



EVALUATION BRIEF:

A SOCIAL CIRCUS IN AFGHANISTAN- BUILDING COURAGE AND GROWTH IN AFGHAN CHILDREN, YOUTH & THEIR COMMUNITIES

Building the next generation of responsible citizens



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community-led arts programmes like ‘social circuses’ are gaining attention globally as a way to help disadvantaged youth build resilience, confidence, and skills. ‘Social circus’ is a type of psycho-social intervention that uses circus arts to physically and mentally engage young people in marginalised situations in a way that supports community building.¹ This evaluation brief, conducted by [Samuel Hall](#), focuses on one such initiative in Afghanistan, which empowers young people in conflict settings who are vulnerable to mental health and developmental difficulties due to the impacts of trauma.

When the global social circus organisation called the Mobile Mini Circus for Children (MMCC) began in Afghanistan in 2001, its founders dreamt of reaching as many children as possible, to help them be full of joy and enthusiastic about life despite its hardships. Through a pedagogic model that brings together education and entertainment, a ‘social circus’ format was developed and adapted for the contexts where the MMCC works. In the challenging context of Afghanistan these founders realised that where infrastructure for child care and schooling may be lacking, social circuses could be a unique source of community building, of home, learning and of joy for the children, and of integration for the most underprivileged. In the isolated environment characteristic of certain war zones, where resources are often limited and events unpredictable, the aim of this initiative became to build a model at once **mobile, flexible, able to reach as many children as possible, and to grow with them as a support system throughout their youth.**

Over the last 21 years, the MMCC model, inspired by child-centred participatory pedagogy, has developed and grown in both scale and impact. The model is built on the assumption that when working in a context where resources continue to be limited, **children and communities themselves are key assets to developments.** The MMCC thus challenges traditional models of early childhood education by asking the question: *can children discover their strengths by themselves?* By working under a structure where children teach others circus arts (like juggling, which requires little to no resources), they learn that they can create and develop skills and relationships themselves while building their own confidence and capacities.

The MMCC programme engages communities in a responsible manner aligned with a localisation agenda, which the international community can learn from and build on in Afghanistan. Unlike much of the international aid system present in Afghanistan throughout the last two decades, the aim of the MMCC has not been to introduce an external structure, but rather to build (on) the strength of local capacities. The model is built on a simple and replicable structure— one that is influenced, felt, and built upon by those living it.

The MMCC approach supports children and youth by addressing their mental health needs and encouraging a sense of belonging and societal contribution, which in turn supports the health of their own communities. Their aim is to create a sense of security and community for children who have faced multiple traumas, who work in the streets, or who live in informal settlements where their rights as children may not always be fulfilled. According to Schmeding (2020) *“the setting of the social circus in Afghanistan uses applied performances to further an emotional culture that enhances healthy childhood development through introducing children to an environment in which they feel safe, interact as a part of a community, and in which they are given the space to experiment with physical and psychological challenges in a safe environment”.*² **By participating in the social circus activities, they can focus on what it means to be a child – to smile, laugh, and exchange – while learning strong foundational and unique skills built on discipline and mastery, and thus gaining a true sense of hope for the future.**

This evaluation assesses the MMCC’s impacts through their contribution to children and youth empowerment activities in impoverished areas and displacement affected communities. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the MMCC’s programming has had to shift its structure to give youth leaders more independence. To understand the impact of the MMCC’s decentralised approach, which transfers programming and decision making to local community centres throughout the country, [Samuel Hall](#) visited two

¹ Cadwell, S. J. Falling together: an examination of trust-building in Youth and Social Circus training, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 2018.

² Schmeding, A, Transforming Trauma in Post-Conflict Settings: Ethnographic evidence from a social circus project in Afghanistan, 2020

locations and used qualitative methods to interview community leaders, youth leaders, participating youth, and their parents about the impacts of the MMCC's programming. **The evaluation sought specifically to assess contributions of the MMCC's children and youth empowerment activities** and reflect on how far this decentralised approach can contribute to a sense of belonging, and to building a generation of responsible citizens, girls and boys alike.

The impact of the MMCC is a reflection of what Afghan children need at a time when the country is suffering a widespread humanitarian crisis, leading to a lack of resources for both education and entertainment. This evaluation brief aims to inspire the international community to take action to support community-led and community-driven programmes like MMCC that invest in youth who have been affected by conflict, and become dependent on aid, yet who represent the future potential of Afghanistan.

Key Findings

The evaluation finds that the MMCC Afghanistan's social circus activities contribute to positive outcomes for both individual and community wellbeing. Children's physical and mental health is improved, alternative education is made available for girls within the safety of their homes and communities, and children are more protected. Their communities' social cohesion has also improved. An overall development of positive coping strategies for vulnerable groups is evident, alongside a sense of belonging and community which they might not have experienced before.

This evaluation confirms that support for such community-led programmes is crucial in empowering and educating future generations of responsible Afghan citizens. For those who have been displaced and are in search of a sense of belonging, the focus on interventions with alternative approaches to individual and community wellbeing is a step towards larger goals of preventing displacement and delivering durable solutions.

This evaluation shows what can be done – despite modest funding– with a flexible, agile, and adaptable educational model that can help sustain Afghan communities. Especially at a time when research shows that social cohesion and community health are on the decline,³ and when aid funding predictions are grim. The MMCC has gone beyond just a "proof of test" for humanitarian aid to being a community model that can deliver on children's needs in the most adverse and resource-tight context. Highlighted below are the impacts documented throughout this evaluation.

Individual Wellbeing

1. **The MMCC's children and youth learn to become responsible citizens.** They feel more confident, and show signs of leadership and mental health improvements such as learning to regulate their emotions and decreasing their stress levels, while also improving their physical health, hygiene, happiness, hopes and aspirations. These personal developments give participants tools to make their own decisions and provide them with a sense of purpose. Improved behaviour and health help the most marginalised youth to cope with the trauma impacts of conflict and displacement. An example of responsibility is shown in the participants' approach to other members of the community with disabilities. Starting in Herat, the programme has integrated disability inclusion and is now being replicated in other locations, in contexts where disabled persons were often marginalised in their homes and communities. Children now grow up with an education and value of inclusion that serves as a foundation for responsible citizenship.
2. **The activities provide informal education and entertainment that is otherwise lacking in Afghanistan:** The decentralised approach has created educational opportunities for internally displaced children who might not otherwise be integrated in formal education systems, or for girls barred from formal schooling. Participants and their families reported increased knowledge of traditional and non-traditional lessons thanks to the MMCC: lessons of religion and English for example are especially beneficial to those who do not attend school, and have been the biggest draw factor for new members.

³ Samuel Hall, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021, 2022.

Parents believe the MMCC' classes have helped children enjoy school by making it fun and creative, and have appreciated that these sessions can be handled alongside their other responsibilities and chores, allowing for a balance for the families too. They see various outcomes, namely an increased curiosity and attendance in their children; as well as the MMCC's ability to help children navigate difficult times, pave the way for their future, and help their youth train for the workforce and higher social positions. Investing into the MMCC's potential to work with girls will be an important part of scaling its impact. This is further developed in the case study of one centre that is focused on girls' inclusion and education in Kabul.

