



**MUMBAI MOBILE CRECHES - LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR
CHILDHOOD ON CONSTRUCTION SITES**

Contact: Devika Mahadevan, Chief Executive, Mumbai Mobile Creches, Abbas Building, 1st floor, Mereweather Road, Colaba, Mumbai 400 001. Tel.: 22020869, 32457774. e-mail: mcreches@vsnl.net



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MUMBAI MOBILE CRECHES.....	3
2. INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND	3
3. CONTEXT ON THE SITE: AN INVISIBLE POPULATION.....	4
4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.....	5
5. AT THE CENTRE.....	6
6. BEYOND THE SITE - LINKAGES WITH CIVIL SOCIETY.....	7
7. CREATING CHANGE: REDUCING VULNERABILITY AND RISK THROUGH OUR CENTRES	8
8. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE	11
9. BUDGET AND SUPPORT	11
10. CONCLUSION	12



1. Brief overview of Mumbai Mobile Creches

Mumbai Mobile Creches (“MMC”) is a well established organisation that aims to transform child care arrangements and services, especially those on construction sites. Its **mission** is to support child-friendly sites – where children are safe, healthy and educated. This is done by running demonstration centres of comprehensive child development, training community women as well as other organisations in early child education and care, and linking with resource providing organisations to influence the policy environment. Over the last three decades, MMC has developed and pioneered a model that supports the development of the very young child, frees young children from the burden of looking after younger siblings, helps children applying to school and ensures they stay in school. Such an approach – which has the needs of young children at its core – creates the foundations for healthy development and overall growth of our society. When nations and communities invest in their children, they invest in the future of current as well as coming generations.

MMC believes that stimulating care, development and education is every child’s inalienable right, and provides the most powerful and profound tool to escape the cycle of poverty. The MMC programme is a **proactive poverty alleviation strategy** focused on championing the rights of the child on the construction site. The reason we focus on the migrant child on the construction site is because she is among the most vulnerable and invisible population among the urban poor. Currently the organisation aids nearly five thousand children every year.

2. Institutional Background

The construction industry is the single largest employer of migrant labourers, the poorest of the poor, in Indian cities. Approximately 35 million men and women work in this sector and they are largely unorganized. Moving wherever they can earn an income, most migrant labourers are illiterate and only able to speak their native language. Their lives are characterized by insecurity of wages, dangerous working conditions, and lack of access to any kind of welfare.

The children of these workers – estimated to be over 50 million – are even more vulnerable. Because of their families’ extreme poverty and also since their parents are constantly working (sometimes mothers go back to work as soon as a few days after delivery), they are left to fend for themselves. They suffer from malnutrition, under nourishment, accidents, and innumerable health problems. They are marginalized from formal schooling, day-care centres or any sort of support system. The dangerous construction site is their only playground.

Mobile Crèches was founded in 1969 in Delhi on the belief that every child has the fundamental right to security, education, health care and protection. Running day care centres on construction sites for the past 37 years, Mobile Crèches has run over 500 centres in

Mumbai (since 1972), Delhi and Pune (since 1980) and reached out to over 600,000 children. It has developed a comprehensive day care service programme that meets children's emotional, physical, cognitive and social development needs. It has pioneered the first Early Child Care Education ("ECCE") programme for migrant workers' children in this country. In April 2007, Mobile Creches split into three organisations - Mobile Creches (Delhi), Mumbai Mobile Creches and Tara Mobile Creches (Pune). The work, focus, staff and board of these organisations, however, remains unchanged.

MMC the only NGO in Mumbai that focuses on **children of migrant construction workers, estimated to be over 80,000** in number. It is deeply ironic that the children of the very people who produce the symbols of economic development - skyscrapers, residential and commercial complexes - are denied the ability to participate in and benefit from the progress the city promises.

While the Construction Workers Act 1996 was progressive and included a number of social welfare benefits, most states, including Maharashtra, are yet to ratify this Act. As a result, MMC is, most likely, the only support service a child on a site will encounter.

