



A Recipe for Success: How Singapore Hawker Centres Came to Be

Azhar Ghani*

* Azhar Ghani was IPS Adjunct Research Associate until 28 February 2011.

This is the third part of a three-part series entitled “Success Matters” which explores narratives less explored in the discussion of Singapore’s success.¹

Introduction

As Singapore morphed into a bustling port city under the watch of the British, itinerant street hawking grew in tandem with other economic activities. Hawkers fed the demand of a population that grew quickly, as migrants -- who were either brought in by the British or who came to Singapore attracted by the job and economic opportunities of the port city – increased in numbers. These hawkers provided the population with cheap and convenient access to a whole range of goods and services -- from cooked food, fruits and other fresh produce, to household wares, newspapers and even shoe repair and key-making services . Many were themselves migrants who had left their homeland in search of a better life. And many congregated around the Singapore River area – the hub of economic activities in early Singapore.

First-generation hawkers were mostly immigrants from China, and to a smaller extent from India and the Malay Archipelago. A 1950 Hawkers Inquiry Commission report stated that 84 per cent of the hawkers in Singapore were Chinese, mostly from southeast China. Hokkien hawkers formed the largest group followed by the Teochews and other minority dialect groups like the Hakka and the Hainanese. The Hokkiens and Teochews often sold market produce, while the Hainanese mostly sold cooked food.

Through the early colonial years and right up to the post-war and post-independence period in the 1960s and early 1970s, not much changed on this front. The economic value of hawking activities was considerable. During the post-war years of high unemployment, hawking contributed to general productivity by absorbing the unemployed, as reported by

¹ The first and second parts of this three-part series which trace the evolution of Singapore’s parking coupon system and Singapore’s greening efforts respectively, are available at: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/enewsletter/Mar2011/Azhar_The%20Parking%20Coupon%20System_010311.pdf, and at: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/enewsletter/Apr2011/Azhar_Keeping%20Singapore%20Green_010411.pdf

Thio Kheng Lock (1963) in a University of Singapore thesis. It was a trade with low entry barriers, requiring little capital, and little or no education and technical skills.

At the same time, hawking activities provided a valuable service that could potentially be lucrative as the demand remained even as Singapore progressed economically. In the early days, low-income migrant workers and coolie customers ate where they worked or where they happened to be, for there was very little cooking in their cramped quarters where many shared facilities. After independence, as industrialisation strategies kicked in and adults joined the industrial workforce, the demand for cheap and convenient meals helped sustained hawking activities. Demand generated supply. And the unregulated nature of street hawking was such that this led to several problems.

Problems Related to Street Hawking

The 1950 Hawkers Inquiry Commission mentioned earlier was the result of the colonial administrators' efforts to come to terms with hawker-related problems. Set up by then Governor F. Gimson, the Commission sought to address issues related to hawking activities as Singapore took stock of the impact of such activities on municipal operations. Tellingly, the resulting Hawkers Inquiry Report said that "there is undeniably a disposition among officials to regard the hawkers as primarily a public nuisance to be removed from the streets".

The negative official view was based on several reasons. For a start, hawking activities and their suspect hygiene practices were linked with cholera and typhoid outbreaks, as well as the increase in the numbers of pests, vermin and insects like flies and mosquitoes. This was because hawkers usually did not have proper equipment, water supply or waste disposal system. Utensils were clean cursorily and there was no proper way to ensure that their food was not contaminated by the flies that were attracted to their place of business. In particular, those peddling cold drinks, cut fruit and ice cream used heavily-contaminated water and ice, thus spreading disease. With improper disposal of food and liquid wastes, there was abundant filth and refuse in the streets. Hawkers thus posed real threats to public health, contributing to food and water pollution, and a proliferation of pests.



