# Report: Week 1

Research and Understanding the Problem

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# Introduction

Our overall aim in the Collaborative Design Project was to identify and design solutions for a problem inherent to the post covid world. In the first week, our goal was to identify different problems associated with the post covid world, and choose one from them. This included first understanding the context of the post covid world, brainstorming the different issues the pandemic has brought up, identifying the spheres we would want to work in, and finally zeroing in on the problem we decide to select. It then included understanding the problem we had selected, which meant primary and secondary research. We finally presented all this, as a presentation and also as this written report.

# Initial Brainstorming

To begin with brainstorming ideas, we first had to decide on a collaborative workspace, as a group. For this purpose, we chose Miro. We started with a broad identification of problems. For this, we identified random spheres of life/categories that have changed due to covid (pink) and for each sphere, we then wrote down the different detailed aspects that we could focus on. The broad topics included work/office, accommodation, travelling, education, economy, etc. This was the end result:
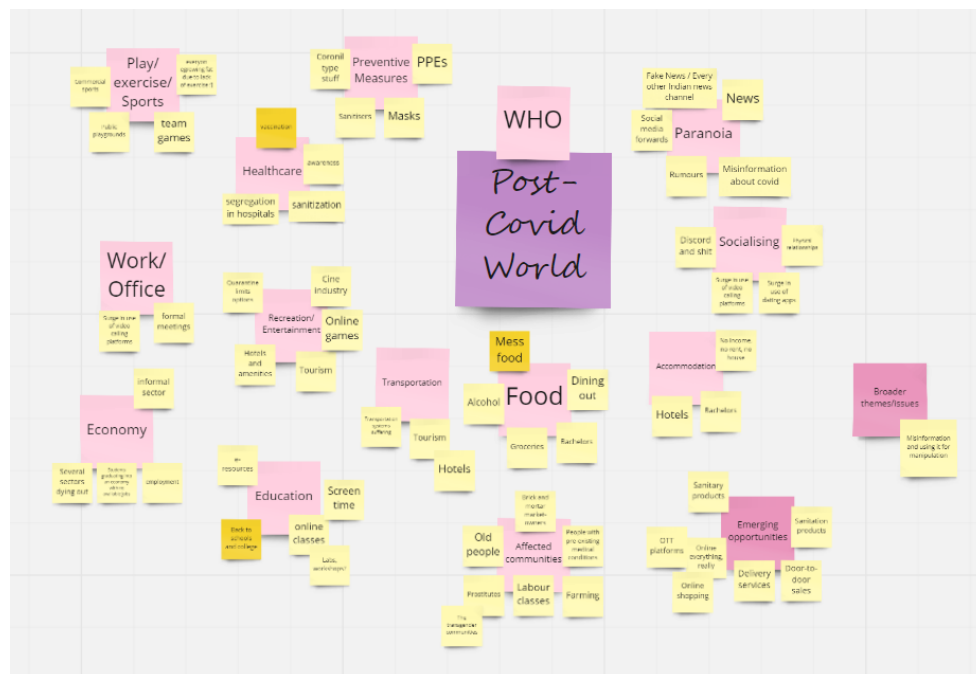
After brainstorming, we had an idea of what we could work on. Our next step was to make multiple flowcharts on possible topics, dividing them into smaller and smaller topics, so that we could have a precise, narrow focus to work on. After making the flowcharts, we each identified the topics we like (by highlighting them in different colours).
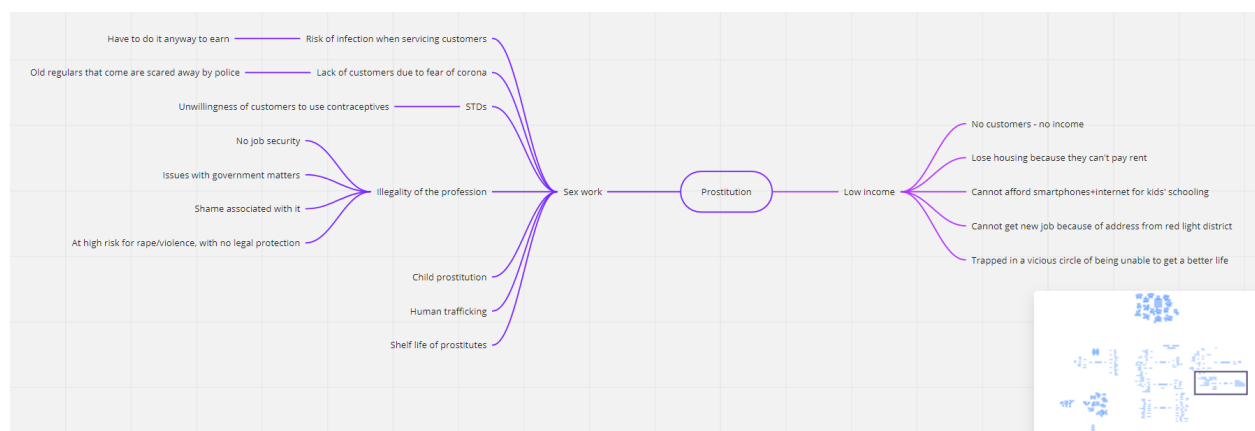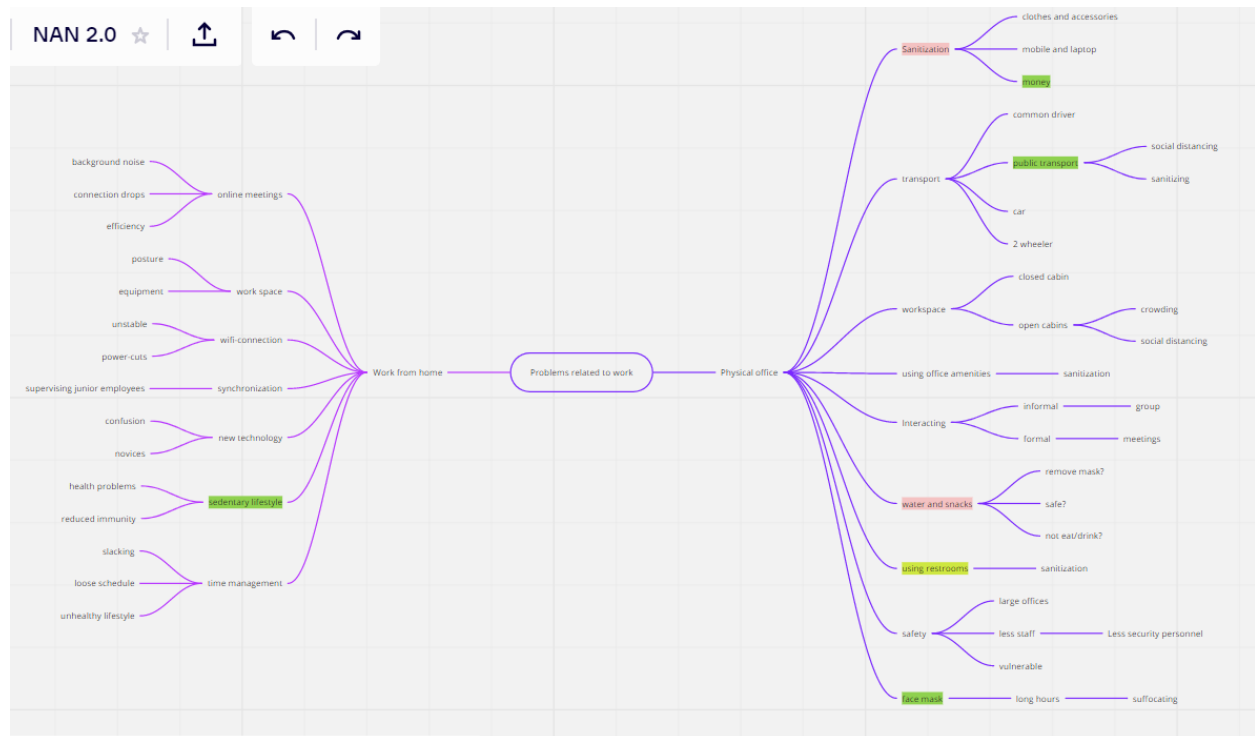
One of the topics our team liked was the idea of tiffins or lunches, how to make them sanitary and safe. Yet another was the idea of working with the affected communities. Together, these two led us to the idea of the dabbawalas.

