The 99-year-old who can't afford to eat... and why red tape is forcing Hongkongers to go hungry

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Lifestyle

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One in five people in Hong Kong lives in poverty and many can't afford to meet basic nutritional needs

Wong Hang is 99 going on 100. That should be a cause for celebration, except it's long been a challenge for her to get three square meals a day.

A former cook, Wong has survived on the government's elderly financial assistance since she stopped working two decades ago but HK$2,000 a month barely covers her basic needs.

She cannot afford to eat breakfast, and her lunch and dinner is typically a bowl of rice with a dish of melon cooked with dried shrimp and salted beans.

"I seldom get to eat meat as it is expensive. Fruit is also out of the question," she says. "I eat poorly because there's never enough money. But doctors say I am fine besides having osteoporosis and poor nutrition."

Wong never married because she was too busy working and caring for her mother and, having outlived all her siblings, she has no family to lean on.

But life improved six months ago when workers from the Food Angel assistance programme visited her public housing estate in Shau Kei Wan, offering free meals for elderly tenants.
Workers at community assistance programme Food Angel help provide cooked meals for seniors living in poverty.

Now she receives a hot, balanced meal from the charity daily.

"I get at least one proper meal now," Wong says.

According to the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, about one in three seniors lives in poverty and would struggle to meet basic nutritional needs. Similarly, the Society for Community Organisation (Soco) estimates some 300,000 children are too poor to have proper meals - astonishing figures in a city as affluent as Hong Kong.

**WATCH: Cardboard dreams: a day with an elderly Hong Kong woman who must scavenge to survive** [1]

Various community canteens and food programmes have sprung up to meet this need. There are now seven publicly subsidised food banks serving 140,000 people, up from five food banks in 2009 when the government began funding such operations.

They reflect the reality that 1.3 million people in our city of 7.2 million - about one in five people - live below the official poverty line, set at half of median household income.

Some are like Ada Wu Yan-qun and her nine-year-old son Gary Wu Ka-chung. A widow, she cannot work or receive welfare because she came to Hong Kong on a two-way permit, so they live on what her two married daughters can contribute each month: HK$3,000. Half of that money goes towards their room in a subdivided flat in Tai Kok Tsui, and Wu says she can only spend $500 a month on food. Their diet is monotonous - tiny, assorted fish that sell for HK$10 a basin in wet markets serve is the main source of protein. That's why her son hates eating at home.
Many elderly cannot afford to eat properly.

"It's always fish. There's nothing else besides fish," Gary says.

Fortunately, as a resident, he attends school on full subsidy and receives free lunches.

"At school I get curry chicken wings, my favourite, which I never get at home. Breakfast is always [plain] noodles, which is boring."

Nutritional meals are also a luxury for many elderly, says Food Angel worker Lau Mai-ling.

"Some of the elderly I visit eat food long after it becomes stale. They may not die of hunger, but they have difficulty getting a balanced diet and enough nutrition."

Lau's encounters reinforce conclusions from an Oxfam report released in June which calculated the lowest cost of providing a nutritional diet for households of different sizes.

With food prices up by 4.7 per cent compared to last year, Oxfam researchers estimated that it would cost HK$1,102 a month to provide a child up to 12 years old with nutritionally balanced meals.

For those aged between 12 and 60, the monthly cost came up to HK$1,632, and HK$1,025 for people above 60.

The calculations were based on meals cooked at home, says Oxfam programme manager Wong Shek-hung.

Poor households of three or four people usually earn around HK$10,000, and the poorest 20 per cent of families were found to spend 45 per cent of household income on food.
I seldom get to eat meat as it is expensive. Fruit is also out of the question.

Wong Hang, food recipient

"But when times are tight, they usually scrimp on food since rental or education fees are locked in. That's why many go hungry or suffer from poor nutrition," Wong says.

But welfare groups such as Food Angel and Soco find red tape and rigid policy is preventing many poor families from getting food assistance.

For example, all 300,000-plus households under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme (57 per cent of which are made up of elderly people) are ineligible for help from food banks because beneficiaries each receive HK$1,000 a month for living expenses, including food.

But, according to Soco community organiser Sze Lai-shan, that $1,000 payment was set in 1995 and has never been adjusted for inflation.

"So many people just make do with two meals per day, leftovers and food past expiry date," Sze says.

Although the government subsidises food banks, it aims to provide only short-term relief, says Wong of Oxfam. All recipients are entitled to just eight weeks of food assistance. These cases may be reviewed again after six months and if they pass muster, they may receive another eight weeks of help. In most cases, there's no more assistance after that.

NGOs understand that policymakers want to avoid being locked into long-term welfare schemes, Wong says, "but when the government's overall policy fails to extricate people out of poverty, there should be more flexibility regarding food assistance programmes which help fulfil basic needs".
It’s time for the government to rethink and give food programmes a boost, he says.

St James’ Settlement, a Christian charity whose food programmes began a decade ago with a canteen providing free meals for Sai Ying Pun’s homeless, has since expanded to similar halls in Shek Kip Mei and Tai Kok Tsui, along with lunches for underprivileged students and food banks distributing tinned food and other dry goods and later even fresh produce.

Last month, its Lai Chi Kok centre began distributing food to Ada Wu after a church friend introduced her to the service.

Feeding Hong Kong, a relative newcomer set up in 2009, also collects surplus food (fresh produce as well as non-perishables) from 90 contributors, including importers, wholesalers and supermarkets for distribution to poor communities through several dozen NGO partners.

Oddly, while conventional food banks receive public funding (the government contributed HK$200 million to the seven recognised providers in 2013), organisations such as Feeding Hong Kong and Food Angel are ineligible because officials regard them as food recycling operations rather than welfare groups.

Established in 2010, Food Angel runs kitchens in Sham Shui Po and Siu Sai Wan. A fleet of vehicles traverses the city daily, transporting surplus ingredients from some 100 donors such as school lunch suppliers, hotels and supermarket chains to its two kitchens. They turn the donated food into cooked meals, which are sent to about 100 NGO partners to be given out in different communities.

The organisation also plans to open a canteen above its Siu Sai Wan kitchen where the elderly can enjoy free meals.

Food Angel operations manager Julian Chow Chung-man questions the priority the government gives to food banks, which buy food for distribution to people in need, while rejecting providers which create meals from surplus that would otherwise end up in landfills.

Besides feeding the needy, they are also helping to reduce the 3,600 tonnes of food waste that the city produces daily.

Chow says the biggest expense for Food Angel is logistics, with 19 vehicles collecting surplus food from across Hong Kong.

"Coupled with labour and other overheads, each meal box costs HK$10. And we produce 4,600 boxes per day. So our monthly operating cost runs to around HK$1 million. The government should be more flexible with funding requirements."

One way the government could help reduce their costs is by setting up food collection and storage centres with their own transport fleets around Hong Kong, he says.

"With such centres, donors and residents will have more motivation to donate surplus food. We can also be spared the high cost making rounds of hotels and clubs to collect food every day."

Besides big charities, neighbourhood efforts have also sprung up to help meet local needs.

Interior designer Benson Tsang Chi-ho and a band helpers buy meal vouchers from over 40 eateries in various districts every month and distribute them to the needy.

"We only buy from small local restaurants like siu mei shops and avoid the big chains. We want to help the small eateries which cannot compete with the big chains."

Like Chan Cheuk-ming, who regularly provides hot meals to the poor at his Sham Shui Po restaurant, Tsang says that his food-sharing movement is about much more than just giving sustenance.

"We visit the needy and hope to bring them warmth."

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