Community Impact

- 3. The empowerment activities have led to increased social cohesion through trust and community building – and it aims to do more on educating the older generations.** Through the MMCC, children and youth showed an increased respect for elders while also recognising the roles of different community members. The competitions allow families to meet and join together, and for children and their parents to develop relations outside of their own neighbourhoods. The improved mental health of individuals has increased trust and social relations, thereby decreasing tension and conflict at a larger scale. An overall increase in community happiness is also observed. Part of this happiness is attributed to a decreased stress experienced by parents. Indeed, parents already under pressure to sustain their families and livelihoods are, through the MMCC, partially relieved of the burden of childcare responsibilities.
- 4. Transferring some responsibilities to committees within communities has led to great collaboration with communities.** An additional impact that the programme hopes to have relates to older generations in Afghanistan, some of whom are themselves decision makers at the community level. The community model used by the MMCC allows program activities to be adjusted to local contexts. For example, in some communities, mobile circus teams were performing live music for the entire community, but since DfA regulations have banned music they have adjusted to finding other avenues for creative expression.
- 5. The decentralised approach allows for the inclusion and integration of displaced populations who are marginalised.** Creating opportunities for social integration with displaced communities increases opportunities for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to engage with host communities around shared social values. This has opened younger generations' minds to other groups and helped bridge social gaps.

Protection

- 6. The empowerment and protection of girls has advanced, through the activities, quietly and safely.** In a context where girls are increasingly barred from educational and creative opportunities, MMCC has continued its community level work and social circus activities with girls. The performances and group discussions help break down social gender constructs and teach youth about their rights. Families feel this has led to decreased child labour and addressed concerns over child marriage. Girls have been inviting more girls to join the centres with female team leaders; a positive word of mouth attracts the trust and confidence of more girls and their families. Some families even started hosting the centres in their homes, creating open-spaces while also keeping a closer eye on their girls. This community-driven action also acts as an in-kind contribution to the effort. With the centres being home-based, the girls are more comfortable teaching other girls circus skills because they have the acceptance of their families and are in the comfort of their homes.
- 7. Health continues to be a major factor in children's attendance and overall well-being.** Parents, youth leaders and the children themselves report experiencing improved physical and mental health due to MMCC activities. The athleticism and performance training required for certain activities has improved the physical condition and health of children. Moreover, the stakeholders realise that the programmes allow the children to, if only temporarily, remove themselves from the hardship of their environment. Stakeholders also expressed seeing increased confidence, feelings of happiness, self-awareness, creativity and thus improved mental health among the children.

The road ahead

8. **There is increased demand for the MMCC's activities which will require flexible funding.** The decentralised model contributes to the ability to expand and scale activities in many more locations across the country. This type of programming requires core funding to be matched by flexible funding, to allow each local centre to take its own contextual approach and adapt the overall pedagogy.
9. **Recommendations include creating more feedback opportunities for children, more room for girls to join, and increasing partnerships for growth.** With 20 years of experience, the MMCC has shown its ability to work with strong female leaders in their communities, who can train girls and be supported with the acceptance of the girls' families. Due to this success, there is potential to increase partnerships with other educational service providers – for instance through the radio, mosques, or community leaders depending on the location – to educate others about the social circus approach: what it can offer, and the light it can bring to families across Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Background and the MMCC

Afghanistan's current security and humanitarian situation has reached a critical point. As communities struggle with the layered impacts of poverty, drought, and violence without the resources to support themselves, existing research has pointed to a **severe decline in both community health and individual mental health.**⁴ This is exacerbated for marginalised groups like children, women, and internally displaced people (IDPs) who experience compounding vulnerabilities to deprivation and trauma. Research conducted in Afghanistan since August 2021 has shown a resulting social fracturing and decline in peer support among and within communities, as individuals struggle with their own mental health and survival needs in the context of the worst humanitarian context since international intervention in 2002.⁵

As a research organisation founded in Afghanistan and based in the country since 2010, [Samuel Hall](#) is dedicated to continuing to support its partners and communities on the ground. Specifically, given Samuel Hall's previous research findings on the current socio-economic impacts on mental health and social cohesion in Afghanistan, **supporting social impact programmes designed to respond to the needs of trauma impacted groups - like IDPs, children, and women - is a priority.**

The **Mobile Mini-Circus for Children (MMCC) Global** and its Afghanistan branch "[MMCC in Afghanistan](#)" together form one such social impact programme: a "social circus" non-profit organisation, whose aim is to empower young people by teaching them skills through circus activities that foster personal and community development in a creative and safe environment. Based in drama therapy and trauma-informed care, **this educational program is a tool to offer vulnerable populations community spaces that can positively impact their mental health and development.** In March 2023, in partnership with the MMCC, Samuel Hall conducted an *evaluation of the impact of the MMCC's activities on young people and their communities.* Specifically, this evaluation assesses the MMCC's contributions to the development and empowerment of children to feel a sense of belonging and growth, especially in displacement settings, and provides recommendations for future sustainable growth.

⁴ Samuel Hall, and International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Unpacking the realities of Displacement Affected Communities in Afghanistan since August 2021, 2022*

⁵ Ibid.

“Social circus” is a subset of circus art that doubles as a psycho-social intervention as it aims to teach essential social, personal, and community building skills through the practice of conventional circus activities. As opposed to traditional circus, which focuses on the performance art form, social circus involves participants in therapeutic ways that foster personal and therefore community development. Circus arts are used to train core values and teach valuable life skills, such as solidarity, cooperation, communication, autonomy, physical fitness, and confidence. This practice has been applied in conflict or post-conflict zones in order to help youth overcome trauma while also growing their abilities to cope, to be responsible, and to be creative.

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The need to support local community-led programmes in Afghanistan has never been greater. Before August 2021, international partners made up 80% of the country’s funds.⁷ After foreign forces withdrew, allowing for the Taliban (hereinafter referred to as the De facto Authorities or DfA) to take over, so did international aid, funding, and programmes. With most of the country’s international support having disappeared, communities are dependent on short-term emergency aid. The lack of medium or long term solutions demonstrates a need to **invest in local and community programmes that have a proven record of impact.**

The MMCC is unique not only in its long standing presence in participating communities, but in its non-traditional **approaches of alternative learning and a decentralised structure.** By focusing on social and behavioural learning, the MMCC has inspired curiosity from students to also engage in traditional learning subjects. In emphasising creativity, the MMCC has developed a programme that simultaneously teaches self-discipline, trauma-coping mechanisms, and essential topics (like health and safety) in child-friendly ways. With an absence of educational opportunities in the country (especially for girls and IDPs), the MMCC provides an alternative way to learn with demonstrated multi-layered impacts for childhood development.

Following a hiatus in activity, the MMCC resumed operating under the DfA but through a **decentralised approach.** This approach trusts and empowers youth leaders to mould and adapt MMCC programming to the specific needs, barriers, and characteristics of the communities they work in. This perseverance and continued demand illustrates the **viability of the MMCC as a model for future replication and larger scaling in Afghanistan.**

Samuel Hall’s assessment of the MMCC’s approach and impact on youth empowerment and belonging in displacement settings serves to show that **participatory, trauma-informed, and locally-driven initiatives that succeed despite and within their constraints are a powerful tool for children, families, and communities in conflict settings.**

Context

Afghanistan: Displacement and the Humanitarian Crisis

This evaluation undertaken by Samuel Hall addresses 1) the contribution of **youth and empowerment** activities in **displacement settings**, and 2) the **sense of belonging and responsibility** achieved by a **decentralised approach** to **social circus** programming in the current **Afghan context.** In order to assess impact through the primary data collected, it is necessary to frame the evaluation within the context, the key concepts, and the programme itself.

What is happening in Afghanistan?

