



Hawker Culture: Safeguarding A Singaporean Gem

INTRODUCTION

In December 2020, Hawker Culture in Singapore was successfully inscribed as Singapore's first element on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.¹ This was a moment of pride for Singapore — a testament to Singaporeans' collective love for hawker food, and an acknowledgement of the generations of hawkers that have shaped Singapore's culture through their delicacies. With this recognition, Singapore has also doubled down on its commitment to safeguarding its hawker culture. This Policy Explainer will explore policies that have been pursued to achieve these ends.

HAWKER CULTURE THROUGH THE AGES

Hawker culture is an integral part of Singapore's culinary heritage. For the uninitiated, the term 'hawker' generally refers to street vendors who sell food from mobile carts or stalls in open-air markets. This had been commonplace in Singapore's colonial era, as many immigrants engaged in street hawking and sold their hometown dishes, augmented with local ingredients and techniques, as a means to earn a living.² Post-independence, however, the deplorable hygiene standards and obstruction to traffic and city planning mandated a need for organisation,³ and a gargantuan effort was undertaken by the Government to relocate 18,000 hawkers to newly built hawker centres with proper amenities.⁴

Today, there are over 110 hawker centres located across Singapore, all of which are managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA).⁵ Many of these hawker centres are situated in Housing & Development Board (HDB) estates or high-density business districts to cater a wide variety of food to residents and workers at an affordable price. Some are also instantly recognisable to both locals and tourists e.g., the Old Airport Road Food Centre, Lau Pa Sat, and the Newton Food Centre, and many house cuisines that have earned either a Michelin star or Michelin Bib Gourmand title.⁶ Consuming hawker food has also become a way of life, with over 80 percent of Singaporeans surveyed indicating that they visit a hawker centre at least once a week, and over half of them deeming hawker centres as one of the top three most important amenities in their neighbourhood.⁷

¹ "Hawker Culture in Singapore," National Heritage Board, August 5, 2021, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/sector-development/unesco/hawker-culture-in-singapore>.

² "The History and Evolution of Singapore's Hawker Culture," ROOTS, December 15, 2021, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/stories-landing/stories/Serving-Up-a-Legacy>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Overview," National Environment Agency, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/overview>.

⁶ "Hawker Centres in Singapore," Visit Singapore Official Site, 2023, <https://www.visitsingapore.com/editorials/the-street-food-of-singapore/>.

⁷ "High Majority Of Patrons Satisfied With Hawker Centres," National Environment Agency, June 13, 2019, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/high-majority-of-patrons-satisfied-with-hawker-centres>.

AN UPHILL BATTLE FOR HAWKER CULTURE

Singapore's hawker culture may be an essential part of Singaporean life, but it cannot rest on its laurels. In 2019, the median age of hawkers stood at 60 years old.⁸ This poses a threat to the longevity of Singapore's hawker culture, since many well-loved dishes may be lost within a generation.

The Workgroup on Sustaining Hawker Trade also highlighted several challenges faced by the hawker trade. First, the hawker trade is not well-regarded by the public as a profession or a livelihood.⁹ Such perceptions had been captured in NEA's Perception Survey of Hawker Centre Patrons 2018, where 87.3% of the respondents indicated their unwillingness to be a hawker, citing "no interest" and "long working hours" as the top two reasons.¹⁰ Second, it is difficult for new hawkers to acquire the know-how required for building up a hawker business, due to a lack of access to information, lack of guidance from mentors, and lack of skills in producing food of good and consistent quality from the onset.¹¹ Third, profit margins for many hawkers remain low, as the costs of raw materials and other business costs have outpaced hawker food prices.¹² According to an episode of CNA's 'Talking Point' in 2018, the profit margin of hawker dishes was generally \$0.20 to \$0.30, five times lower than what interviewed patrons anticipated.¹³

SAFEGUARDING OUR HAWKER CULTURE

In light of these findings, NEA, in partnership with other government agencies, has adopted a range of measures to support aspiring hawkers in learning the ropes, while facilitating the transfer of skills and businesses from retiring veteran hawkers to successors.

1. Hawkers Development Programme¹⁴

The Hawkers Development Programme was introduced in 2020 to equip aspiring and existing hawkers with the skills and competencies necessary to run their businesses. Participants of the programme may partake in up to three stages, 'Training', 'Apprenticeship' and 'Starting a Business'.

In the 'Training' stage, both aspiring and new hawkers will receive coaching from certified trainers in culinary and business management. This is intended to provide aspiring and existing hawkers with foundational knowledge in operating a hawker stall. Thereafter, existing hawkers will be channelled to the 'Apprenticeship' stage, where they will undergo a two- to four-month apprenticeship to learn the ropes from experienced hawkers. In the final

⁸ "New Programme Targets To Train 100 Aspiring Hawkets Over The Next Three Year," National Environment Agency, January 20, 2020, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/new-programme-targets-to-train-100-aspiring-hawkets-over-the-next-three-year>.

