% of a hawker stall's total cost.²⁶ In recent years, hawkers have reported needing to pay around \$1,800-\$2,400 for a rental assistant as compared to \$1,200-\$1,300 in the past.²⁷

Further, hawkers also face an increase in service and conservancy charges. For hawkers selling cooked food, hawkers managed by the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment will have to pay \$175 per month for conservancy charges from July 2024 onwards.²⁸ This is a \$35 increase per month from the previous rate of \$140.²⁹

Public perception of hawker food

Hawker food occupies a special place in Singapore for having cheap and affordable meal options.³⁰ According to The Makan Index 2.0 by the Institute of Policy Studies, a full meal inclusive of a main dish and a drink would, on average, only cost \$4.81 for breakfast, \$6.01 for lunch, and \$6.20 for dinner.³¹ In fact, if one were minded to have the cheapest meal, it would only cost \$2.00 for breakfast, \$2.00 for lunch, and \$2.80 for dinner.³²

The role that hawkers play in providing cheap meal options for Singaporeans is further reinforced in the public policy discourse by officials. As noted by Ravi Menon, Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), hawker centres are viewed as one of the country's "safety nets" that "offer good quality meals at almost Third World price[s]".³³ Taken together, "cheap" has become intertwined in the DNA of hawker food.³⁴

The perception that hawker food prices must remain low has led to heavy resistance from the public when prices are hiked, leading hawkers to face the risk of losing their customers.³⁵ Hawker Mr Zhang Ah Seng told

²⁶ Ibid. 42.

²⁷ Desmond Ng, "Profit Margins for Hawker Fare? As Low as 20 to 30 Cents", *CNA*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/profit-margins-for-hawker-centre-fare-as-low-as-20-to-30-cents-921281>.

²⁸ Hui Shan Chin, "Service and Conservancy Charges for 27 Markets, Hawker Centres to Increase from Jan 2024", *The Straits Times*, June 3, 2023, [https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/service-and-conservancy-charges-for-27-markets-and-hawker-centres-to-increase-from-jan-2024](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/service-and-conservancy-charges-for-27-markets-and-hawker-centres-to-increase-from-jan-2024#:~:text=Stalls%20selling%20cooked%20food%20will,%246%2C%20depending%20on%20the%20produce.https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/service-and-conservancy-charges-for-27-markets-and-hawker-centres-to-increase-from-jan-2024)

²⁹ Chin, "Service and Conservancy Charges".

³⁰ Ghani, "A Recipe for Success".

³¹ Kay Key Teo, Hanniel Lim, and Mindy Chong, "The Cost Of Eating Out: Findings From The Makan Index 2.0", *IPS Exchange Series*, no.24 (2023): 156, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-24.pdf>.

³² Ibid. 159.

³³ Menon, "Economic Thinking and Practice".

³⁴ Annie Tan, "Commentary: Hawker Food isn't What It Used to Be. And It's Partially Our Fault", *CNA*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/hawker-food-singapore-unesco-culture-heritage-list-local-555331>.

³⁵ Kong Cheen Lau and Allan Chia, "Commentary: When Eateries Quietly Shrink Food Portions, Customers Notice – and Get Angry", *CNA*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/shrinkflation-food-restaurant-portion-small-rising-costs-business-3028116>.

The Straits Times that as a small business, should hawkers raise their prices by as much as 50 cents, there will be backlash from their regulars which would negatively affect their business.³⁶ As such, hawkers have been reluctant to increase their prices except as a last resort. For instance, Ms Theresa Tan, a *chwee kueh* (Teochew steamed rice cake dish) seller only raised prices in 2022 for the first time in ten years, after cost pressures threatened the viability of her business.³⁷

Furthermore, even where prices have increased, the extent of the increase has been disproportionately lower than the inflation experienced in other goods. Prices of chilled poultry, a common ingredient in hawker dishes, skyrocketed by 36.7% in 2023 Q1 while price increases for hawker food only increased at a much lower rate of 8.2% in the same quarter.

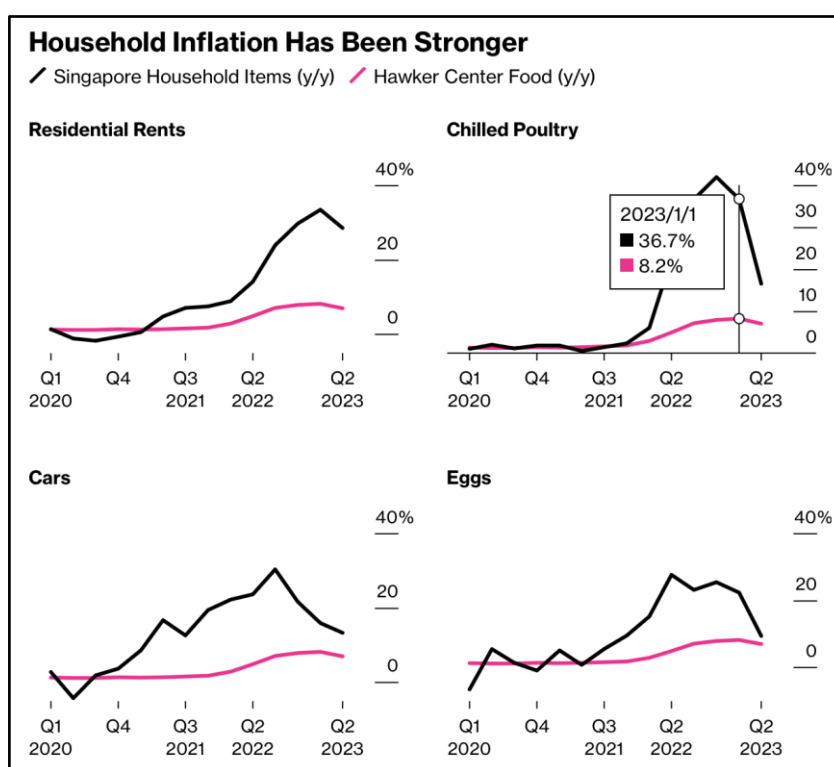


Figure 2: Year-on-year quarterly CPI of hawker centre food against other items, Q1 2020-Q2 2023³⁸

In the face of such public perception, hawkers are faced with the dilemma of whether to raise prices to protect their profit margins but risk losing customers, keep prices static but risk being unable to make ends meet or to shrink portion sizes but risk consumer dissatisfaction. Regardless of which option hawkers choose, they are faced with unenviable trade-offs.

