

Strengthening the care environment through the Babies Second Home Project

The Foundation for Slum Child Care, Bangkok, Thailand

After a year of separation from her husband, who had migrated to Bangkok to work as a factory worker, Mu left her home in rural Sri Saket with her 2-year-old daughter to join him, following in the footsteps of millions before her. The relative poverty and deprivation in the rural provinces and the chance of better opportunities in Bangkok are the primary motivations and ingredients of the dream for a better life, not only for the migrants but for the extended family they leave behind.

Unfortunately, things do not always work out as hoped. Mu and her family settled into a slum community in Klongtoey and slipped into a life most migrants are not prepared for. Life in Bangkok slum communities is a daily struggle for survival, compounded by a fear of being forced to leave their homes because they are built on land they do not own. The focus on survival and making ends meet often precludes the engendering of a community spirit, of caring for and sharing with one another. There is generally a lack of social cohesion or social solidarity.

Families are unstable. Single mothers are often left to bear the burden of raising children by themselves. Working parents have to leave their young ones while they go to work. Some are left in the care of older siblings, who in turn have to miss school. Others are left to play by themselves in hazardous places, such as on the roadsides or deserted areas.

Although there are people who could be hired to look after the children, the help is usually of poor quality and unaffordable by many. Child neglect goes unaddressed, even by the child's parents, who have no support or guidance. Life in a Bangkok slum

is a constant struggle, and the children born to these families suffer.

The Foundation for Slum Child Care (FSCC) was established in 1981 to provide care to disadvantaged children from birth to age 5. We operate four daycare centres, one at the city's biggest slum, Klongtoey, and three others near the garbage dumps of Bangkok where the poorest people live. The centres each service about 200 children per day.

Crisis

The Asian financial crisis in 1997 greatly affected our budget for operations. Both individual and corporate contributions were markedly reduced, at one point threatening the closure of one centre. We therefore looked for alternative ways to help more children and at lower costs. We visited other childcare operations, collected information and consulted with their operators, and met with parents in various slum communities. We learned that young children were often left with caregivers who did not have any knowledge or support on childcare or child development.

Response to the crisis: a new approach

We therefore embarked on an approach that would significantly expand our services to children in the slum communities. It was decided that FSCC would give support and training to caregivers in existing daycare homes. Our role was to empower the community to care for their own children.

Our daycare centres would function as a model and training school. The crisis then turned into an opportunity for us to expand through a proactive



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and far-reaching approach. It became an important milestone for our work at fSCC.

However, it was not easy for everyone at fSCC to understand that effort spent to improve the caregivers would benefit more children in the long run. There were too many children around who needed immediate help and could not wait for long-term solutions.

We hired three new staff members for a pilot project. They recruited caregivers to join our programme. As we worked closely with them, we had a better understanding of what the caregivers needed, and we designed the programme to address their needs. In 2001 we started the full programme under the name 'Babies Second Home Project', with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Sharing the success

For the Babies Second Home Project, we

methodically reviewed what we ourselves had been doing in our centres. We had frequent exchanges of ideas and active staff participation in the reviewing process. The lessons gathered from this 'laboratory' cannot be found in textbooks. The outcome has been beyond our expectations and we are happy to share our thoughts on the aspects that have contributed to our success.

Staff: the backbone of the project

As it is the staff that make the objectives come to life, the selection process is the first important task. We recruit college graduates who work easily alongside community members. Besides being tough and able to tolerate the heat and roughness in the slum areas, they must be humble, patient and show respect for the people they help. They must also be highly dedicated and willing to work after hours and on weekends – most training activities are during these times to accommodate the caregivers.

Just as the first set of staff seemed to be making good progress, there was an unexpected high turnover. It seemed like a serious problem at the time, but we recruited new staff and started over without too much of a setback. Field work is demanding and we must be prepared for higher turnover than usual. However, those who have left us often come back to help when we have training sessions and camps. These experienced staff are an important additional resource for us.

Gaining trust

Our work is based on the belief that everyone has the potential to improve and develop if only given the chance. We must be sincere and never put ourselves above the people we help. We have to be concerned with every aspect of their lives and make them feel part of the family. Once we succeed in winning their hearts, everything else will follow easily.

