



The dabbawalas have joined a programme that helps feed street children. Kuni Takahashi for The National

Mumbai's dabbawalas begin deliveries to hungry children

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NEW DELHI // Mumbai's legendary lunch delivery network is about to become even more efficient.

Each day, an army of dabbawalas delivers about 120 tonnes of home-made food in tiffin boxes to about 200,000 workers across the city. Though the system is renowned for rarely delivering the wrong box, an estimated 16 tonnes of food still goes to waste.

In a country where nearly half of children younger than three show signs of malnutrition, wastage has not gone unnoticed. Now a charity has started to use the leftovers to feed the city's hungry children.

The "Share Your Dabba" campaign attempts to use the dabbawala network to pass the excess food into the hands of street children.

"We don't see it as leftover food," said Kanupirya Singh, the founder of The Happy Life Welfare Society, which is behind the programme. "What people want to share, we take and we are able to give it to someone else within two

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hours of the lunch pick up and drop off."

Ms Singh teamed up with the Dabbawala Foundation of Mumbai to start distributing the food in April.

Participants in the programme place a "share" sticker on their lunch boxes, so that dabbawalas know to drop it off with Ms Singh and her volunteers after the customer has finished. The leftovers are removed and the lunch boxes are returned to the dabbawalas, who continue on their journey.

The project also relies on the charity of the dabbawalas' customers. Dabbawalas take food cooked at home by the workers' families to their office. So far, 2,000 have participated in the pilot programme and the organisers hope to expand their services across the city.

"We work on a very tight schedule. Our business is on-time delivery," said Abhishek Dinkar Ekal, the vice president of the Dabbawala Foundation. "So our biggest challenge has been to motivate the dabbawalas to take this on without spoiling their schedules, their efficiency."

Dabbawalas operate on extremely tight time frames and have as little as 10 minutes to travel between pick up and drop off points.

It took three months to figure out the logistics of how to deliver the leftovers without making the dabbawalas late. The pilot programme was launched in April to iron out the kinks in service.

So far, about 40 to 50 dabbawalas have agreed to take part in the project, with at least twice as many more promising to start next month, according to Mr Ekal.

"This is a voluntary duty that everybody is doing," Mr Ekal said. "The more dabbawalas sign up, the better the food distribution. Then they can help each other."

The programme has not been without hiccups. With no guarantees of how much food they will receive each day, the volunteers often hesitate to reach out to the children until they have seen what has arrived.

A YouTube video advertising the Share Your Dabba campaign has had more than 300,000 hits since May 9.

"There are 200,000 children on the streets who will go hungry," one of the messages in the video said. "How do you solve a problem this big?"

In a city of 18 million where almost half the population lives in slums, the message in the video is stark: highlighting the disparity that exists between the rich and the poor.

Last week, as children from one of Mumbai's slums waited for some food, only one lunch box arrived.

"It was completely untouched," said Ms Singh. "Whoever had donated his lunch that day had not eaten a bite. We fed eight children that day."

On average, the programme feeds as many as 20 children in each location every day.

For now, there are four locations in Mumbai where dabbawalas drop off the

boxes with stickers and from where at least two volunteers pick up the food.

One of the more successful projects has been at Crawford Market where, on average, 10 boxes from merchants who run shops, arrive each afternoon with leftovers and where the children eat under a nearby bridge.

"The children know where to come," said Ms Singh. "They know they are going to get food at that location every day."

Ms Singh, who has worked on other projects including Share Your Wealth, which distributes discarded clothing to the homeless and children who live in slums, has been hesitant to take on offers of free food from other sources, including from caterers and wedding venues.

"If you take that food from a wedding, I am scared at the promise of freshness. If there is food poisoning, who will be accountable?" Ms Singh said. "With the dabbawalas, we know it was cooked that day, that is fresh and is coming from people's homes."

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