The reality in Afghanistan is dire. In the aftermath of the withdrawal of foreign troops and the consequential regime change, the country is at its most concerning level from a humanitarian and security perspective since the international community intervened in 2002; currently, Afghanistan is arguably the worst country in the world for

⁶ Thompson, B.A. and Broome, K. Social circus for people with disabilities: A video analysis through the lens of the MOHO. Occupational Therapy International. 2021. <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/oti/2021/6628482/>

⁷ Jon Lee Anderson, “The Taliban Confront the Realities of Power,” The New Yorker, February 18, 2022.

women and girls. Upwards of 6.6 million people have been internally displaced,⁸ the basic rights of women and girls are being threatened, the economy is deteriorating, and agricultural workers are suffering the effects of climate change and drought. These impacts pose the risk of further hunger, which half the population is already suffering from.⁹ Even in terms of providing assistance to those in crisis situations, health systems are currently dysfunctional. This is made worse by the lack of support networks and systems.

Twenty-eight million three hundred thousand people, including 15.3 million children urgently need humanitarian assistance with regards to the provision of nutrition, health, WASH, and education services, as millions are out of school without access to any form of education— especially girls.^{10,11} The withdrawal of foreign troops exacerbated an already difficult context, layering political upheaval on top of 40 years of war, natural disasters, chronic poverty and a global pandemic. The new regime is unable to provide civilians with needed services. International aid has been drastically reduced, as international partners pulled out along with the US military in August 2021. This has significant humanitarian, economic, and security consequences for all of Afghan society, but especially for marginalised populations already predisposed to experiencing compounding vulnerabilities.

What is meant by youth empowerment in this context?

Youth empowerment means developing youth capacity with the tools and opportunities necessary for them to make informed decisions in their community and take control of their own lives.

Children and youth in a conflict setting experience compounding vulnerabilities; the inability to access basic needs and fundamental rights like education, when coupled with their overwhelming experience of trauma, is detrimental to their development and to their ability to see a better future for themselves. A previous study conducted by Samuel Hall on returnee youth in Afghanistan revealed that youth experiencing the stress and trauma of conflict and displacement find it difficult to go about their daily lives- to complete tasks, keep a personal routine, eat, sleep, concentrate, and control their emotions.¹² The **mistrust and lack of control** induced by trauma means it is even more **essential in a conflict or post-conflict setting to invest in youth empowerment activities** that combat these impacts, specifically ones that use a **trauma-informed approach**.

In response, community arts programs aimed at promoting social solidarity and inclusion are gaining attention from practitioners and scholars who focus on interventions for vulnerable populations like disadvantaged youth.^{13,14} **Social circus is a unique psycho-social intervention, often seen as a “catalyst for change”,¹⁵ that encourages youth empowerment.** It creates resilience by building social support, self-confidence, and interpersonal trust through circus art skills and community building.¹⁶ Recent research on social circus impact finds that, “social circus approaches offer safe community settings that allow children in current and former conflict zones to experience an emotional anchoring and belonging that supports healing.”¹⁷ Not only do social circus activities encourage physical skill development as well as foster the creation of social networks, but they also provide the personal motivation often taken away by trauma. The repetition of learning skills teaches children and youth discipline, responsibility and goal setting. The consistent activities also help to combat trauma impacts with calming effects by providing repetitive stimuli in a controlled environment. **The MMCC’s programme employs these practices to encourage personal and community development with a model that empowers youth leaders, who in turn empower children in their communities.**¹⁸

⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM). DTM Afghanistan — Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16 (September-December 2022), IOM, Afghanistan, June 2023.

⁹ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Afghanistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation September - October 2021 and Projection for November 2021 - March 2022, Accessed September 2023.

¹⁰ United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Humanitarian Action for Children 2023 - Afghanistan, Accessed September 2023.

¹¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Afghanistan Country Profile, Accessed September 2023

¹² Samuel Hall, *Urban displaced youth in Kabul : Chapter 1 : Mental Health Matters*, 2014

¹³ Spiegel, J.B., Breilh, M.C., Campana, A., Marcuse, J. and Yassi, A., Social circus and health equity: Exploring the national social circus program in Ecuador. *Arts & Health*, 2015

¹⁴ Sorzano, O.L. Is Social Circus the "Other" of Professional Circus?. *Performance Matters*, 2018

¹⁵ Karin Hannes, Lise Uten, On the act of giving, receiving and rendering: Piloting the use of YouTube videos to develop a contextually inspired portrait of social circus trainers. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 19, pages 96-108., 2018

¹⁶ Van Es, V., Rommes, E. and De Kwaadsteniet, L. Building resilience by becoming a Circus artist. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), pp.760-786, 2021

¹⁷ Schmeding, Annika, *Transforming Trauma in Post-Conflict Settings: Ethnographic evidence from a social circus project in Afghanistan*, 2020

¹⁸ In this context, youth leaders refer to those ages 20-30 years old, and children refers to participants under 18 (for boys, and under 12 for girls).

Where and how is the programme being evaluated?

Over the years, the MMCC has shifted its efforts to extend programming to children and youth who have the added vulnerability of being displaced. As of December 2022, 6.6 million people in Afghanistan were living in internal displacement settings.¹⁹ Most activities now take place in IDP camps as the MMCC is active in several informal IDP settlements in Kabul, including Tasadi, Baghlan, Tagab, Qal-e-Barqi, and Lab Jar, as well as in more formal locations in Bagh Dawood and Qais bin Lais school. In Nangarhar, the MMCC is active in Majboor Abad camp, Tajrobaw-e-High School, and Adi Akhond Zadi. Integrating children from IDP camps with other children, while at first proved challenging, allowed for the development of meaningful friendships through social spaces and eventually led to social cohesion.²⁰ For displaced youth who are susceptible to mental health problems caused by trauma and social isolation, social circus activities are particularly important. Activities provide opportunities to develop self-esteem through visible progress, trust through social support, and inclusion through building relationships.²¹

Samuel Hall's evaluation specifically looks at how the MMCC is empowering youth in displacement settings through their decentralised approach. Previously, the MMCC used to operate from a main flagship urban centre in Kabul, the Children's Culture House, where permanent students were in attendance and where development of pedagogical methods took place. The aftermath of August 2021 compelled the MMCC to decentralise their approach by giving leaders at various centres the autonomy to make decisions and design programmes based on their different community's needs. This has allowed the MMCC programming to reach more displaced populations and rural communities. To increase accessibility, in areas where a full centre is not developed, colourful containers with circus arts equipment called "Funtainers" are used to showcase the social circus.²²

The decentralisation approach also means the MMCC has found a way to work under the current DfA and their restrictions, gaining their trust and support to continue providing services to children and youth without alternatives. Their decentralised approach also extends to the way the participants themselves are empowered to make decisions, both in the programming, since "75% of all activities are run and taught by children", and, as a result, in their personal lives.²³

Why does this matter?

Understanding the MMCC's approach to empowering youth provides insight into how Afghan youth are responding to efforts to provide them with social and life skill development. Since "trauma... can negatively influence children's cognitive, emotional, and social development", many children and youth who have only known conflict suffer from mental health problems and feelings of social isolation.²⁴ Social circus research, including the ethnographic study of the MMCC's programme in particular, points to the ability of participating children and youth to develop **feelings of belonging and tools for being responsible citizens** as a result of being in such programmes.