Public health and environmental issues aside, street hawking affected both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. It also made street cleaning difficult because hawkers and their paraphernalia obstructed the way. During colonial times, this became a source of much friction between the town cleansing labourers and the hawkers. The Hawkers Inquiry Commission of 1950 described the “disorderly sprawl of hawkers, blocking up entire streets with a jumble of goods in defiance of all order and reason”. Although the municipal authorities sought to impose some semblance of order through a licensing scheme, only a third to a quarter of the hawkers came under the programme in the early 1950s. The rest were illegal, and it was up to the authorities to make sure that this lot did not add to the problems caused by their licensed counterparts.

There is undeniably a disposition among officials to regard the hawkers as primarily a public nuisance to be removed from the streets.
– the *Hawkers Inquiry Report* in 1950

These conditions led to strained relations between hawkers and the authorities. Tensions ran high as the police tried to enforce their responsibilities by conducting raids on illegal hawkers. In these raids, the authorities would confiscate and destroy the hawkers’ equipment and stock – literally, taking away their means of livelihood. Compounding the authorities’ problems was the fact that public opinion was not on their side despite the obvious public health and other benefits which these clean-up operations were meant to effect. Sympathy was on the side of the hawkers, popularly seen to be poor men and women, committing no offence and trying to earn an honest living.

The constant cat-and-mouse game between the illegal hawkers and the authorities spawned other problems as well, as hawkers resorted to bribing the police or paying protection fees to gangs and secret societies for respite from the police practice of mass raids and summary arrests.



Street hawkers selling coconut-water for 10 cents per glass, c.1967. Source: Mr Peter Chan, [*Good Morning Yesterday*](#)

To encourage hawkers to move into markets and shelters, the rent for market stalls, with the exception of the few choice locations, was set at an amount close to the licensing fee previously charged on the open street. These recommended sites for hawkers included Seng Poh Road, Rayman Estate, Syed Alwi Road, Bugis Street, Kandang Kerbau, River Valley Road, Waterloo Street, China Street and Merchant Road. However, as there was no formal policy to relocate hawkers into permanent structures in those days, the

construction of markets and hawker shelters lacked impetus. Some hawkers however recognised the advantages of operating under a roof with proper amenities and rallied together to ask permission to build markets and shelters of their own. One hundred and ten hawkers in Somerset Road formed a syndicate, bought a piece of land at the junction of Kiliney and Exeter Roads and submitted plans to the City Council for a market. Another syndicate of hawkers proposed to build a market in Sennett Estate, while yet another decided to erect a shelter on a site opposite Rex Cinema in Mackenzie Road. A private entrepreneur built a market in Serangoon Road in 1954 and rented the space to hawkers.

At the macro-level, the activities of hawkers conflicted with the modern sector for land usage. Another reason was that Singapore was striving to be a modern city, and the colonial administrators regarded such small-scale trading as traditional and not keeping with this goal. Later, in post-independence Singapore, hawking activities conflicted strongly with Lee Kuan Yew's search for "some dramatic way to distinguish ourselves from other Third World countries", as he settled on a strategy of a "clean and green" Singapore.

In particular, street hawking around the business cluster located at the Singapore River basin was an obstacle to Lee Kuan Yew's clean-up mission. Lee Ek Tieng, the then head of the Anti Pollution Unit whom Lee Kuan Yew put in charge of a plan to clean and dam up all Singapore's streams and rivers so as to enable the country to collect as much rainfall as possible for its water supply, explained how a major part of cleaning up the Singapore River was to relocate the street hawkers who discharged their waste into the river:

...the main reason was how to keep Singapore clean. These hawkers polluted the drains and you got rats, making the city resemble squatters. So it was decided that the government would build hawker centres.
– **Goh Chin Tong, former head of the Hawkers Department, NEA**

"Singapore River was the main source, apart from the upper estuary, mainly from Chinatown - Smith Street, Sago Street, they were all street hawkers plying their wares and slaughtering chickens, you name it they do it, including those days even snakes, wild animals and so on. Everything went down, from the blood, feathers and everything, notwithstanding garbage removal and so on. So, the cleaning up of Singapore River was essentially a project not just of garbage removal, you can only remove garbage from households, from hawkers and so on. But you are dealing essentially with water pollution. They are water-borne waste, actually."

