

## **How Covid-19 offers Hong Kong a chance to tackle food waste and poverty**

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The way we treat our food often mirrors the way we behave. Food is important for our sustenance and our survival. Yet, we are wasteful and almost disrespectful with what we have. According to the Food & Agricultural Office, about one-third of all food produced globally goes to waste. It has other implications too – 25 percent of the world's fresh water supply is used to grow food that ends up uneaten. Wasteful food habits are a shocking testament to our modern lifestyles and disregard for resources.

In Hong Kong, the recently released Waste Blueprint reports that we have reduced the daily disposal of food waste to around 0.3 kg per capita, down by 17 per cent from before. However, this still amounts to a whopping 820,000 tonnes annually that ends up in our landfills. From a climate perspective, this is worrying as the methane that is emitted by rotting food has a greenhouse effect 20-30 times that of the carbon dioxide that comes from burning fossil fuels. Even allowing for the clutch of organic composters that the government has set up, our carbon reduction aspirations have a long way to go.

Food leftovers are a big contributor to this problem. Our largesse lifestyles encourage banquet style dining; it is not to say that celebrating happiness and joyful occasions is bad – but how we do so is damaging. It is common after banquets to see food that is still edible and nutritious being scooped up and bagged for disposal.

But food can be rescued - it is heartening to see the intrepid efforts of NGOs collecting food that is perfectly good, but unwanted, and distributing it to vulnerable communities that appreciate warm meals that they probably would not have been able to access or afford. Although it is a telling indictment of Hong Kong's situation where 1 in 5 families still lingers in poverty, nonetheless this basic yet effective system of recovering food - that would have otherwise been disposed - to fill hungry bellies has a double benefit of tackling a social problem as well as an environmental conundrum.

COVID 19 has changed the game for this paradigm.

Eating habits are different now due to confinement and there is less opportunity for dining out. The result is that the bulk buying practices that restaurants normally carry out has left them with excesses of raw food that will perish if left untended. From another angle, tourism-related activities like air travel and hotels have surpluses of food in a similar predicament. What this means is that NGOs have had to reconfigure their collection logistics to tap into this new resource, especially from a 'cold chain' approach i.e., integrating refrigeration practices to ensure that food remains unspoilt and edible.

At the distribution end, the normal channels of congregating vulnerable communities like the elderly to receive food at NGO centres has been massively disrupted due to COVID outbreaks at these centres. The outcome is that disadvantaged individuals must queue up at newly created distribution centres – and even improvised vending machines - to receive a hot meal. This exacerbates the situations that the government's efforts to maintain social distancing are attempting to avoid, and this is prevalent amongst the groups that are most susceptible, namely the poor and underprivileged.

But we should not look at COVID 19 as entirely negative. There are opportunities to rethink how to turn adversity into an opportunity.

One, we should be mindful of food security and our dependence on supply chains that feed Hong Kong. We are still able to have regular meals everyday despite the ravages of the pandemic, but we should not take this for granted. Let's appreciate our food and not overorder or succumb to wasteful habits from now on.

Secondly, the plight of the underprivileged should be recognized. It is a sad reflection that a city of Hong Kong's opulence still tolerates the existence of urban poverty amongst groups like the homeless, the socially disadvantaged and victims of economic circumstances. These groups should not be overlooked, let alone suffer from hunger and deprivation.

Lastly, we need to be smarter in the future. Supply chain efficiency- which is what Hong Kong excels at - needs to shift up a notch. The advent of AI and Big Data means that meals can be planned and managed with less wastage and at the same time, with whatever is surplus, we can make sure that the needy have safe and convenient access to this resource. We furthermore need to consider healthy eating as well; overordering and overeating leads to later problems in life like obesity and diabetes so early food education can only augur well.

It is said that food defines a society. Let's not fritter this opportunity to make Hong Kong more resilient as well as sustainable from a food perspective.

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