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PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Transforming 'Ugly' Food into Social Good

Bedok Sunflower RC
Community Fridge¹

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Food waste is one of the largest waste streams in Singapore, accounting for about 11 per cent of the total waste generated in Singapore in 2022.² A key strategy established by the National Environment Agency for food waste management is to redistribute unsold/excess food. It seeks to encourage both organisations and individuals to donate their excess non-perishable food items to food distribution organisations, such as Food Bank Singapore, Food from the Heart, Willing Hearts, and Fei Yue Community Services.³

Another major source of food waste in Singapore is edible, visually imperfect fruit and vegetables; there have been a range of community-driven initiatives in recent years to reshape people's perceptions towards 'ugly' food to reduce food waste. For instance, since July 2022, the 'Share a Pack @ Taman Jurong' interest group has collected and redistributed visually imperfect food items to 3,300 households on a self-collection basis, in collaboration with other community groups such as Fridge Restock Community, Food Citizen, Tasek Jurong,

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² National Environment Agency. (2024). *Food Waste Management*. <https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/waste-management/3r-programmes-and-resources/food-waste-management>

³ National Environment Agency. (n.d.). *Food Waste Management Strategies*.

<https://www.nea.gov.sg/our-services/waste-management/3r-programmes-and-resources/food-waste-management/food-waste-management-strategies>

Bedok Sunflower RC Community Fridge

and SG Cares Office (People's Association, 2023).

This article presents the community fridge initiative at Bedok Sunflower Residents' Committee (RC), with a focus on its social benefits to older residents, especially those who are at higher risk of food insecurity and social isolation (e.g., those who live alone or have walking difficulties).

Community Fridge at Bedok Sunflower RC

The community fridge at Bedok Sunflower RC (Figure 1) is one of the community fridges established by the Fridge Restock Community SG, a non-profit organisation that rescues edible unsold fruit and vegetables from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre and redistributes to 14 community fridges and more than 40 distribution points across Singapore to reduce food waste and help residents who are in need (Fridge Restock Community SG, n.d.).



Figure 1: Community fridge at Bedok Sunflower RC (Image credit: author)

The Fridge Restock Community SG initiative was started by its founder, Mr Daniel Yap. Its inception can be traced to December 2017 when Mr Yap 'accidentally' noticed that two food rescue volunteers were digging the green bin of his minimart at Little India. It turned out that the volunteers would like to rescue edible, ugly vegetables like carrots, clean the skin and distribute them to people who are in need. Mr Yap made the arrangement for the volunteers to collect this food twice a week, and the frequency gradually increased to three times a week as there was too much ugly food to be rescued.

In February 2018, Mr Yap established the first community fridge at the void deck of Block 441 Tampines Street 43. Over the years, the Fridge Restock Community SG has collaborated with RCs, senior activity centres (SACs) and other community groups to operate community fridges across Singapore.⁴

To restock community fridges, the Fridge Restock Community SG initiative engages with volunteers to collect edible unsold fruit and vegetables from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre every Tuesday and Wednesday, 9am-1pm. The rescued food is then delivered to community fridges and collection points by volunteer drivers. The Fridge Restock Community SG also provides a guide on how to start and maintain a community fridge.⁵

⁴ Interview with Daniel Yap. (July 16, 2024). Personal conversation.

⁵ Ibid.

Bedok Sunflower RC Community Fridge

At Bedok Sunflower RC, the community fridge was launched in September 2021.⁶ The fridge is restocked with rescued fruit and vegetables from the Fridge Restock Community SG every 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month.⁷ Upon receiving the rescued food, a group of active ageing centre volunteers (about 10 to 12) help with the preparation between 12pm-1:30pm. They sort, clean and organise the rescued fresh produce, e.g., cut out cabbage layers that are squashed, peel off layers that have dark spots, and put them in boxes accordingly for distribution⁸ (Figure 2).

The Sunflower RC community fridge also receives food donation from a range of sources, such as the nearby Bedok South 58 Market every Friday and occasionally from the vegetables harvested by Primary 5 students who grow vegetables in Bedok Green Primary School.⁹ In addition, Bedok residents can also donate halal food items and drop off crops harvested from community gardens to the Sunflower RC to fill the community fridge (East Coast Town Council, 2021). An information banner is provided on-site to offer guidance on accepted food items and how to place them in the community fridge (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Active ageing centre volunteers helped sort, clean and organise rescued fruits and vegetables at Sunflower RC (Image credit: author)

⁶ We Love Bedok Facebook Group. (September 27, 2021). *Our community fridge at Bedok Sunflower RC is officially open!*

<https://www.facebook.com/weluvbedok/posts/our-community-fridge-at-bedok-sunflower-rc-is-officially-openjoin-this-movement-/4725448667479309/>

⁷ Interview with Madam Mee Ling Wong (Sunflower RC Chair). (July 16, 2024). Personal conversation.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Bedok Sunflower RC Community Fridge