Even those implementing the solution on the ground were able to recognise the fact that the reason behind the elimination of street hawking was bigger than just public health concerns. Goh Chin Tong, who was a public health inspector before rising to his former post of Head of the Hawkers Department, a unit under the National Environment Agency (NEA) that oversees hawking activities to this day, said:



Ngo Hiang street hawker operating in front of a five-foot way, c.1970

Source: Mr Peter Chan, [*Good Morning Yesterday*](#)

“The way I saw it, the bigger objective was to keep Singapore clean. Of course, when you relocate them into proper premises, public health benefits come in. But the main reason was how to keep Singapore clean. These hawkers polluted the drains and you got rats, making the city resemble squatters. So it was decided that the government would build hawker centres.”

This hierarchy of objectives was supported by yet another Goh observation on the rules governing street hawking that were already in place, especially after hawkers were taken off main streets and relocated to back lanes and side streets – a move that eliminated the problem of traffic obstruction. This was done after a massive island-wide hawkers’ registration exercise in 1968 and 1969. The exercise covered all types of hawkers including those selling cooked food, fresh produce as well as those selling household items but excluded ice cream sellers, newspaper vendors, cobblers and key-makers or locksmiths. It involved a day and night census of hawkers, noting their operating hours, the goods they sold and the exact location they operated from. Around 18,000 of 24,000 hawkers were street hawkers, and the registration exercise served to lock in the number of hawkers and prevent further proliferation of the illegal hawking situation. After registration, the street hawkers were relocated to less busy side streets, back lanes, and even some car parks during certain designated hours. Goh noted:

“Licensed hawkers had to abide by certain rules. Public health standards are one. There were basic ones like preventing food from becoming contaminated. Even back then, you were not allowed to smoke while preparing food. Street hawkers had to have their own carts or stalls, which must be easily moved and should not be left on site when not in operation. They were licensed for night or day and not allowed to operate outside their licensed hours. They were also not allowed to throw water or rubbish into the drains. We also made sure that they stayed at their designated spots as they had a tendency to move outside their approved hawking area and back on the main streets where customer traffic was higher.”

Indeed, licensing of hawkers was not new, although the 1968-1969 exercise arguably covered a larger percentage of the hawkers active at the time, compared to earlier efforts. In 1966, then Health Minister Yong Nyuk Lin noted that only one quarter of the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 hawkers during that time were licensed. Similarly, rules were not new either. A Hawker Code laid down by the Government in 1966 stipulated that while the “right

of a Singapore citizen to a hawker's licence is guaranteed", the preservation of this right was conditional on "his upholding what we expect any law-abiding citizen to do, namely, not to endanger public health, not to obstruct traffic (whether pedestrian or vehicular), and not to contravene law and order".

Finding a Solution

Finding a solution for the street hawking issue – as it was framed then, as a public health and nuisance issue, as well as an impediment to Singapore becoming a modern city -- was not difficult: hawkers just needed to be taken off the streets. However, implementing the solution was another matter as earlier failed or half-hearted efforts would testify. Demand for hawker goods and services was healthy, and hawking activities actually addressed a public need for cheap and convenient goods and services. Many hawkers also had family members helping them to prepare the food and tend the stalls, and it was common to find even children of hawker parents helping out with chores, often performing adult tasks. Relatives also often chipped in with contributions in kind. A study in the mid-1970s found that only 12 percent of hawkers had assistants not related to them. Hawking was thus very much a family affair and policy affecting hawkers would impact the livelihood of whole families.

In the 1960s long queues would form at our 'Meet the People' sessions...the unemployed, many accompanied by wives and children, would plead for jobs, taxi or hawker licences, or permission to sell food in school tuckshops. These were the human faces behind the unemployment statistics.

