

India: Holistic Development for Migrant Children Living in Informal Settings

By Katie Maeve Murphy, PhD Candidate, University of Pennsylvania; Research Fellow, ARNEC

Key Noteworthy Practices

Employing effective techniques to promote long-term improvements in child care practices and sustainable services for children 0-3, Mobile Crèches demonstrates noteworthy practices in the following programmatic areas:

- A focus on improving the lives of an extremely vulnerable and marginalised population by providing services for children who are typically excluded from public or private social and health services, with a keen sensitivity to the needs of migrant labourers in construction sites.
- A holistic approach to early childhood development through nurturing care, age appropriate stimulation, educational activities, nutrition, health and hygiene
- Comprehensive training programmes for crèche workers include practical, hands-on experiences at working crèches, and have expanded to provide training in ECCD for a diverse range of partners.
- Respect for Community and Cultural Diversity is celebrated through songs, dance and festivals using low-cost, local resources for creative arts and cultural celebrations.
- Advocacy efforts are supported and encouraged throughout the broad spectrum of the organisation's activities—from grassroots community communication to building coalitions of ECCD advocates to interfacing with the government to work towards improved policies for children and migrant families.

Abstract

Established in 1969 in response to the observed absence of critical childcare services for children of migrant construction workers, Mobile Crèches (MC) has grown into an organisation that stands at the forefront of advocacy, research, training and practice for early childhood care and development (ECCD) in India. Over the course of 42 years including earlier work in Mumbai and Pune, MC has reached approximately 750,000 children, trained over 6,000 childcare workers and established 600 day care centres. Within the National Capital Region of New Delhi, MC currently operates 19 day care centres at construction sites, provides support through training and facilitation at 18 construction sites and empowers communities at eight urban settlements to demand access for government services for young children.

MC provides a safe environment for children living in dangerous and deprived conditions from birth to adolescence, where they receive appropriate cognitive stimulation and education, nurturing care, nutrition, and health services. Daily activities are infused with storytelling, dancing, singing, games and locally made toys, celebrating a diversity of cultures and traditions. Community engagement lies at the core of MC's operations, and parents work closely with MC staff and volunteers to spread awareness about key issues relevant to child development and education, health, nutrition, antenatal care and parenting.

An analysis of the evolution of MC reveals important lessons for those working in the field of ECCD. Their long-standing ability to positively impact the lives of marginalised children stems from a process of strategic planning, the establishment of organisational systems to support professional development, long-term staff retention, and the commitment to self-reflection and evaluation to inform modifications. MC's work with the construction industry and government agencies serves as a model for establishing private and public partnerships to ensure the provision of basic services for mobile populations in vulnerable settings. Increased advocacy for the importance of social and cognitive development of young children, improvements to the Management Information System (MIS) and defining a clear role for MC in future permutations of crèche programmes remain some of the challenges for MC to confront in the coming years. For organisations working with marginalised populations seeking to build and strengthen their impact from grass-roots initiatives to policy-level advocacy efforts, the MC model serves as a powerful example.

Background

A recent study of construction workers in New Delhi, India, provides a vivid account of the migrant experience (see right text box). Migrant women and children are often unable to participate in—or are excluded from—state-sponsored health, education and nutrition programmes, increasing their risk for disease, exploitation and poor developmental outcomes. Furthermore, mothers working as daily labourers have limited time to provide direct care for their children or to breastfeed their young children. These observations were highlighted in the “Distress Migration” study, which found that 78% of young children in migratory families were unable to receive the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding during the six first months, approximately 70% of children were malnourished and lacked critical immunisations and access to health care (Mobile Creches, 2008).

In India, for any company that employs more than 49 women, the Building and Other Construction Worker’s Act (1996) requires the provision of crèche services. Yet many construction companies have evaded this responsibility and the government has not been able to effectively respond to the significant challenge of convincing construction companies and contractors to support crèches. This formidable task has been adopted by Mobile Crèches as part of its core mission.

Programme Description

Mobile Crèches has developed distinct modalities of childcare services in construction sites and in urban slums. This report focuses on the day care programmes within the construction sites.

