

alms

How living with the poor inspired action

Nora Tong
familypost@scmp.com



Hunger and poverty can be abstract notions even if we sympathise with people in need. But moved by what he saw of how the poor

coped while he was a visiting student in Tokyo, Charles McJilton undertook what some might regard as a radical experiment to understand their predicament. He spent 15 months living in a cardboard house among its homeless. The American emerged from that life in April 1998 with an entirely changed outlook.

"I no longer felt motivated to 'help' people [or 'save the world']. Instead of feeling guilty about the world's problems, I am responding to [them]," he says.

The experience spurred him to set up Second Harvest Japan (2HJ), in 2002, the first food bank to be incorporated in the country.

It has worked so well that McJilton set up Second Harvest Asia (2HA) two years ago to promote food banking in the region. The



Instead of feeling guilty about the world's problems, I respond to them

CHARLES MCJILTON (ABOVE)

organisation aims to achieve that by sharing information and creating opportunities for food banks to meet. For example, a regional forum was organised earlier this month in collaboration with the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

"Food banks are unique. They have one foot in the for-profit sector because they deal with food companies and distributors. They help donors save money and do good. [Their] other foot is in the non-profit sector providing a service to those in need," he says.

Food banks in Asia face obstacles such as insufficient funding and the lack of infrastructure to distribute food, including warehouses and know-how, but governments can help in an important way.

"The government has information about people in need. [It] can introduce them to the local food banks for assistance and to work with the food banks to create a food safety net," says McJilton. "We look at food banks as a public utility [like] police, hospitals and libraries, something you can access if you have a need."

meal. A dinner comprised of a bowl of leftover rice, accompanied with some preserved vegetables, soy sauce and soup made by heating some chopped turnip in hot water flavoured with chicken powder. Total cost: HK\$3.

Recognising the continual need for help, NGOs here have raised funds to provide a greater variety of foods over longer periods, and in different ways.

The People's Food Bank, for example, offers food assistance from six weeks to a year. Programme managers also devise new initiatives to more effectively reach vulnerable groups, such as students who cannot afford school lunchboxes.

Among its latest programmes are fortnightly shopping fairs, where users can buy basic necessities such as oil, salt, sugar and toilet paper at a discount. It's a way of delivering assistance while striving to maintain users' sense of self-respect, Lee says.

"I was very touched when I saw a middle-aged father pushing a trolley with his kids at one of the fairs. Fathers rarely go to food banks. It is difficult for you and me to imagine what it feels like to depend on other people for food. We introduced the shopping fairs hoping to make the experience a dignified one."

Feeding Hong Kong, however, plays a different role. It grew out of concern at the enormous amounts of food wasted, with 3,200 tonnes sent to landfills daily. So instead of making purchases, the group acts as a conduit. It builds partnerships with food companies from manufacturers to retailers, and channels surplus food donated to grass-roots NGOs.

"[Frontline groups] know the needs of the community. But many lack the capacity to knock on the door of food companies and deal with the logistics of donations; it is [in this respect that] we can fill the gap," says Feeding Hong Kong executive director Gabrielle Kirstein.

As part of its Bread Run initiative, staff and volunteers collect salads and sandwiches from Pret A Manger outlets at closing time and deliver them to crisis shelters. They also pick up bread from Maxim's shops, which is stored overnight before

being sent to charities the next morning. The Providence Family Farm also donates vegetables, which are redistributed to NGOs with good refrigerating facilities.

"The majority of our food supplies are given free of charge by our partners in the food industry," Kirstein says. "The food is still fit to eat but has lost its commercial value during the normal course of business." With a supply of free food, grass-roots NGOs can divert some of their funds to other services.

But food banking services are hampered by several factors, including donors' worries about potential liability, lack of storage space and the capacity of neighbourhood centres to handle different foods.

Feeding Hong Kong's warehouse in Yau Tong and a temporary facility in Tsuen Wan are sponsored by Sino Group. However, Kirstein hopes to secure sponsorship of a larger permanent space of 5,000 sq ft, with walk-in refrigeration facilities. This would allow them to distribute more fresh produce that would add variety and nutritional value to the diet of poor families.

It's been a challenge persuading food companies to donate surplus stocks because of concerns about

potential liability should anyone fall ill after eating them, Kirstein says. However, with help from a local law firm, some fears have been allayed by drafting individual agreements with companies and NGOs. Based on examples overseas, the agreements outline each party's responsibility for achieving the common goal of providing quality food to people in need. This includes putting in place rigorous guidelines on how and when the food should be used, she says.

"With sandwiches, for example, we have a 30-minute guideline between pick-up and drop-off at the designated charity. The sandwiches typically go to crisis shelters where they are eaten the same night or refrigerated for the following day."

Their priority is to ensure the safety and quality of the food distributed, so all items are checked at the warehouses to make sure they haven't expired, packaging isn't ripped or punctured, and cans aren't dented. They also get NGO partners to commit to best practices in food handling and advises them on use-by dates and any special storage requirements.

A few policy changes could go a long way to help, Kirstein says, including the introduction of Good

Samaritan legislation which protects donors if they take measures in good faith to ensure the quality of food being distributed. Another incentive would be to make donations of food items a tax-deductible category, as financial contributions are now.

For all the flurry of food banking activities, Stephen Fisher, director general of Oxfam Hong Kong, says focus should not be diverted from addressing the roots of poverty.

"We need sound policies to tackle poverty, and one such area lies in improving CSSA so that poor people can have all their basic needs met," says Fisher, a former director of the Social Welfare Department. "Giving out food isn't the solution to eradicating poverty. People often fall into the poverty trap because of changes in the structure of the economy, or when they have experienced sudden changes."

So while NGOs tap the opportunity of meeting food-bank users to find out more about their specific problems and offer job coaching and counselling where necessary, he says, we must tackle the problems of social injustice. Until broader solutions are found, people like Chan continue to rely on others.
familypost@scmp.com



Gabrielle Kirstein, with some food collected in one night from Western District (above); elderly people receive a free meal from People's Food Bank. Photos: K.Y. Cheng, Nora Tam, Thomas Yau