– **Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew**

Compounding these problems was the fact that hawking served as a useful buffer for unemployment as its low-capital and low-skill requirements meant a low entry barrier for anyone who needed a livelihood. Lee Kuan Yew wrote in his memoirs *From Third World to First - The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*:

"In the 1960s long queues would form at our 'Meet the People' sessions, clinics where ministers and MPs helped solve the problems of their constituents. The unemployed, many accompanied by wives and children, would plead for jobs, taxi or hawker licences, or permission to sell food in school tuckshops. These were the human faces behind the unemployment statistics. Thousands would sell cooked food on the pavements and streets in total disregard of traffic, health or other considerations."

Putting the Plan to Work

Despite noting that "the resulting litter and dirt, the stench of rotting food and the clutter and obstructions turned many parts of the city into slums", Lee Kuan Yew was politically shrewd and pragmatic enough not to take a tough stand against the hawkers, demonstrating the need for public policies to be timed well for maximum efficacy and minimum negative impact. He wrote:

"For years we could not clean up the city by removing these illegal hawkers and pirate taxis. Only after 1971, when we had created many jobs, were we able to enforce the law and reclaim the streets. We licensed the cooked food hawkers and moved them from the roads

and pavements to properly-constructed nearby hawker centres, with piped water, sewers and garbage disposal. By the early 1980s we had resettled all hawkers.”

“... We had a resettlement unit to deal with haggling and bargaining involved in every resettlement, whether of hawkers, farmers or cottage industrialists. They were never happy to be moved or to change their business. This was a hazardous political task which unless carefully and sympathetically handled would lose us votes in the next election. A committee of officials and MPs whose constituencies were affected helped to limit the political fallout.”

The objective and long-term solution to our hawker problem is to persuade and educate our hawkers that it is in their ultimate interest to trade inside proper permanent licensed premises...where the essential facilities of running water, electricity and proper refuse disposal are available...

– **Yong Nyuk Lin, former Health Minister in a 1966 statement**

The committee of officials and the elected representative had its precedent in the Hawkers Inquiry Commission of 1950, although the latter was more inclusive in soliciting feedback and views from stakeholders. The Commission had called for the views of the Municipal Health Officer in the course of its inquiry, as well as of the Police and Superintendent of Town Cleansing. It also heard representations by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Clerical Union, 20 Teochew Guilds, the Indo-Ceylon Club and the Straits Chinese British Association. It sought the views of hawkers, too, including those who plied their trade in public areas, as well as those in coffee shops and hawkers’ shelters.

While the island-wide hawker registration exercise of 1968-1969 was a starting point for taking hawkers off the street, the authorities had signalled their intentions earlier. In 1966, then Health Minister Yong Nyuk Lin issued a statement that noted:

“Licensing of all hawkers, although a major operation in itself, is but a first step towards its effective control (sic). Millions of dollars of public money have been spent by the Government to build markets, but some markets are practically empty and many are only partly used. With only one quarter of the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 hawkers being licensed, a considerable sum in Government revenue has therefore been lost over the years. Such an untenable position must be rectified by taking steps to ensure that all Government markets are fully utilised, for the purposes for which they were built and also to restore order and responsibility, by licensing all hawkers.”

“...The objective and long-term solution to our hawker problem is to persuade and educate our hawkers that it is in their ultimate interest to trade inside proper permanent licensed premises, i.e markets and shophouses, where the essential facilities of running water, electricity and proper refuse disposal are available and will attract profitable and stable business to hawkers because of better convenience to customers, instead of present uncertain business through temporary and unsatisfactory use of roads and thus being subjected to the sun, rain, dust and traffic (sic).”

Indeed, bringing hawkers into a legal and manageable framework became the order of the day in the post-war period. Yong's statement, as part of the fledgling government of independent Singapore, reflected the 1960s push to legalise hawkers and house hawkers in tidy places. However, the challenges remained. By 1973, despite licensing, illegal hawking was still rampant.

