

## A healthy and safe environment for young migrants at urban Indian worksites

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The study also intended to inform an attempt to come up with a replicable model for creating a safe and healthy environment for the young children of seasonal migrant workers, in which they could enjoy care and learning opportunities. Photo • Courtesy Aid et Action

**This article shares the findings of a study conducted by *Aide et Action* and the Bernard van Leer Foundation to assess the situation of seasonal migrant workers' children in Indian cities. It also describes a model intervention at a brickworks in Hyderabad to explore how safer and healthier living conditions can be created for these children.**

An estimated 326 million people in India are migrants, according to the National Sample Survey in 2007–08. However, while data on permanent migrants are relatively easy to collect, seasonal migration often goes under the radar. Laws exist to protect migrant workers' basic rights to housing and other entitlements, but in practice the invisibility of seasonal migrants leaves them vulnerable to spending half of their lives in testing conditions where basic services, civic amenities, safe environments, entitlements and rights are lacking.

Seasonal migrant workers are typically poor and marginal – debt-ridden farmers, farm workers, landless labourers, tribal, Dalit and other vulnerable people – and they have little capacity to bargain for their constitutional rights as workers. They and their

families are consequently often forced to work and live under practically subhuman conditions, in makeshift tarpaulin-covered houses that are now a common sight in almost all big cities in India. These living conditions are detrimental to young children's growth and development.

Brickworks are among the biggest employers of seasonal migrants. Globally, India's brickmaking industry is second only to China, producing close to 140 billion bricks a year. Seasonal migrant labourers are recruited from different states, and children form an integral part of the labour unit; indeed, there are works which are tailor-made for children. Some engage in making mud dough, moulding, staking and also head-loading the bricks to the furnace. There are also children who work as babysitters, looking after their siblings. The workers live with their families inside the worksite for 7–8 months and return to their own villages before the onset of the monsoon season.

*Aide et Action* is an international development agency that has worked in India for past three decades, on projects such as creating access to basic education and safe

learning environments for seasonal migrant families at their worksites. *Aide et Action's* Migration Information and Resource Centre (MIRC) has partnered with the Benard van Leer Foundation to assess the situation of young migrants and create replicable models for making their environments safer and healthier. In 2013, *Aide et Action* and the Foundation initiated a study to assess the situation of young migrants at worksites, with the aim of making their issues visible, heard and acted upon by government, markets and civil society.

The study, which is nearing completion and will be published soon, was undertaken in seven cities in India: Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Guwahati, Patna and Bhopal. These were chosen based on the pace of growth of their population, industry and infrastructure; because of their faster economic growth, these cities have been attracting large numbers of seasonal migrant workers. The study covered a sample of 3500 seasonal migrant households living with one or more young children at a total of 361 worksites. In all, these households comprised 15,103 people, of whom 47% were children and 27% aged below 6 years. Of the worksites, 56% were brickworks, 40% construction sites, and the rest engaged in stone crushing, road building and laying pipelines.

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#### **Study findings**

Most of the workers come from rural and tribal areas. It is interesting that 45% are classified as BPL (Below Poverty Line) and 57% are from scheduled tribes or castes, given that the Indian constitution has made special provision for the welfare of these groups. In reality, these poor and vulnerable people are unable to access basic facilities when they move from one region to other as migrants. For example, only 17% of the children

surveyed were found to be in school, and only 5% had access to preschool education.

Regarding living conditions, 56% of households reported living in makeshift tarpaulin-covered houses, 41% in other kinds of temporary shelter, and only 3% lived in houses with better conditions. The study found that 90% of families lived in one-roomed dwellings, and 97% of children had no separate living space. Shockingly, 91% of houses had no ventilation and experienced severe heat, dust, smoke and risk of suffocation because 63% of households cooked their food inside the one room they were living in.

The study starkly reveals how dangerous it is for the children to live in close proximity to worksites. Children of 306 households – just over 8% of those surveyed – reported having sustained injuries in accidents on the worksite, including falling from buildings under construction. Not only this, 2% were often abused by the contractors or owners. Being unfamiliar with their surroundings, 61% of the children said they didn't go out to play for fear of being abused. Most of the families and their children reported facing discrimination at the worksite.

