

Feeding Communities, Cutting Emissions: How Greeners Action Turned Wet Market Surplus into Social Impact

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A Decade of Food Rescue

Hong Kong, with a population of 7 million, generates approximately **3,500 tonnes of food waste daily**, constituting around **35 percent** of the city's total municipal solid waste (MSW).¹



To address this, Greeners Action (GA), a local non-government organization (NGO), developed a food donation project focused on wet markets, a major source of fresh fruits and vegetables, where, due to the vendors' lack of space and refrigeration equipment, good produce is often discarded.

Recognizing the potential for food waste reduction at source, GA staff were deployed every night to collect unsold produce from 20 vendors in Cheung Sha Wan market who signed up for the program. This food was then sorted at a nearby venue and distributed to registered beneficiaries. These recipients, who were recruited from nearby low-income communities, collected the food on a schedule to optimize the program's reach.

The food donation program in Cheung Sha Wan market ran for almost a decade- piloted in 2013, and fully operational from 2014 to 2023. The program closed in 2023 due to a lack of continued funding. GA estimates that the Cheung Sha Wan wet market program distributed at least 100kg of food every day. This included fresh produce, baked goods (bread), and canned goods.



In 9 years, participants diverted 439,734 kg of edible food from the landfill, benefiting 343,843 people and reducing emissions to the tune of 1,602.43 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent.

Given that there are about 126 markets in Hong Kong of varying sizes, there is a high potential for food rescue. GA estimates that, on average, about 40 tonnes of food can be saved annually in each market.

In addition to its positive impact on the environment, this program also has a positive social impact: providing better nutritional options to people.

The Cheung Sha Wan market experience shows the difficulty in sustaining a program that is focused on diverting food waste with the co-benefit of providing improved nutrition to low-income households. The challenge lies in developing a sustainable fiscal model that is not dependent on charity.

One other concern is food safety and legal liability. Currently, regulations around food in Hong Kong are focused on sales/distribution of cooked food, which have specific hygiene and food safety standards to be met. There are no regulations around food donation, but given that perishable food is being distributed, there is always a concern about hygiene and safety. The lacuna in legislation is a challenge that GA is advocating for resolution. Food donation programs, such as the one in Cheung Sha Wan market, clearly underscore the need to consolidate and organize food donation programs as a public service in Hong Kong.

About the Organization

Established in 1993, Greeners Action (GA)² is a Hong Kong-based environmental charity focused on waste reduction and promotion of sustainable living through education and policy advocacy. The organization engages with varied stakeholders - government agencies, commercial establishments, institutions, and citizens - to provide actionable, sustainable, practical solutions. Some of the successful campaigns led by GA are:



Plastic bag levy

Sustained campaigning led the government to introduce a levy on single-use plastic shopping bags in two phases: In 2009 (phase 1), a 50 HK cent (US\$ 0.06) fee was leveled on single-use plastic shopping bags in large chain stores and malls, which was extended to smaller shops in 2022. The impact, reported by the HK government, is a 31.5 percent reduction in the use of these bags³.

Ban on single-use plastic bags to store wet umbrellas

It used to be common for malls to offer single-use plastic bags for mall-goers to keep their wet umbrellas⁴, accounting for an estimated 14 million bags annually, according to GA. Thanks in large part to the organization's advocacy, these bags were banned in April 2024.

Zero Packaging Fiesta

Since 2022, the Fiesta, a public annual event, has been a space to showcase alternatives to single-use plastics. At the Fiesta, a variety of vendors (food, personal care, etc) offer products that are refilled in customers' boxes/utensils. In 2025, this public event drew 10,000 visitors and 30 different vendors.

School lunch program

A campaign to shift the school lunch program from disposable plastics to reusable lunch boxes was partially successful. Some schools made the shift by tapping government funding to open a canteen where students could have their food packed in their own lunchboxes. The government also issued guidelines⁵ to promote green school lunches.

Lai See Packets Reuse & Recycle Program

It is customary for people in Hong Kong to give cash presents in paper packets around the New Year (Lai See packets). The packets are neither reused nor recycled. GA worked with commercial outlets selling Lai See packets to have 400+ collection points, so the packets get reused the next year. In 2025, 4.5 million Lai See packets were saved and reused during the Lunar New Year.