3. Context on the Site: An Invisible Population

Workers on construction sites live in appalling conditions, housed in makeshift shanties and working under dangerous conditions, without benefit of machinery or safety equipment, often perched precariously on bamboo scaffolding high above the ground, building sky scrapers for the affluent. Many construction sites are located in areas where development is just being initiated and therefore there are few facilities of drinking water, sanitation, health care or schooling for the children. In the villages or in urban slums, the extended family would have looked after the children, but here they are left to fend for themselves. This migrant population usually does not get registered on any municipal rolls, is not considered a political vote bank and consequently falls through the cracks. The children grow up, playing in the rubble of the construction work, and are in constant danger from falling debris, pits, open lift shafts, drains, chemical fumes, trucks and bulldozers.

Inequalities start even before birth. Mothers are ignorant about the kinds of nutrition they need for their growing child, and once their child is born, about the immunisations and foods their infants require. Indeed, in India, more than half our women are anaemic, 400 out of every 100,000 babies born die at childbirth, 6% of children do not live to see their first birthday, 30% are born underweight and nearly 50% of children under three suffer from malnutrition. All these deprivations have devastating consequences that are life long. **On the construction site, where the poorest rural migrants work, levels of deprivation are much higher than the national average.** Coupled with the lack of information, families also face a lack of support to look after their children. In a situation, where government services through the Integrated Child Development Services only reach 30% of children in need, that too, primarily in villages, the urban migrant child is completely isolated from any kind of social security or safety net.

The young child then spends most of her days being looked after by a slightly older sibling. Naturally, both are denied their childhood. Low levels of stimulation, malnourishment, and vitamin deficiencies result in slower brain development and poor performance and confidence. The cycle is repeated as more children are born. Moreover, since these children remain uneducated and have no support to enter school; they are vulnerable to being put to income-earning work. While children are not involved in hard labour on the site, boys frequently work serving tea, and girls work as domestic help in neighbouring residential buildings. Girls are also expected to manage all the chores at home. Their low skills sets and low income earning capacity means that they are vulnerable to further exploitation and early marriage. And thus the cycle of poverty is perpetuated.

4. Aims and Objectives

MMC views the following as its main challenges: (1) to break the cycle of poverty on the site by creating the support mechanisms and structure for children to receive stimulating child care and education and improved wellbeing; and (2) to promote the importance of child friendly construction sites among care givers, builders, contractors, civil society and the government.

Providing stimulating child care is a poverty alleviation strategy that has numerous positive and empowering consequences for entire communities; such as improved nutrition, enhanced performance, self confidence, and higher school attendance, a reduction in teenage parenting, smaller, healthier families, and more economically productive individuals. Child development centres focussing on young children are essential to child protection, survival and growth.

MMC sees its role as multi-pronged. When set up on a site, our child development centres:

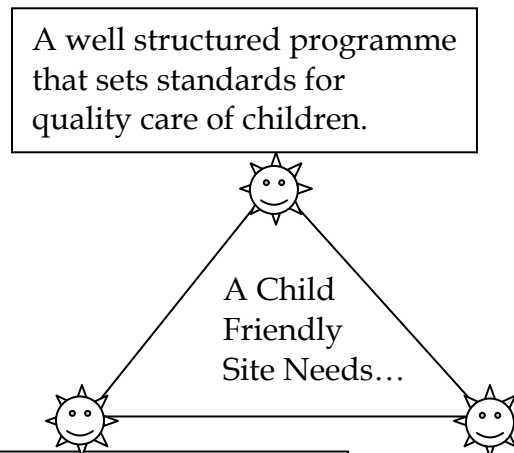
- Support the intellectual, emotional and physical development of the very young child and create the foundations required for school entry and high individual achievement;
- Free older children from the burden of child care and child labour and help them enter and perform well in school;
- Support the working mother who is reassured in the knowledge that her children are safe and looked after;
- Provide guidance and support to parents on child rights, health and care, especially educating parents on the importance of crèches and balwadis on construction sites.