A previous review of the MMCC's activities found that participating children shared "the feeling of safe communal belonging, contrasting it with their experience outside of the circus".²⁵ The Cirque Du Soleil Foundation equally recognises the ways in which the community fostered by social circus activity offers a "sense of belonging and solidarity; citizenship; ... socioeconomic integration; ... pride in diversity; ... and supporting resilience" as means to adapt to adverse situations. By showing students that in order to achieve their desired autonomy and self-esteem they have to exercise discipline and consistently show up, make an effort, and face challenges, they learn the ability to take responsibility for the development of their own essential practical and social skills.²⁶ Enabling youth to feel empowered, to feel a responsibility towards their community, and to feel like they belong is vital to equipping future generations with the tools to overcome the contexts they are in. Supporting Afghanistan after decades of conflict is impossible without investing in its children and youth. Helping community programmes like the MMCC's social circus is one effective means to that end.

¹⁹ Internal Displacement Centre (IDMC), Country Profile: Afghanistan, Accessed September 2023

²⁰ Schmeding, Annika, Transforming Trauma in Post-Conflict Settings: Ethnographic evidence from a social circus project in Afghanistan, 2020

²¹ Van Es, V., Rommes, E. and De Kwaadsteniet, L., Building resilience by becoming a Circus artist. Journal of Refugee Studies, 34(1), 2021.

²² Mobile Mini Circus for Children's website : <http://afghanmmcc.org/An/2Index.html>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Van Es, V., et al. Building resilience by becoming a Circus artist.

²⁵ Schmeding Annika, Transforming Trauma in Post-Conflict Settings: Ethnographic evidence from a social circus project in Afghanistan, 2020

²⁶ Director KII

"Circus is a physical illustration of cooperation. Children can pass clubs, stand in a physical pyramid, one on top of another, Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik. The bones and muscles absorb that wisdom of cooperation. If you want to see what happens when people don't learn to play together, just look at Afghan politics."²⁷

The MMCC in Afghanistan

What has the MMCC's Afghanistan branch accomplished?

Since its founding in 2002, the Mobile Mini-Circus for Children in Afghanistan (the MMCC) has expanded to become a countrywide education programme and reached over 4 million people in audience and workshop participants.²⁸ Focused on a pedagogy that sees education as an art itself, it teaches children personal, social, and creative skills by allowing them to play, explore, and make their own decisions. The overall aim is to provide children with the tools to develop and lead in the spreading of creative and engaging education throughout Afghanistan.

The MMCC Afghanistan is currently active in 11 provinces: Kabul, Nangarhar, Bamyán, Khost, Herat, Laghman, Balkh, Ghor, Helmand, Daikundi and Kunar. MMCC's chief areas of success are 1) individual psycho-social development and 2) creating a sense of community amongst young Afghans, regardless of location and ethnicity. Children who have participated in social circus activities expressed feelings of communal belonging, comparing it to their life outside of the circus - as Karima, one of the circus performers put it: *"There is one world outside, and another one here, within the circus walls."*²⁹

Circus arts are used to train core values. Current and past activities include juggling, educational theatre, acrobatics, gymnastics, football, cricket, singing, rope jumping, unicycle, and more which teach:

- **Children sport technique, teamwork, creativity, and performance.** The approach used by the MMCC is not a traditional type of therapy, as it does not include psychological counselling processes like talk therapy, but rather addresses psychological impacts such as trust and control.
- **Valuable life skills, such as solidarity, cooperation, communication, autonomy, physical fitness, and confidence** through physical exercises and team bonding. Schmeding demonstrates in a programme analysis that the MMCC's 'emotional culture' allows for
- **Healthy childhood development through the performance of physical and psychological challenges in a safe setting among the community**— an experience participants may not otherwise have in a post-conflict zone.

Since its founding, the MMCC has retained a strong membership with returning youth team leaders and participants, some reportedly being involved for ten years or more.

*"I love the MMCC because I grew there, I learned a lot of new things. For example I was far away from home and learned how to be independent, we got education, I improved my capacities, we travelled outside of the country, I went to Italy for 25 days through this program. We received food support, the MMCC is my second home and it changed me a lot (I am talking about before Aug 21)."*³⁰

Overall, the **approach is participatory and led by the youth themselves at community level.** This culture has fostered curiosity and engagement and led to the development of additional educational opportunities. These learnings have further increased the demand from parents who want their children (kids under 18) involved.

Within this environment, youth leaders have brought in supplementary programming through an 'add-on' programme that has resulted in health classes on WASH and hygiene, and traditional classes like maths, Islamic Studies, and English. The degree to which youth leaders can bring in "add-ons" and get awarded funding for doing so is directly related to their performance and success in applying the MMCC's values. The MMCC uses a

²⁷ Warren, Zach. Afghan Scene Magazine. Paragraph 4, 2013

²⁸ MMCC Global, Info, <https://mmccglobal.org/info/>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ SSI1

scoring system through which attendance at weekly meetings, gender inclusion in programming, public shows etc. are assessed and given a score. While youth leaders are given the independence to negotiate and adapt their activities to the community they are involved in, they are also encouraged and rewarded for implementing the MMCC's values as closely as possible. Those who do so will consequently score higher and be rewarded with more funding to expand their activities within their respective community. Moreover, regular weekly meetings are held virtually, and serve as a forum for the MMCC directors to assess the situation of each circus, and for youth leaders to update and support each other in developing and leading programming.

Throughout their operations, they have been successful in increasing girls' access to empowerment circus activities. Prior to August 2021, girls up to 18 could participate but since then, the MMCC's activities have generally been limited to girls 12 and under. However in practice this is ultimately the decision of the youth leader and varies according to the local situation and the community's cultural and political restrictions, as some do allow older girls (usually in secret). **The participatory nature has also ensured that young women can participate.** At present, there is a committee of 27 youth team leaders between the ages of 20-30 years old - six of whom are young women.

Since the change in power to the de facto government, the MMCC has shifted some of its processes, but still maintained its core values and programmes. Overall funds and activities have decreased or stopped altogether due to the decreased allowance of public activity and, significantly, the ban on performances. The bureaucratic processes of permission have understandably put a strain on activity development, *"Now the situation is tough for us. Firstly for us as a trainer/team leader, this is so difficult for us to do the MMCC activities, even our activities were stopped some months ago, now even a single move needs DfA's authorisation. Sometimes we do the activities secretly."*³¹

While some girls still participate, whether openly or in secret, there has been a decrease in many centres in terms of having gender mixed groups and some girls have been altogether excluded from activities (some even before the government change).

There are differing opinions on the impact of the DfA restrictions on other marginalised groups, for example in IDP camps. Some report that the government has essentially destroyed the camps altogether, *"most of them [IDPs] live now in homes, because Taliban destroyed our camp, Taliban fired and one person injured, they brought bulldozer and destroyed our shelters, we fought with them when our people injured we fled and left the area, they shot at the people, they completely destroyed our houses, now our people live in the houses of the local people."*³² However, others say that the new government has provided for better livelihoods and support and security at community events like the MMCC's activities. Some even reported that while the DfA was not accepting of the MMCC programmes at first, or satisfied with their work due mostly to its performance aspect, with exposure they became supportive and activities resumed with their help.

*"In the first days of the new government we had some programs about our activities and we invited the Taliban members to our program but at first they didn't show their satisfaction about that. But after that there was a program that the Ministry of Information and Culture collect 1,000 youth so in the last minutes of the program people wants to leave the program but when we start our shows all them sit again and watched our shows even most of the Taliban member watched the games of juggling and it was very enjoyable for them after that the Taliban also told us, 'every kind of support if you need we will support you'. It shows that our activities [could] have more funds."*³³

What is the big picture?