Food waste reduction

In 2013, the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department initiated the FoodWise Hong Kong Campaign⁶, based on GA's food waste reduction campaigns. A cornerstone of the campaign was to bring together citizens and major restaurant chains to reduce food waste, resulting in lower food costs at the 160 participating restaurants - a win-win situation with restaurants saving on food costs and customers seeing a reduction in their bill. Over time, the campaign expanded to other stakeholders such as the university cafeteria, hotels, and even wet market vendors.



Engaging Vendors and Building Trust

Hong Kong has approximately 73 government and 53 housing estate wet markets, which supply most of the population's daily vegetables. In 2013, GA launched a pioneering food donation program to reduce vegetable and fruit waste from the Cheung Sha Wan wet market. Co-benefits included promoting food security and improving the beneficiaries' nutrition. The project also recognized that reducing food waste is a climate action that cuts down methane emissions from landfills and has the potential to positively impact land use.

Initially, the project needed to liaise with the vendors individually to convince them to donate surplus food daily. Multiple conversations were held with the vendors explaining the program and its benefits to disadvantaged community members. Few vendors participated at first, but over time, as trust was built, more vendors joined with around 20 eventually signing up.

The process was simple: every evening, at the wet market's closing time of 6:30 PM, four to six part-time staff would collect the surplus food. The collected produce was taken to the distribution center (GA's office), sorted, and evenly divided into 30-40 baskets, depending on the amount of food collected. Registered beneficiaries would then come to the distribution center between 7:30 and 8:30 PM to pick up their basket of produce.

Beneficiary recruitment

While vendor outreach and sign-up were ongoing, the team canvassed the area around Cheung Sha Wan market to identify and register elderly people living alone and people in need. These were the potential beneficiaries of the food donation program. Posters were also put up in the neighborhood, directing interested people to the GA office. The locality around the market is densely populated with several high-rise housing projects for low-income families. In addition to the canvassing and the posters, news of the project spread through word of mouth. Over time, a waiting list of potential beneficiaries became necessary, with about 20 to 30 people at any given time.

Stringent criteria and systems to verify eligibility were not implemented, as the focus of the program was on waste reduction rather than charity or poverty alleviation. However, some other NGOs that later took up similar programs in other wet markets did put in place selection criteria around the beneficiaries' economic background.

Food distribution

On average, 100 kg of edible surplus food was received daily from the Cheung Sha Wan Market, with 2-3 kgs distributed to each of the 30-40 beneficiaries, enough to last 3-4 days. Beneficiaries were assigned a collection schedule of an average of two times per week, and were requested to bring their own bags to avoid the use of single-use plastics. If a beneficiary is skipping a collection day, they must inform the team the previous day. On days when less produce was collected from the wet market, the basket was supplemented with canned foods and groceries donated by supermarkets.

Once the food donation program became fully operational, the model was extended to bakery items. In Hong Kong, bakers typically discard surplus bread when they close at about 7:00 PM. Unlike vegetable and fruit vendors, outreach to bakeries differed by store type. While small shops were approached directly, the team had to liaise with the head offices of larger chain stores. Some chain stores, fortunately, proved willing to cooperate with NGOs.

Seven neighborhood bakeries joined the program and donated a total of 2 big crates of products daily. Similar to the wet market model, part-time staff used a trolley and a large plastic box to collect unsold bread from participating bakeries. The items were not distributed by weight but into roughly equal quantities. Each beneficiary would then receive 2-3 packets of bread. Bakery distribution, however, was in the mornings since bakery products were delivered to the distribution center only after 7.30 PM, making it too late to complete distribution the same day. The donated bread would be refrigerated in the GA office.

Beneficiaries

While the target group was the same, the list of beneficiaries for the bakery items was maintained separately. There was some overlap between the fresh produce and bakery beneficiary list, though the extent of it has not been documented systematically.

Beneficiaries were given a card that had to be dropped off the previous evening as a confirmation of their commitment to collect the bakery items the next morning.

More canned foods

In the last 6-7 years of the program, canned foods became common. This was because Feeding Hong Kong, an NGO, began to systematically organize donations from chain supermarkets. They collected food that was close to the expiry date and moved it through their warehouses to smaller NGOs like GA on request.