³⁶ Lee and Lim, "Hawkers Mull Over Raising Food Prices". <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/consumer/hawkers-mull-over-raising-food-prices-as-russia-ukraine-crisis-adds-to-cost-burden>.

³⁷ Jalelah Abu Baker, "Hawkers Say They Have to Raise Prices to Survive, as Rising Cost of Ingredients Hits Hard", *CNA*, 29 April 29, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/hawkers-say-they-have-raise-prices-survive-rising-cost-ingredients-hits-hard-2653076>.

³⁸ De Wei Low and Kevin Varley, "Singapore's Vanishing \$2.20 Chicken Rice Stokes Inflation Angst", *Bloomberg*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-28/inflation-hits-cheap-eats-at-singapore-hawker-centers>.

Therefore, in light of the rising cost of raw materials and the relative price elasticity faced by the hawkers, they are left to grapple with shrinking profit margins.³⁹

Poor replacement rates for hawkers

Presently, the industry's workforce suffers from a poor replacement rate. As mentioned, the median age for hawkers stands at 60 years old.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the median age of new hawkers entering the scene stands at 46 years. Younger generations have demonstrated a strong reluctance in joining the trade due to the "long working hours" and "no interest", with 87.3% stating that they would not join.⁴¹ This is in spite of their positive sentiments towards hawker food, with over 80% of Singaporeans consuming hawker centre food at least once a week.⁴²

Examining employment expectations amongst the younger generation, such a trend is unlikely to be reversed. According to a 2023 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies, young Singaporeans ranked pay adequacy and work conditions as two of their most important considerations for a job.⁴³ These two preferences are unlikely to be satisfied by working in the hawker trade due to the low profit margins established earlier, and the need to work in a hot and humid environment with preparation work starting in the early hours of the morning.⁴⁴ Further, given an increasing focus on work-life balance, it is unlikely that the long working hours of the hawker trade would appeal to most Singaporeans.⁴⁵

³⁹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup*, 13.

⁴⁰ Parliament of Singapore, "Take-Up Rates for Digitalisation, Productivity and Succession Schemes for Hawkers in Past Three Years", Vol. 95, October 5, 2021.

⁴¹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup*, 12.

⁴² "High Majority of Patrons Satisfied with Hawker Centres", National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/high-majority-of-patrons-satisfied-with-hawker-centres>.

⁴³ Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Institute of Policy Studies, "Findings from IPS Survey on Future of Work Singaporeans Want", January 16, 2023, 25, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/sp2023-presentation-findings-from-the-ips-survey-on-future-of-work-singaporeans-want.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Lianne Chia, "On The Job as a Hawker Assistant: Long Hours, Stifling Heat but Great Job Satisfaction", CNA, December 16, 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/job-hawker-assistant-long-hours-stifling-heat-great-job-satisfaction-985331>.

⁴⁵ "Better Work-Life Balance Tops List Of Reasons Singaporeans Resign: 2023 Employer Brand Research", Randstad, June 5, 2023, <https://www.randstad.com.sg/hr-trends/employer-brand/better-work-life-balance-tops-list-reasons-singaporeans-resign/>.

Policy Options

No.	Policy	Short Term	Medium Term	Long Term
1	Rent Control Measures	X	X	
2	Hawker Training Programmes		X	X
3	Innovation in Machines, Processes, and Design		X	X
4	Changing Public Perception of the Hawking Trade			X

Table 1: Overview of policy options and their corresponding phase

Policy 1: Rent control measures

Under the current system, hawkers have to submit bids for their preferred hawker stalls under a monthly tender exercise. The vacant stall will be awarded to the highest bidder.⁴⁶



TENDERING OF HAWKER STALLS
LIST OF SUCCESSFUL TENDERERS FOR OCTOBER 2023 TENDER EXERCISE (CLOSED ON 26 OCT 2023)

HAWKER CENTRE	STALL NO	ARTICLE OF SALE	TENDERER'S NAME	TENDERED BID
BLK 335 SMITH STREET	02-158+^	INDIAN CUISINE	YUSNITA BINTE YUSUFF	\$36.00
BLK 335 SMITH STREET	02-160	COOKED FOOD	GOH CHONG LEE (WU ZHONGLI)	\$888.00
TAMAN JURONG MARKET & FOOD CENTRE	03-170	COOKED FOOD	CHUA YAH MENG (CAI YAMING)	\$666.60
BLK 6 TANJONG PAGAR PLAZA	02-49+^	HALAL COOKED FOOD	SURIANE BINTE MUSTAJAB	\$688.00
BLK 79 TELOK BLANGAH DRIVE	01-32	COOKED FOOD	OH BENG GUAN	\$2,600.00
BLK 93 TOA PAYOH LORONG 4	01-42+^	INDIAN CUISINE	TAN ZHEN LIN, ENEIDA	\$237.00
BLK 531A UPPER CROSS STREET	01-51	COOKED FOOD	HO HUAN XUE	\$2,888.00
BLK 503 WEST COAST DRIVE	01-30+^	INDIAN CUISINE	SEIKH UKIL	\$3,196.00

+ Halal Items only
 ^ Indian Cuisine only
 +^ Indian Cuisine or Halal Cooked Food

Note:
 The Schedule of Tender is available for viewing at One-Stop Information and Service Centre (OSISC), National Environment Agency, HDB HUB, East Wing, #26-01, 480 Lorong 6 Toa Payoh, Singapore 310480, from 8.30am to 5.30pm from Monday to Friday.

Disclaimer
 NEA reserves its right to vary, modify, delete or replace its list of tender awards at any time after publication of the results and prior to the award of the stall to the successful tenderers. For the avoidance of doubt, the successful tenderers shall be informed of the acceptance of their tender by a letter sent to them to the address stated in the tender form, and not by the publication of the list of tender awards. NEA makes no warranty as to the accuracy of the information in the list of the tender awards and expressly disclaims any liability for any errors or omissions contain therein.