In order to help communities in Afghanistan at large who are impacted by displacement, humanitarian organisations are trying to find strategies for children and youth to be protected and included in social structures, and for IDPs to be integrated in their communities of transit, destination or return. These solutions all incorporate the need for inclusion, and for an intersectional, generational lens. **The pathways being considered to achieve local integration include education, building a sense of community and social cohesion, and giving children in a displacement setting a sense of purpose.** International advocates have also acknowledged

³¹ SSI 1

³² KII 1

³³ KII 6

the need to **work with community based structures, engage in dialogue with affected community members, and build off of evidence-based initiatives to find durable protection mechanisms.**

The MMCC is an example of a community based programme that offers opportunities for each of these pathways— education, social cohesion, sense of purpose— and can therefore offer a template for local integration. These pathways fit into the context of a larger durable solutions framework being considered at the international policy level, which seeks to find ways for IDPs to return safely, integrate, or relocate. This evaluation therefore provides evidence of an initiative that contributes to these overall goals of improving humanitarian responses and delivering solutions for IDPs in Afghanistan.³⁴

Methodology

This evaluation provides an analysis of the MMCC’s impact as an organisation **whose mission is to provide children and youth with the tools to develop psycho-social skills in creative and safe ways.** It was conducted pro bono by Samuel Hall. As a research organisation based in Kabul for 14 years, Samuel Hall has carried out over 200 projects in the Central and South Asia region and covered issues throughout all of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. With geographical, first-hand, academic, and thematic knowledge in displacement and child protection issues, Samuel Hall is able to support NGOs, governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders by providing evidence of what can and cannot work within the Afghanistan context.

While Samuel Hall has always supported community-based and community-led social impact programmes throughout the country, the humanitarian context prevalent since August 2021 has proved a significant challenge to this mission. It is important, now more than ever, to provide support as the international community increasingly refrains from engaging with Afghan institutions. **This means investing in community-based and community-led programmes in Afghanistan like the MMCC, that support local youth to become future leaders and agents of their own change in an unstable conflict context.**

Evaluation Framework and Evaluation Questions

This evaluation asks two primary questions regarding the MMCC’s activities in Afghanistan:

What is the contribution of the MMCC’s children and youth empowerment activities in displacement settings?

How does this decentralised approach contribute to feelings of belonging and to responsible citizens – at all ages?

This evaluation is grounded in **empirical research that highlights the voices of participants (children), leaders (youth), and the community (parents and others).** In order to assess the impact of the MMCC’s programmes on empowerment and belonging (in displaced contexts), our evaluation exercises a **participatory and people-centred approach**, by collecting and analysing data and evidence together with youth to capture perspectives from a range of voices at the community level.

The evaluation uses a **culturally-, gender-, disability- and age-sensitive approach** to ensure that the voices of marginalised groups, women and girls, and people with special needs are represented in the samples and findings, given the importance of gendered differences in youth engagement. Since Samuel Hall emphasises working with children, youth, and their communities as stakeholders in research, **an ethical and participatory approach to youth and community research** is applied. This serves firstly to strengthen children’s agency and to better understand concepts that are difficult from an adult perspective; secondly, to follow inclusive and non-extractive research process procedures that are increasingly understood as best suited for empirical action research. Simply, children and youth’s skills are different from those of adults, but they are no less valuable: **children and young people are experts in their own experience.**

³⁴ United Nations (UN), The United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, June 2022 <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-agenda-on-internal-displacement/>

This approach is enforced by Samuel Hall’s [Child Protection Policy](#), which ensures that the best interests of the child remain at the heart of research and that safeguarding processes are put in place to make sure all aspects of the work prioritise child protection.

Data Collection

Prior to starting data collection, the research team carried out a scouting mission in March 2023, to speak to youth leaders and children in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Nangarhar to help define the design of the evaluation. During the data collection, key informant interviews (KIIs) provided an overview of the programme, structures, and mission. The semi-structured interviews (SSIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and case studies allowed the evaluation team to understand the individual experiences of leaders and participants in the MMCC programmes.

Tool	Sampling	Location
Scouting Mission	Youth leaders, coaches, children	Kabul and Nangarhar provinces: 1) Jalalabad (Majboorabad camp and Tajrobaw-e-High school) and 2) Kabul (Hawzia 8 Qalaebarghi, and Camp Kampani)
Desk Review	N/A	Remote
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	7 KIIs (5 community leaders, MMCC Directors, MMCC focal point/finance manager)	Kabul, Jalalabad, remote
Phone-based Semi-structured Interviews (SSI)	24 MMCC Youth Leaders	11 active provinces: Kabul, Nangarhar, Bamyan, Khost, Herat, Laghman, Balkh, Ghor, Helmand, Daikundi and Konar.
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Community consultations	8 FGDs (4 with mothers, 4 with children), 1 participation in youth leader meeting	Kabul and Jalalabad.
Case Studies (CSs)	3 CSs with children.	Kabul and Jalalabad.
<p>Altogether, close to 100 respondents were consulted and interviewed from the scouting mission to the data collection phases to collect their perceptions of the MMCC’s impact on children and communities.</p>		

These two stories sharing the lives of the MMCC youth leaders and children exemplify what the MMCC represents to its community. Their stories and needs are reflected in the recommendations.

The story of Najia, 35 years old

Najia works in an IDP settlement in Kabul. She has worked for the MMCC for many years, with children in her programming coming from Wardak, Kunduz, Helmand, all internally displaced. She says her own life has improved and changed: “when I am with these children I feel young too, I laugh, play, feel good”. She has involved mothers to meet, speak, understand hygiene practices that can improve their lives, while teaching girls and boys the values of sports, trust, and team support. For now she has almost 200 students, twice a week. The potential is there to add another teacher and register them for daily sessions.

The story of Muzzamel, 10 years old

Muzzamel joined the MMCC Jalalabad center only three months ago. He likes to play ball, juggle, participate in acrobatics. In his own words, he comes to the center to grow strong, to learn, to open his mind. He sees everyone doing better than him, and it encourages him to do more and better. The circus has taken him to Kabul and other places in Afghanistan, he wants to discover the rest of the world through the circus. “Before others made fun of me, now that they see what I do, they want to join too. It’s changed their perspective of me and of themselves”, he explains. He also has a heart problem, and the circus has helped him cope with that, too, and feel better.

1. IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING & INTEGRATION

"We [MMCC] are much more relevant in Afghanistan now, under this situation, than before the Taliban"
- Director of the MMCC

This research sought to understand the impacts of the social circus as a participatory development programme from the perspectives of its participants. Based on the data collected, the evaluation finds that the **MMCC succeeds in their mission of creating opportunities for psychological and behavioural development for children and youth.**

The most notable impact among almost all respondents was the individual growth the MMCC's participants experienced in terms of developing social interaction skills, personal confidence and communication, as well as traditional education (achieved through alternative methods). The value of the MMCC's activities and the community they create for individual children and youth is evident in the

- 1) **improved physical and mental health** of participants,
- 2) **the opportunities made available** in the current context and
- 3) the significant impact on their **ability to cope with displacement-related vulnerabilities.**

Box 1. Impact Case Study: One day with MMCC's leaders and students in Jalalabad

A story of courage, recognition and growth: becoming responsible citizens in Jalalabad, Nangarhar

On March 4 in Jalalabad, our research team conducted a focus group discussion with 12 youth leaders and their coach in their centre in Jalalabad after a day of training. The leader's name is Mustafa (name changed), he is 23 years old and has been with the MMCC since he was 11 years old. We also visited a second centre run in Jalalabad by a teacher, Habib, who has also been part of the programme for 12 years, welcoming children from both public and private schools, who come themselves, or are referred to the MMCC. This is how they spoke about defining impact, success, and the changes in their lives.