Backed by a new confidence gained from economic progress and the creation of jobs, the Government took a tougher tack and sought to break the back of the problem. In 1974, the Hawkers Department's Special Squad was established. When it was formed, the Permanent Secretary (Environment) issued a deadline of 18 months to the Hawkers Department to get rid of all illegal hawkers. Every day, four or five vehicles of inspectors were dispatched to look for illegal hawkers and to carry out raids. Vehicles used by illegal hawkers were seized and impounded. Confiscated perishables and fresh produce were given to charity homes, while cooked food was thrown away. With these measures, the illegal hawkers situation was brought under control within six months.

Along with enforcement, the government sought to relocate licensed hawkers in a more structured way. From 1971 to 1986, it engaged in a programme to construct markets and hawker centres with proper amenities. Whenever possible, the agency which wanted to use a parcel of land for redevelopment would be granted the land on condition that it also built a hawker centre to house the street hawkers who would be affected by the redevelopment. One example was when the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) built the Golden Shoe Carpark. To satisfy the hawker relocation condition, it built in a hawker centre to



Hawker centres have been part of the infrastructure of residential estates across Singapore.

accommodate relocated street hawkers. The cost of land was shared by the various agencies involved. The hawker centres at Amoy Street and Cuppage Centre were other examples. Besides such cases where other agencies with their own redevelopment agendas had built hawker centres, the Hawkers Department also obtained land directly from the Land Office to build its own hawker centres.

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was also instrumental in the relocation of hawkers. The Board included hawker centres as part of the infrastructure of the new residential estates. Once the estates were ready, the street hawkers would be relocated there as the residents moved into their new flats. The HDB's industrial counterpart, the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) was involved. When developing industrial estates, JTC also made provisions for hawker centres. Said Goh Chin Tong:

“In the past, what we did was that whenever URA or someone else wanted to clear certain places, we said you have to have a space for us to build hawker centres. That’s how we had hawker centres in places like Cuppage Centre, Market Street, and Blanco Court and a few other places. There was also a requirement in the early days where, if you employed a certain number of workers, you must have a canteen. If you had 500 workers there would be demand for food and illegal hawkers would come, so we put in the requirement for a canteen to relocate hawkers and also to stop the proliferation of illegal hawkers. But we stopped this practice after we had hawker centres almost everywhere, as workers could then go to these places.”

In the relocation plans, one consideration given was to try to place hawkers in centres that were close to their original sites. Rent was also charged at a very low rate – pegged initially to the licensing fee paid on the streets. This was facilitated by the grand census of 1968-1969, where hawkers were registered and their business locations mapped. Daniel Wang, former NEA Director-General of Public Health said:

“Although my role at that time was to find the suitable sites to build the hawker centers, I also worked very closely with the Hawkers Department to make sure that these people were relocated in a way that would not create too much hardship or too many problems. So one of the challenges was looking for a site close to where these street hawkers were at that time. We recognised that if you wanted to relocate them, you would want to put them in a place near to where they were operating before. Because a lot of them had their own customers and if you put them far away then they would say, ‘I’ll lose my clientele because of the government.’ So that was the challenge. We had to look around for suitable sites.”

Both Wang and Goh acknowledged that there were limitations to this policy, as there could be space constraints in centres that were built in areas where there was a large concentration of street hawkers. Said Wang:

“For example, as most street hawkers were concentrated in the central city area, it was not possible to relocate every single one of them to the new hawker centres in town. If you were to accommodate everyone according to the mapped census we did, and everyone chooses to go only where they wanted to go, then I don’t think we could have ever moved (the

...one of the challenges was looking for a site close to where these street hawkers were... a lot of them had their own customers and if you put them far away then they would say, ‘I’ll lose my clientele because of the government.’ So that was the challenge. We had to look around for suitable sites.

– Daniel Wang, former NEA
Director-General of Public Health

programme). But generally we understood what they needed, so when we looked for a site, we always had that in mind. Also coupled with that, we took advantage of the fact that HDB was also very actively building housing estates at that time. So wherever there was a housing estate close by, then of course HDB would build markets and hawker centers with these street hawkers in mind. So that when the estates were ready, the street hawkers hawking nearby would then move over to this housing estate. So that also provided us a ready access to some of the sites.”

