Source: *The Straits Times*, pB3
Date: 22 November 2023

Unfinished business: Coffee shop and hawker centre toilets still dirty

Singapore has much to be proud of when it comes to sanitation, but it has failed to get its hawker centres and coffee shops to clean up their act.

Alec Morton and Jack Sim

The refurbished toilet at Newton Food Centre. In the 2022 Public Cleanliness Satisfaction Survey, only 63 per cent of respondents were satisfied with toilet cleanliness in hawker centres, and only 53 per cent in coffee shops, compared with 81 per cent for public toilets overall. ST FILE PHOTO

Since independence, Singapore has made huge strides in universal access to sanitation. According to World Health Organisation figures, Singapore is one of only four countries in the world where 100 per cent of the population can boast access to safely managed sanitation facilities. What's more, Singapore is the largest of these four states and only one, Kuwait, is of comparable size: The other two countries are the tiny Monaco and Andorra, with populations of less than 100,000 people each.

As part of its efforts to ensure access to sanitation, Singapore mandated that private sector buildings must open their toilets for public use if they serve the public. As such, there is no shortage of common-use toilets in Singapore. There has also been a concerted and consistent public education effort to remind toilet users of their responsibilities, and the public has, generally speaking, done its part: Over the last few decades, the standard of common-use toilets has strikingly improved.

Unfortunately, progress has been underwhelming in one crucial area: Singapore's hawker centres and coffee shops. In the 2022 Public Cleanliness Satisfaction Survey conducted by researchers from the Singapore Management University (SMU), only 63 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the cleanliness of toilets in hawker centres, and only 53 per cent in coffee shops, compared with 81 per cent for public toilets overall. A notable concern expressed about coffee shop toilets was the lack of provision of toilet paper, suggesting shortcomings at a quite basic level.

More recently, a team of SMU students led by SMU principal lecturer of statistics Rosie Ching has documented the state of the toilets in the country's hawker centres and coffee shops, physically inspecting more than 1,000 toilets and interviewing almost 10,000 individuals. Their results were reported earlier in November. Ms Ching's extensive and detailed work shows shortcomings in several dimensions of toilet cleanliness: not only the toilet bowl and seat, but also the floor, sink and rubbish bin. Readers also may have encountered lack of hand-drying facilities and liquid soap for handwashing, as well as dark colour decor and poor lighting, which make verification of cleanliness difficult.

Many diners may prefer not to think about this issue. Why not just enjoy your lunch and use the toilet elsewhere? However, the workers and vendors in the hawker centres and coffee shops do not have this privilege. For reasons of public hygiene, it is critical that toilets which are in regular use by cooks and food handlers should be kept to the highest standards of cleanliness. Unsettlingly, Ms Ching's research shows that there is a negative correlation between closeness to cooking facilities and cleanliness of toilets. In other words, the closer the toilets to the cooking facilities, the dirtier they are.

There is now an evidence base over several years which shows both the scale and persistence of problems in this area. It is disappointing that the owners of the premises have not shown greater willingness to invest to address the issue. Unlike the shopping centres which were persuaded to see clean toilets as a service to customers, owners of hawker centres and coffee shops still seem to see clean toilets as an expenditure that does not bring additional profit. Even when government funds are available to support improvements, many owners do not take the trouble to apply.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) has clear guidance on what it expects from owners of common-use toilets. This advice applies to all public toilets in Singapore. The customers of hawker centres and coffee shops have the same biology as the customers of shopping centres: There is no reason why they should be expected to put up with a lesser standard of cleanliness. NEA has the power to sanction toilet operators who do not measure up to basic standards. The entrenched nature of the problem demands that it uses this power to its fullest extent.

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Hawker centres and coffee shops have a special role in Singaporeans' affections – they do not just provide convenient and low-cost meals, but are also a vital community meeting place. But, as have been shown in repeated public surveys, customers do notice when toilet facilities do not measure up to their reasonable expectations – and ultimately will vote with their feet. Enforcing compliance of toilets in these establishments to the standards met by other common-use toilets in Singapore is not only the final piece of unfinished business in the Republic's toilet journey, but it is also an important part of ensuring that hawker centres and coffee shops remain popular and sustainable in the years to come.

It is an opportune time to reflect on this issue. Nov 19 was World Toilet Day – observed by the United Nations and a day to reflect on the state of global sanitation. This day was first observed by the Singapore NGO World Toilet Organisation in 2001 as its founding day and adopted by the UN in 2013 as the result of a resolution by the Singapore diplomatic team.

The Republic has much to be proud of when it comes to showing others the way when it comes to universal sanitation, particularly on the roles of public and private financing and the importance of public education and individual responsibility. It now needs to ensure that the state of toilets at its hawker centres and coffee shops does not dim its brand.

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More information about World Toilet Day 2023 can be found at https://www.worldtoiletday.info/learn

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