Figure 3: List of selected hawkers with successful bids in October 2023⁴⁷

⁴⁶ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Becoming a Hawker*, accessed December 12, 2023, 6, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/hawker-centres-documents/tender-notice-docs/becoming-a-hawker.pdf>.

⁴⁷ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *List Of Successful Tenderers For October 2023 Tender Exercise (Closed On 26 October 2023)*, accessed December 12, 2023, 3, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/hawker-centres-documents/tender-notice-docs/successful-tenderers/oct-2023-successful-tenderers.pdf>.

To ensure that rental fees remain affordable despite the bidding system, the government has adopted various measures.

Staggered Rent Scheme

Primarily, the government has ensured affordable rents through a system of subsidies and waivers. Owners of hawker stalls in new hawker centres will benefit from the Staggered Rent Scheme (SRS).⁴⁸ The SRS only collects 80% and 90% of rental in the first and second year of the hawker centre's operations, allowing them to save about \$400 per month and \$200 per month for each year respectively.⁴⁹

Subsidised Rent Scheme

For older hawkers, they continue to benefit from subsidised rates that the government offered in the 70s and early 80s to encourage them to relocate to the hawker centres. According to NEA data, about 40% of cooked food stallholders continue to benefit from this subsidised rent scheme.⁵⁰

Type of Stall	Trade type	Subsidised Rent per month (inclusive GST)		
		Without upgrading	Standard Upgrading	Reconfiguration / Rebuilding
Cooked Food	Cooked Food	\$160	\$192	\$320

Table 2: Current subsidised rent under the Subsidised Rent Scheme in upgraded and non-upgraded centres⁵¹

COVID-19 rent waivers

The government was also alive to the impact of the recent pandemic. Additional ad hoc support was extended where all hawkers enjoyed rental waivers lasting ten months and a one-time payout of \$500 across 2020 and 2021.⁵²

⁴⁸ "New Staggered Rent Scheme At Upcoming Hawker Centres", National Environmental Agency (NEA), August 26 2019, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/new-staggered-rent-scheme-at-upcoming-hawker-centres>.

⁴⁹ Cheryl Teh, "Lower Rents for Hawkers at Social Enterprise Hawker Centres; 13 More to Open by 2027", *The Straits Time*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/13-new-social-enterprise-hawker-centres-to-open-by-2027>.

⁵⁰ "NEA has Put in Place Various Measures to Moderate Hawker Stall Rents", National Environmental Agency (NEA), August 14, 2020, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/readers-letters/index/nea-has-put-in-place-various-measures-to-moderate-hawker-stall-rents>.

⁵¹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Rental Policy for Stalls in Hawker Centres and Wet Markets*, accessed December 12, 2023, 1, <https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Singapore-Rental-Policy-for-Stalls-in-Hawker-Centres-and-Wet-Markets.pdf>.

⁵² Parliament of Singapore, "Impact of Higher Electricity and Ingredient Prices on Earnings of Hawkers", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, April 4, 2022.

Information asymmetry

Separately, the NEA has also sought to remove the information asymmetry to prevent over-bidding. To this end, bidders may access the list of successful tender bids submitted in the past 12 months and the five highest tender bids which may or may not have been successful.⁵³ This provides bidders with a point of reference to submit a suitable bid.

Disallowing subletting

Since 2012, NEA has prohibited subletting and assignment of hawker stalls.⁵⁴ This restricts competition for rental to those with an intention to run the hawker stalls, preventing bids from bidders that seek to sublet the stall for higher rent.⁵⁵

In the words of Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Dr Amy Khor, this removes “real estate play from hawker stall rentals” which had driven up rental prices.⁵⁶

No reserve rent

The NEA has also removed the reserve rent requirement, allowing bidders to bid below the assessed market rent. Such a policy has allowed for rents as low as \$1 provided that it is the highest bid.⁵⁷ According to the NEA, 53% of bids awarded since 2012 were below the assessed market rent value.⁵⁸

Evaluation

Empirical data from the average hawker bids suggest that these rental control measures have been successful. According to the NEA, the three-year average successful monthly bid for cooked food stalls stands at \$1,598, which is lower than the rental at food courts and coffee shops.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, in the case of measures like subsidies, these measures in and of themselves merely target the symptoms of the issue. The root cause of the issue lies in the bidding system which subjects prices to market forces of demand and supply. As such, instances of high rentals will still occur from time to time. For example, in 2021, Ms Lim Ah Ber's successful bid to rent a stall to sell drinks at Chomp Chomp Food Centre cost her \$10,028, spotlighting the shortcomings of the system.⁶⁰

⁵³ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “NEA has Put in Place”.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Parliament of Singapore, “Factors Influencing Rental Cost of Hawker Stalls”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 94, September 11, 2017.

⁵⁶ Parliament of Singapore, “Committee of Supply – Head L (Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment)”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, March 2, 2023.

⁵⁷ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “NEA has Put in Place”.

⁵⁸ Parliament of Singapore, “Factors Influencing Rental Cost of Hawker Stalls”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 94, September 11, 2017.

⁵⁹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “NEA has Put in Place”.

⁶⁰ Ting Wei Toh and Jan Lee, “Bidder Ends Deal on Record \$10,028 Monthly Rental Bid for Chomp Chomp Hawker Stall”, *The Straits Times*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/10028-monthly-rental-bid-for-chomp-chomp-hawker-stall-highest-in-3-years-bidder-walked#:~:text=Calling%20the%20%2410%2C028%20bid%20for,Food%20Centre%20to%20sell%20drinks>.

The bidding system is primarily undergirded by the consideration of ensuring fairness and transparency in allocating hawker stalls to potential hawkers.⁶¹ However, this is at odds with the role that hawkers play as a social safety net for affordable food due to the inherently capitalistic nature of the system.⁶² Therefore, if the current system is retained, the necessary trade-off is that rental fees for certain stalls will be subject to upward pressures from market forces, despite the government's best efforts.