The study recorded food insecurity among seasonal migrant workers' children, with 25% of the households not eating two square meals per day; 51% of children did not receive a balanced diet, and went without vegetables, meat, eggs, fish and milk. This implies higher levels of malnutrition-related ailments and 64% of the households reported suffering from various diseases and ailments at their workplace, 58% having no access to proper health care facilities.

In general, young children of migrant workers are invisible in urban governance, programme planning and policy frameworks. They are much more likely to enjoy access to basic facilities such as housing, health care, education, early childhood services, entitlements and security in their native villages. When they move to cities, it is as if they become alien citizens in their own country.

### The Hyderabad model

Our study intended not only to shed more light on the plight of young migrants, but to inform an attempt to come up with a replicable model for creating a safe and healthy environment for the young children of seasonal migrant workers, in which they could enjoy care and learning opportunities. With the help of its Hyderabad regional office colleague, MIRC made a blueprint for prototype low-cost housing with child-friendly spaces. A young local architect was hired to research how migrants lived in their home villages and came up with a design.

The design was further discussed with owners of brickworks in Hyderabad, to find one who was especially enthusiastic about providing decent housing for their workers. Typically, when the migrant workers – most of whom are from the neighbouring states of Odisha and Chhattisgarh – reach the worksite during November and December, the first moulded unbaked bricks are used to construct their houses, with a roof of polythene sheets. Measuring 8 x 7 feet with a maximum height of 5 feet (roughly 2.5 x 2 x 1.5 m), these are the houses where the migrants are going to cook, eat and shelter with their families for almost 7–8 months.

After visiting several locations, finally the choice was made to build the housing at LBM brickworks in Annaram village of Jinnaram Mandal in Medak district. This site is located 20 km outside Hyderabad city limits and has over 100 migrant families from Odisha and Chhattisgarh working in the brick kilns, including 65 children aged under 14 years.

The firm of architects '23° Design Shift' was engaged to plan and execute the project. The entire site for the housing project measured 3200 square feet (about 300 m<sup>2</sup>), to include 12 dwelling units, child-friendly community space and backyards. The living space was designed in such a way that sleeping areas for adults and children were demarcated, with spaces for storage, and the cooking area was in the courtyard or backyard. Two public toilets were constructed. A cavity wall construction method was used, so that

the dwelling spaces would be cooler in summer, and ventilation shafts were provided in between the cavity walls in order to radiate the heat outwards. The project was completed in April 2013. Eleven families were each allotted a house, while the twelfth house was used as the worksite's first aid and medical centre. Andhra Pradesh Department of Education has also started a worksite school for the children in the community space.

*'When young children move to cities, it is as if they become alien citizens in their own country.'*

The houses have profoundly changed the experience of seasonal migrant families, such as 40-year-old Timan Karvel, his wife Padma and their four children, who have migrated to work at the brickworks for the last 10 years. Padma says:

*I used to struggle a lot to take care of my kids and belongings. During summer, we used to sleep outside and my kids inside the hut. When it rained, we all used to huddle inside and worry about whether the wind would blow away the tarpaulin roof. Now our living place is much better and my kids are also going to the child learning centre.*

Chandrama, a 12-year-old girl, says:

*The brick kiln area was always windy and dusty, but the new place is spacious and cool. Before we had no place to play since heavy vehicles were always moving around. Now, my brother, I and our friends have a very good place to play, learn and spend time. We are also now getting midday meals served by the school authority.*

### Towards replication

Regional Manager Shredhar Methar, who executed the project, says:

*We have already spoken to the local government administration, who is interested to learn from the model and replicate it.*

Babu Rao, the owner of the brickworks, adds:

*I was sceptical when Aide et Action first talked to me about the project. However, now the houses are complete, people have*

*started demanding to have them for all the workers and their families. I will try to replicate this since it will increase the output of my labourers.*

Migration is here to stay, as people are pulled to the cities by the hope of a better livelihood and pushed from rural areas by factors such as poverty, natural calamity, conflict and human insecurity. It is estimated that the population of India's cities will double by 2030. Seasonal migrants who live part of the year on worksites are harder to track and reach than permanent migrants who settle in slums – but reaching them is imperative for their children to be able access the basic entitlements and services required for human survival.