Clear objectives

It is essential to teamwork that objectives are clear and are shared. Our role is to give knowledge and support, not money or free lunches. All staff must go through the 15-day course we designed for caregivers. In the first four years we recruited as many caregivers as possible and focused on improving their quality. We initiated networking by forming clusters and creating cluster leaders who had a good understanding of our approach and shared our values. These leaders helped the new or less experienced caregivers as well as motivating the community to be more concerned with child matters. We are now in our sixth year of this programme, and have created and supported good, strong leaders in 22 clusters, which are constantly expanding as new members join. Our programme now has 185 caregivers in 104 daycare homes, benefiting more than 5000 children each year.

Volunteers

Our work in the communities is supported by more than a 100 community volunteers. We recruit and train them to recognise and know how to deal with child problems and bring them to our attention. Through these volunteers we manage to reach out to more homes and recruit more caregivers to join our programme. The volunteers are committed to our organisation and are ready to help in any way they can. Recently we had to move one of our

daycare centres to a temporary shelter and all the construction work was done by volunteers. We also have junior volunteers (aged 12–18 years) to lead children's activities and campaign on child rights. They report any abuse or neglect to either FSCC staff or community leaders.

Cluster leaders

Our success is contingent on the strength of the cluster leaders. They gradually take on the duties of the staff. When we eventually pull out, our work has to be sustained through the continued effort of these cluster leaders. Thus, a lot of effort is spent on their development to make sure they share our values and will follow our childcare guidelines. Individual coaching as well as group training sessions are important and frequent.

Cluster leaders are selected from promising caregivers. We provide them with training and recognition to enhance their status and respect among the members of their cluster. Items like FSCC caps and T-shirts are given in recognition of their involvement in the programme. Aside from running their own daycare business, they help the weaker members and seek new additions to their cluster. All caregivers are encouraged to aim to become a cluster leader, but not everyone will pass the trial period and be made a cluster leader.

The progress made by cluster leaders bedazzles us. The sense of belonging is very strong, and it is obvious that they are proud to be part of the organising team at FSCC.

Parents

We encourage caregivers to get to know the parents and make it a joint effort in caring for the child. This makes the work more effective and much more meaningful. Friendship begins simply with informal talks, followed by home visits when possible. Caregivers feel proud to be able to invite parents to activities held by FSCC.

We run family camps that have shown to be our most effective way of building trust, understanding and love between the participating families and ourselves. Camp activities give people the opportunity to open up to each other and ultimately make behaviour changes easier. The

family camp is run over three days at a shelter by the beach. For many, it is the first time they see the beach, and for most it is a rare time of enjoyment and happiness as a family. Parents realise that they have not given enough love and time to their children and, more importantly, that spending time with and caring for their children can be a source of unbridled happiness.

Curriculum

Our curriculum for the care of children is periodically reviewed and modified. At present we have a number of courses for the development of people involved with childcare, namely caregivers, teachers, families and volunteers. The subcommittee of our board on education is responsible for the curriculum, and we have many experienced lecturers. We designed a 15-day course on caring for young children; so far 10 classes – a total of 134 people – have completed the course and received our certificates. They have a good time while gaining knowledge, and it is apparent from the reunion parties that they have become good friends. Our curriculum has been approved by the Ministry for Social Development and Human Security for daycare registration.

A meaningful career

A very important issue we had to address was the sense of inferiority caregivers felt about their career. They saw themselves as merely being hired to look after other people's children. Therefore, we emphasise the impact of their career and work on the larger society as well as the community they live in. We strive to make them proud of their work. We also make learning fun. When the participants have a good time and feel relaxed, they open up and share their experiences with the group. We have had very positive feedback on this. Attendees say they are impressed with the warmth they receive, make many new friends, learn a lot, and are motivated to go back to work even harder. Many caregivers mention that they would be greatly motivated if FSCC executives or managers visited them once in a while, so we make a special effort to do that.

Show and share

We divide our staff's responsibilities into four geographical zones. Within the zones, they motivate the caregivers and learn about problems through

frequent home visits and small group gatherings. The staff facilitate and encourage the members to exchange ideas and share experiences. These small and informal meetings in community centres, or sometimes in member's homes, are good platforms for caregivers, who are typically shy and uneducated, to build up self-confidence and express themselves. This is how we get to know them well and can tailor support to fit their needs and culture.

