

Hawkers' business costs ignored in IPS study on food expenses, says Kf Seetoh, who calls for end to bidding practices of stalls

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Commenting on The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study titled "The Cost of Eating Out: Findings from the Makan Index 2.0", Makansutra founder Kf Seetoh expressed his disappointment over how the study only focused on people's food expenses without considering the hawkers' cost of doing business.

"Many common Sinkies like me take this to mean..Eat in Toa Payoh, avoid Tampines, Queenstown and Bishan. ...And in one fell swoop , you harm the struggling hawkers and their related supplier's business and viability in Tampines Bishan and Queenstown."

Instead, he suggested that policymakers should focus on reducing rental costs for hawkers and finding alternative ways to support low-wage Singaporeans.

"If you indeed wanna help Singaporeans keep food expenditure down ..then go cajole your leading policy makers to abort the "highest bid for public hawker stalls" practice la, plus tell them to stop egging hawkers to sell a meal at \$3 or so. It only helps the well heed and stingy."

The IPS study surveyed the cost of eating out in Singapore's hawker centres, food courts, and kopitiams, which aimed at better understanding the costs of living in Singapore and does not provide any value judgement on the pricing strategy of food establishments.

The survey examined a variety of food and drink items commonly consumed during breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and collected drink and food prices from the menus of 829 food establishments, comprising 92 hawker centres, 101 food courts, and 636 kopitiams within 26 residential neighbourhoods in Singapore.

The study found that the average cost of breakfast is S\$4.81, lunch is S\$6.01, and dinner is S\$6.20. Each meal comprises a food item and a drink. When adding up all three meals, an individual spends an average of S\$16.89 if they eat at hawker centres, food courts, and kopitiams.

Kf Seetoh: "which stall sell briyani and Milo at \$14.90? wagyu beef ah?"

The Straits Times (ST) listed out the most expensive lunch and dinner meal was found to be in Queenstown, where an iced Milo with chicken briyani costs around \$14.90, and in Tampines, an iced Milo with chicken briyani or chicken chop costs around the same price.

In a Facebook post on Wednesday(15 March), Kf Seetoh doubted: "Which hawker sell briyani n Milo at \$14.90 ah? Where got so expensive..wagyu beef ah? "

Kf Seetoh, who is also a strong advocate for Singapore hawkers, argued that the study's findings might be misinterpreted by common Singaporeans to mean that they should only eat in certain areas and avoid others, thus harming hawkers and their businesses.

"So, these Intelligent People Say (IPS) in this Makan Index that prata (satu kosong, satu telur), in Toa Payoh is cheap (\$2.89) and briyani n Milo in Tampines is expensive at \$14.90...plus West is cheaper and East is jialat."

However, Kf Seetoh wondered if the study may have neglected to take into account how food costs have increased due to inflation.

"Allo, they said \$7.50 for chicken chop is expensive. Hey, It is what it is today. Have you checked food costs n rentals lately? "

Get rid of the "highest bid for public hawker stalls" practice

He urged that the policymakers to get rid of the "highest bid for public hawker stalls" practice, and for policies that would help hawkers stay in business without having to sell meals for as low as \$3.

"It only helps the well heed and stingy..Find other ways to support the poor and low waged Singaporeans. It is not the duty of hawkers to do so."

In addition, Kf Seetoh suggested that these researchers should go file some paper and stop this freewheeling market practice of selling public-built (turned private) kopitiam at S\$40 million.

"You should know those hawkers suddenly are paying \$12k per month rentals in Tampines. Do you know how many plates of chicken chop they need to sell to be viable? "

Kf Seetoh was referring to two coffee shops in Yishun and Tampines which changed hands for over S\$40 million in June last year.

The record-high transaction shocked the entire city state with *ST* reporting that some tenants were thinking about terminating their agreements following a surge in rent after the coffee shop in Tampines changed hands for \$41.68 million.

As for the coffeeshop at Yishun, *8 World News* reported that at least 10 of the 14 stalls have thrown in the towel and left.

Ignoring hawkers' cost of doing business

Kf Seetoh expressed disappointment that the study only focused on people's food expenses without considering the hawkers' cost of doing business.

"Fact is, in this inflationary times , Singaporeans will know where in their neighbourhood sell affordable meals. Don't need a report to warn them, just help guard against rising operation costs, if you can, " Kf Seetoh concluded.

This is not the first time Kf Seetoh has called for an end to the practice of bidding for hawker stalls, and instead suggested a fair rental system based on factors such as menu, talent, and the preservation of Singapore's unique food culture.

Despite the inflation, most hawkers are hesitant to increase their prices, fearing the loss of customers and criticism.

At the same time, many Singaporeans have a weird mentality where they feel that they should not be paying higher for hawker food.

Kf Seetoh has also been asking hawkers just to raise their prices to sustain.

He noted that if hawkers have to close shops if they cannot raise prices fairly, then no one would care if they do close.

"You will just be a not very viral post online for one day." wrote Kf Seetoh and said that they should do what they need to survive.

Kf Seetoh is currently leading efforts to expand authentic Singapore hawker culture, with Urban Hawker set food in New York City in September 2022.