Policy 2: Hawker training programmes

The current suite of policies comprising the (i) Hawker Incubation Scheme (ii) Hawker Development Programme and (iii) Hawker Succession Scheme seek to improve the replacement rate of hawkers by targeting the various stakeholders involved. While these schemes are strictly speaking separate policies, they are nevertheless intricately intertwined.

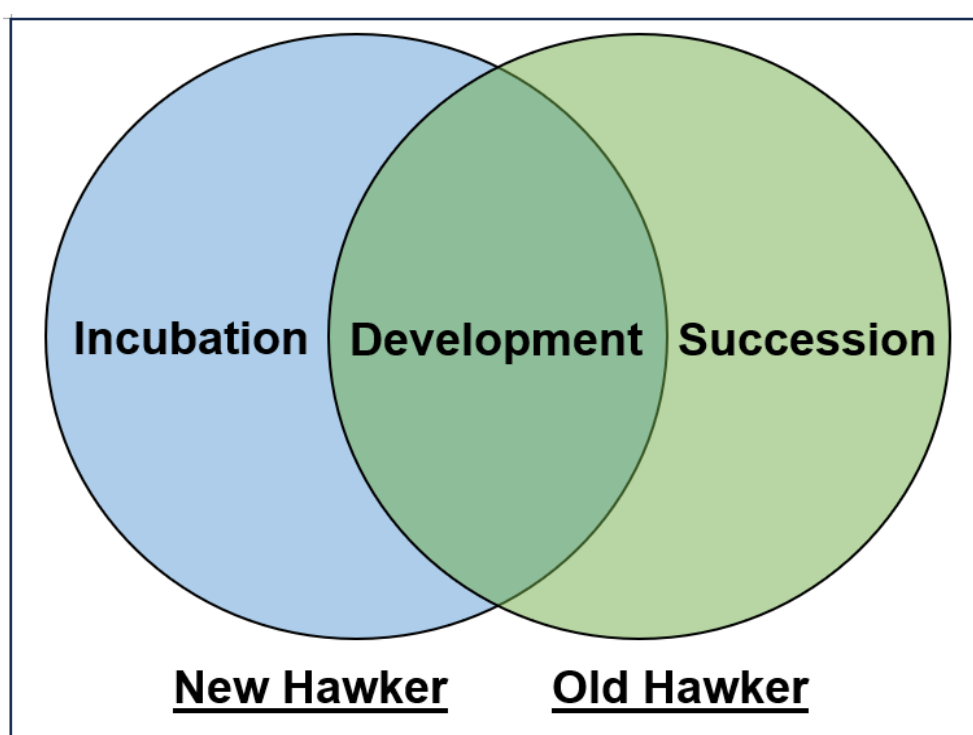


Figure 4: Current hawker training programmes organised by target stakeholder

Incubation Stall Programme (ISP)

The ISP is targeted at new aspiring hawkers and provides subsidised rentals for a 15-month period. Successful hawkers will only need to pay 50% of rent for nine months and 75% for the next six months.⁶³ They will also

⁶¹ Andrew Low, "Open Tender Process Ensures that Hawker Stalls are Allocated in a Fair and Transparent Manner", National Environmental Agency (NEA), September 16, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/readers-letters/index/nea-open-tender-process-ensures-that-hawker-stalls-are-allocated-in-a-fair-and-transparent-manner>.

⁶² Menon, "Economic Thinking and Practice".

⁶³ "Incubation Stall Programme", National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/isp>.

benefit from basic equipment that is prefitted in the stalls. According to the NEA, this allows hawkers to test their business plans and hone their cooking with lower start-up costs.⁶⁴

Per publicly available data, 92 hawkers have participated in the ISP and 38 have gone on to become full-fledged hawkers.⁶⁵ The ISP participants have a much lower median age of 36 as compared to the current median age of hawkers which is 60.

However, it is unclear whether 38 new hawkers represent a sufficient number, and the significance of the data remains to be seen. Furthermore, a clear gap in the programme has been identified by an NEA Workgroup Report, noting that participants still have a lack of opportunities to learn from veteran hawkers willing to pass on their skills.⁶⁶

Hawker Development Programme

To fill in this policy gap, the Hawker Development Programme was introduced. Comprising three stages from Training to Apprenticeship to the Start of Business, it aims to endow new hawkers with skills that “boost their chances of succeeding”.

Stage 1: Training	Stage 2: Apprenticeship	Stage 3: Start of Business
• Coached by certified trainers in two main areas - culinary and business management • Available to both aspiring and existing hawkers	• Learn the ropes of the trade from experienced hawkers at their stalls for two months • Available to aspiring hawkers only	• Bid for available stalls released during NEA's monthly public tender or test business plan through NEA's Incubation Stall Programme • For the first three months of this stage, experienced hawkers will provide support and advice to aspiring hawkers • Available to aspiring hawkers only

Figure 5: Hawker Development Programme scheme⁶⁷

Like the ISP, while the data reveals that 376 participants have finished the Training Stage and 96 are under the Apprenticeship Stage, the significance of the statistics are unclear.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Parliament of Singapore, “Nurturing a Thriving, Innovative and Sustainable Hawker Industry as a Cornerstone of Singaporean Culture”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, August 3, 2021.

⁶⁶ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Workgroup*, 16.

⁶⁷ “Hawkers Development Programme”, National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 14, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkers-development-programme>.

⁶⁸ Parliament of Singapore, “Nurturing a Thriving, Innovative and Sustainable Hawker Industry as a Cornerstone of Singaporean Culture”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, October 5, 2021.

