An Indian nonprofit is showing how free childcare at work can help disrupt the poverty cycle [1]

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EXCERPTS

It's 11am on a Tuesday morning in Gurgaon, a bustling city southwest of New Delhi. Hundreds of construction workers are laying steel bars around what looks like a pile of rubble—a project that, in two years, will become a massive residential center.

Most of the construction workers, both men and women, are migrants from remote parts of India who've come to Gurgaon in search of work for themselves and their families. For the length of the project, they will live in a makeshift camp near the construction site. They will probably have to deal with the corruption and exploitation that plagues the industry. But unlike most Indian laborers, they won't have to wonder who will take care of their children while they work. Their children will be cared for by Mobile Creches, a nonprofit, onsite daycare which pioneered in India a half a century ago, and whose relevance has only grown with India's development.

As India grows, its people are increasingly moving from rural areas to urban centers, which are ill-prepared to receive them (paywall). Industrial construction projects are sprouting up everywhere, but very few public services are available near the sites. Toddlers and babies roam the camps under the supervision of the community, receiving very little education or medical care. Many of them are malnourished.

For almost 50 years, Mobile Creches has cared for vulnerable children and their mothers through its community-oriented early childcare and child education model in construction sites and informal urban settlements. Available evidence shows that this model is successful: Kids who attend mobile creches for significant periods of time have shown gains in nutrition, hygiene, and cognitive and school readiness skills.

However, research evaluating the impact of these kinds of interventions is tricky by design. Migrant workers and their kids move around often and, as a result, attrition is high and sample sizes are too small, so generalizing findings can be difficult.

Still, for the outside experts who have worked with Mobile Creches, it's clear that the organization is onto something. As Theresa Betancourt, a professor at the School of Social Work at Boston College who conducted research with Mobile Creches explains in a 2013 study, "the crèche was a safe, child-friendly haven in an otherwise harsh physical environment, in utter contrast to most construction sites."

On a recent visit to a morning creche class in Gurgaon in December, a dozen kids below the age of three explain what they like about their daycare, which apparently includes "bananas," "nice teachers," "stories," and "songs." One little boy gets up the courage to start singing about a flower that grows under the sun's rays. Some join in, others just listen. When asked what he would like to be when he grows up, he answers that he dreams of being a police officer. A Mobile Creches staff member is surprised by his choice. She asks him, "Do police officers only beat?" He smiles and answered: "No, they also love."

That a child could even conceive of escaping the cycle of poverty that had led his parents to the migratory construction industry is a testament to what is perhaps Mobile Creches' biggest success: Giving vulnerable kids the tools to imagine, and develop toward, a better life.

Mobile Creches

In 1969, India was gearing up to celebrate the centennial of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the country's independence movement. Many cities erected statues and monuments in his honor. At one of these construction sites, a woman named Meera Mahadevan came across toddlers and babies "left out in the open, on the hot sand, in a dirty, pathetic way, uncared [for], and to a large extent, unloved, and definitely in very poor health," says Sumitra Mishra, the current director of Mobile Creches. That year, Mahadevan decided to launch Mobile Creches.

In the almost 50 years since, Mobile Creches has become one of India's leading advocacy groups for the rights of vulnerable children and their mothers. In the 2017-2018 fiscal year, it took in $1.18 million in donations, government aid, and interest—69% of which came from private grants, institutional donors, and large corporations—and spent $1.19 million.

India already has the world's largest community-based early childhood and maternal health program, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, which makes the success of Mobile Creches seem puzzling at first. ICDS already provides public health, nutrition, and education services to children under six, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, through anganwadi centers that serve more than 102 million children. But most of these centers don't operate near temporary construction sites or aren't close enough to the sites to be useful to parents who work all day or moms who breastfeed. Critics have also questioned the efficacy, quality, and reach of ICDS programs.

That's where Mobile Creches has carved out a niche, filling a gap in early childcare and education created by inefficient laws, a mostly uncooperative construction industry, and the inherent challenges of working with migratory populations. This could serve as a model for other countries plagued by systemic poverty and struggling to provide quality education and health services to their youngest citizens.