DEFINING IMPACT AND SUCCESS

Through the MMCC, all youth leaders have participated in sports festivals, competitions and tournaments that they have both won and lost – as can be seen through the prizes and medals in Mustafa's office. They attend workshops with the MMCC staff, they practise together, consistently and daily, to improve children's skills in juggling, gymnastics, theatre and so forth. In the winters, around 120-130 trainees are trained, children – girls and boys – under Mustafa's supervision, and about the same for Habib. Overall this is 250 children across two centres.

The most significant change for those interviewed is both real and aspirational, supporting both the present and their future. Mustafa summarises it as **"the path to growth"** – from trainee, to leader, to coach, he now participates in national activities that open him to the world outside of his neighbourhood in Jalalabad, and to the world. He dreams of representing his country, beyond its own border. This is what happened to some of the trainees who represented Jalalabad in national tournaments, but also for some who went to train in Italy. This path to growth is open to all who join the MMCC as trainees, and many trainees have now become coaches too, with their own circuses. Mustafa considers their role to be more important in Afghanistan than ever before.

"With the change in government, we don't have the singers we used to have – like Aryana Sayeed and others – who brought smiles on people's faces. The only entertainment that is left is the circus, which is still allowed here. It's the only authorised

activity that continues to bring smiles and happiness to people who have suffered, for so long”.

UNDERSTANDING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE: “JORRAT”

The programme gives **courage (jorrat) and recognition** to young girls and boys who become known to their peers, their neighbours, and even once met the ex-president and the first lady during a show in Jalalabad. Outside the schools, they all reiterate how difficult the environment is, and how, thanks to MMCC, every day after school, for two hours, they learn discipline and what constitutes good behaviour and a strong community life. They practise daily to continue aiming higher, despite the odds, to make daily progress, learn to compete, work hard and play, using perseverance as the key to their success. Not giving up is what the children are taught – a skill that is a key to their resilience in a growingly tense context. Habib explains that “courage is the world, it opens their minds”, words that were also voiced by one of his 10 year old student:

“Everyday I show what I have learned. I get stronger, and braver. I came here to open my mind. If I see someone else who does better than me, then I strive to do as well or better than him. It encourages me to do more and better”. – Nader is 10 years old, has been studying for 3 months with MMCC. He has a heart problem and this programme has helped him cope with his health problem.

The young people explained that they **feel comfortable raising their voices and representing their communities** – they feel they gain skills, the trust of others, and can then influence their own lives and those of others better. They detailed, in their own words, what it means to be a responsible citizen. They **feel accepted – culturally, socially** – as this is a programme for children that families and communities support.

Mental and Physical Health

Through the creation and maintenance of a supportive environment, all affected groups (participating children, youth leaders, and parents in the community) recognise an increase in both physical and mental health. Both parents and youth leaders alike report that children who participate in MMCC programming experience an increase in their physical shape from the athleticism and performance training required in their activities. According to participants, the physical health impact has a clear correlation with mental health impacts,

*“We change more as when a person does the exercise they become more healthy ... I believe that we change positively because exercise is good for our body. In addition my mind changes because when I play I feel happier mentally”.*³⁵

Most interviewees reflected on their children experiencing increased **confidence**, from them being able to witness their own progress in skill development, and **feeling happy and accomplished** upon winning competitions. They are **able to grow responsibly** because of an environment of support and accountability.

Leaders are known to follow up and call participants if they don't attend, showing concern for their physical and mental health, i.e. overall wellbeing. The youth leaders realise the children in the programmes are able to remove themselves from the hardship of their environment temporarily, and can focus on being happy and creative as children. Parents recognise a change in their children's hopes and aspirations, expressing interest in future careers and their ability to achieve them. They have become more independent, confident in skills learned in the MMCC activities, and developed more self-awareness from interacting with other participants; for example, practising better hygiene and understanding the need for taking care of themselves.

³⁵ CS3

Coping in Difficult Contexts

After the fall of Kabul in August 2021, there has been varied impact on the MMCC's activities depending on location and leadership. While some describe an improvement in security, they also explain a simultaneous increase in poverty and decrease in personal freedoms (such as young girls not being able to join activities like social circus). Within this context of restricted movement and activity, **children engaging in MMCC programming have reportedly improved their behaviour, which families attribute to their learning in a positive environment vs. being idle at home.**

While the new regime is aware of the programme, other restrictions impede upon the ability of the MMCC leaders to carry out activities to the full extent because of the restrictions on individual participation (access to tools, public spaces, including girls, etc.). While involvement may therefore be challenging within the current context, it further proves the need for the MMCC's programmes. Social circus activities can help decrease stress that children are currently under and allow them to use their new skills and safe space to cope with added stressors or past trauma.

On a related level, **the coping skills developed in the MMCC's activities also help children and youth handle the stressors, feelings of hopelessness, and vulnerabilities associated with the realities of marginalisation and displacement.** The social atmosphere, skill building, and performance aspect enhances participants' confidence and enables them to make their own decisions, to express themselves and their feelings— which may otherwise be limiting or out of their control in a displacement context.

The 'add on' programmes supported by youth leaders have also held space for more traditional education such as religion and ethics or languages classes. This provides an alternative to school when some report the complete absence of schools in camps, demonstrating that the existence and continuance of the MMCC programming is vital.³⁶ This atmosphere has reportedly also increased children's motivation to learn; one parent claimed, *"my children's brain has become more flourishing as they now study more than before"*.³⁷

Some of the youth leaders themselves are also from IDP camps and benefit from the programming.³⁸ One leader markedly shared his experience being discriminated against as an IDP as a younger student and how witnessing interactions of non-discrimination at the MMCC helped him pave a way forward for himself. As most programmes are held inside IDP camps and settings, linking host communities and displaced populations creates opportunities for social cohesion and awareness that may not otherwise take place. The links between outside communities as well as between camps has reduced tension and decreased fighting. Allowing children to play together helps them build relationships and increases their integration capacities. When the MMCC expanded its activities and outreach to include children from the IDP camps, clashes between local children and "camp" children were evident, which initially overwhelmed trainers. However, through regular visits, which included shared workshops, performances, and many playful interactions through group games, the two groups found ways to interact and develop friendships.³⁹

2. IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Community Perceptions

Circus arts are not always common or understood, but they make up the core of the MMCC. However, among more conservative communities they may be seen as a 'corrupting activity'. As such, girls, regardless of their age, are often first to be deprived of participating due to cultural barriers. Certain parents are concerned with the perception neighbours and other community members would have if they were to find out their daughters were in the circus.

*"Here, no family is concerned about children studying or joining the circus but some families are against playing games. They don't want their children to be corrupted. They don't have any problems with their children going to school, but they don't allow them to play games."*⁴⁰

³⁶ FGD 7

³⁷ FGD 4

³⁸ SSI 19

³⁹ FGD 7

⁴⁰ KII 5

While reticent at first, once exposed, many families learn to accept and embrace the art of the circus. This was cited as having improved either after a few performances, learning about it in media broadcasts, or from other programmes that promote the MMCC. This exposure in and of itself shows how the initiative's ability to engage so many participants and community members in cultural activities that combine essential education and entertainment is a testament to the impactful structure and pedagogy of the MMCC.

The current decentralised approach allows some centres to be both localised and innovative in their methods of engagement, by starting with traditional educational lessons and later introducing circus arts activities, in areas where it may not have been initially received positively or even accepted. In this way, the MMCC opens the door for creative expression in a society where it has historically been repressed, proving not just the value of alternative artistic education, but also the demand for it.

