
SITE VISIT: Mobile Creches at Delhi, Bombay and Pune, India—ECCD at the Construction Sites

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"Mobile Creches" is a voluntary organization that was set up more than 25 years ago in response to the needs of one of the most invisible and deprived groups of people—migrant construction workers who move from site to site with their children and their belongings with no predictable pattern and with no voice for claiming any rights for help. Migrant labourers move from impoverished rural areas to the cities in which large buildings are being erected.

An explanation of the "mobility" of the creches/day care centres can be understood only in the context of the construction industry itself. Different groups of labourers perform the tasks of digging the foundation, laying it, doing the brick work, concreting, finishing, carpentry, and so on. The labour camps are temporary, its huts makeshift, and there is no long-term stability of employment. Thus, when the foundation for a building is completed, one set of families moves out and the next group of labourers moves in. This mobility provides a real challenge for any project.

There were several problems in starting a centre for young children on the work site. Usually there was no building to house the children, and water was not be available. Improvised shelters were used: sometimes a tent, a hut, a basement, or part of a room. Mobility is the keyword for migrant workers. The workers and their children have to be ready to shift, within the site from one place to another, or to a totally different construction site. Hence the name "Mobile Creches"—symbolic of the migrant nature of the families and the transitory nature of the centres.

In setting up the Mobile Creches, help came from friends and well-wishers. Experts were consulted for the establishment of the organization, and many sources of funding were tapped. Charitable organizations, both Indian and International, gave financial support. The beginnings looked only like ordinary acts of thoughtfulness and common sense. The Mobile Creches is a good example of right action having power and sustainability.

The primary focus was on the infant, which explains why the term "Creches" has been used for the centres. The earliest tasks involved persuading the mothers to leave infants in the care of others, planning the routines of hygiene, feeding and immunization, and getting doctors to attend to the infants' health. Cribs for the infants that conformed to the family's familiar hammocks were purchased. Gradually, the mothers developed confidence in the programme. They would come two or three times a day to breastfeed their babies and pick up ideas about child development through informal conversations with the creche workers.

Older children on the construction sites also suffer from lack of access to school or health centres. So the Mobile Creches programme included care and education for children up to age 12.

From small beginnings, Mobile Creches as an organization has grown, now serving an average of 5000 children at any time, and functioning in Delhi, Bombay, and Pune. Along with this growth in numbers of children, there has been a parallel growth in field staff.

Today the outreach is vast. The recent publications by the Mobile Creches of innovative training modules for creche, balwadi, and non-formal education are evidence of the confidence with which the experience of workers is being documented and disseminated.

The Field Programme

The field programme is holistic and integrates all aspects of child care. Thus the programme covers the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural aspects of child development.

Other aspects of the Mobile Creches programme include extension of training to other groups, documentation and research, and networking with other voluntary agencies in the field of child welfare.

The MC milieu is the ideal setting for the Child-to-Child approach, as children of all age groups live and learn together, and their families are eager recipients of any input that the children can give. Through the fun-filled Child-to-Child method, the physical, cognitive, psychosocial, cultural and emotional aspects of learning are dealt with in an integrated and holistic way.

Since the programme responds to the needs of the community, their involvement in the planning and evaluation of the input is ensured. The parents are at work till late in the evening, and the older children become the guides as well as the inspiration for the community.

■ HEALTH, HYGIENE AND NUTRITION

Mobile Creches provides health care services to children in the age-group of 0-12 years. The children are divided into three age-groups:

0-2 years: the Creche section that sometimes includes babies as young as 1 month

3-5 years : the Balwadi section for preschool children

6-12 years : the non-formal education (NFE) section for children who are either not attending school or are being equipped to join the formal schooling system.

When the doctor visits, which is fairly regularly, children are checked out and provided with treatment for ailments and given immunizations according to schedule. The day care workers take follow-up action and the necessary medicines are provided at the centre. The first aid needs of the community are also met at the centre. The cases referred by the doctor for treatment at

nearby hospitals are taken to the hospital for the first time by a staff member of the Mobile Creches, along with a family member, to ensure that they receive the required attention. Once the parents learn to handle the system, the staff lets them visit the hospital on their own. The procedures for early detection of many illnesses and their timely treatment are known to the workers. Thus, great emphasis is laid on preventive care.

The preventive health measures emphasized include the following:

- Immunization
- Regular supplementary nutrition
- Special diet for malnourished and sick children and adults
- Care for pregnant and lactating women
- Health and nutrition education for parents and children at the centre

However, in many instances the immunization schedule cannot be followed fully due to the migrancy of the labour.