Hawker Succession Scheme (HSS)

Unlike the previous two schemes, the HSS is targeted at veteran hawkers to assist them in finding successors to pass on their skills and recipes.⁶⁹ The scheme pairs potential successors with veteran hawkers for a three-month apprenticeship and an optional two-month mentorship period. The hawker will be paid a stipend of \$1,500 per month for the apprenticeship period and \$500 per month for the optional mentorship period.⁷⁰

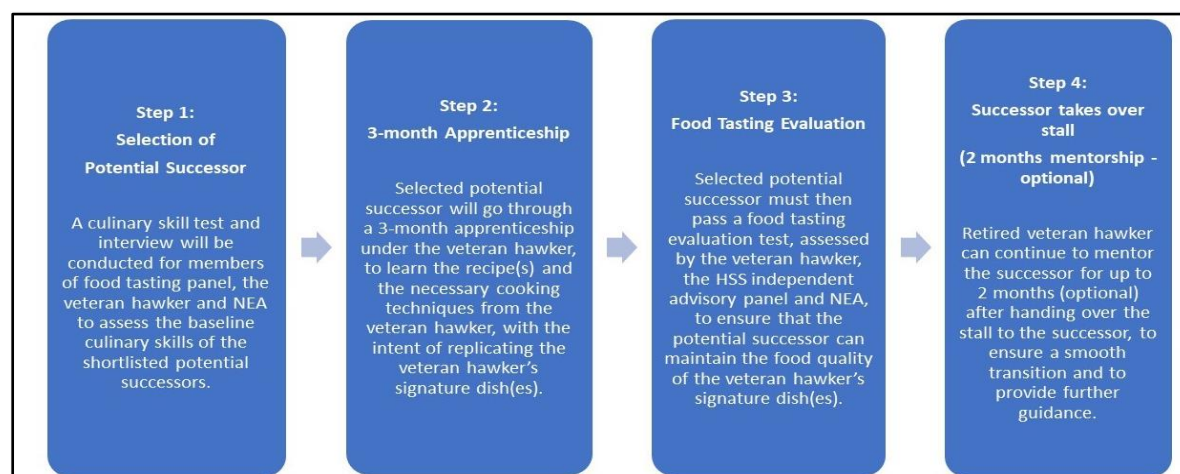


Figure 6: Hawker Succession Scheme⁷¹

As of 2021, 70 veteran hawkers were involved in mentoring new aspiring hawkers.⁷² The unique role of the HSS lies in allowing new hawkers to take over a business with “established clientele and hawker food recipes that have been refined over the years”.⁷³

However, given that the scheme was intended for veteran hawkers to pass on their businesses, the HSS comes with additional restrictions. For the first three years, successors may not transfer the stall and are required to maintain the veteran hawker's stall name and signature dishes.⁷⁴ This may discourage new hawkers who wish to run their own stores from participating and curtail the ability of successors to react to changing market conditions within the first three years.

Further, there does not appear to be a clear incentive mechanism for veteran hawkers to pass on their recipes. As such, the HSS may not appeal to retiring hawkers who are disinclined to give away their hard-earned business for the nominal monthly stipends that the HSS gives.

⁶⁹ “Hawkers Succession Scheme”, National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkers-succession-scheme>.

⁷⁰ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Hawkers Succession Scheme Frequently Asked Questions*, March 14, 2022, 1, https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/hawker-centres-documents/20220314_faqs-for-hss.pdf.

⁷¹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “Hawkers Succession Scheme”.

⁷² Parliament of Singapore, “Committee of Supply – Head L (Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment)”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, March 4, 2021.

⁷³ “Hawker Culture”, Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment Singapore, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.mse.gov.sg/cos/hawker>.

⁷⁴ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “Hawkers Succession Scheme”.

Overall Evaluation

The above suite of policies is premised on the assumption that people are interested in or considering joining the hawker trade. This is evident from how the framework of the schemes are targeted at “interested” or “aspiring” hawkers.⁷⁵ As such, the target group of individuals belong to a narrow demographic that already does not mind long working hours in a hot and humid environment with low profit margins.⁷⁶

A more sustainable approach would devote attention to combat the negative perceptions associated with the industry and generate a broad-based appeal. This would entice a greater group of people, especially those not already interested in the industry, to consider becoming a hawker.

Policy 3: Innovation in machines, processes, and design

Authorities have also sought to resolve the poor replacement rate of hawkers and improve the working environment through a series of policies that may be categorised into the three prongs identified below.

