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# Kopi, kaya and a longer life: Hawker centres hold the key

But it is too much to expect hawkers to spend more on healthier offerings while being forced to earn less.

**Daniel Mahadzir**

With the nation set to be “super-aged” by 2026, and many set to face chronic disease and social isolation, it’s time to improve what already exists: our experience of the humble, bustling tables at hawker centres. Singaporeans rightly see hawker centres as places to get affordable, delicious meals. They are stitched so deeply into the national fabric that they were inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

From breakfast kopi to late-night suppers, they are where lives intersect and social contact is effortless.

Tourists flock to Newton, Lau Pa Sat and Maxwell not just for the food, but for the cultural experience of a city where Malay satay, Indian roti prata and Chinese dumplings coexist under one roof.

For locals, I would argue that, with some smart tweaks, hawker centres can also help us lead longer, healthier lives.

In short, as Singapore refines its national longevity agenda through programmes such as Healthier SG and Age Well SG, the hawker centre must be seen as a primary ally, not a passive backdrop.

## HEALTH AND HAWKER CENTRES

A bite at a hawker centre is a solid Singaporean memory, ritual, and source of identity. A plate of chicken rice recalls childhood afternoons; a bowl of fish porridge comforts after illness; a kaya toast with half-boiled eggs signals the start of a workday.

These dishes connect generations: grandparents guiding grandchildren to mix just the right amount of soya sauce, parents recalling flavours from their own youth, tourists discovering a Singaporean story through taste.

Food connects us to our past, to our communities, and to our sense of belonging.

But food also connects us to our future, because what we eat today shapes how we age tomorrow.

Singapore’s high life expectancy is both an achievement and a challenge. Chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease are increasingly prevalent, and they are strongly linked to diet.

Here, the picture is less rosy. One in three Singaporeans has a



Attendees at the opening of the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (Bukit Panjang), located inside Bukit Panjang Hawker Centre and Market. The hub offers everything from exercise classes to health screening. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

lifetime risk of developing diabetes. The drivers of this risk: a bit too much salt, sugar, and refined starch, which are the “traditional recipe” in many favourite dishes.

Thus, hawker centres, as the most common eating venue in Singapore, sit squarely in the path of the nation’s longevity agenda.

The Government has, quite correctly, recognised this. The Health Promotion Board (HPB) has nudged stalls to offer “healthier options” such as offering a brown rice option, less sugar, or healthier oils. As of 2022, around 60 per cent of stalls had at least one such option.

But this is where policies can work in silos, creating friction. While the HPB encourages hawkers to use better, often more expensive, ingredients, the economic models governing some hawker centres do the opposite.

Under the Socially-conscious Enterprise Hawker Centre (SEHC) model, for instance, hawkers are often contractually obligated to offer mandatory budget meals at capped prices and to fund 10 per cent app-based discounts from their own pockets.

This creates a tension between public health and social affordability goals. For hawkers, the challenge lies in balancing healthier ingredients with the

need to remain economically sustainable. This conflict between public health and business reality must be resolved.

Targeted incentives – such as government subsidies or shared-cost schemes – could be explored to make healthier staple ingredients more affordable for hawkers. This aligns the hawkers’ financial interest with the public’s health interest. Perhaps hawkers and seniors must be involved in these policy decisions from the start, to co-design them.

## LONGEVITY BEYOND THE PLATE

Apart from offering food, hawker centres play another role: tackling social isolation. Loneliness is a public health crisis, linked to depression, cognitive decline, and a risk of premature mortality comparable to smoking.

Think of the elderly uncles who cycle to the hawker centre each morning, not just to eat but to meet friends. Or the aunties who gather in groups after morning walks to share a bowl of porridge. These small acts of daily life compound into significant health dividends over time.

We learnt from Blue Zones – where people live extraordinarily long, healthy lives – what makes people live longer is healthy social connections, and this is already

happening in Singapore.