Crèche Set-up

Designed to address the needs of construction workers who typically work eight hours a day on the site, the MC day care centres provide services for children from birth to age 12 or older from 9am to 5pm Monday through Saturday. Each MC centre is usually divided into three sections: (1) the crèche for children from birth until 3 years of age; (2) the balwadi (preschool) for children from 3 to 6; and (3) the non-formal education section for children older than 6 years of age. Using low-cost materials, the MC model demonstrates a keen ability to convert desolate spaces into colourful and stimulating, child friendly spaces.

Distress Migration: Key Findings

In 2007-2008 Mobile Crèches, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation and Plan India, conducted a study of 425 migrant households across 15 construction sites in the New Delhi National Capital Region. Key findings include:

- 81% leave their homes because of “low wages and irregular income in the villages”
- 98% reported no increase in assets post-migration (likely due to increased living expenses and debts)
- 33% had moved from the village, while the majority (58%) had moved from another city or another construction site
- 66% remain at a construction site for less than one year
- Women migrants experience a triple burden of raising children amidst the harsh living conditions and without traditional social and familial support, hard labour in the construction site, and running a household without adequate water and sanitation services.
- 70% of women were found to be malnourished
- 89% of women reported to be illiterate

Activities in the centres reflect the child-centred approach that MC employs for all levels of programme planning as trained teachers and facilitators lead age-appropriate games, educational lessons, art projects, storytelling, cultural celebrations, and other activities. The variety of services that are provided for children across the broad spectrum of ages is important not only because it prepares and assists older children in the transition to formal schooling, but also because it discourages parents from leaving their small children in the care of older siblings.

Nutrition

Breastfeeding is an important component of the crèche model that promotes healthy attachment of mothers and their children, and ensures that children are receiving the health benefits of breastfeeding. Securing permission for women to leave the construction sites to breastfeed their children without fear of punishment from their employers has been a priority of Mobile Crèches and their advocacy partners, and MC works to ensure that women are permitted to leave the site to breastfeed at least two times a day. Hot meals of porridge, rice, wheat, lentils or crushed chickpeas are provided to all the children after six months to complement breast milk. Hard-boiled eggs and additional foods are provided to children that have been identified as undernourished. As advised by MC doctors, children are also provided with supplementary vitamins and minerals. Continuous

monitoring of children's growth and nutrition is an important component of the MC programme, and the weight of each child is recorded once a month and entered into MC's Management Information System (MIS).

Health and Hygiene

Often located outside the traditional catchment area of government health services, the migrant labour camps require specialised services to ensure the provision of adequate health care to mothers and children. This is accomplished through partnerships with local doctors and nurses who visit the MC centres on a regular basis. Volunteer doctors are paid a small honorarium to cover basic transportation to the MC centre, and perform regular health-check-ups for children at each centre 3-4 times a month. They conduct initial screenings for physical delays or deficiencies, provide essential childhood immunisations, prescribe treatment for illnesses and infections, and monitor children's health on a regular basis through MC's Management Information System (MIS). MC's trained community volunteers also help pregnant women or children connect with health services.

Community Awareness and Mobilisation

While the term "community" may seem incongruous with the reality of the migrant labourer's transitory patterns, the experiences of MC have demonstrated a tendency for parents within the labour camp to come together and form a sense of "community" around issues related to the needs and welfare of their children. Community participation and mobilisation to raise awareness about important topics is key.

Staff members work closely with community members to identify issues that may warrant additional efforts to raise awareness, increase knowledge, and promote positive behaviour change. Street plays, media campaigns, and community meetings facilitated by MC staff and a group of trained, energetic youth are among the key initiatives that MC supports.

Recognising that the impact MC directly has on children within the construction site is limited to operations between 9am and 5pm (Monday-Saturday), MC initiated a new component to the community outreach programme in 2009. The programme identifies and trains community leaders,

called Saathi Samoohs, to help promote child development, health, nutrition and other key issues for women and families within the labour camps. They make home visits and serve as liaisons between MC and the community.

Impact

Each year, Mobile Crèches provides approximately 1,500 children with a safe and secure environment to grow, play and learn. By providing services for children from birth to adolescence, MC has been able to reduce the practice of sibling care, which is a burden that typically falls on a young girl who is expected to care for young siblings at the expense of her own education.