Those interviewed also highlighted increasing awareness among the children, as the MMCC exposed them to more realities – within and outside of their communities. One example is the opportunity offered to travel to other provinces for competitions, which allows them to meet new people, and learn from other leaders and children. Many children have discovered their own country through the MMCC, not having had the opportunity, prior to joining the MMCC, to travel for leisure or pleasure. Through travelling they experience adventure, knowledge exchange, and keep up positive practices such as sports. They also learn **networking** and the power of expanding their support systems through competitions and travels.

The strongest takeaway from discussions with participants is the overwhelmingly positive association with the MMCC, its programmes and impact at the community level; members feel that the community outside of the MMCC holds a positive and hopeful perspective of their initiative and recognise it as beneficial to society. Families reported being happy to see their children dedicated, performing, learning to work hard and set goals, and grow their education and talents. When thinking of how to deliver sustainable aid services to Afghanistan and help the most vulnerable groups, interventions should follow the lead of the MMCC by **responding to and building on the community's reception and engagement.**

Misunderstanding

While the overall community assessment is positive, many still offered minor feedback in terms of improvement, expanding services, and funding. Qualitative data collection with the MMCC families in Nangarhar province for example highlighted confusion regarding which activities are offered and whether there is a need to pay for enrolling in the MMCC. While this uncertainty may be isolated to the province's MMCC site, the lack of clarity regarding the concept, goals, and structure of the MMCC is symptomatic of a potential larger perception problem and misunderstanding from the community. The decentralised approach and youth leaders' independence at each programme site also allows room for misunderstanding in the absence of thorough, clear and sustained communication. The way that youth leaders present and advocate for the MMCC's activities to the community plays an important role in the general perception and understanding of the program. The discrepancies in understandings found in this research indicate a need for **the MMCC to place extra emphasis on streamlining communications given their decentralised model, to ensure information is both accurate and received.**

Social Cohesion

Box 2. Impact Case Study: One day with the MMCC's leaders and students in Kabul –

A story of displacement, integration and inclusion

On March 6 in Kabul, our research team led two observation missions to two centres in Kabul, one run by a male youth leader and the second by a female youth leader. We saw in each centre about 30-40 children learning and perfecting their skills, laughing and competing, each with their own path to the MMCC – some having been involved for years, others for just a few weeks.

Both environments were among the poorest of Kabul, with young children who are from internally displaced households, and who have been living in protracted displacement all their lives, and young leaders who were

themselves refugees in Pakistan before returning after 2001. Their stories mix the realities of displacement and integration in Afghan communities.

DEFINING IMPACT AND SUCCESS

The MMCC has branched out to include internally displaced children in its programme, essentially reaching the unreachable. The young leaders welcomed the initiative by the MMCC to partner with *Welt Hunger Hilfe (WHH)* to work together in the camps of internally displaced people (IDPs), teaching them about gymnastics, sports and recreational activities. They work in situations of precarity and uncertainty, as forced evictions are common from informal settlements around the country. The first centre we went to attended to 250 families, with about 200 girls overall. Some come several times a day – in the morning, and in the afternoon- and the MMCC willingly adapts the hours to their availability.

“There are people who no one is reaching, who are marginalised. Children are often not even enrolled in schools. They arrived from the eastern and southern provinces, and live in areas that used to be deserted lands, some are renting, others are keeping other people’s homes, and others have no right to be here and could face eviction anytime.”

The children gain trust in themselves and in each other, in situations where trust has often been broken following displacement. Teaching them that they can trust their new environments, that they can safely compete without fear, with people in the city. and win, means that their belonging to one group (of IDPs) no longer defines them. They realise they can be equals. **In the process of learning, they learn to live with each other better, to get closer to each other, to not feel lonely.**

UNDERSTANDING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE: “INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION”

In these IDP communities, the key is social cohesion and integration. Participation is entirely voluntary. There are over 300 children, and the goal is to integrate them in the MMCC’s activities, so that they can, in turn, integrate within their communities. These communities have additional needs, being displacement-affected communities where children tend to work all day. The MMCC gives them a space for that freedom – between their street and their home. Many said this is the only time of their day where they can feel free and happy.

“The impact of that smile is beyond just a smile. They have learned to appreciate what makes a positive difference in their lives. They come an hour early, they’re ready to wait until we arrive. If there is no circus, their parents ask them to work. But since we are here, they can be children: who play and learn. When they juggle, they do away with their stress. They speak better to each other. They learn to keep calm and focused. Everyday in these areas, there used to be fights, they would hit each other. We have calmed this down”

The same words were repeated by the female leader in another IDP camp in Kabul. The same patterns of conflict demonstrated by children hitting each other in a fight, or parents hitting their children as discipline, arose in her community too. She had to help them unlearn their attitudes, and tailor her work to different levels of learning. **In her centre, the approach is less focused on competition than on recreation and inclusion, as well as equality.** They all leave their homes, their tents, to come to the centre, where they are all the same. Through the children, the mothers are invited to meet and speak too, to learn hygiene practices that can improve their lives. The mothers then start gaining trust.

Reviews from participating families and their surrounding localities alike are compellingly positive due to the concrete changes they witness in their children, and therefore in their communities.

There are increases of social cohesion at multiple levels: children are making more friends with their peers, youth are getting along with and respecting their elders more, and at a larger level tensions between camps, informal

settlements and hosts are being reduced. The competitions have allowed families to meet and join together, and children and their parents develop relations outside of their own location. Among children, the programmes help create tolerance, understanding and unity.

*“when we start our daily activities we have a unity circle, In this circle children hold hands to show their unity and affection for each other”.*⁴¹

MMCC activities allow for children to come out of isolation and interact with each other and share both vulnerable moments and ideas. These practices have helped children and youth reduce discrimination and aggression and increase their level of acceptance of others.

Although many of the MMCC’s activities are directed at IDP children, many host population children have been known to participate in the circus activities as well (although this greatly depends on province and circus site). The opportunity for host population children and IDP children to come together at the circus has led to important advances in social cohesion.

The resulting local integration fits into a larger international goal of durable solutions, one of which is integration. Only one case from the research described a youth leader’s decision not to include IDP populations within their programmes in order to prevent tensions from arising. However, in general, the MMCC activities have led to decreased discrimination and ostracization of IDP children. Mahmood,⁴² a young youth leader that joined the MMCC as an IDP child, told us about his experience:

*“We have lived in the camp. Inside the camp we had more problems as when we went to school others told us you are IDPs and the people don't accept us there but when we saw the MMCC circus it made us too happy because there was no discrimination between the people. Before joining the Circus we were street peddlers but when we joined we were so happy there as we played different games.”*⁴³

Along the same line, **the interaction of children with different ethnic identities, through team building and circus exercise has led to a decrease in ethnic discrimination** in specific localities. The MMCC children learn to accept each other as children, and not as different minorities. This exposure allows the children to increase their interaction and bridge gaps, potentially across generations.

*“MMCC activities have built the capacity of children to accept each other and avoid discrimination among different ethnic groups. Children are like family members.”*⁴⁴

These bridges have been shown to go beyond the children, and indirectly set the foundations for their communities to come together. Through their children, adults of various displacement and ethnic backgrounds are brought together and ‘forced’ to interact and set their differences aside in support of their children.