Our centres support the entire community on the site, setting the basis for the possibility of dreaming of a future that does not involve hard labour and unskilled construction work. In Mumbai, MMC runs 22 centres – 18 on construction sites, two in slums and two special projects. Every year we help nearly 5000 children.

Moreover, MMC champions the cause of young children on construction sites through its advocacy efforts with builders, civil society groups, NGOs and the government. MMC's slogan – 'Futures Under Construction', refers to the future of children

construction sites, as well as the organisation's vision for inclusive futures throughout India.

The following diagram represents our areas of work.



A supportive environment where ECCE programme and child-friendly sites are recognised as essential to good governance principles and included in educational policy.

Community involvement and support - Empowered communities who demand crèches and adopt child-friendly practices.

5. At the Centre

Child development centres are set up on the construction site itself, in finished or unused rooms allotted by the builder. This could be in a range of locations, such as a constructed car park, unfurnished apartment rooms, or the remains of a demolished building. Each centre is different although all centres have a kitchen, bathroom, electricity and clean water.

Centres run programmes that focus on comprehensive development that include education, health and nutrition components.

a. Holistic Development and Education Demonstration Models through Child Development Centres

- Children from birth to three years of age are part of our crèche programme where emphasis is placed on creating a stimulating environment that nurtures motor, cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth. This is, in fact, what the organisation is best known for promoting - a model of Early Child Care and Education where learning happens through music, dance and play.
- Children from three to five years of age are part of our pre-primary programme that includes school preparedness.
- Children above six are part of our non formal schooling that assists out of school children to enter and stay in school.

Apart from language, general knowledge and mathematics, the teaching methodology of the pre-primary and non formal programmes includes art, song, puppetry, theatre, leadership training and a monthly project. The curriculum is planned yearly and teachers meet every other month for feedback and support. Centres are standardised and follow the same programme to ensure consistency and better sharing, learning and monitoring. Financial assistance is provided to children who are enrolled in school but require support for materials, travel and tuition classes.

- b. Health, Hygiene and Nutrition – All children attending the centres are given lunch, snacks and receive curative, preventative and rehabilitative care, monitored by weekly doctor's visits. This is a critical intervention since we find that a significant number of children are malnourished and suffer from various deficiencies. Such deprivations can seriously damage brain and physical development and have life long consequences, and therefore, we ensure that they are immediately identified and addressed at our centre. Moreover, financial assistance is provided for serious illnesses or ailments, and health and hygiene awareness workshops are run with children and in communities.

Type of Service or Support	Number performed in last 5 years
Immunisations	10,291
Pulse Polio Campaigns	6,949
Routine Dental and Health Check-ups	19,445
Hospital Referrals	29 Children and 65 Adults
Nutrition to lactating mothers	3,200
Special Diet	2,082
Vitamin A Dosage	6789

- c. Community Outreach – MMC sees the community as the central focus for creating awareness and sustainability of the intervention, whether it is regarding health, education or any other relevant social issue. Through workshops, training, monthly community meetings and street theatre, various issues such as child care, child labour, hygiene, nutrition, health care, family planning, AIDS, substance abuse, and many other issues are discussed. MMC is also training community women to manage the crèche and pre-primary programme.

6. Beyond the Site – Linkages with Civil Society

- a. Networking and Advocacy – Mobile Creches is a founding partner in the national Forum for Creches and Childcare Services (“FORCES”) and MMC participates in the Maharashtra chapter. One area of intervention is to champion the cause of children on the construction site, as well as to work towards a situation where early childhood education and care is included in education policy and recognised not simply as the mother's but the entire family's and state's responsibility. MMC is also a member of the Coordination Committee for Vulnerable Children, which networks with 40 Mumbai-based NGOs working on child rights. The organisation

is also involved in city-wide campaigns and coalitions with NGO partners on issues of child labour, education and health and to especially ensure that construction workers' children's issues are included. Finally, the organisation links with the Maharashtra Chamber of Housing Industries and the Builders' Association to advocate for children's rights on construction sites.