■ SUPPLEMENTARY NUTRITION

A regular supplementary nutrition programme supplies nutritious food items like milk, sprouted grain, cereals, and seasonal vegetables in suitable proportions over the day.

Prophylactic doses of vitamins A and D, multi-vitamins, and iron are also given. Children and mothers identified as having below normal weights are recommended for a special diet by the doctor.

Health and nutrition education is given to mothers, children and the community through community meetings, Bal Sabhas (children's forum), Lok Doot (street theatre groups) performances, and camps.

■ EDUCATION AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The cognitive development of infants receives careful attention. Stimulation is provided in the creches with colourful, low-cost play materials like crib mobiles, rattles, and stuffed toys. The under twos are encouraged to explore materials, sing, and dance and develop concepts through age-appropriate play activities.

The Balwadi (preschool) section is for children between the age of 3 and 6 years. Simple concepts are introduced through selected educational materials, story-telling sessions, songs, poems, and free play.

In the non-formal education section, which is approximately at the primary level, the 6 to 12-year-olds learn by play-way methods, using paper, leaves, newsprint, old magazines, crayons, waste material, and sets of flash cards. These make learning interesting and absorbing for a group

with little exposure to schooling. Gradually, the children are introduced to the textbooks used in local schools, to enable easy entry into the formal schooling system at a later stage.

All older children are encouraged to enrol at the schools in the neighbourhood. The day care workers help the children after school hours with their homework. The primary goal is to see that the children become a part of the mainstream and to ensure that drop-out rates are minimised. By and large, the plan to get the children admitted into the regular schools has been successful. As an example, in 1993-94, 514 children were admitted to Municipal Schools (in Delhi, Bombay and Pune), out of whom 328 passed.

There is a scholarship scheme which provides financial support to children at Rs. 50/- p.m. for classes up to VII, and Rs. 100/- p.m. for Class IX and above. The total number of children receiving scholarships from Mobile Creches stood at 98 in 1994.

Other enabling group activities are also organized at the centres. Bal Sabha, the children's forum, encourages children to develop leadership qualities. This forum instills confidence and creates awareness on a wide range of topics. Bal Sabhas are held every Saturday during which the children debate and discuss issues. Visits to historical monuments, museums, and parks are also arranged, providing opportunities that the families themselves can not.

Bal Melas (Children's Fairs) are held on a zonal basis. A theme is chosen for the exhibition and the cultural programme. The Bal Mela provides an opportunity to the children and staff of one zone (around six centres) to work together. In addition, the children and staff from other zones visit each other's Bal Melas. Parents and others participate actively in the fair, which provides them with an excellent opportunity to interact with the children and the staff.

Children's Camps (one day, overnight or three days) are held, as are Sports' Days, once or twice a year.

■ COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Activities involving the parents and the community, are organized on a continuous basis.

- Adult education is a regular activity of Mobile Creches, which focuses on health, hygiene, nutrition, family planning, prevention of illness, care during illness and special care needed by pregnant and lactating mothers.
- Regular monthly and quarterly meetings are held for mothers. Incidental discussions on health aspects are initiated by the child care worker when mothers come to the centre to feed their babies.
- The Creche workers make regular door-to-door visits, finding occasions for getting parents and other community members together and talking to them.
- Group activities for children, parents and community members are organized.
- In Bombay, the Ksetriya Nataki Mandali, a theatre group, is made up of members of the Mobile Creches staff who have an aptitude for the performing arts. Plays and songs to convey messages to the community are improvised by them.

- Lok Doot is the name of a similarly constituted performing group in Delhi which stages plays for the migrant community at regular intervals. Issues relevant to their situation are selected and the consciousness among the community members with regard to them is kindled. The purpose is to provide both entertainment and education, and to communicate messages in an enjoyable medium.
- Mobile Creches has also developed materials for neoliterates and, for a period of 12 years, an annual journal called 'Eklavya' for community workers was published.

■ PRINCIPLE OF INTEGRATION

A major organizational principle in Mobile Creches, which has been accepted, absorbed, and adopted into practice by its various categories of workers, is that of integration. Integration is at several levels:

- Infants and older children are integrated in the same centre, quite often in the same room with suitable activities for each group.
- Health, hygiene and nutrition, play and cognitive activities, drama, music and art are integrated into the day's schedule.
- Each worker cultivates multiple skills, rather than handling any one specialization.
- Training and supervision are done by the same persons, i.e., the trainer is not outside the system, but a part of it.
- The Mobile Creches centre is not isolated from the community it serves. It has close linkages with the families and is responsive to their needs.

In the management of voluntary organizations as well, this integrated approach appears to be effective.

