

KL's pathways are shrinking to street vendors

MALAYSIA today is evolving, albeit slowly into a walkable city. Pedestrian-friendly zones have been popping up and initiatives to promote walking and cycling are underway. Behind this upbeat exterior though, presents a recurring problem. Street vendors have been invading the city walkways. These formerly wide pathways are becoming clogged with obstacles making it difficult for people to walk smoothly and sometimes venture onto the road just to pass by.

The sellers themselves are not the problem. Malaysian street food is a staple of the country's cuisine, providing both locals and visitors with tasty and reasonably priced meals. More than 100,000 people make their living from street vending, according to a 2023 survey conducted by the Malaysian Federation of Hawkers and Petty Traders Association. However, the unchecked proliferation of booths severely reduces the width of walkways, frequently leaving pedestrians with very little room to manoeuvre around them.

This presents a severe risk to public safety. A 2022 study by Universiti Putra Malaysia found that approximately 70% of pedestrian accidents in Kuala Lumpur occur on blocked walkways. The booths from street vendors spilling over onto designated pedes-

trian walkways force everyone, especially those with disabilities depending on the tactile paving and families with small children to veer into traffic.

Recent case

Back in June, the residents of Brickfields and Taman United were urging Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) to ban traders from carelessly operating on all public walkways, not exclusive to the pavements with tactile blocks used to guide the visually impaired. They stated that DBKL's own regulations and guidelines prohibit street vendors from operating on sidewalks but dozens of traders are still operating in plain sight without probes by the authorities.

Locals in Brickfields mentioned heart-stopping moments where schoolchildren experienced many near-miss incidents due to the view for both pedestrians and motorists being obstructed by street vendors. When DBKL finally conducted a walkabout as a result, business operators scrambled to remove obstacles and even cooking stations spilling oil and other ingredients onto the pathway.

The authorities were labelled as negligent because several street vendors had no issue building permanent

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structures on the pathways, complete with zinc roofs and tiled flooring without obtaining development orders from relevant DBKL departments.

City charm

The effects of careless streetside vendors go beyond safety. The ability to explore at one's own pace while soaking in the sights and sounds of things going on nearby is what makes a city walkable and charming. When such walkways are blocked, simply moving forward becomes a game of frustration and dodging obstructions. This sours the mood and overall perspective of the location. It is also a major deterrent that makes people less likely to walk as a form of transportation, impeding initiatives to create a city that is healthier and more sustainable.

So what solution should Malaysia employ? It is not at all practical nor desirable to outright ban all street vendors because that is their livelihood. Finding a balance is key, just like many other successful cities that manage their street vendors without obstructing traffic. Singapore is a good example, where their street vendors operate lawfully and safely without interfering with pedestrian traffic. To take a note from Singapore's page, Malaysia should try the designated vending zones. Usually placed in busy areas, these zones are strategically aligned so that no views are obstructed, tactile blocks are clear and pedestrians can walk safely.

Another crucial aspect is to encourage the formalisation of the street vendor sector. Efforts to protect public health and empower vendors could include training programs on fire safety, proper waste disposal and hygiene standards. Further encouraging more vendors to operate within the law could be accomplished by looking into licensing options and expediting the application process.

It is the 21st century, so let's use technology. Residents could be encouraged to contribute to the solution-finding process by using a mobile application that lets users report crowded walkways or unsanitary practices. DBKL might then use this information to more precisely target enforcement actions.

Any solution's ability to work depends on how well it is implemented. At the moment, enforcement actions appear inconsistent. An article by The Star displayed residents' frustrations at seeing vendors return to their spots shortly after being issued warnings by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) enforcement officers. Collaborating with vendor associations, communicating clearly and enforcing laws more strictly is essential.

Ultimately, finding a balance is the key. In addition to providing a distinctive and mouthwatering culinary experience, street vendors are an essential part of the country's culture. It is also imperative that walkability and pedestrian safety shouldn't suffer as a result of its dynamism. It is not too late to restore the nation's walkways for pedestrians and guarantee a flourishing street food scene that operates responsibly. Imagine strolling down a wide, clean walkway and suddenly catching a whiff of satay wafting from a designated vending zone nearby. Who wouldn't want that?