- b. Early Childhood Care and Education Training – to train a multitude of child care professionals able to promote the importance of early childhood care and take this concept forward through other organisations. These trainings include a year long course as well as an extension course for people already working in child care. Over the past thirty years, MMC has gathered a tremendous amount of knowledge, skills and experience and developed an enormous resource base as one of its core competencies. In the last five years, the organization has trained 3850 people from NGOs, government agencies, colleges, schools and other organizations.

7. Creating change: Reducing vulnerability and risk through our centres

MMC works with the city's poorest and most vulnerable. This is the population that suffers from malnourishment, extreme poverty and hunger, deplorable levels of child and maternal health. Through its health, nutrition, education, child to child and community awareness programmes, the centres simultaneously reduce multiple forms of vulnerability and risk among children on construction sites.

The importance of our crèche and balwadi programme cannot be underestimated. Early childhood interventions are not only an essential component of human development but are also a support to universalisation of elementary education and a programme of women's development. ECCE provides the inputs required to lay the groundwork for a child to go to school and interact successfully in her community. It indirectly enhances enrolment and retention of girls in primary schools by providing a substitute care facility for younger siblings. The government has recognised this need in its national Integrated Child Development Services ("ICDS") policy and sees the crèche and balwadi as a holistic input fostering health, psychological and nutritional development of children. Especially for the poor working mother who has no alternative, a crèche is a pre-requisite to health, overall development and education for the child. As a result, we work closely with the Central Social Welfare Board that supports the child under six.

The second Millennium Development Goal adopted by the UN in 2000 was "to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling". The Government of India also launched the Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan, a campaign to ensure that all children from 6 – 14 would complete an education. MMC crèche and balwadi programmes set the necessary foundation for school entry and our non formal programme supports the school going age child be enrolled as well as stay in school.



When MMC surveys a new site, it routinely finds that up to 80% of children of school going age are not attending school, a figure that is far above the city or national average. There are several reasons for this apart from the issue of sibling care, such as distance of school from the site (especially in the case of construction sites in the far flung suburbs), inability to speak the local language, or the parent's unwillingness to send the child. By setting up a MMC centre, children of school going age are immediately freed from child care as they enter the crèche or pre-primary programme. The older children are enrolled in the non formal school programme and their education levels are assessed. On rare occasions, there are a few children who have been to school before and only need some encouragement to enrol in the local school, along with some financial assistance for books, material or travel.

While some children have been to school in their villages and studied in their local dialects, in many cases, MMC is the first introduction to any kind of schooling for children. In Mumbai schools, subjects are taught in either Marathi or Hindi, so children from other states need to be taught the language.

Our programme is particularly important for the migrant girl child. For most young girls of school going age, the choices are sibling care, domestic work, or early marriage. Motivating parents to educate their girl children increases gender equality, reduces incidence of child labour, increases child survival, increases income earning capacity, empowers families in the long run, and decreases chances of early marriage and sexual abuse.

Because the children whom we work with are from all over the country, at different ages and levels of development, our centres follow a teaching methodology that is holistic, flexible and inclusive. A child who is 14 years of age but has had no schooling of any kind, or a child with a disability that prevents her from keeping up with the others, or a child that has been in and out of school for various reasons (sickness, migration, younger siblings at home) are all welcome and included. So while there is a structure of activities and events, there is a built-in flexibility to take care of those that need special attention.

Therefore, for MMC, the centre is not seen simply as a conduit for a child to enter school. It is a space for children to meet, learn different activities, have fun, relax and be children! The curriculum focuses on all round development, which encourages creativity and leadership. The afternoons are usually reserved for recreational and art activities because many children have never had access to games, notebooks, colour pens and paints or clay before.