Under The Building and Other Construction Workers Act of 1996, any construction site in India with more than 50 female workers has to provide a creche facility and a trained childcare worker. But in practice, many employers leave female workers off the books to avoid having to pay for a creche.

That's where Mobile Creches comes in. "We say 'look, under the law, you are required to provide childcare to the children of your workers, and the law says that if you hired 50 women workers, you have to have a creche facility,'" says Mishra. "'You struggle to deliver it because that's not your core competency area. Let us partner together, and we will help you run the creche and daycare facility at your site.'"

The sticking point with builders and contractors is usually the money: The average operating cost is about 1,400 rupees (about $20) per child per month—or about $12,000 a year for a center with 50 children. Many contractors and builders are reluctant to invest this much because they already pay a labor tax to the government. They argue the tax should cover labor welfare provisions like childcare.

If an employer agrees to pay for the creche, Mobile Creches offers one of three different center models. In one, Mobile Creches runs a "demonstration" childcare center in a specific construction site. The construction company pays for the operating costs, and Mobile Creches supplies the trained staff. The point of the "demonstration" center is that, after some time, the employers can take over and run it themselves, with Mobile Creches' guidance; that's the second, "employer-run" model. And finally, in a third model, the group trains partner NGOs to run their own creche, based on the Mobile Creche template.

In the 2017-2018 fiscal year, the organization says it ran 72 creches and helped 10,828 children—9,632 in construction sites in New Delhi, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Mohali, and Chandigarh, and 1,196 in poor urban settlements in New Delhi. That, by Mobile Creches' own estimates, is not a lot. Writing in 2016, Mridula Bajaj, the former executive director of MC explained that "there are approximately 20 million children aged under six living in India whose parents are part of the informal labor force, working for a daily wage, without any socia security from employers or the state or access to healthcare, childcare or education services."

While Mobile Creches can't help every vulnerable child in India, they do reach some, helping to kickstart a conversation about the importance of early childhood development within poor communities. And crucially, they have designed an early intervention model that creates a fun, safe, and nurturing learning environment for some of the world's most disadvantaged kids, and helped to strengthen community support for pregnant women and new mothers.

Caring for the whole child

Most Mobile Creches centers are split into three age tiers: A creche that caters to babies from six months to three years old; a balwadi center that educates three- to five-year-olds; and a "bridge course" that helps kids ages five and up prepare for the transition to formal schooling. Because the kids in mobile creches are migrants, many don't stay long enough to get through the full curriculum, so Mobile Creches has split it up into month-long learning themes on subjects like basic math and science. That way, "the child doesn't lose out on any particular theme or developmental benchmark," says Mishra.

The organization's approach is centered around four pillars: nutrition, health and hygiene, education, and community awareness. This means Mobile Creches makes sure children in its center are fully immunized; gives them monthly doctors' check-ups and monitors their health and weight; feeds each child two meals per day and gives extra food to malnourished kids; teaches them about basic hygiene practices; and educates them in a way that stimulates their cognitive and social-emotional skills and prepares them for school. The group also organizes community awareness programs to teach caregivers about the importance of children's early years.

Organizations like Mobile Creches believe that targeted interventions between the time when a child is born and when they go into formal schooling can have a huge impact. Available science backs them up: Between ages zero and five, children's brains develop at astonishing speed, and early experiences have a significant impact on a child's outcomes later in life. Adverse childhood experiences, like malnourishment, exposure to heavy pollution or toxic levels of stress, or a lack of affection and care from loving adults can make kids more likely to suffer from serious emotional and physical impairments later in life.

Learning through play

One of the ways Mobile Creches supports children is by harnessing the power of play. At Mobile Creches, the idea that play is crucial to learning is practically gospel, and at the mobile creche in sector 68, kids play—a lot. The toddlers make sand pancakes in their sandpit and sing songs. The walls are covered with colorful posters that help kids learn about the world around them, like their five senses, or the elements of nature, or the kinds of animals they might encounter.