⁹ "Workgroup on Sustaining Hawker Trade Report," National Environment Agency, November 24, 2020, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/workgroup-on-sustaining-hawker-trade-report-24112020.pdf>.

¹⁰ National Environment Agency, "High Majority Of Patrons Satisfied With Hawker Centres."

¹¹ National Environment Agency, "Workgroup on Sustaining Hawker Trade Report."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Saving the Hawker Trade | Talking Point | CNA Insider," YouTube (YouTube, November 21, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW9wMa0Jl4s>.

¹⁴ "Hawkets Development Programme," National Environment Agency, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkets-development-programme>.

‘Starting a Business’ stage, aspiring hawkers can then gain hands-on experience in operating a hawker stall while receiving up to six months of support and guidance from experienced hawkers.

Altogether, the Hawkers Development Programme provides a comprehensive roadmap for aspiring hawkers to foray into the hawker trade while equipping existing hawkers with the business acumen needed to level up their businesses. The programme has also enjoyed relative success, receiving close to 400 participants as of October 2021,¹⁵ and with continued uptake by aspiring hawkers, a steady pipeline of stewards for Singapore’s hawker culture can be developed.

2. Incubation Stall Programme¹⁶

The Incubation Stall Programme was launched in 2018 to support aspiring hawkers in starting their hawker businesses. Under this programme, interested hawkers must first submit a feasible business plan and undergo a food-tasting session to demonstrate their culinary skills. Successful hawkers will then be invited to select a pre-fitted stall and will receive subsidised rentals for 15 months.

Such a programme is beneficial on two fronts. First, aspiring hawkers are encouraged to devise a clear business strategy and ensure that their food is of sufficiently good quality before embarking on their hawker journeys. Coupled with feedback from an expert panel, this will increase the chances of success for aspiring hawkers. Second, the subsidies provided will help to reduce the upfront capital investment needed for setting up hawker stalls, providing them with greater bandwidth to refine their craft, build their clientele, and stabilise their business operations. Altogether, this is intended to guarantee the longevity of new hawker start-ups, allowing Singapore’s hawker culture to be perpetuated. The programme also complements the Hawker Development programme, as aspiring hawkers in the ‘Starting a Business’ stage may opt to apply for the Incubation Stall Programme concurrently.¹⁷

3. Hawker Succession Scheme¹⁸

The Hawker Succession Scheme was rolled out in 2020 to help retiring veteran hawkers to pass down their skills, recipes and stalls to aspiring hawkers. NEA, with advice from an independent panel, will first match compatible aspiring and veteran hawkers. Thereafter, aspiring hawkers will undergo a 3-month apprenticeship to learn the signature dishes from veteran hawkers. Only those who have passed a food evaluation will be permitted to take over the veteran hawkers’ stalls, and retiring hawkers may offer up to 2 additional months of mentorship to ensure a smooth succession.

This scheme is critical in safeguarding Singapore’s hawker culture. For one, it allows those who are unable to find suitable successors among their family members or relatives to pass on their business before retiring. In addition, the scheme provides an opportunity for aspiring hawkers to operate a hawker business with an established clientele and recipes that have been perfected over the years. Such guarantees that the *wok-fu* of our retiring hawkers is

¹⁵ Grace Fu, “Written Reply to Parliamentary Question on Hawker Digitalisation and Succession Programmes by Ms Grace Fu, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment,” MSE, October 5, 2021, <https://www.mse.gov.sg/resource-room/category/2021-10-05-written-reply-to-pq-on-hawker-programmes/>.

¹⁶ “Incubation Stall Programme,” National Environment Agency, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/isp>.

¹⁷ National Environment Agency, “Hawkers Development Programme.”

¹⁸ “Hawkers Succession Scheme,” National Environment Agency, 2023, <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/hawker-management/programmes-and-grants/hawkers-succession-scheme>.

retained — a win-win for aspiring hawkers who are more likely to see success in their endeavours, and for patrons who can continue to enjoy the same flavours that they have grown to love.

CONCLUSION

While naysayers may doubt the sustainability of Singapore's hawker culture, our nation has shown considerable resolve in safeguarding it for future generations. This is mostly clearly seen from the Government's efforts made to nurture the next generation of hawkers and ensure that the delicacies of our generation are not lost with time. Yet, the Government's efforts alone are insufficient. We, as the next generation of Singaporeans, have an onus to carry the torch of our predecessors and take up the mantle of hawking. Only through us will Singapore be able to preserve its hawker culture, so that generations after can continue to enjoy what we have.

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This Policy Explainer was written by members of MAJU. MAJU is an independent, youth-led organisation that focuses on engaging Singaporean youths in a long-term research process to guide them in jointly formulating policy ideas of their own.

By sharing our unique youth perspectives, MAJU hopes to contribute to the policymaking discourse and future of Singapore.

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