

THE HINDU

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Strength in numbers: Mumbai reaches out to feed 3.5 lakh people in just a week



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Corporates, NGOs and the BMC come together in one of the largest distribution drives in the city's COVID-19 containment zones

It took just one week of working 24x7 at breakneck speed for Mumbai to prove that people, irrespective of class, agenda or agency, can come together for a humanitarian call.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), corporate houses, the police, the State government, NGOs, mathadi workers and volunteers, sourcing chains and a social enterprise poured their hearts and collated their energies into the Slum Relief Drive, one of the city's biggest COVID-19 relief efforts so far. Together, they supported 70,455 families with ration kits which will last for two weeks, feed 3.5 lakh people and serve nearly one crore meals.

The pace of the operation was as dizzying as the scale. From April 13 to 21, more than 1,500 tonnes of material worth over ₹6 crore was mobilised in the five biggest containment zones: G South, E, D, K West and H East wards.

The driving force was philanthropist Amit Chandra's A.T.E. Chandra Foundation, the ground work was managed by Praja Foundation and various NGOs, the BMC gave out the requisite permissions, social enterprise Donatekart Direct helped with the operational part, while philanthropists chipped in with the funds (see box).

"No one slept for the first three to four days. In the last two days, work proceeded on a war footing," Sarang Bobade, COO, Donatekart, said.

How it worked out

When the lockdown was announced, a few individuals working closely with the government examined data on where most of the novel coronavirus cases in the city were. Mr. Chandra, chairman of Bain Capital; Noshir Kaka, senior partner and global leader, analytics, McKinsey and Co.; and Ajay Piramal, chairman of the Piramal Group, got talking and realised that the bulk of the cases were in five wards. "It became evident to us that the war was being fought in a highly concentrated way," Mr. Chandra said.

They concluded that from a human perspective and to contain the disease, the problem of hunger needed to be solved in the containment zones.

Laying the ground

The 'what' had been figured; the 'how' was the more difficult part. Nobody could enter the containment zones, and packaged food could not be sent as the supply chain was broken during the lockdown. The police were imposing restrictions on movement, the BMC did not want people queuing, and a kitchen could not be set up in containment zones. Because of these limitations, the team thought of bringing in a partner with an understanding of working on the ground.

Mr. Chandra connected with Praja Foundation, a policy organisation that works to increase accountability in governance. Praja would leverage its relationships MLAs and councillors that had been cultivated over decades. "Councillors have an amazing outreach," said Milind Mhaske, director, Praja. "We would get them do the last-mile delivery."

<p>Material distributed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rice: 350 tonnes ■ Wheat flour: 350 tonnes ■ Onion: 210 tonnes ■ Potatoes: 210 tonnes ■ Oil: 70 tonnes ■ Sugar: 70 tonnes ■ Salt: 70 tonnes ■ Tur dal: 70 tonnes ■ Chilli and haldi powder: 70 tonnes <p>Last-mile delivery partner Porter, which mobilised over 50 trucks on a daily basis to supply dry rations in the containment zones</p> <p>Hygiene kit donors Godrej Industries and Oberoi Realty</p>	<p>Distribution of relief (packets per ward)</p> <p>K West: 14,300</p> <p>H East: 17,050</p> <p>G South: 25,750</p> <p>D: 1,200</p> <p>E: 12,145</p> <p>Family food kits: 70,455</p> <p>Reached: 3,52,225 people</p> <p>Served: 98,62,300 meals</p> <p>On-ground volunteer and labour support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A.T.E Chandra Foundation team ■ Tata Institute of Social Sciences ■ Making the Difference ■ Upasana ■ Vandana Foundation ■ Antarang Foundation ■ Pranik Healing ■ Human Welfare Charitable Trust ■ Toybank - Development Through Play team ■ GuideStar India <p>Donors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Azmin and Noshir Kaka ■ Hemendra Kothari ■ Sanghavi Trust ■ Swati and Ajay Piramal ■ A.T.E. Chandra Foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vita and Jalaj Dani ■ Ashok Karnani ■ Atul Nishar ■ H Bawa Trust ■ Alka and Shantanu Nalawadi ■ Others
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Source: Donatekart Direct

Everybody then went back to their drawing boards. “The challenge was to raise resources, find a space, and put everything together. And it couldn’t happen over weeks; it had to be done in the next few days,” Mr. Mhaske said.

A massive operation needed to be worked out, in which more than 300 tonnes of food could be brought in, packed and distributed in a hub-and-spoke model. Calls went out to the Chief Minister’s Office, and in no time, the National Sports Club of India (NSCI) dome in Worli was opened up for the operation.

The police had a dedicated team of officers issuing passes for every person and vehicle used in the exercise, and a BMC team issued approvals. “Everything was set up within 48 hours,” Mr. Chandra said. “We knew we had to break mindsets and silos. We would require collaboration across strata of society and different agencies in the public and private sector to get past this period.”

At the same time, the cost was being worked out. “We had estimated the broad operation to cost ₹7 crore to

₹10 crore, but because of efficiencies, it cost us less. Right at the beginning, we (Mr. Chandra, Mr. Kaka and Mr. Piramal) had said we would underwrite this operation in the worst case.”