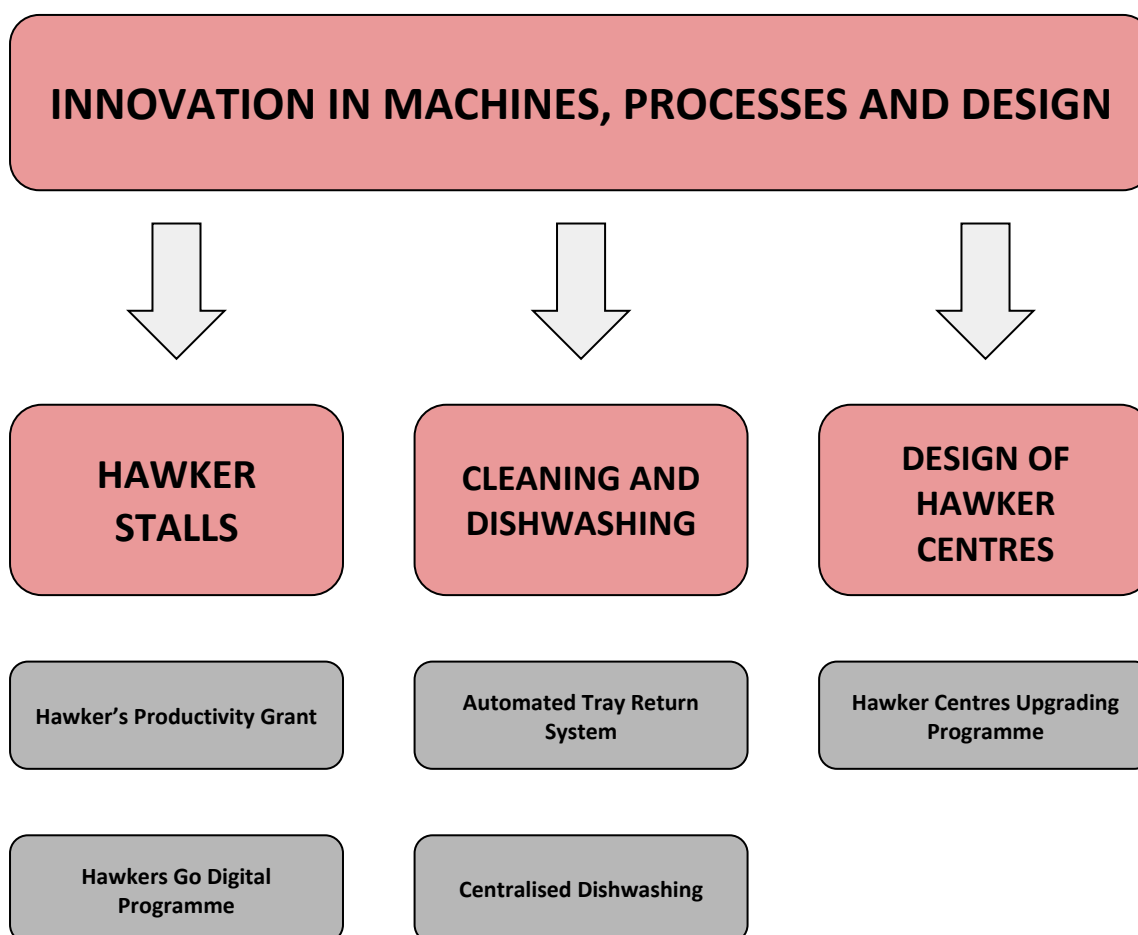


Figure 7: Overview of innovation-related policy options

⁷⁵ National Environmental Agency (NEA), “Incubation Stall Programme”; National Environmental Agency (NEA), “Hawkers Succession Scheme”; National Environmental Agency (NEA), “Hawkers Development Programme”.

⁷⁶ Chia, “On The Job”; Randstad, “Better Work-Life Balance”.

Hawker stalls

Hawkers have primarily benefited from two main schemes (i) the Hawker's Productivity Grant and (ii) the Hawkers Go Digital Programme.

The Hawker's Productivity Grant provides financial support for hawkers to acquire automation equipment and digital services solutions.⁷⁷ Subject to a cap of \$7,000, stallholders may claim up to 80% of the cost of approved automation equipment and digital services solutions.⁷⁸ Approved equipment include peeling machines and commercial grade blenders. According to the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, more than 900 stallholders had already benefited from close to \$3 million of grants by December 2022.⁷⁹

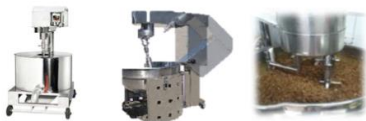
S/N	Equipment	Example	Function	Mode of Operation
1	Automatic Stirrer		Automate turning to stir fry ingredients for paste, gravy, sauces etc	Gas and Electricity
2	Blender (Commercial grade)		Blend, crush, grind	Electricity
3	Mixer		Mix ingredients such as batter, fish and meat paste	Electricity
4	Peeling Machine		Peel roots, stem vegetable (such as potato and turnip) and fruits	Electricity
5	Continuous Feed Vegetable Cutter		Chop, dice and shred vegetable	Electricity

Figure 8: Hawkers' Productivity Grant automation equipment list⁸⁰

Separately, the Hawkers Go Digital Programme launched by the SG Digital Office and the NEA has sought to assist hawkers to reach customers via online food delivery platforms.⁸¹ An awareness campaign was launched

⁷⁷ "Hawkers' Productivity Grant", National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkers-productivity-grant>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Media Factsheet: Safeguarding our Hawker Culture*, accessed December 12, 2023, 2, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/cos-2023---factsheet/annex-l-cos-2023---media-factsheet-on-hcs.pdf>.

⁸⁰ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Hawkers' Productivity Grant Automation Equipment List*, accessed December 12, 2023, 1, [https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/hpg_ae-list_english-\(9mar2023\)5e76d45081384b168b10f20cf762c367.pdf](https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/hpg_ae-list_english-(9mar2023)5e76d45081384b168b10f20cf762c367.pdf).

⁸¹ "Hawkers Get More Help to Go Digital", Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), September 23, 2021, <https://www.imda.gov.sg/resources/press-releases-factsheets-and-speeches/press-releases/2021/hawkers-get-more-help-to-go-digital>.

in 2021 to educate hawkers about online ordering platforms, with Digital Ambassadors engaging 5,500 hawkers in four months across 113 hawker centres.⁸² NEA has also published Digital Support Guides in English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil to provide step-by-step support for hawkers to establish an online presence.



Figure 9: NEA digital support guide⁸³

The two initiatives above help to assist hawkers to adapt and modernise their business. The HPG allows for hawkers to improve their productivity and efficiency, reducing the cost of operation. Meanwhile, establishing an online presence allows hawkers to reach a wider base of customers, potentially allowing them to increase their sales.

Evaluation

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the high median age of 60 for the hawker industry will necessarily impede the adoption of digital technology due to their lack of digital literacy.⁸⁴ While education campaigns will

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Digital Support Guide For Hawkers*, accessed December 12, 2023, 3, [https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/hawker-centres-documents/afa-digital-support-guide/digital-support-guide-\(english\).pdf](https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/hawker-centres-documents/afa-digital-support-guide/digital-support-guide-(english).pdf).

⁸⁴ Parliament of Singapore, "Take-Up Rates for Digitalisation, Productivity and Succession Schemes for Hawkers in Past Three Years", Vol. 95, October 5, 2021; Ee Ming Toh, "The Big Read: Feeling Lost in a Digital World, Some Elderly Shun Technology", *Today*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-feeling-lost-digital-world-some-elderly-shun-technology>.

alleviate this to a certain extent, some hawkers may still be understandably reluctant to adopt technologies that they are unfamiliar with.

Further, some food delivery platforms like Grab charge high commission fees of up to 30%.⁸⁵ Should hawkers maintain the same price, they would have to absorb the commission fees and sacrifice their already marginal profits. Alternatively, should hawkers increase the price of their dish, consumers may be reluctant to purchase the dish. As a result, there is also no guarantee that business will improve for these hawkers listed on food delivery platforms.