# The Dabbawalas

The dabbawalas is one of the affected communities of Mumbai. They are a service, a group of 5000+ labourers that work in coordination to deliver home-cooked lunchboxes to office-goers from their homes, every day, and bring them back.

Due to the pandemic, as physical offices shut down and the lockdown was enforced, there was no longer a need for the dabbawalas, nor the possibility of them being able to deliver food. Due to this, the entire community lost its source of livelihood. Most went back to home villages in Pune; the few who stayed in Mumbai are not being able to earn enough for even two square meals a day.

To begin with, we started noting down the different aspects of the problem that we could identify, and also different features of the dabbawalas:

# Secondary research

After this, we dove into secondary research. We went through a number of research papers, case studies, books, their official website and documentaries.

Research papers
- "Dabbawala- Introducing Technology to the Dabbawalas of Mumbai"
  By *Abishek Chakraborty (IDC),  Akshay Narayan Hargude (IDC)*

- "Dabbawalas of Mumbai"
  By *Nishesh Patel (EMBA 2006), Naveen Vedula (EMBA 2006)*

- "Delivering the Nation: The Dabbawalas of Mumbai"
  By *Gauri Sanjeev Pathak (National University of Singapore)*

- "Mumbai lunch box delivery system: A transferable benchmark in urban logistics?"
  By *Deepak Baindur (CEPT) , Rosário M. Macário (Departamento de Engenharia Civil e Arquitectura)*

Book - Feeding the City: Work and Food Culture Of The Mumbai Dabbawalas  *By Sara Roncaglia*

Website - *www.mumbaidabbawala.in*

Documentaries
- TEDxSSN - *Dr Pawan Agrawal* - Mumbai Dabbawalas

- THE DABBAWALA: A documentary film

- A Day In The Life Of Mumbai's Dabbawalas

# Primary research

We then set about identifying our primary stakeholders, who were the dabbawalas themselves and their customers. We interviewed two of each.

The customers were both wives who had been sending dabbas to their husbands and then kids for several years. Speaking to them, you could hear the kind of trust the men of the dabbawala community had instilled in their customers. The women both said that they would return to using the dabbawala service once it was restarted. One of them, however, mentioned that though she would start the service for her husband, she would not do so for her son. This was because the husband's office is taking precautions and sanitising everything that comes inside, while her son's hostel is not. As we can see from this statement, she is scared of the situation itself, and would not blame the dabbewale for what they are doing.

I also talked to two dabbewale. One was a muqaddam (regional head) and the other was a regular dabbawala. I inquired about their daily journeys and such, from when they were delivering dabbas. I found out that they were going to restart the process from November 2nd. The muqaddam mentioned, however, that they would be getting a tenth of the customers they used to. The other dabbawala I talked to mentioned that he had been unable to find any work throughout the lockdown, and had had to cut into the meagre savings they had had.

# Research Insights

We learnt about several important aspects of our problem through the secondary and primary research.

The first thing would be the brand. The work itself is over a century old, and has been working flawlessly ever since, even though they have expanded many-fold. The dabbawalas are very trusted by the people of Mumbai, and are shown a certain level of respect despite their economically lower position in society. Individual dabbawalas are identified by their uniform and cap. This is how they get new customers - people identify them and ask them to deliver dabbas for them. It also happened by word of mouth.

Another interesting aspect was the structure of the organisation. The organisation functions on basically three strata. The head comprises of 13 members, and includes the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, etc. The next level contains all the regional heads, or muqaddams. These are responsible for individual dabbawalas under them, and for getting new customers. The final, lowest level, contains all the 5000+ dabbawalas. An interesting thing to note was that the muqaddams do not earn more than the lower dabbawalas. The seniority is a matter of respect, not higher pay.