In some cases, however, being moved to virgin territory proved to be a boon. Noted Goh:

“Hawkers from Orchard Road carpark were supposed to go to Cuppage Centre and Newton. They liked Cuppage Centre as it was a central location and near to their old site. Some were not too happy to go to Newton but in the end, Newton flourished and the same hawkers who grumbled because they were sent there said they were thankful they did not get the Cuppage Centre location.”

Perhaps more than proximity to the hawkers’ original place of business, a key consideration was the population “catchment area” of customers. After all, the hawkers’ proclivity for a new location near to their original site of business was nothing more than a desire to retain their existing pool of customers. Hence, centres located in the vicinity of HDB housing estates were made more attractive by being sited within walking distance for most of the residents or are easily accessible via a short bus trip. Centres were also not located too near each other, to ensure their viability. Through such careful planning, hawker centres have generally thrived, and hawkers’ apprehensions on relocation allayed.

Still, the authorities proceeded with caution. Said Wang:

“Initially, we took it slow, gradually one at a time and we watched the reaction, to see if the relocation programme was accepted. At the same time, we solved all the other problems related to the business of hawking on the streets and managed to assure the hawkers that they were actually benefiting from this relocation. We used them as examples for other street hawkers to see for themselves. And then word got around and they said ‘hey, it’s not so bad after all’. So when we accelerated the relocation exercise, things were very smooth.”

This was the period from 1974 to 1979, when 54 hawker centres, or an average of nine a year, were built. While these centres served to accommodate relocated hawkers, stalls at hawker centres also served another purpose. In a nod to the past, when hawking was an activity that the unemployed and lowly-educated and lowly-skilled gravitated towards in order to eke out a living, there was a policy of allocating vacated low-rent stalls to the needy. Said Goh:

“There was natural attrition – hawkers passed on, retire or they get sick or they gave up their business, and we had vacant stalls. So there was this so-called hardship policy, where we provided stalls for the poor. At that time, I think, the criteria was that they had to be above 35 years of age, be the sole breadwinners earning no more than \$500 per month, with a family and young children.”

Relocation Rewind

With the authorities keeping its eye firmly on the objective of getting hawkers off the streets very quickly, there were some glitches. One was the allocation of stalls, which was done by balloting in the interest of fairness. This resulted in some cases where two hawkers selling the same things ended up side by side. Said Goh:

“When it came to the allocation of stalls, there were potentially a lot of competing requests – ‘I want a good location’, ‘I don’t want my stall to be near the toilets’ etc. We decided to make it clean through balloting. It was a very open system with the MP doing the balloting. There

was a lot of debate on whether we should control the mix of stalls. But what happened if there were two hawkers selling the same thing? You couldn't tell them to change their products because it was what they had been doing all the while. And even if you could, which one would you ask to change? So we left it to the ballot and market forces to decide the mix."

The problem with this system, however, was the lack of variety, noted Goh:

"You go to Newton and what do you see? Do I need 25 seafood stalls? Do I need such competition? I can't get bak kut teh or lor mee. So the food mix is not there. (Leaving things to) Market forces, up to a point, is fine, but sometimes when I look back, I think we should do some tweaking. Again, look at Newton, all selling the same thing so they have the problem of touting to get ahead of the competition. I think maybe there is a need to, say if one of the stalls were to give up business, to stipulate that the replacement vendor sells something else. I would like to see some variety."

Another problem was the so-called hardship policy.

"At that time, we didn't care if they couldn't cook or if they were good businessmen. The only criteria was that they had to be poor, so we had a lot of people coming in. Many waited for good stalls, like in Newton, and we found that some of them actually waited for years, so we wondered if they were really hardship cases. Anyway, this caused problems. First, because they were paying the subsidised rate that we offered to the relocated hawkers, they were shielded somewhat

There was natural attrition – hawkers passed on, retire or they get sick or they gave up their business, and we had vacant stalls. So there was this so-called hardship policy, where we provided stalls for the poor.