Supermarkets, like wet markets, are a major source of food waste. Food that is past the expiry date is usually discarded. However, this food is still within the best-before date and can be consumed. This window of opportunity to rescue food needs to be systematically tapped. Supermarkets dislike donating food as they fear people would stop buying their products. In addition, local branches of chain stores do not have the authority to make decisions to donate food. The corporate office needs to be convinced and must issue a diktat to all their branches for this approach to work.

In addition to the volume of food they can donate, chain stores have the advantage of greater logistics systems, which could be enabled to ensure food for donation is handled safely and appropriately (i.e, with adequate refrigeration and storage) and transported to reach beneficiaries efficiently.

Recognition of stakeholders

GA made sure to recognize vendor contributions by distributing annual certificates appreciating their generosity, encouraging long-term participation in the program. Additionally, when possible, especially during festivals, GA presented the vendors with traditional festival foods.

Expansion

The program was extended to two smaller wet markets in addition to the Cheung Sha Wan market. However, due to a lack of funding, the food donation programs in all three markets had to be wound up. Luckily, since 2013, several other environmental NGOs and charities have replicated this model.



Food Safety, Liability, and the Need for Clear Legislation

Changing political interest

The government began its Food Wise HK Campaign in 2013, which led to dedicated government funding for food waste reduction programs. This funding boost sparked greater interest among NGOs to establish food donation initiatives. In January 2024, the HK government reported that as of December 2023, the government has provided a total of HK\$194 million (US\$ 24868654) to support 89 food waste reduction programs.⁸

After a decade, however, political interest shifted to green buildings and energy efficiency/conservation programs. As a result, funding for food diversion has reduced considerably since 2023, forcing the suspension of many food donation efforts.

Hygiene and liability

In Hong Kong, food donation programs have no formal legal support, nor do they need any legal paperwork or license, as long as they do not provide hot meals. The law requires anyone cooking and selling food to have a license and abide by the Food Hygiene Code⁹, which includes rigorous standards for food storage, handling, preparation, and personal hygiene for employees.

Therefore, while food donation programs that provide produce and grocery items should be safe, there is always a concern that, since the programs handle food that can be contaminated or spoiled, the NGOs running them may be subject to liability. In the Cheung Sha Wan market food donation program, GA requested the beneficiaries to sign a declaration stating they would take responsibility for food hygiene. However, there was no information on what protocols and monitoring systems to follow, and what would happen if something went wrong. Fortunately, in the decade that the Cheung Sha Wan market food donation program was functioning, there were no complaints. However, a legal framework is crucial to protect future food donation programs and their beneficiaries.

Community Connections and Trust-Building

Community engagement has been the cornerstone of the food donation program in Cheung Sha Wan market. Starting with the produce vendors in the market and the elderly and people in need, outreach and constant interaction have been key in ensuring the success of the program. As mentioned earlier, the initial batch of beneficiaries was registered with the program through door-to-door canvassing and via posters. Over time, such recruitment drives became unnecessary as word got around about the program, and requests came from community members to enroll. At one point, there were 20 to 30 people on the waiting list. In the nine years the program ran, it reached an average of 38,200 beneficiaries and distributed 48,859 kilograms of food annually.

GA's program has also inspired several other NGOs in Hong Kong to launch their own food waste reduction programs. Unfortunately, there is no database of all the food donation programs in existence, nor is the government of Hong Kong tracking the impact of these programs. Shared below are some data points collected from the websites of several other NGOs that are running food donation programs similar to GA's to give a sense of the scale of the food waste problem and the potential for food waste reduction.

In addition to the Cheung Sha Wan market, below are some broad statistics from 11 other market programs of varying size. These programs ran/have been running for varied lengths of time since 2013. These initiatives cumulatively facilitated the donation of 1,472,962 kgs of food annually, benefitting nearly 1,050,000 people. Given that there are over 100 markets in Hong Kong, there is untapped potential for more diversion of food waste that can benefit even more communities throughout the city.