Children are also encouraged to produce drama and puppet shows on issues they think are important in their communities. In fact, one of the most successful programmes the organisation has pioneered over two and a half decades ago has been the child-to-child programme. Through song, dance, poems and theatre, older



children spread messages on health, hygiene, nutrition, illness and many other issues in the community. Regular *bal sabhas* or “children’s meetings” are held when children decide the agenda for community awareness programmes. This year, groups of students from different centres will come together on a quarterly basis to share their work and ideas with each other.

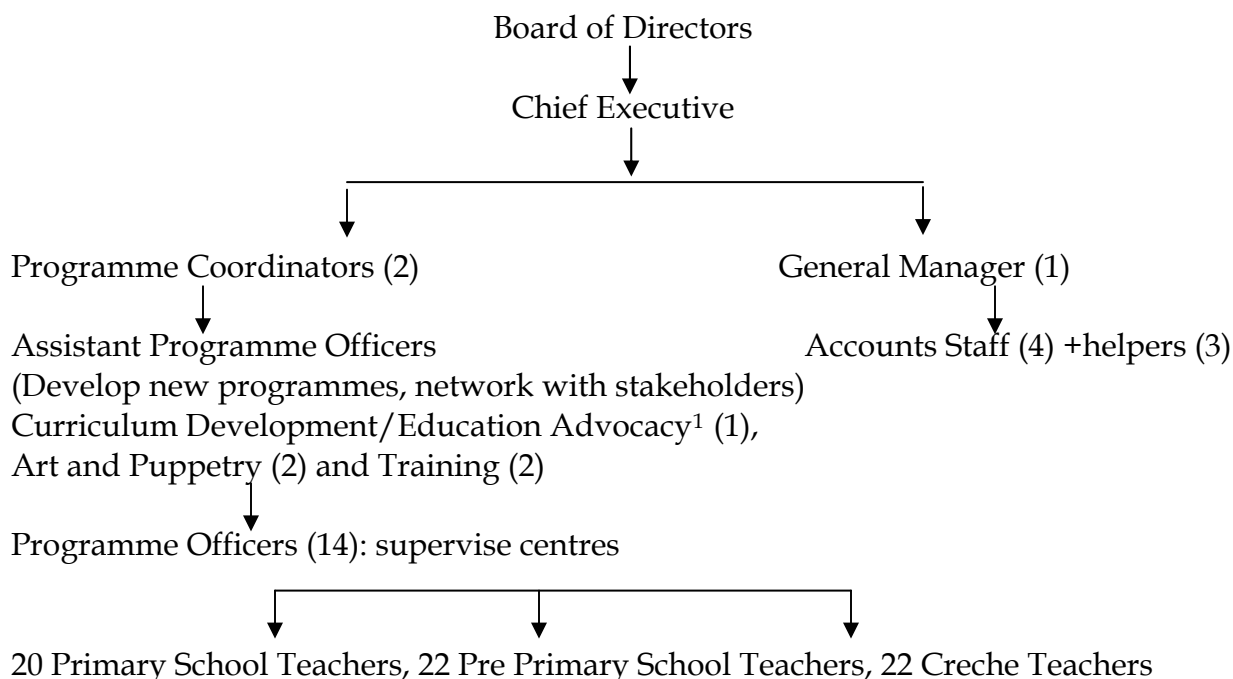
In this manner, while an important aim remains to mainstream children into school, a comprehensive approach to learning is followed. The organisation’s most important resource, without doubt, is its teachers, most of whom have been working at the grassroots for over twenty years. These teachers are models and mentors who, while monitoring numeracy and literacy progress, also create the space for children to explore their potential, to improve self confidence, to be aware and articulate, and to begin to dream of and work towards a brighter future. This is precisely why the organisation maintains low student – teacher ratios. For the older children, no more than twenty five to thirty children are assigned to one teacher.