– **Goh Chin Tong, former head of the Hawkers Department, NEA**

from market forces. Because they were shielded from market forces, they were not efficient as there was little incentive for them to work hard. Why would I want to work long hours if my rental is (the then subsidised rates of) \$120, \$240 or \$300 now? I can just work for 3 or 4 hours a day, making \$30 to \$40, and go on long holidays and still I would be able to cover my rent. There was also no incentive to make sure that your food was of the quality that would attract customers. So you got inefficiency and low quality. Try this at a kopitiam stall where you pay \$7,000 or \$8,000 in monthly rent and see if you can last for three days."

If Goh had his way, the current tendering scheme to allocate hawker stalls would be implemented earlier, as soon as the first-generation hawkers affected by the relocation exercise were out of the picture. He said, "The tender scheme brought some benefits. First, rents are not subsidised, they pay market rates. Then we bring people who pay market rates who must make sure they can make money. These would be motivated people who would bring quality and good business models to our hawker centres."

(Then Acting Environment) Minister Lim Swee Say said there shouldn't be a policy to phase them out to private operators because of this unique social role that hawker centres play. It is a focal point for the community. For example, during elections, it would be the first stop for aspiring MPs.

– **Goh Chin Tong, former head of the Hawkers Department, NEA**

Upgrading

Today, there are 113 government market-cum-hawker centres or stand-alone hawker centres, housing more than 6000 cooked food stalls. These have been managed by the NEA

since April 1 2004. Since the resettlement of the last street hawker from Change Alley in 1986, no new hawker centres have been built. Bukit Batok was the first HDB estate without a hawker centre. Similarly, newer towns like Choa Chu Kang, Sengkang and Punggol have to make do without this icon of the Singapore heartland and make do with privately-run coffeeshops. Recalled Goh:

“The reason why we stopped was very simple: we were not in the business of providing food stalls. The only reasons we built hawker centres was because we needed to get hawkers off the streets. When some hawker centres were affected by development plans, we paid the hawkers a cash grant and phased them out and it was up to the hawkers if they wanted to get another stall elsewhere at market rates. The policy at that time was that if a hawker centre was affected by development plans, we will phase it out. Many were phased out under this policy. We phased out Cuppage Centre, Blanco Court, Princess Street Market, Satay Club, Lau Pa Sat.”

However, government leaders soon realised that beyond the utility (first as a tool for hawker relocation and then as a service to Singaporeans) of hawker centres, there was the role that the institution played as unique community space for social interaction. Said Goh:

“(Then Acting Environment) Minister Lim Swee Say said there shouldn't be a policy to phase them out to private operators because of this unique social role that hawker centres play. It is a focal point for the community. For example, during elections, it would be the first stop for aspiring MPs. So (Lim) said we have to preserve the hawker centres and to do that, we have to upgrade them. The result was a policy that took care of all related issues. We had to decide how to treat those who didn't want to continue as hawkers, how much rent to charge after the upgrading, and also the general features of an upgrade, for example, bigger stalls.”

In all, \$420 million was allocated to the upgrading programme. The Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme (HUP) was launched by NEA in February 2001. Upgrading involved re-tiling, new tables and stools, replacement of utility services such as sewer pipes, rewiring, improvements to the ventilation, bin centres and toilets, re-roofing where necessary, and providing an exhaust flue system. For some centres, there is a complete reconfiguration or rebuilding. Central freezer areas are set up as well as central wash areas for sorting out used crockery. Also built in are barrier-free features to allow the ease of movement of patrons in wheelchairs. During the upgrading process, affected hawkers are offered temporary stalls in other hawker centres, or even the chance to take a break. They are also



Many older hawker centres, such as this one in Ghim Moh, have undergone upgrading – from minor renovations to complete facelifts.

allowed, as a group and working with the local grassroots organisation, to set up and operate temporary markets or hawker centres. Each hawker is also paid a removal allowance of \$1000. A discount in rental rates is also offered: during the relocation period, those paying rentals at market or tendered rate need only pay the subsidised rental rate. The programme signalled that hawker centres are here to stay, as replacements were built for those that were affected by redevelopment plans.