■ MULTISKILLED WORKERS

Not only the staff of Mobile Creches, but even the volunteer who comes with one or two areas of expertise and some time to spare, will find that she needs to develop a broad spectrum of abilities. The same workers have to prepare the budget, plan the finances, raise funds, keep minutes of meetings, give press interviews, write project proposals and serve as resource persons for in-service training of the workers. These talents may not be demonstrated by everyone, but all the workers are expected to take on diverse and multiple responsibilities.

However, while the integrative and holistic nature of the functions served by volunteers and workers reflected a major principle of the organization, systems were established to enable the smooth working of the centres. For instance, the purchase, storage, and distribution of provisions like milk powder, wheat, and oil, requires a person with logistic skills to be in charge. Similarly, a person with a knack for accounts would take on the supervision of the maintenance of accounts, help plan the budget and learn to deal with audit questions. So there are some specialised roles and duties with flexibility in working hours. Thus, being prepared to take on multiple

responsibilities does not imply that workers handle duties randomly. There is of course, an order, pattern and specificity in the tasks they undertake; it is only that there is a mental preparedness to handle whatever needs to be done. In other words, while roles and duties are identified and defined, a strict compartmentalisation is not part of the scheme.

In the management of such a programme, the training of the workers is the main issue. The next sub-section is devoted to a description of the training that Mobile Creches provides to its staff.

■ STAFF TRAINING

Good child care programmes tend to be personnel-intensive. The indicators are caregiver-child ratio, as well as competence and skills, of the worker. If the caregiver is from a cultural background similar to that of the child, it is easier for them to relate to each other. There is a minimum of social distance, and the caregiver is able to be spontaneous and natural. However, this need not be a rigid rule. Adjustments can be made and are made. The quality of care provided to the children ultimately depends on the warmth of the person who is looking after them.

Ideally, the child care worker should have multi-dimensional skills in the areas of nurture, physical care, stimulant activities, nutrition, and health care. She also has to be a self-confident person with high self-esteem and analytical skills that will help her deal with field level problems and emergencies. She should have absolute integrity to uphold the trust placed in her by the parents of the children in her care.

Therefore, for quality child care, the personal development of the child care workers is as important as the methods of imparting knowledge and skills. A person who is disorganized, has a low self-esteem or is frustrated in life, cannot be expected to give her best to providing the optimal environment for the child.

With changing needs and demands, integrated child care has taken on dimensions far beyond physical care and education. Proper child care involves child development in the holistic sense, and "people management", i.e., skill in dealing with parents, authorities, and colleagues.

The staff at the Mobile Creches are generally drawn from the lower middle socio-economic stratum of society. They are usually young housewives who are interested in working with children, or young women looking for an acceptable vocation to supplement the family income.

It is important for child care workers to have the courage to uphold traditional practices which are sensible and useful, like massaging the baby or singing lullabies. At the same time they should be able to reject old practices that are detrimental. They themselves may have to make the transition from traditional culture to modern scientific culture and adopt new practices and professional approaches.

These are challenges that the child care workers in Mobile Creches have to face. Passive acceptance of a secondary role in society for generations had evolved into the role model of an ideal wife, which they have internalised. These women have not been expected to take decisions

or solve problems and would not normally show leadership qualities at home. Yet at work, they are expected to take on several responsibilities.

They also have to learn to work with others and to share their duties. They need to take an active part in team discussions, and if necessary, challenge their seniors. Therefore, personality development is essential. They have to understand and differentiate between a friendly approach and a manipulating one; a critical appraisal and a vindictive one; and objectivity in work and impersonality. These qualities are intangible, and can only be developed through systematic awareness building.

The organization has developed systems of frequent interactions in the form of meetings and workshops where everyone is encouraged to be responsible for collective decisions. The groupings for the meetings vary according to the objective. Thus there are horizontal groups, where all the supervisors meet and decide on issues. There are also vertical groupings of the staff members at various levels in one centre or in one zone, or involving a cluster of centres, who meet periodically.

The issues that are taken up for discussions and decisions include administrative problems like stocking food, teaching materials and other equipment; or staff problems like leave rules, appointments, routine postings, appraisals, and increments. In addition, the staff are trained to think about larger issues like women's causes, their own role in the family and society and in saving the environment. Their horizons are widened through multi-sensory inputs like role plays, drama, music, games, picnics and camps. These activities help also to give them a sense of belonging.

The theoretical inputs for child care are given through regular workshops and deal with methods and content of teaching, health education and training for creative arts.

The child care workers are also sent to other organizations working with children, so that they can observe and learn and get new ideas. These interactions help in their enhanced understanding of the importance of their work and also in networking.