Cleaning and dishwashing

Automation has also been further adopted in the form of the Automated Tray Return System (ATRS) and the centralised dishwashing system under the Productive Hawker Centres Programme. The NEA subsidises 30% to 70% of the centralised dishwashing cost for four years for existing hawker centre stall holders while co-funding stall holders at new hawker centres at 50% and 30% for the first and second year respectively.⁸⁶ As of 2022, 16 out of 111 existing hawker centres have implemented the centralised dishwashing system.⁸⁷

Evaluation

While automation is ostensibly the right step, the current degree of automation only extends to the collection of trays.⁸⁸ Manpower is still required to sort and clean the different dishes that were returned. Given the increase of wages for cleaners under the Ministry of Manpower's Progressive Wage Model (PWM) from \$1,312 to \$1,570 in July 2023, further reduction in reliance could be needed to alleviate the rising cost pressure on the thinning profit margins of hawkers.⁸⁹

Design of hawker centres

A majority of the current 114 hawker centres in Singapore were built in the 1980s or earlier.⁹⁰ At over 30 years old, many of these hawker centres featured older designs that did not place consumer comfort as a top priority. Complaints about "poor ventilation, stuffy on hot days" are thus commonplace amongst the population.⁹¹

⁸⁵ "Grow your Business with Grab", Grab, 2023, <https://www.grab.com/sg/merchant/>.

⁸⁶ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Media Factsheet*, 1.

⁸⁷ Parliament of Singapore, "Percentage of Hawker Centres with Centralised Dishwashing Services", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, October 3, 2022.

⁸⁸ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Problem Statement/Title: To Develop an Automated System to Collect and Process Crockery to Facilitate Downstream Centralised Dishwashing*, accessed December 15, 2023, 1, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/problem-statement.pdf>.

⁸⁹ "Progressive Wage Model for the Cleaning Sector", Ministry of Manpower Singapore, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/progressive-wage-model/cleaning-sector>.

⁹⁰ Andrew Loh, "Forum: Hawker Centres Have Been Regularly Upgraded", *The Straits Times*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/forum-hawker-centres-have-been-regularly-upgraded>.

⁹¹ Parliament of Singapore, "Committee of Supply – Head L (Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources)", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 88, March 6, 2012.

The NEA thus carried out the Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme (HUP) between 2001 and 2013, costing \$420 million.⁹² The HUP helped improve consumer comfort by reconfiguring centres with bigger stalls and wider passageways, and installing fans and high ceilings to maximise ventilation.⁹³ The HUP also brought new upgrades. One example is the provision of exhaust systems, which were not fitted in hawker centres prior.⁹⁴ A total of 106 hawker centres have been upgraded under the HUP.⁹⁵

Evaluation

Although renovation works on old hawker centres have been undertaken, the extent of upgrades is limited to the inherent space and structural constraints of these centres.⁹⁶ As such, the NEA may not be able to implement the best upgrades available to these older hawker centres, but merely whatever upgrades can be accommodated. Therefore, it would be beneficial to future-proof hawker centre infrastructure during the phase of planning.⁹⁷

In particular, the aspect of thermal comfort has gained increased relevance in light of rising global temperatures. Future hawker centres should thus utilise available data on the effect of building layout and materials to create favourable thermal conditions.⁹⁸ These recommendations are especially pertinent to the nine new hawker centres already planned to be built.⁹⁹

Policy 4: Changing public perception of the hawking trade

Finally, it is key to consider how the public perception of hawker culture may be changed. According to Dr Leslie Tay, a member of the Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee and an award-winning food blogger, incentives are insufficient to “save an entire culture”.¹⁰⁰ Singaporeans “must be ready to pay more for hawker food because it is valuable” and be willing to work in the hawking industry.¹⁰¹ In this regard, two main approaches have been observed (i) UNESCO inscription (ii) Language shift in describing hawkers.

⁹² Yong Soon Tan, Tung Jean Lee, and Karen Tan, *Clean, Green and Blue: Singapore's Journey Towards Environmental and Water Sustainability* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 67.

⁹³ Loh, “Forum: Hawker Centres”; “Measures Have Been Implemented to Encourage Tray Return and to Help Improve the Hawkers’ Working Conditions”, National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/readers-letters/index/measures-have-been-implemented-to-encourage-tray-return-and-to-help-improve-the-hawkers-working-conditions>.

⁹⁴ Parliament of Singapore, “Carbon Filters for Food Exhaust Systems at Hawker Centres”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 94, May 9, 2016.

⁹⁵ Parliament of Singapore, “Preventing Sharp Increase in Hawker Centre Food Prices”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 92, November 5, 2014.

⁹⁶ Loh, “Forum: Hawker Centres”.

⁹⁷ National Environmental Agency (NEA), *Media Factsheet*, 1.

⁹⁸ Nyuk Hien Wong, Jiafang Song, and Agustinus Djoko Istiadji, “A Study of the Effectiveness of Mechanical Ventilation Systems of a Hawker Center in Singapore Using CFD simulations”, *Building and Environment* 41, no. 6 (2006): 730-732, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2005.03.015>.

⁹⁹ Parliament of Singapore, “Plans to Expedite Construction of Hawker Centres in Constituencies with No Hawker Centres”, Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 95, February 22, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Ashley Tan, “Can Singapore Keep its Precious Hawker Culture Alive?”, *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2021, 3, <http://libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/can-singapore-keep-precious-hawker-culture-alive/docview/2477160250/se-2>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 3.

UNESCO Inscription

Singaporean hawker culture was successfully inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on 16 Dec 2020.¹⁰² This was Singapore's first inscription.¹⁰³

On a local level, the prestige of this inscription has spurred ground up initiatives to support Singapore's hawker culture.¹⁰⁴ This has taken the form of competitions like the #ThankYouHawkers Art Competition organised by the National Heritage Board and games such as an online hawker game created by the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre.¹⁰⁵

Globally, there has been an increase in recognition and visibility of Singaporean hawker culture.¹⁰⁶ In fact, most recently, in 2023, 53 out of 79 Michelin Bib Gourmand awardees were hawker stalls.¹⁰⁷

The growing international recognition lends a further boost to tourism as well. This is because "food and tourism are inextricably linked" and hawkers and their dishes are "symbols of local identity" that embody "aspects of the societies and cultures in which they work".¹⁰⁸ With more visitors becoming aware of the beauty of hawker culture, it lends hope to the possibility that hawker food may gradually shed its identity of merely being a cheap source of food and instead be valued more for its "soft cultural power" as a unique part of Singaporean culture.¹⁰⁹