Success Factors

The relocation exercise went smoothly as there was a general buy-in among all stakeholders. While street hawkers had no choice but to relocate, they were incentivised to do so by the low rents offered at the hawker centres as well as the availability of amenities at their new stalls. Said Goh:

“On the streets, potable water supply was a problem, gas was a problem - they were using firewood. In the hawker centres, they have water, gas, electricity, and are also not subjected to the vagaries of the weather. On the streets, they could only do either day or night operations (hawkers typically ‘share’ their locations with other hawkers in shifts). The new stalls offered them the choice to operate for longer hours at the same rent, so why not? And everyone was affected equally. Also we made sure that hawkers had a pool or potential pool of ready customers by building hawker centres at places where they were needed. At the same time, we showed them that we were strict in our enforcement activities such that when they were moved out, no one else took over their old locations. So they were happy.”

At the same time, the authorities also ensured that the relocation of hawkers meant not only a geographic change but also one that dealt with issues associated with hawkers of the past. Some concerns of the old-time municipal authorities are still relevant today, particularly the issue of hygiene. In the past, the filth around stalls and unhygienic food practices among itinerant hawkers were common and accepted.

By the 1980s, these conditions had become intolerable. Good hygiene became the focus of an aggressive regulatory and public health campaign by the then Ministry of Environment. Complaints in the 1980s against hawker centres reflected the era's higher expectations. The emphasis was on ensuring that any unhygienic personal habits of hawkers were corrected. Those who smoked while cooking and those who handled money and food with the same hand, for example, drew regulatory attention.

The Ministry of Environment adopted a two-prong approach: regulate and educate. All food centres and markets were told to clean up their premises and carry out improvements in line with a standard set by the ministry. In 1987, a Demerit Points System was introduced to regulate the hygiene standards of hawkers. Under this system, demerit points are given out when public health laws were violated. Repeat offenders could have their license revoked. The Ministry also required all food handlers to be trained and certified. From February 1990, a food handler needed a Food Hygiene Certificate before being registered. Since June 1997, a grading system has been used to regulate the cleanliness of cooked food stalls. Stalls are issued grades ranging from A (for excellent hygiene) to D (for below average cleanliness), which have to be displayed prominently so that the public knows the hygiene standards of the stalls they wish to patronise. This transparency puts pressure on the stalls to improve their hygiene practices. The grading system covers several criteria – housekeeping and cleanliness, food hygiene and personal hygiene. The rating is reviewed annually to make sure that stall-holders are kept on their toes.

The Ministry also zoomed in on common areas outside the stalls, urging hawkers to use contract cleaners to clear tables fast, especially during the busy lunch and dinner periods. This not only reduced the unsightly and unhealthy piles of used crockery and cutlery, but also made sure that leftover food are not left in the open long enough to attract pests or vermin. To ensure cleaning contractors provided trained cleaners, the contractors were required to have a workforce trained under the National Skills Recognition System. The certification ensured that cleaners were properly trained to clean floors and toilets, as well as crockery and tables.

Given anecdotal evidence which suggested that many patrons paid heed only to the quality of the food they bought and not the hygiene grade of the stalls they patronise, public health education programmes were undertaken. Exhibitions, educational talks and slide shows were organised, and health education posters and pamphlets were distributed to reinforce public health messages. As part of public health education, consumers were also urged to play a greater part by insisting on good hygiene standards. The public was also urged to boycott irresponsible hawkers.

As for the upgrading process, like the relocation exercise of yore, NEA has made sure that hawkers are involved in the upgrading process. Their views are conveyed through hawker representatives and taken into consideration in the public consultation process conducted to seek feedback on what the upgraded centres should look like.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2011 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.