Appeals were sent out to the people they knew, and people came forward with the funds. As word went out into the NGO community, volunteers began coming forward to help.

Donatekart, the crowdfunding platform that helps NGOs raise in-kind donations, was the next big link in the chain: they would help with placing orders with their vendor partners, getting them processed in a short time, organising labour, and last-mile transport.

More than 300 drivers and labourers worked on the project. They were given double their basic pay, and their food and hygiene was taken care of for a week. On the last day, everyone received a dry ration kit worth ₹1,000.

The funders and NGO partners took charge of managing the logistics, labour, volunteers, the assembly line and distribution. The BEST arranged for 10 buses to pick up and drop the workers and volunteers.

“Every bag contained nearly 50 kg of material, and we needed labourers to load and unload them. We had to work with timelines like unloading 8,000 kg in 45 minutes. Also, the labour had to be brought in, and the material sourced, from non-containment zones,” said Mr. Bobade.

He reached out to his best-price vendors. In his experience with helping NGOs, he has built a fairly large network of suppliers, besides a supply chain and process expertise. In this case, though, he had to bypass retailers

and wholesalers and source directly from farmers, to avoid margins and cut out middlemen.

Challenges

Managing an operation of this scale required near-perfect coordination, and there were slip-ups: getting the material unloaded, collecting curfew passes, doing multiple trips to pick up and drop labour, among other things. “Meeting deadlines was a challenge,” Mr. Bobade said.

An early crisis came when dinner for the labourers ran out one day. “We immediately connected with an NGO, which opened its kitchen and got food ready for 300 people at midnight,” he said.

The next crisis was when nearly 500 kg of onions rotted in the absence of vehicles and labour. “From then on, we prioritised the packing of onions. We had to take many such micro-level decisions,” he said.

On another occasion, nearly ₹1 crore debited from the Donatekart account did not reach the vendor as it was a bank holiday. “The vendor was sceptical and didn’t want to process the order. We had to do a lot of convincing, and even arranged for money that served as collateral,” Mr. Bobade said.

A few days into the operation, the team received information that they had to vacate the NSCI dome, which the BMC wanted to use as a quarantine facility. The team had to work in double quick time from then on.

It all worked out, as Mr. Bobade says, because “everyone gave 200% to the task.”

‘Blood, sweat and tears’

“Every day, there were lots of hiccups, a lot of blood, sweat and tears. I can’t say any single stakeholder was perfect. All of us had degrees of imperfection, in what ended up being a good outcome,” Mr. Chandra said.

The team had lost track of whether it was day or night. “Ours was a seven-day clock. We also wouldn’t let vendors and all those in the chain sleep,” said Mr. Bobade.

The reason it clicked, said Mr. Mhaske, was because “every person took ownership of their function and executed it.” There were heated arguments, but the next step was to simply figure out what to do, and not blame anyone. “Everyone was in problem-solving mode, and understood the larger goal. The drive came from there. The labour too went beyond their call.”

At the core, a lot of trust was passed on from one level to the next. “We learnt not to ask for too much data or do cross-checking down the line. This relay of trust happens over time,” Mr. Mhaske said.

He also credits the police and municipal corporation with facilitating the process. “The connect was because the local leadership came together to reach the last person. The BMC and police had to follow a lot of decisions taken at a policy level and they were doing it stringently. That was a great thing.”

The BMC, though, said they were mere “facilitators.” The corporation had initially offered the use of a municipal school for packing and distribution, but had to change the venue since a lot of trucks would be coming in.

“It was their (the team that approached them) initiative, and they were doing a good job. We just helped in whatever way we could, and don’t want to take credit for it,” said additional

municipal commissioner Jayashree Bhoj.

Just like the BMC, the other agencies also worked day and night, without taking any credit for their role in the operation. “It was humanity for the sake of humanity,” said Mr. Mhaske.

In the end, there were tears, and the thrill of having come together for such a big purpose. Vendor partners, drivers and the labour force had gone beyond their call of duty.

To Mr. Chandra, full marks need to go to the volunteers. “I have no doubt in my mind that the real dedication and commitment came from the last-mile worker going from door to door taking packets that we organised, putting their lives at risk,” said Mr. Chandra. “These are the real heroes.”

More to be done

The Slum Relief Drive was, for many of the organisations involved, just a continuation of the work already being done, and the effort continues.

The A.T.E Chandra Foundation, for instance, has launched the ‘next version’ in the M Ward and Dharavi, with the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables. The produce is being sourced directly from farmers. The Praja Foundation, in its third phase of distribution, is reaching out to police personnel across the city.

Both organisations said they were helping the government to meet an immediate need. “We are a policy organisation, not a relief organisation,” said Milind Mhaske, director, Praja. ‘We’re not doing the government’s job.’”

Amit Chandra, philanthropist, said this was “a template for governments everywhere to realise.” In the Slum Relief Drive, the cost per meal, per beneficiary worked out to be ₹10, while in the fresh food distribution programme, it was ₹8 per meal, he said. “This is the amount I’m putting in the hands of farmers in distress.”

Link:- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/strength-in-numbers-mumbai-reaches-out-to-feed-35-lakh-people-in-just-a-week/article31513819.ece>