Yearly food distributed (kg) to beneficiaries (persons) in Cheung Sha Wan Market

2014 - 2016

100,881 kg to 84,544 people

2016 - 2018

106,132 kg to 95,948 people

2018 - 2020

101,049 kg to 77,137 people

2020 - 2022

84,177 kg to 54,623 people

2022 - 2023

47,495 kg to 31,591 people



Data from 11 other markets



The program can offer the added benefit of providing job opportunities for low-income residents. In two smaller markets where GA ran the food donation program for a few years, local women were hired on an hourly basis. These part-time roles are ideal for local women, whose existing community ties allow them to communicate effectively with both vendors and the elderly. Employing these women, who may otherwise be unemployed, makes them a key component of the program.

Hong Kong's Organic Waste Challenge

Over the nine years that GA ran the food donation program in Cheung Sha Wan market, **439,734 kilograms** of food waste were diverted from the landfill, reducing potential methane emissions by **1602.43 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent**. Hong Kong produces 1,277,500 tonnes of food waste annually. Food waste diversion (including for animal feed in the case of food not fit for human consumption) and composting could potentially reduce Hong Kong's emissions by **4,655,328 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent**.

Cost, Structure and Labor Needs

Running a food donation program in a busy wet market involves careful planning and dedicated staff. The food donation requires about 5-6 part-time staff per market every day to collect, sort, and distribute the food to the people in need. The number would vary, depending on the market size. In the two smaller markets where GA also had a food donation program (for a shorter period), local women were hired on an hourly basis to handle the food distribution. Other NGOs tried to work with volunteers, but reliability and consistency were a challenge. The cost of running a food donation program in a market such as Cheung Sha Wan is estimated to be US\$75,000 per annum.

Since the canned food collected cannot legally be sold, and produce that is discarded by vendors is unlikely to find buyers, the program cannot create a profit and requires external financial support to sustain its operations. However, its social, public health, and ecological value is high; not only does the program reduce food waste and treatment costs, but it also provides economically disadvantaged individuals and families access to fresh produce, thereby boosting their long-term health.



Recommendations: A Citywide Framework for Food Waste



Data collection

The Cheung Sha Wan market program ran for nine years but struggled to document processes due to inadequate financial resources. Integrating this from the beginning of the program is crucial to tracking impact and to improving future programs.



Funding

The cost of the food donation program in Cheung Sha Wan market was about US\$75,000 every year. A funding plan is essential to ensure sustainability, including looking at tapping into other government social welfare programs that may already exist.



Stakeholder engagement

Continued stakeholder engagement is crucial to building trust and a sense of community to ensure the program runs smoothly.



Staff recruitment

With reliable long-term volunteers being hard to find, a program could hire part-time workers from the local community as a means to give back to the community as well as gain wider access into the local society.



Comprehensive food waste plan for Hong Kong

Thirty-five percent of Hong Kong's municipal solid waste is organic, which is landfilled, decomposing under anaerobic conditions, leading to the emission of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. This food waste needs to be source-segregated according to potential uses: fit for human consumption, animal feed, and the rest for composting or to be used as fuel via biomethanation. The pathways to divert organic waste from landfills need to be understood, mapped, and tapped.



Mandatory food donation

Supermarkets have a great potential to divert food waste, which is fit for human consumption. However, there is a reluctance to donate food past the expiry date. GA has raised this issue with the government to introduce legislation requiring supermarkets to donate surplus food to NGOs. Unfortunately, there has been no response from the government as yet.



Good Samaritan Law

A concern for NGOs running food donation programs is the question of who is liable if donated food causes illness. A Good Samaritan Law that protects people putting together a food donation drive is required, which balances the health and safety of beneficiaries such as the one in the USA.¹⁰ This has been one of GA's unfulfilled demands of the government.

Conclusion

The Cheung Sha Wan program highlights the potential to divert edible food from landfills, cutting methane emissions, and reducing food loss. With supportive government policies—funding, donation legislation, and liability protections—such initiatives can scale, turning surplus into shared opportunity and healthier, more sustainable communities.



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About GAIA

GAIA is a network of grassroots groups as well as national and regional alliances representing more than 1000 organizations from over 100 countries. With our work we aim to catalyze a global shift towards environmental justice by strengthening grassroots social movements that advance solutions to waste and pollution. We envision a just, Zero Waste world built on respect for ecological limits and community rights, where people are free from the burden of toxic pollution, and resources are sustainably conserved, not burned or dumped.

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