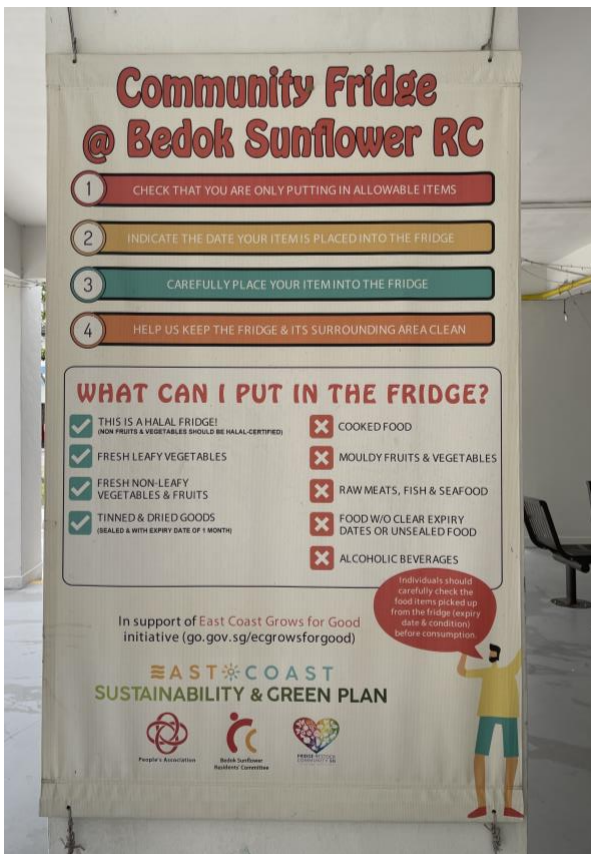


Figure 3: Guidance on accepted food items (Image credit: author)

Residents can bring their own woven bag and collect up to 2 bags of rescued fruit and vegetables every 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month at 2pm from the community fridge (Figure 4 and Figure 5).



Figure 4: Collection schedule and instructions (Image credit: author)



Figure 5: Residents collecting rescued food at Sunflower RC Community Fridge (Image credit: author)

Social Benefits to Older Adults

Older residents, especially those living alone or having walking difficulties, are at higher risk of food insecurity and social isolation. The distribution of community fridge food items plays an important role

in not only reducing food expenditure but also fostering social connection on several fronts.

Reduce Expenditure on Food

Fruit and vegetables from the community fridge are edible, though visually imperfect. The use of this food helps to lower food expenses for residents who are in need. As shared by Madam Loh, a resident of Block 35 in Bedok South, the Sunflower RC community fridge is a good initiative to help older adults with savings; she attends almost every session of the food collection at Sunflower RC. Since she lives alone, Madam Loh added that she shares the collected food with neighbours who live with their children to help lower their expenditures on food.

“Every little bit helps. The RC is doing an excellent job!” Madam Loh¹⁰

Facilitate Social Interaction in the Community

Participation in out-of-home activities is a pathway for maintaining social well-being among older adults. Mr Yong, a wheelchair user and Block 35 resident (Figure 6), spoke about the multifaceted benefits of collecting food from the Sunflower RC community fridge.

“Food collection at the RC not only helps me save money but also offers me the opportunity to socialise with friends when

we line up before the collection time.” Mr Yong¹¹



Figure 6: Mr Yong (in a wheelchair) and his friends queuing to collect rescued food from Sunflower RC (Image credit: author)

Foster Community Care of Older Residents

As Madam Wong Mee Ling, Bedok Sunflower RC Chair observed, redistributing rescued food items is also a way to foster community care for older residents (Figure 7). Regularly meeting and chatting with residents during rescued food collection hours provides valuable touchpoints to learn about their health, needs, and daily lives. This is particularly important for those older residents who live alone.¹²

¹⁰ Interview with Madam Loh. (July 16, 2024). Personal conversation.

¹¹ Interview with Mr Yong. (July 16, 2024). Personal conversation.

¹² Interview with Madam Wong Mee Ling. (July 16, 2024). Op. cit.

Bedok Sunflower RC Community Fridge



Figure 7: Sunflower RC Chair Madam Wong (in orange colour top) and older residents at the rescued food collection session (Image credit: author)

Challenges and Critical Success Factors

The Fridge Restock Community SG has been rescuing unsold, fresh fruit and vegetables from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre and redistributing them fortnightly to community fridges and distribution points in Singapore to reduce food waste and help residents who are in need.

Challenges facing the community fridge initiatives are mainly related to the food rescuing and redistribution process.¹³ Enough volunteers are needed to collect unsold fresh produces from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, which is a non-trivial task. In addition, sufficient storage space is required to keep the rescued fruit and vegetables fresh for up to two weeks to work well with the fortnightly redistribution schedule. Expansion of storage space is likely to be needed when scaling up the community fridge initiative.

¹³ Interview with Daniel Yap. (July 16, 2024). Op. cit.

Through the case study of the community fridge at Bedok Sunflower RC, several critical success factors may be identified:¹⁴

- **Collaboration:** Bedok Sunflower RC works closely with the Fridge Restock Community SG to restock the community fridge every two weeks. This ensures a continued supply of edible, rescued fruit and vegetables for distribution to residents who are in need. At the same time, the redistribution helps to reduce food wastage.
- **Volunteers:** The involvement of and generous support from volunteers are an essential component of the food redistribution process. Volunteers enable various key steps of the community fridge initiative. These include food rescuing, transportation, restock, distribution, and cleaning the void deck after distribution.
- **Engagement:** Sunflower RC organises weekly activities and events to engage with residents, including older adults. Through outreach and building relationships with residents, the community fridge engagement has enabled the RC to provide more targeted help to meet residents' needs.

Sources:

East Coast Town Council. (2021). *East Coast News: Caring, Vibrant, Green*. <https://ectc.org.sg/wp->

¹⁴ Interview with Madam Wong Mee Ling. (July 16, 2024). Op. cit.

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