This “space” for children cannot be overemphasised because **currently there is no alternative to our centres**. Also, the reality on the ground is that 70% of children did not stay on the same site for longer than 6 months because their parents find work elsewhere. There are thousands of construction sites in Mumbai alone and we have centres on eighteen. On one hand, we are advocating for builders and contractors to ensure crèches and schools on their sites. This is a long and very slow struggle, although we do see builders taking up more responsibilities on their sites. On the other hand, wherever possible, and what is our vision and work, is that an expanding network of children have access to our centres and programme where they are supported to love to learn, to be creative and adventurous, to develop life skills (especially in terms of health and hygiene) that are life long, and to discover the joy of childhood.

An exposure to such a space is important for two main reasons – first, it is a critical time of tremendous growth and support for the young child on the construction site who is deeply vulnerable. The case for the criticality of these years and the positive and life-long impact care and stimulation has already been discussed. Moreover, our work with communities produces changes both in the child’s life and the parent’s mindset, which live long after the child has passed through our centre and moved to a new construction site. It is not unusual for parents to postpone taking up new jobs and remain on the site so that their child can continue to attend the MMC centre. We also estimate that a significant number of children enter and stay in the school system once they have been enrolled – especially if language was the main barrier.

It is our fundamental belief that every child has a right to education, safety, health and all the benefits of childhood. And each and every opportunity to exercise this right is equally important.

8. Organisational Structure



9. Budget and Support

MMC encourages developers to pay the majority of the costs for running centres on their sites. Contribution amounts vary from site to site and last year, these contributions covered 30% of the organisation's expenses. About 10% of the costs are also met by central and municipal government allocations. However, every year, the organisation faces a shortfall and has to raise the majority of funds through individuals and organisations. Our expenses are itemised as follows.

Rs 500 - supports a child's comprehensive development - health, education and nutrition expenses - for one month
 Rs 1,200 - supports a child's nutrition expenses for the year
 Rs 6000 - supports a child's comprehensive development -- health, education and nutrition expenses -- for the year
 Rs 11,000 - supports 22 children's comprehensive development for a month
 Rs 25,000 - supports a small child development centre for a month
 Rs. 50,000 - supports one balwadi teacher for a year

Apart from financial support, MMC highly values the support it volunteers and friends - whether it is time or resources. Here are some ways to partner with MMC:

- Get involved and spread awareness about the cause - ensure builders have child friendly sites.
- Sponsor a centre.

¹ Although we have two, one recently retired. We are in the process of promoting one of our staff to fill this position.



- Sponsor an event.
- Sponsor a health, education or nutrition programme.
- Encourage employees to get involved with children at the centres
- Encourage employees to volunteer their professional skills to help Mobile Creches in strategy and planning and developing better communication and advocacy materials.

10. Conclusion

Children living on construction sites are a particularly vulnerable group among the urban poor. Their location – behind the high private walls of the construction site – has meant that they are rendered invisible to the city and policy makers alike. Moreover, apart from MMC, no organisation focuses on their rights, and most children have no access to any form of social or governmental safety net. Unattended and uneducated, they are particularly vulnerable to being forced into taking on adult responsibilities such as running homes and earning an income when they should instead be learning and having fun.

MMC has developed a comprehensive model that works on the ground and promotes child-friendly sites – to ensure the safety, health and education of children on construction sites. By running a crèche, pre-primary and non formal school, the centre addresses both women and children’s issues at multiple levels. For the time the child is in the centre, she enjoys all the benefits and freedoms of childhood. Moreover, this exposure increases her likelihood of attending and staying in school, and reduces her chances of getting married and working at a young age. Supporting our programme will assist extremely vulnerable and marginalised children to have the opportunity and space to enjoy their right to learning and fun. We need to invest in our most precious human resource – our children – so that they can be successful and confident members of our nation and society.