Meanwhile, trained childcare workers turn these moments of play into opportunities for learning. That's the case for Lakshmi, a project leader and creche worker who once attended a mobile creche herself when she was a child growing up in Puri. She asks the kids to name

the colors of flowers and the sun, and then come up with other objects that share the same color. One child screams out the color blue, and the rest of the group jumps in to say "water," "fish," and "the sky." Lakshmi rewards them with a smile. The teachers at Mobile Creches have time to get to know their students and celebrate their accomplishments—a luxury that overworked, underpaid, undertrained, and frequently absent anganwadi workers can ill afford.

Many mothers—and it's virtually only ever mothers who come pick up or drop off their kids at the centers—say that their kids enjoy going to the creche and playing with their teachers. They also say they've seen a change in the way their children interact with adults. Lakshmi says the kids are "more outgoing" and speak Hindi more confidently. The children who have attended the creche for longest certainly seem more open and outspoken than their peers.

Does it work?

Creche workers are trained to measure and track kids' progress over time, and Mobile Creches says the data shows that attending a work-site creche program has an impact on a child's health, school readiness, and life skills. According to figures provided by the organization, "67% of the children who stayed for a minimum period of four months improved their nutritional status" and "91% of children staying for a minimum of two months were age-appropriately immunized."

Mobile Creches provided Quartz with a recent, unpublished evaluation of its work-site programming, conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) at Ambedkar University in New Delhi. In the study, which was funded by Mobile Creches, CECED visited 11 construction site creches and assessed 79 children between one and five years old on a number of factors, using tools like the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and the World Bank's School Readiness Instrument (SRI). The children were separated into an intervention group of kids who attended a mobile creche for six months or more and a control group of those who attended a mobile creche for less than a month. The group was also split according to age into balwadi (three to five) and creche (below three).

The researchers at CECED found that kids in the intervention group scored better than their peers in the control group in most indicators measured. Kids who attended a mobile creche for more than six months were more likely to be properly immunized and to have better problem solving, communication, and fine motor skills. They were also much less likely to be severely stunted and severely malnourished. But the researchers found no difference in social and emotional skills between both groups at the balwadi level, and no difference in gross motor skills between both groups at the creche level.

The study suffers from a small sample size and high attrition, so generalizing any of these findings is almost impossible. That's the case of many studies looking at Mobile Creches' work, which is why the group often resort to anecdotal success stories to discuss its impact. Those stories, while often heartwarming, have very little scientific value. But they do highlight how the community views Mobile Creches programming. For example, to fill the gaps in the data, CECED supplemented their research with focus group discussions with parents and childcare workers. These discussions uncovered one crucial point: "Community communication is the backbone of the success of the program." That's because Mobile Creches understands that caring for children in a holistic way means also helping the caregivers who largely shape kids' early experiences.

It takes a village

Supportive caregivers have the power to serve as a buffer for kids whose adverse childhood experiences expose them to chronic and elevated levels of stress. Those buffering relationships don't have to be parents—they can be a grandparent or a close mentor, for example. In many countries, tight-knit communities serve as a built-in protection system for vulnerable kids.

Mobile Creches understands that communities are crucial in helping children adapt to stressful or adverse situations, such as frequent migration or malnutrition. In every settlement the organization works in, trained childcare workers serve as a kind of community liaison under what's known as the Community Engagement Plan (CEP). Every day, the worker in charge of the creche goes out into the construction workers' camps and checks up on pregnant or sick women, chats with community members about their work, and advocates for better parenting and health-care practices.

At every site, Mobile Creches forms local community groups called saathi samuh, who push employers for better child-care support and create safe spaces where women can talk about issues that affect them, like domestic violence or substance abuse. And this year, the organization is also piloting a new model of community-run creches.

At the Sector 68 construction site, Lakshmi, the creche worker, tours the workers' settlement, which is made up of several hundred brick or tin structures called jhuggis, for more than an hour every day. On a recent Tuesday, she checks on about 10 pregnant women, asking them whether they've had their monthly health visits. She encourages new mothers to breastfeed their babies exclusively for the first six months, based on the recommendations of most major medical bodies.