For the elderly widower who comes each morning for kopi, for the group of retirees meeting weekly to compare blood pressure readings, for the intergenerational family sharing a table on Sunday, the hawker centre is a community hot spot where it folds social life seamlessly into everyday routines.

But infrastructure upgrades must go further than just offering senior-friendly seating. The true potential lies in integration.

This is not about turning hawker centres into clinics or classrooms. It is about building on what they already do, better.

A prime example is the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (AAC) located inside the Bukit Panjang Hawker Centre and Market. This is not just a seasonal booth; it is a permanent, co-located hub offering everything from exercise classes to health screening. This model, which echoes the celebrated design of integrated hubs like Kampung Admiralty, is the future. These show that longevity is not just an abstract policy, but that it can be a lived reality at the kopitiam table.

This model should be replicated across the island. Every hawker centre can host an integrated wellness node, a “longevity hub” that acts as a front-line outpost

for the national Healthier SG strategy. A doctor or general practitioner enrolled in Healthier SG could, for example, use “social prescribing” to refer a lonely senior not to a clinic, but to a befriending programme or an arts-and-crafts session at their local hawker centre’s AAC. This leverages the space’s existing social gravity as a direct health intervention.

These hubs can also formalise the intergenerational bonding that already happens. Imagine the AACs running “Kopi, Kaya, and Coding” workshops, where young volunteers teach seniors how to use their smartphones safely, addressing the digital divide over a shared meal.

## THE HARD REALITIES: THE LONGEVITY OF HAWKER STALLS

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. This vision faces significant, practical obstacles.

First, the very people this strategy aims to help, seniors, are also the ones running the stalls. The median age of hawkers is 59. They are grappling with long hours, physical toil, and thin margins. Any longevity strategy must be an ally to the hawker, not another burden on them.

Second, the push for digitalisation, while necessary, can be a major barrier. The “Hawkers Go Digital” drive for e-payments is a prime example. For an older hawker, a digital terminal can feel complex and intimidating; for an elderly patron, the fear of scams is real. This digital divide cannot be solved by apps alone. It requires high-touch, human support, like the Digital Ambassadors from the SG Digital Office, stationed permanently at these new wellness hubs to guide both hawkers and seniors.

Finally, there is the existential threat to the trade itself. Singapore has a “leaky bucket” problem. While programmes like the Hawkers’ Development Programme train new entrants, their retention rate is low. Even today, only about one in three participants in the Incubation Stall Programme go on to become full-fledged hawkers, often because the economic realities are simply too harsh once the rental subsidies end.

This is not just a business problem; it’s a cultural one. If the trade is not viable, the UNESCO heritage will vanish.

## THREE STEPS TO CLOSE THE GAP

To make hawker centres a major actor in the national longevity agenda, Singapore must move from vision to action. Here are three practical next steps.

First, the economics must work. Public health goals cannot be funded from the pockets of hawkers. There may be room to refine aspects of the SEHC model to better align public health incentives with hawkers’ financial realities. Budget meals and app discounts, if deemed socially necessary, should be co-funded by the state or operators.

The core principle must be: a hawker must be able to earn a dignified livelihood. Only a profitable hawker can afford to be a healthy hawker.

Second, integrate, don’t just co-locate. The model adopted by the NTUC Health AAC at Bukit Panjang should be the rule, not the exception. Future hawker centres could be designed with these wellness nodes, building on successful models like Bukit Panjang, and older centres could be retrofitted. These hubs must be deeply plugged into the Healthier SG network, serving as the community front line for social prescribing and preventive health.

Finally, rope in hawkers and seniors when policies are being crafted. They must have a real seat at the table, not just for feedback, but for co-designing these new policies. They are the experts in their own lives and businesses. Trusting them as partners allows a system that is not only effective, but also embraced by the very community it is built to serve.

The hawker centre is already where Singaporeans are. They are right in front of us, in the kopi session shared with a friend and the simple joy of eating together. We must make sure they, too, remain economically healthy when we further the nation’s health and social goals through them. These community dining rooms can then nourish the nation, in body and spirit, for generations to come.

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