Language shift

In recent times, younger hawkers who are selling traditional hawker food with modernised store fronts and social media marketing have been termed "hawkerpreneurs".¹¹⁰ This term has made its way into Parliamentary discourse with Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and Environment utilising the phrase

¹⁰² "Hawker Culture In Singapore - Singapore's First Inscription On The UNESCO Representative List Of The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of Humanity", National Heritage Board (NHB), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/sector-development/unesco/hawker-culture-in-singapore>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ "Hawker Culture Is Singapore's First Inscription On UNESCO's Representative List Of The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of Humanity", National Environmental Agency (NEA), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/hawker-culture-is-singapore-s-first-inscription-on-unesco-s-representative-list-of-the-intangible-cultural-heritage-of-humanity>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Olivia Lee, "Singapore Street Food Added to UNESCO Heritage List", *The Guardian*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/dec/21/singapore-hawker-culture-street-food-added-to-unesco-heritage-list>.

¹⁰⁷ "The MICHELIN Guide Singapore 2023 Bib Gourmand Selection", Michelin Guide, June 15, 2023, <https://guide.michelin.com/sg/en/article/michelin-guide-ceremony/singapore-bib-gourmand-2023>.

¹⁰⁸ Joan C. Henderson et al., "Hawker Centres as Tourist Attractions: The Case of Singapore", *International Journal of Hospitality and Management* 31, no. 3: 849-850, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2011.10.002>.

¹⁰⁹ Tan, "Can Singapore Keep", 3.

¹¹⁰ Navene Elangovan, "The Big Read in Short: What the New Generation Hawkers are Bringing to the Table", *Today*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/big-read/big-read-short-what-new-generation-hawkers-are-bringing-table>.

in various parliamentary debates.¹¹¹ Such a terminological change is much alike the change in the public transport sector where bus drivers are now described as bus captains.¹¹²

By changing the language used in the discourse surrounding their work, it assists in elevating the status of the work that hawkers do and reflects the innovation that younger hawkers have brought to the industry.¹¹³

Evaluation

As discussed above, changing the perception of the hawker industry is critical to sustain Singapore's hawker culture. However, while the above approaches are commendable, it is likely to run into various difficulties.

Firstly, as a cosmopolitan city, Singaporeans are spoiled for choice when it comes to food. Cuisines ranging from Nepalese to Fijian and Swiss are all available in Singapore.¹¹⁴ As such, locals might not be willing to pay a premium for hawker meals in light of the diversity of options.

Secondly, the nature of the hawking industry is at odds with the country's overall focus on building an educated workforce. Over the years, Singapore has "placed emphasis on knowledge work over technical and services jobs", with degree holders making up 41% of the total workforce.¹¹⁵ While there might be isolated instances where individuals in white-collared roles opt to switch to the hawker trade, these cases are likely to be the exception rather than the norm.¹¹⁶ After all, given the lack of progression and the long working hours, attempts to change the public perception of the desirability of the hawker industry could be insufficient in the face of the larger workforce trend.¹¹⁷

Epilogue

This case study examines the factors leading to the declining hawker culture and the problems faced by policymakers in crafting policies that preserve the hawker heritage of Singapore. Undoubtedly, a comprehensive suite of measures ranging from financial subsidies to automation have been rolled out. However, success appears to have varied amongst different policies.

At its core, the issue with hawker culture features as part of a wider conversation about the role that cheap hawker food plays in an increasingly affluent country. In a country where younger generations aspire towards white-collared professional industries as opposed to blue-collared manual labour, it will naturally be difficult

¹¹¹ Parliament of Singapore, "Application and Price Trends for NEA Hawker Stalls", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 94, July 4, 2017; Parliament of Singapore, "Different Models for Hawker Centre Management", Singapore Parliamentary Reports, Vol. 94, November 19, 2018.

¹¹² Nicole Tarulevicz, "Hawkerpreneurs: Hawkers, Entrepreneurship, and Reinventing Street Food in Singapore", *Revista De Administração De Empresas* 58, no. 3 (2018): 298, <https://doi-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/10.1590/S0034-759020180309>.

¹¹³ Ibid. 298.

¹¹⁴ "Around the World in 10 Feasts: Global Cuisines in Singapore", Singapore Global Network, June 6, 2022, <https://singaporeglobalnetwork.gov.sg/stories/culture/around-the-world-in-10-feasts-singapore/>.

¹¹⁵ "Less-Educated S'poreans Risk Falling Behind as Jobs Change", Nanyang Technological University Singapore, January 17, 2023, <https://www.ntu.edu.sg/business/news-events/news/story-detail/less-educated-s%27poreans-risk-falling-behind-as-jobs-change>.

¹¹⁶ Tarulevicz, "Hawkerpreneurs", 298.

¹¹⁷ Chia, "On The Job as a Hawker Assistant".

to improve the replacement rate of hawkers. Further, given the prevalent perception of hawker food as a cheap source of food perpetuated in public and official discourse, it creates a tension between the interests of the hawker in increasing the prices of dishes to generate sustainable profit margins in contrast with the interests of the consumer. In discussing the appropriate policy approaches, an appropriate balance needs to be struck between these competing considerations.

Looking forward, a sustainable solution will require a shift in the mindset of Singaporeans. An apt starting point for such a discussion could be the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and how future policies could leverage on the prestige and awareness generated. Separately, any measure proposed could consider how to further strengthen its efficacy through effective utilisation of the discourse surrounding the hawker industry and its culture.

Discussion Questions

1. Recall how the hawking industry has to contend with the problem of cost inflationary pressures in Singapore. How has the problem evolved in the post COVID-19 era and in light of recent geopolitical events?
2. Explain the difficulties hawkers face in increasing the price of their dishes. Link it to the role that hawker food plays in Singapore.
3. Illustrate the reasons that inhibit the younger generation from joining the hawker industry.
4. Subsidies are the most effective strategy to resolve the problems faced by hawkers. Do you agree?
5. Critically analyse and evaluate the efficacy of the current suite of policies and propose modifications or enhancements. How would you strike a balance between the various competing interests identified?