As India rapidly urbanises, more and more parents are migrating from villages to live and work on construction sites in the country’s growing cities – and bringing their young children with them. This article describes how the New Delhi-based organisation Mobile Crèches is scaling-up provision of early childhood care and education services to these children, working in three-way partnership to persuade construction companies to support services and train NGOs to provide them.

In 1969, when Mobile Crèches began, very few people knew anything about the lives of young children who were brought along as their parents migrated to work on urban construction sites. That included the founders of Mobile Crèches. We observed that these children were living in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, and missing out on the fundamental requirements of childhood – care, nurturing, protection, and opportunities to develop. But we learned only gradually how to address this, through consulting experts in paediatrics, pedagogy and other relevant disciplines.

By the 1980s, we had developed a ‘mobile crèche’ model that we implemented on the work sites of willing employers – a comprehensive programme comprising health, nutrition, learning, care and nurturing. Over the years we gained experience not only in the business and nuances of crèche management, but also in dealing with the construction industry. We began to understand that we would need to intervene at the law and policy level if we wanted change at a macro level. We saw there were gaps in the laws: working conditions were exploitative; lack of portability of identity, combined with the breakdown of traditional community support networks, deprived the children of basic services – healthcare, childcare, schooling – which would have been possible at their place of origin.

In 1996, the Government of India passed the Building and Other Construction Workers’ Act. Among other things, this provided for the collection of a ‘cess’ – a levy of 1–2% of project turnover, to fund specific initiatives for workers and their children. However, getting a law on the statute books is not the same as getting it implemented in practice. As we continued for several years to press the government for effective implementation, we worked with construction companies to persuade them to take on partial responsibility for managing the crèches.

Mridula Bajaj
Executive Director, Mobile Crèches, New Delhi, India

Sonia Sharma
Senior Manager – Programme, Mobile Crèches, New Delhi, India
This approach had some success. Some companies have, over the years, progressed to providing better infrastructure facilities for crèches, facilities for working parents – such as breaks for breastfeeding – and even responsibility for provision of supplementary nutrition. However, they needed significant technical support and hand holding from Mobile Crèches, and it became clear that most would rather outsource the activities needed to meet their legal mandate. We realised that to be more effective in scaling up, we needed a different approach.

Tripartite engagement

With the support of Grand Challenges Canada’s Saving Brains initiative, we have embarked on an approach of ‘tripartite engagement’ in which Mobile Crèches develops two kinds of partnership: negotiating with developers for space, infrastructure and partial finance for the establishment of childcare centres at their project sites; and training credible NGOs to run the programme, with monitoring, financial and other technical support. Together, the intention is to build both demand for and supply of early childhood services at construction sites.

Figure 1 Tripartite engagement – levers to scale (NGOs and builder partners)
In terms of negotiating with developers, Mobile Crèches can build on 47 years of experience of the best ways to develop and maintain relationships. We have found that a non-confrontational approach works best to keep the conversation going with construction companies. We can also help construction companies to see the business incentive for embracing their legal responsibilities. If children are being looked after in a crèche while their parents are working, they are less likely to have an accident on the work site – and, for the company, fewer accidents means fewer costly claims for compensation. We have also found that parents work more productively if they know their children are safe during working hours.
In terms of training NGOs, we wanted to find credible organisations with deep commitment to the rights of young children, who could act as future advocates and practitioners. We conducted a due-diligence process on their financial, legal and institutional capacities, backed up by field visits, to ensure the right selection. Internal financial and monitoring systems were put in place to enable routing of funds.

Many of the selected NGOs have gaps in terms of their organisational capacities and internal systems. In some cases commitment at the leadership level makes all the difference, as very few have previously worked in the field of early childhood. It takes time to make connections between early childhood and their area of expertise – such as health or formal education – and widen their original mandate. Quarterly collective meetings, where efforts are made to identify and solve problems, have succeeded in building a sense of equal partnership.

**Transferring business operations**

To transfer our business operations – our skills, knowledge and systems – to these NGOs, we planned a strategy to develop their capacities. For the first six months, we provided intensive supervision and hand holding during on-the-job training for crèche supervisors. Thereafter we conducted monthly monitoring sessions, and supervision as required by the NGOs’ capability – it is not a case of ‘one size fits all’, with weaker NGOs needing more frequent supervisory visits than stronger ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare workers</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th>NGO heads</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 days</td>
<td>56 days</td>
<td>14 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 12 days pre-service training</td>
<td>• 4 days ECCD* orientation</td>
<td>• 4 days ECCD orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 12 days incremental training</td>
<td>• 12 days pre-service training</td>
<td>• 10 days subject-specific training on supportive supervision; strengthening community awareness; organisational systems; governance, etc.</td>
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* early childhood care and development

Since beginning the process we have learned a lot, enabling us to fine-tune the training process (set out in the Table 1) through changes to modules and selection criteria. A particular challenge has been selecting candidates from local communities to train as childcare workers, as we found many trainees dropping out after the first few days of training when they realised what it meant to be responsible for the personal care needs of under-3s.
So far we have trained eight NGOs, who are operating 22 centres across four states and employing 120 workers. The quality of the daycare programmes run by NGOs is being assessed using the Early Childhood Education Quality Assessment Scale, which includes domains of infrastructure, physical setting, meals, naps, learning/play aids, classroom management and organisation, personal care, hygiene and habit formation, language and reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, activities for social development and disposition of childcare workers.

All the NGO-run centres have scored on the higher end of the scale, with most activities deemed by the observers to be age-appropriate and the daily schedule provided by Mobile Crèches largely being followed. Nonetheless, some useful information was learned to inform future development of the programme, notably that some construction companies are not providing infrastructure conducive to outdoor activities; some NGO supervisors are not making enough effort to ensure time is allowed for rest or naps, which is important for healthy development; and there is scope to better engage children in a manner which enhances their thinking and skills.

Business development plan

Mobile Crèches is committed to going beyond creating 'best practices' on a small scale and scaling up by building relationships, capacities and platforms. One measure of success in the long term will be the extent to which the NGOs we train, having built their capacities to manage crèches and negotiate with the building industry, are able to join us in future as advocates to the stakeholders whose support is necessary to scale up further. These include the building companies, financial institutions, industry standard-setting bodies such as the Confederation of Real Estate Developers Association of India, state authorities responsible for development, and the Ministry of Labour to ensure compliance and monitor use of welfare funds.

Our training of trainers programme will in the long run create a ripple effect through other service providers. We will also enhance the fundraising and negotiation capacities of the NGOs to negotiate with new developers, helping them to become independently able to initiate, run, manage and financially sustain initiatives at new construction sites.

Beyond the construction industry, the model may be replicated in other vulnerable situations where worker settlements cluster around the workplace and the employer is identifiable.
It is estimated that there are approximately 20 million children aged under 6 living in India whose parents are part of the informal labour force, working for a daily wage, without any social security from employers or the state or access to healthcare, childcare or education services. Without action, these children will in turn grow up to be unskilled labourers, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty. Addressing this situation is not only an issue of rights but of stopping the squandering of the nation’s precious human resource and social capital.

Reference