

# The shipping containers tackling South Africa's chronic childcare shortages <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Access to affordable childcare is a worldwide problem, particularly so in South Africa where just 16% of all children from birth to age four receives care from a government-regulated programme, according to Unicef.

Matchbox Africa is striving to reverse this shortfall. The Cape Town-based organisation installs repurposed shipping containers in non-white township communities to provide permanent spaces for existing community-run creches. But, unlike other charity projects entering a community and starting from scratch Matchbox taps into an established community network of local caretakers, explains project manager Verena Grips.

"There are so many people who do fantastic jobs working for the white communities in Cape Town, but their own kids are growing up in an environment that is completely un-resourced," says Grips. "However, in these communities there are also many clever and helpful women, who use their skills as mothers to start locally-run creches to look after unsupervised children while their parents work."

Grips says that mothers working outside of the townships generally pay these caretakers 150 rand (£8) per month, but the facilities the children spend time in tend to be improvised housing structures or shacks — often cramped, unsafe and lacking basic amenities like electricity and water. By providing a formalised, resourced, and safe space, Matchbox is strengthening the physical environment, which in turn bolsters the care that's already being provided. In addition, they partner with other local support services to train caretakers in skills such as financial planning, English language, nutrition, education and how to register their business properly.

When it comes to the containers, permanence matters. In South Africa's townships, property is notoriously fluid, improvised and uncertain. As the headlines of local papers frequently report, forced evictions and mass clearances plague these communities.

Grips says that by partnering with local people and working out what will work in the long-term before installation, the centres take on an elevated meaning and begin to serve as a permanent community hub. This improves local safety by increasing social activity around these areas and means that children feel more comfortable knowing they can rely on the space to be there for them.

"Things are very dynamic in the township setting — they change all the time, so people always adjust, there's always movement," says Grips. "We hand it over and the space grows and develops into whatever people feel is necessary. After a few months we see surrounding spaces have been built in ways we couldn't have imagined. It's a very interesting process for a designer to just let go and see where the thing carries itself."

While Matchbox is a nonprofit, the work they do alongside their partner organisations are enabling a myriad of sustainable small businesses and expressions of entrepreneurship. Carers can rent the spaces out for after-hours functions such as weddings or funerals; they can run small bakeries using the oven; they can hire and train women to make school uniforms using sewing machines bought using cash surpluses; and they can provide a well-lit space for older children to do their homework.

Mavis Ngcongolo, the principal at Matchbox's pilot project, Injongo, says that being consulted by Matchbox before the project was built has helped the space serve the community's needs.

"Being part of the process and taking ownership has been for the benefit of us all and helped create a sense of pride and identity," says Ngcongolo. "Parents from other neighbourhoods try to get their kids into my creche and it provides opportunities to the youth for after-school activities, community meetings and special occasions."

Matchbox is rolling out two more centres in Cape Town townships this year, with plans for more in 2016. While they have far to go before they can fill the acute demand for adequate childcare spaces, their approach is proving that a handful of resources is all it takes to spur further opportunity. While Matchbox retains ownership of the shipping containers, Grips says the main focus is for them to provide business opportunities for the future of the community.

“We help the ladies with maintenance and we make sure [they’re] not being used for purposes that aren’t good for the community,” says Grips. “But it’s important that these women have a financial plan for their future otherwise the project won’t work in the long term.”

-reprinted from The Guardian

**Region:** Africa <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** spaces <sup>[4]</sup>

availability <sup>[5]</sup>

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