Studies tracking the growth and development of migrant children conducted by MC indicate that 71-72% of children improve their nutritional status or remain at a normal nutritional grade after six months at an MC site (Mobile Crèches, 2008; Mobile Crèches, 2010), 94% of children receive age appropriate immunisations, children and families have greater access to government health services, and parents report improved cognitive, social and motor skills of children that have participated in MC, compared to children in other sites where children have no access to child care services.

Operational Costs

As an organisation with 130 people, Mobile Crèches has an annual budget of approximately \$700,000 USD in 2011. To determine the actual costs per child MC uses data collected on actual child attendance rather than total enrolment to determine the number of child days per centre. The total costs per centre include transportation for teachers to travel to remote sites, which account for approximately 10% of total costs. MC has calculated that total costs for day care operations are \$21 USD per month for each child. Currently, these programmes are funded through partnerships with construction companies, private donors, corporate partners and non-governmental organisations.

Noteworthy Practices

Mobile Crèches' long experience in providing innovative and effective programmes for children serves as a powerful example for organisations

working with similar populations. Unique and noteworthy features of the **programme** that have contributed to the success of the Mobile Crèches include:

- **A focus on improving the lives of an extremely vulnerable and marginalised population** by providing services for children who are typically excluded from public or private social and health services, with a keen sensitivity to the needs of migrant labourers in construction sites. Through a combination of direct service delivery in the day care centres, community outreach, and connecting children and families with relevant social services, schools and health clinics, the work of Mobile Crèches has a direct and long-lasting impact on the lives of an extremely marginalised population.
- **A holistic approach to early childhood development** through nurturing care, age appropriate stimulation, educational activities, nutrition, health and hygiene.
- **Comprehensive training programmes for crèche workers** include practical, hands-on experiences at working crèches, and have expanded to provide training in ECCD for a diverse range of partners. Day care workers, teachers, and relevant MC staff receive pre-service and in-service training in holistic development, child-centred education, nutrition, health, hygiene, crèche management, monitoring and evaluation, among other key topics.
- **Respect for community and cultural diversity** is celebrated through songs, dance and festivals using low-cost, local resources for creative arts and cultural celebrations. The labour camps represent a mélange of different native languages, traditions, cultures and religions, as children and parents within the camps come from diverse locations around India, and usually are recruited in groups from their village by the thekedar, or middleman. While the predominant language spoken in the crèche is Hindi, songs, dances, and religious holidays from various cultures are represented within the MC centre.
- **Advocacy efforts are supported and encouraged throughout the organisation**—from grassroots community communication to building coalitions of ECCD advocates to interfacing with the government to develop improved policies for children and migrant families. Through years of

advocacy, training, campaigning and community outreach, MC has established a reputation as a powerful voice in the ECCD arena. Recent highlights of MC's advocacy work include their initiation of a large-scale campaign leading up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games to address issues of inequity, social security and child welfare for construction workers and their families. In addition, MC has been asked to contribute their expertise to several national-level policy initiatives including the review of the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers, and serves on the Working Group on Child Rights and the Working Group on the Development of Children for the Government of India's 12th Five Year Plan, executed through the Planning Commission.

Noteworthy **organisational** features that have played a critical role in shaping the development of Mobile Crèches include:

- **Human resource systems to support a cadre of well trained, committed staff** while fostering shared learning and promoting staff motivation to encourage long-term commitment and continued professional growth. Staff members from all levels of the organisation articulated a strong passion and personal dedication to the mission of Mobile Crèches and to the needs of migrant children. There is an emphasis on creating a positive work environment to support and motivate staff and to encourage collaborative problem solving. Thus, Mobile Crèches demonstrates an exemplary ability to retain staff and to support their professional growth. This is reflected in the long tenures of senior staff, supervisors, field-level staff and board members, as many have served over 30 years with the organisation and have retained a strong commitment and passion for their work.
- **Supervising systems to ensure quality** through regular field visits, meetings and monitoring and evaluation of Mobile Crèches' management information system (MIS). Focusing on the operations of MC day care centres, there are five mechanisms to ensure that high standards of quality care: (1) daily and monthly monitoring of children's growth, attendance and development through the management information system; (2) regular site-visits from MC Project Leaders

and the Project Coordinator; (3) community participation and feedback through parent's meetings, conversations with Saathi Samooths, and feedback received after street plays and other communication events; (4) monthly meetings with Project Leaders and Supervisors; (5) reporting structures and feedback to MC Senior Management, overseen by the Governing Board.