The objectives of training are as follows:

- To understand the curriculum and the rationale. The teaching of children has to be in keeping with their socio-cultural background and context.
- To learn to work with children of all age groups, and also with the parents and other members of the family.
- To develop the skills for team work.
- To learn to budget financial and time resources.

Mobile Creches—ECCE Components

- A developmentally appropriate curriculum
- Supervisory support and on-the-job training
- An optimal adult-child ratio
- Sensitivity to the socio-economic status and cultural factors of the families
- Involvement of parents and other members of the family in the child's development
- Constant monitoring and feedback to help assess and redesign the programme
- Critical self-appraisal of child care workers with regard to the expected norms

In Mobile Creches, since the major part of the training of all levels of workers is practical, (on-the-job), 80 per cent of the time is spent in the field with the children, while 20 per cent is allocated for theoretical inputs in workshops. The training is a continuous on-going process with every child care worker being trained in child-related subjects: day care, early childhood education, creative activities for children, milestones in the child's development, and so on.

Features Unique to Mobile Creches

The child care workers at Mobile Creches are expected to have many skills—like the ability to teach children through inquiry and activity-oriented methods, the ability to take care of their psychosocial development, and to encourage creativity. They must prepare and serve meals, recognize and deal with illnesses, administer medicines, and impart health education. They also have to learn to work effectively despite field level constraints, adapting constantly.

- Unlike in most other organizations, the workers in Mobile Creches have to work under harsh conditions. The centres are usually situated in remote building sites with only rubble, iron rods and bricks providing the environment. The centres are not very accessible and sometimes the child care workers have to walk long distances from the nearest bus stop or train station. More often than not, since the builder feels that the creche is temporary, the facilities provided leave much to be desired. Even basic amenities like toilets are usually not available.
- Since all the mothers are at work, and are often too busy and sometimes unaware of the facility for their children's education, the child care workers go to the houses of the children to collect them for the centre. The advantage of this practice is that the workers meet the mothers informally every day and learn about their current problems and help to resolve them. The problem could be that the child is ill, or that there is a family fight—any sort of a problem may be posed to the worker, who is trusted to provide a solution.
- Because of the high turnover of families on construction sites, new children come into the programme every month. At any time 20 to 30 per cent of children are new to the centre. So

the child care workers have to repeat the same basic messages on health and hygiene many times over. In order that it does not become monotonous and repetitive, the workers have to be innovative and think of new ways to implement the programme effectively.

- Since the workers get all their training only on the job, and they do not have time to study the theory at home, the knowledge has to be imparted to them in a simple manner—information that can be easily remembered and recalled at will. For this, all the workers, including the trainers, are required to go through refresher courses to have their skills upgraded. Training for content enrichment and skills enhancement is therefore a continuous exercise.
- Use of teaching aids is encouraged, and through experience it has been found that when the teachers themselves prepare the play materials, they understand the context better and are able to use them more effectively. They work in groups, discuss aims, and prepare the necessary material. Through repeated application, most of the workers have become skilled in drawing, handicrafts, and puppet making. They use everyday waste objects like cardboard cartons, old bottles, and newspapers.
- Good quality child care is ensured through supportive and supervisory measures.
 - Providing basic amenities for children—food, medicines, and clothes.
 - Teaching aids and creative arts
 - Community work—theatre activities and meetings

To end this brief paper, an extract from the book "From Raj to Rajiv" by Mark Tully and Zareer Masani (1988) follows:

Offering simple answers to simple needs, and Indian answers to Indian needs, these creches use the workers' traditional love of puppet theatre to reconcile their internecine quarrels.

"There were two contractors working on the same site, and there were constant wrangles between the children of these two groups. We had centres in both of them; so one of the teachers thought of a way of bringing them together and created what is called a wedding of two puppets. One centre produced the bride and the other the bridegroom, including the palanquin in which they were carried and everything else. Everybody got into the act; and the parents started making puris and halwa¹ for the wedding; and the contractor donated money, very much as he would for any other wedding. It was an exercise which the children enjoyed, making musical instruments and picking up the old songs. The bridegroom's party went to the bride's and picked her up and came back. In this process, they all became friends; and the minor skirmishes were the kind that happen in any Indian wedding, but nothing more than that. They really became friendly after that, with jokes about having married into each other's families. Since it worked so well, we tried that out wherever there were two contractors working, or where the children felt themselves to be different groups."

¹ Puffed Indian Bread and Sweetmeats

Finance

The finances come from many sources:

- Spontaneous response from volunteers and willing donors
- Contribution from employers and builders
- Central Social Welfare Board (Government)
- Foreign agencies and organizations
- Fund raising activities by volunteers
- Sponsorship programme where cost per child per year is given by a sponsor.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1999.