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One teen's campaign to cut waste

Undergrad ropes in 27 food outlets to use less styrofoam and plastic on National Day

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Undergraduate Tamsin Chen (front row, third from right) with Operation Zero Waste Dabao volunteers outside City Square Mall during a takeaway picnic on Sunday. -- PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

By Grace Chua

BUY takeaway food from a hawker centre, coffee shop or cafe, and the chances are it will come in a polystyrene or plastic box. But one person is on a campaign to cut down the number of such disposable boxes used, in the name of saving the Earth.

On National Day tomorrow, undergraduate Tamsin Chen, 19, has got 27 food

outlets - including VeganBurg and Food for Thought at the Botanic Gardens - to use 70 per cent fewer styrofoam or plastic containers and switch to more eco-friendly Cornware or reusable ones.

The campaign, called Operation Zero Waste Dabao ("Dabao" means "takeaway" in Chinese) has received funding and other support from the National Youth Council, youth environment group ECO Singapore and the Singapore Environment Council.

Polystyrene cannot be recycled, and plastic can be recycled only when clean.

While there are no figures for how many disposable food containers Singapore uses, the country throws away some 721,300 tonnes of plastic each year, and about a sixth of household waste is food and beverage packaging.

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So far, 17 cafes and care chains have agreed to take part in Ms Chen's campaign, and some plan to extend their efforts beyond it.

Madam Rajeswary Sinan, 51, who owns Gokul Vegetarian Restaurant at Fortune Centre, said: "We're also concerned about what is happening to the Earth."

Does she think it will work? "We have to try," she said. But filling customers' own containers can take extra precious minutes, and customers sometimes complain after they bring larger containers that the cafe's standard portions don't fill, she said.

Madam Tan Say Ghim, 53, from a vegetarian stall at a Toa Payoh North coffee shop, is not taking part in the campaign. "We can't take too much time, or customers will complain," she said.

Ms Chen, a Singapore permanent resident studying in the United States, held a takeaway picnic with volunteers on Sunday and has been surveying diners since last week about takeaway habits. Preliminary findings from 100 surveys show more than half do not bring their own containers.

The main obstacles are inconvenience and not knowing or planning when a person will take food away. But diners say they will do so if stores encourage them with signs or discounts.

"We might expect that if it becomes a norm in society, perhaps more people would be comfortable doing it," Ms Chen said.

Diner Satnam Kaur, 34, who is in middle management, pointed out that takeaways are not always planned, unlike supermarket trips where shoppers can take reusable bags. "But I feel guilty about it, and try to reuse and recycle the plastic containers."

Ms Chen said she would pass the data on to green organisations to take up the cause. "If I could, I would have done it (the campaign) at foodcourts too, because people eat there every day."

Environment consultant Eugene Tay of Green Future Solutions said the campaign was "a good start to educate the public and nudge people and businesses towards using fewer disposables".

He called for more government regulations restricting the use of disposables over time, especially for the public sector and large food companies.

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We might expect that if it becomes a norm in society, perhaps more people would be comfortable doing it.

- Undergraduate Tamsin Chen, 19

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