The four zone leaders work very closely as a team. They plan their work, discuss lessons learned and evaluate caregivers together to assure the same standards. The manager and her deputy meet with them monthly for further guidance. The high level of participation creates a unified approach and work ownership. Participation is the biggest theme in every step we take.

Setting criteria

Daycare homes, as well as caregivers themselves, are evaluated and graded periodically. Evaluation criteria are set jointly with the caregivers themselves. Thus, they have a part in determining their standards and are willing to improve to reach the target. They do not feel that they are being checked upon to find fault.

Changes resulting from our work

Career image

The Babies Second Home Project has given the caregiver career a totally different meaning, changing from a babysitting business to a social worker. The career is recognised as one of great value to the family, the community and society at large. Caregivers are seen as people who help children to reach their full potential and become good adults. The child's welfare comes before money, so they follow FSCC's practice in leniency for those who cannot afford the full cost of childcare.

Status of women

Support from FSCC has helped women to become respected people in the community. From being seen as doing the menial work of child-caring, they are now regarded as having special knowledge in childcare and family issues. They are active members of their communities, where they assert leadership. Caregivers form a network and help one another, even though they may live in different communities

scattered all over Bangkok. (Bangkok has a total of 50 districts. In six years we already work in 29 districts.) Overall, the project lifts the woman's status and leadership in the community.

Husbands

Many daycare homes have expanded. As the business grows, other members of the families begin to see that it is a good and respectable career. There have been eight husbands who left their regular jobs to help their wives in the daycare homes. When men become caregivers, there are often changes to their behaviour. They often drink less and pay more attention to the well-being of their family and the children they help to care for.

Daycare registration

FSCC encourages and assists in getting the daycare homes registered with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. To date 20 daycare homes have been registered, to the surprise of the authorities who did not think it possible for a daycare home in the slums to meet their standards.

Children

Children benefit most from this project. As caregivers have better understanding of children, they get more love and warmth and less beating and abuse. The daycare homes have activity schedules for learning and playing. Children are taught good values and manners, as well as how to stay healthy and eat well. The caregivers make sure the children are ready physically, mentally and socially by the time they enter primary school. This is a revolutionary change from the previous role of attending only to basic needs of children.

At least 83 communities now have good daycare homes at which parents feel comfortable leaving their children while they go to work. This means that families can stay together, and not have to leave the children with grandparents upcountry as before. Also, the daycare homes serve as centres of information on childcare and child development.

Important documents

With the help of FSCC and the caregivers, children can obtain the necessary documents to entitle them to services provided by the city, i.e., healthcare and education. Prior to our involvement some children

did not have birth certificates. Their mothers did not realise their importance and did not bother to obtain them.

Parents' involvement

Caregivers are now starting to work with parents. They realise that family problems affect the growth and development of children. They interact with parents and offer advice. There are activities that include parents, e.g., sports days and FSCC family camp. The caregivers have noted that parents who have been to the family camps come back paying more attention to their children, especially fathers who used to regard child-rearing as the role of the mothers only. They now spend more time playing with their children and are less reluctant to show affection.

The role of FSCC

In the six years since the beginning of this programme, FSCC has changed from a small organisation working in only four communities to one with much expanded coverage, but with very little increase in the number of personnel. Our emphasis has changed from being a provider of services, to being a facilitator and trainer in the art of empowering communities. We are beginning to roll out our model by conducting practical childcare workshops to other groups, such as the daycares in tsunami-affected areas in Phuket, Crown Property communities in Bangkok, and in adjacent communities in Samutprakarn. This widens our network in Bangkok as well as upcountry.

Challenges

Our work is all about behaviour modification, which requires a change of mindset. This is the biggest challenge, but at the same time is extremely rewarding when successful.

We would like to cover all 50 districts of Bangkok, expanding through the system of networks. We have seen the power of networking and must continue to strengthen and create more leaders. Training in more city and provincial daycare centres will enable us to roll out our model and reach the multitude of children under their care.