Elsewhere, she chastises a man for not taking his sick wife to the hospital; he says it's too expensive, and she explains how he can sign up for the government's health care smart card program. She tells an "auntie" not to make jokes about smoking in front of children—"they absorb everything," she explains—and asks Puja, a young girl who was at the creche that morning, why she isn't back there yet. The answer, it turns out, is that Puja's mother has told her she needs her to stay at home that afternoon to care for her younger brother.

Rilakynti Kharwanlang, a project coordinator at Mobile Creches, says that's a widespread problem. "It's very difficult to break the cycle," she says. "Especially when it's an older girl, the parents think she should…do everything."

Women like Lakshmi are at the heart of the Mobile Creches model. They take the time to integrate themselves into these communities; learn about people's problems; and support them in their role as parents. The child-care workers know everyone's names. They know

whose child is sick, whose husband drinks too much, and where gaps exist in health-care coverage. When doctors come to the construction site every month as part of the government's public health drive, the child-care workers know which pregnant women need monitoring and prenatal care, and which kids have been sick a lot lately.

"Mobile Creches has an important community engagement approach," says Betancourt. "They recognize that to be successful with what they're trying to achieve with the program, they have to have multi-level engagement with communities, with families, with key players, with the leadership at work sites."

Challenges

Mobile Creches is omnipresent in the field of early childhood in India. But that doesn't mean everyone is a fan. The organization is often criticized for overlapping with the ICDS scheme, which the government presents as "the foremost symbol of the country's commitment to its children and nursing mothers." But critics on the ground say that while ICDS is great on paper, it often under-delivers in practice. Mobile Creches says it's not trying to step on the government's toes: As Kharwanlang explains, "We understand that the government's work is the government's work." But it often has to fill in the gaps, especially around construction sites, where anganwadi centers are sparse.

Mobile Creches also struggles to hire, train, and retain qualified childcare professionals. "In the country, there is no policy that recognizes childcare work as professionally-qualified worker," says Mishra. "So there is no accreditation, there is no recognition, there is no wages benchmarking for them, which is why it's not an attractive career choice for young people."

In March 2019, Mobile Creches will celebrate its 50th anniversary. They believe they have found a model that helps vulnerable kids have better lives; now, they want to focus on improving the network they've created. Mishra says that effort starts with better data collection and a focus on diversity and inclusion. "We want to see how many children with disabilities are there in our program," she says. "We want to see, when we say 100% coverage in the community, have we got the disabled child? Have we got the sick child? Have we got all girl children? Have we got the Dalit and Adivasi child into our communities?" (Dalits are the caste called "untouchables"; the Adivasi are tribes of indigenous people in India who have historically been discriminated against.)

But Mobile Creches' largest, and most ambitious, goal is to have its model scale up on its own. They are looking to increase the number of employer-run creches, encourage more NGOs to open creches, focus on improving their existing centers, and push the government to improve anganwadi centers and invest in the early childhood workforce. In doing so, they are leading a movement to disrupt the cycle of poverty by providing India's most vulnerable kids with high-quality, free, and onsite childcare options.

What they don't want to do, however, is become a crutch for a fledgling early-care industry. "The vision…is not to be the default program service provider at all construction sites in India," says Mishra. "Because Mobile Creches believes that it's an entitlement of the child that needs to be provided by the employer, with the support of the government."

The group's greatest success would be to render itself obsolete as a provider, instead focusing only as advisor and advocate for India's most vulnerable kids.

Mobile Creches' raison d'être started with a simple observation, explains Kharwanlang: "As a nation, our priorities have never been children. Especially the young ones." Now, she says she sees a change in her daily field work with builders, child-care workers, and the government: "When I look at people where we work now, they understand."

But change will be slow in a growing and opaque construction industry known for violating the fundamental rights of migrant workers and their families. And Mobile Creches is just one small organization working in a country where the scope of the problem is enormous. For migrant workers, Kharwanlang says, other things are more pressing than their child's development: "Even if they want to take care of their children," she says, "you have to fight for your survival."

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