We also learnt about the cultural background of the dabbawalas. Most of the *dabbawalas* belong to the Varkari sect of Maharashtra, and the community is known to be a close-knit one, with the next generation often taking over from their fathers and continuing the chain, becoming *dabbawalas* themselves. They mostly all belong to the Malva caste, and see themselves as descendants of Shivaji Maharaj and his soldiers. They see themselves as 'Maratha' people. Despite this, they are willing to deliver to people of all religions and castes, and do not discriminate against anyone.

For them, the act of serving food, or serving the community, in general, is an act of godliness. That is what drives them to do the work with dedication, along with the notion that they are descendants of Shivaji's soldiers, and that lifting heavy weights is part of their duty.

They believe in employing people from their own community. So whenever there is a vacancy, the elders recommend a relative from their village. Most of the dabbawalas come from smaller villages in Pune, where lack of income from agriculture pushes them to get jobs in the city. In the city, they live with their families, and belong to the lower economic classes, earning only a few thousand per month.
The Dabbawala community treats everyone within the community as family. Dabbawalas address fellow dabbawalas as 'bhau', 'kaka', or 'dada', and the women as 'mami'.

# Problems Identified

Through interpretation of our research we were able to identify the following problem areas:

- COVID has impacted both their work and their personal life. Since the lockdown started, they have been out of work till now and will be resuming the service soon. But due to the current pandemic situation a lot of office goers have started working from home and thus have opted out of the Dabbawala service. Also since safety has started to be a big concern in this Post-COVID World, customers are worried about the safety of this service as each dabba goes through at least 6 different hands in just the one-way journey through public transport till it reaches the customer. The more the object comes into contact with different people, the higher is the risk of it being a carrier of the virus.
Safety is not a concern just for the consumers but also the dabbawalas themselves as they're the ones not only delivering them but also coming into contact with so many different people in their journey. Being daily wage workers they're economically more vulnerable in conditions of an illness as they don't have savings or insurance money to support them in case of emergencies.

- The growing competition with other services which both deliver and provide food services hold a big threat to the dabbawala community. These services having huge digital coverage and social media presence holds a better stake with getting new customers compared to dabbawalas who still use word of mouth communication. These competitors also hold an edge in terms of winning their customer's trust back after COVID as they're able to advertise their safety measures better.
On top of that, with the consumeristic attitude of the coming generations, home-cooked meals are losing their value and popularity to outside bought food.

- There are other inherent problems in how the dabbawalas deliver the dabbas which involves long journeys through harsh sun, heavy rains, congested trains on top of carrying the heavy wooden crate and some 30-40 dabbas each on their head.

# Areas for Design intervention

Following are the possible opportunities we have identified for intervention:

1. One of the major threats to the dabbawalas are companies like Swiggy or Zomato, who not only steal the customer base because the new generation prefers outside food over home-cooked, but they also advertise better the safety measures they are taking. The dabbawalas do not yet have such an online media presence, and hence cannot advertise the same. So one of the issues we would be trying to solve would be to help them regain consumer trust by advertising the safety measures they are taking.

2. Another area we could work on would be personal safety for the dabbawalas. Travelling by locals and carrying dabbas that pass through so many hands are just open chances for getting infected.

3. Another opportunity we had seen was getting some sort of new packaging, that would help not only in protecting the containers from infection, but also possibly help in brand establishment

4. Another opportunity we saw was venturing into newer markets. In the post-covid world, there are going to be several bachelors working from home permanently, who would love daily home-cooked food. There are also going to be several maids out of jobs because people would not be comfortable with others entering their houses. It is possible to connect these two through the dabbawalas; a system where the maids cook home-cooked food which the organisation delivers to those working from home.

# Initial Design Ideas

After identifying these areas for intervention, we once again turned to Miro to brainstorm possible design ideas. None of these have been finalised yet, these are simply preliminary thoughts on what we could focus on.

# Conclusion

Overall, the first week was not only fun, it was also chock full of learning. We learnt more about the wonderful organisation of dabbawalas, including their ingenious coding system, their impressive work ethics, and flawless teamwork, than we possibly could ever have, otherwise.

Going forward, we are going to be collaborating with the dabbawala organisation, and will hopefully design something that will help them not only regain their former glory, but also maybe expand into newer markets.