- **A partnership model provides a range of cost-sharing options** for private companies to promote essential care and education for the children of migrant labourers. As the primary stakeholders in Mobile Crèches's programmes are the families working in the unorganised sector, MC's direct interface with private companies provides a voice for the workers whose rights have been largely ignored. The connections that MC forges with the private companies promote increased communication between the company representatives, the MC teachers, and the workers. Furthermore, MC's strategic transition away from direct service model towards shared ownership and eventually transferred ownership to the construction companies, as illustrated in Figure 1, promotes long-term support for child care by encouraging and supporting companies to assume their social and legal responsibilities. MC provides training to day care teachers and facilitators for crèches that are directly managed and operated by construction companies, as well as ongoing monitoring and support.

Recommendations

As Mobile Crèches considers the next steps in scaling up efforts to improve the lives of young children and migrant children, the following recommendations may provide guidance as they continually assess and evolve their organisational strategies:

- **Advocate for an increased emphasis on cognitive and social-emotional development for young children in ECCD programmes and policies.** A strong emphasis on the importance of crèches in providing a safe environment and proper nutrition is an important component of MC, but the importance of cognitive and social-emotional development is rarely articulated. Although observations revealed a focus on the stimulation of these developmental domains through activities, lessons and games, general

attitudes seem to place these domains below physical development in terms of importance (e.g. the emphasis on weight gain and injury prevention). As the MC model may serve as an example for future permutations of day care centres, a renewed emphasis on cognitive and social-emotional development is required to ensure that those key components of the model are overlooked.

- **Recommended improvements to the management information system (MIS).** The current MIS used by Mobile Crèches is a robust system for regular data collection at each centre that includes attendance, growth monitoring, immunisations, incidences of illnesses and attendance during doctor's visits. The benefits of this system are that the information is relatively easy to collect and field staff are competent in collecting and analysing data. Yet improved opportunities to monitor and document children's developmental growth and outcomes would identify children who are stunted and link children with developmental delays to specialised services. In addition, India's new Unique Identification initiative (Aadhaar), may potentially serve to link migrant children to medical and educational records that could allow for improved monitoring of this vulnerable population
- **Carving out a clear role for MC in future iterations of crèche models.** In light of the changing landscape of construction labour and migratory patterns in India, Mobile Crèches will once again need to redefine their role and their operational strategies to ensure that they are addressing the needs of vulnerable children. MC's advocacy efforts and the growing acceptance of the importance of crèche services in the informal sector have prompted government agencies and private sector companies to assume greater responsibility in ECCD services. If key stakeholders are able to support environmental and classroom inputs, health and hygiene services, as well as basic support for human resources, Mobile Crèches could play a critical role in the area of human resource development and sharing their knowledge and experience of what to whom? Is missing. Figure 2 illustrates the various components of the day care centre, mapping out the key inputs required for day

care operations as well as the presumed funding agencies or responsible government services.

India's Mobile Crèches programme serves as an example of a pro-active, preventative and cost-effective intervention that addresses the critical needs of children who have been deprived access to essential health, protection and educational services and of the ability of one organisation to apply passion, strategic thinking and thoughtful implementation to provide on-going support for migrant children. Additionally, Mobile Crèches' 42 years of experience provides important lessons for organisations seeking to build and strengthen their impact from grass-roots initiatives to policy-level advocacy efforts.

References

Mobile Crèches (2008). Distress Migration: Identity and Entitlements. Mobile Crèches: New Delhi

Mobile Crèches (2010). Annual Report 2009-2010. Mobile Crèches: New Delhi

What do parents value most about the Mobile Crèches programme for children 0-3?

Interviews and focus groups with parents conducted across four MC sites revealed a common emphasis on the value of having a safe and secure place for their infant or toddler to stay while they worked on the site. Nutrition was also mentioned in each of the conversations, and the parents expressed great appreciation for the food and the special diets that were provided to the children. Two mothers, each in different locations, mentioned that their toddlers had become accustomed to the hygienic practices that they learned in the crèche and routinely requested hand washing before eating their meals at home.

Web Resource

PowerPoint presented at 2011 ARNEC Conference, accessible at <http://www.arnec.net/ntuc/slot/u2323/conference/presentations/Mobile%20Creche%20ARNEC%20PPT.pdf>