*“It has created links between the displaced people and the host communities and it has brought them closer because the children or young people of these communities play together in the circus and they have created good relationships there. So, when the children have started/created relationships and links between them through team building or group work, obviously their families will have good relations. Obviously, it has brought changes in terms of integration as they have created links and relationships among themselves.”*⁴⁵

Witnessing these changes in their youth has increased public awareness within the community at large to defend children’s rights to have spaces for creativity and learning and to be able to *“make their aspirations count”*.⁴⁶

The self-growth individuals experience, which has led to strengthened levels of social cohesion, comes at a time when research points to a decline in community health. A study by Samuel Hall for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) found that since August 2021 community health has worsened: in other words

⁴¹ SSI24

⁴² Respondent’s name has been changed to a pseudonym.

⁴³ SSI19

⁴⁴ SSI6

⁴⁵ KII3

⁴⁶ SSI 6

communities no longer have the resources to protect their own.⁴⁷ In the case of the MMCC interventions, improving individual health amounts to reinforcing household and community health. The reported improved mental health of the MMCC participants has led to higher social relations and development of trust and decreased tension and conflict between groups.

There is a pattern of progress at play: children being happy makes their parents happy and in turn, this makes their community happy. This community happiness coincides with reflections of the youths' "modernisation" in that their behaviour has noticeably changed for the better because of awareness, education and exposure.

In addition to having mental health impacts, the MMCC has been used as a vehicle for physical health progress, not just through exercise in circus activities but by using theatre to educate the public on health problems (such as the polio vaccine, hygiene practices...⁴⁸ However since the regime change, public presentations such as theatre have been restricted.

Given the current context in which the MMCC is operating in Afghanistan, community health and social cohesion has been impacted, and heightened by varying levels of trust, safety, and inclusion (especially that of girls). **This points to the sustainability and viability of the MMCC, not only to withstand challenges and changes, but to provide ways to support community growth at a time when individual and societal physical and mental health is at risk.**

3. PROTECTION OF MARGINALISED GROUPS

Gender

The MMCC's impact on gender relations is both restricted by the current political (and cultural) context and highlighted as crucial for girls empowerment and development, specifically.

There is a disparity from respondents in exactly the minimum age that girls are restricted from participating in public activities, in mixed gender activities, or in recreational activities altogether. Following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, the DfA severely restricted women and girls' movements and right to education. Girls aged above grade 6 (after puberty) were no longer allowed to participate in educational or other similar pedagogical activities. As such, it was largely understood by the Afghan population, and by certain MMCC youth leaders, that girls over the age of 12 should no longer be included in the circus' programs as well. While some corroborate this, others say anywhere from age 8-14 is the range covered.

The implementation of this regulation also differs by location, notably as a result of decisions taken by youth leaders in this regard. For instance, some MMCC teams still include girls but in separate locations with female trainers, while in other areas girls are limited to certain activities. In some instances, girls still secretly came to the circus activities, but after news spread quickly, some were arrested which scared families, who barred their daughters from attending. This type of fear has levelled impacts,

"The Taliban don't let the girls participate in the circus activities but these girls were secretly coming to the circus activities because the Daikundi is not as big as Kabul city where no one will get informed about you when you are participating in a course or circus. Thus, most of the families didn't let their girls come to the circus because when the ban on girls' education was announced, the Taliban arrested some girls who were going to learning courses and then the Taliban took guarantee from their fathers/husbands/brothers that they won't participate in learning courses. Therefore, the girls and their families are scared and don't come to participate in these activities." ⁴⁹

In certain communities, girls did not participate under the previous regime as they come from families that are more conservative and believe it is against their culture. For instance, some think that the daughters should be learning and helping with more traditionally held roles like working in the house. Alternatively, some of the girls

⁴⁷ Samuel Hall, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021, Mental Health. 2022

⁴⁸ Gallagher 2014, cited in Spiegel, J.B. and Parent, S.N., Re-approaching community development through the arts: A 'critical mixed methods' study of social circus in Quebec. Community Development Journal, 2018.

⁴⁹ SSI21

that attend are already married from a young age, and many of the husbands are obstacles to them taking part in the activities.

The personal choice to participate or not made by families is even reflected in areas where the new government has not imposed restrictions. With the current limitations being more official, conservative “rules” can be more easily exercised even if girls from those households participated previously. This shift was explained as follows: *“Girls were free and could easily participate in our activities in the former government. They did shows in the schools, they attended media broadcasts. Now they can’t do anything. The Taliban do not allow young girls to join our team and they are so restricted.”*⁵⁰ This research shows that even in other communities where the Taliban might not have directly taken measures against girls participation, many families seemed to “independently” decide to not send their girls to the MMCC in order to avoid DfA repercussions.

Some girls don't participate out of fear of consequence, public perception or insults directed towards them or their families. This risk is heightened by restrictions on movement, as young women and girls may fear travelling to and participating in activities for fear of walking at night and receiving unwanted attention and possible affronts.

For the girls that do participate, they have been limited to certain activities because of the restrictions on education. For example they can no longer participate in singing or theatre, which has seemingly had the most impact on the community. This is because shows, performances and discussions helped break certain social constructs and allowed youth to discuss important issues. Some mentioned how a theatre performance portraying issues like child marriage influenced decisions to not engage in it, once they understood the potential impacts and risks. Workshop performances were also seen as a way to decrease gender differences and teach boys about gender awareness.

However, this evaluation showed that even with the restrictions, depending on the location and governance of the province, certain leaders persisted and continued to make the lessons available to girls. Some even mentioned stories of brothers bringing home lessons to their sisters once they were restricted. Many in the MMCC community are seemingly dedicated to finding ways to still engage girls in learning and development.

The most pronounced positive impact on gender taken from the participant interviews was the support and hope for girls empowerment, and the MMCC’s influence. **Parents and leaders shared how girls came out of their shells, experienced growing confidence, and became educated with physical, social, language, and traditional academic skills.** The MMCC provides a space for girls to interact with others their age, a natural human experience taken away through increased restrictions.

Some girls told leaders that these are the only spaces where they feel joy and happiness. This is indicative of the fact that girls are one of the groups most in need of empowerment in the current environment, yet are the ones least able to access it. Respondents described increased aspirations and development goals; one parent was proud that the MMCC has helped their daughter become a hard worker and move forward in her goals to become a doctor or teacher in the future (something not expressed before).⁵¹

Amid restrictions, **girls continue to practise their circus activities with leaders who hold sessions in their private homes to avoid public perception and to gain community acceptance.** Some girls expressed these spaces to be some of the only ones where they feel enjoyment, *“These activities had a good impact on their wellbeing, as well as attitudes. We had a 2-hour session for them but they were asking me to extend the time of the session from 2 hours to 3 hours as most of the girls were telling me that this is the only place where they feel joyful and happy.”*⁵²

The presence of female trainers adds to this encouragement, as girls feel inspired by their leadership to be motivated and empowered. However, the less female trainers available, the less girls are able to learn, as they are usually more able to engage when female trainers are present. The empowerment provided to girls through MMCC activities and the community is crucial in the current context as it offers an alternative education to girls who are banned from attending school.

⁵⁰ SSI 21

⁵¹ SSI 3

⁵² SSI 21

Child Protection

"I feel safe with my parents and in the circus. The circus is like our second home. We feel much safer here." ⁵³

In the same way that girls are not participating out of fear, as well as not knowing or understanding the details or outcomes attached to current restrictions, people in general are not participating in community activities at the same level as they were before the change in government. **However, despite the reduction in engagement, the MMCC provides a safe space in an environment where so few exist.**

While some families feel travelling or participating in the MMCC's activities could present risks given the recent restrictions, for many the safe space provided is also an important means of protection. As with the variance on gender limitations, some households or communities have self-imposed restrictions and do not let their children leave their community. Some fear they will be captured by members of the new regime, some parents fear public repercussions, some fear risk of injury from circus activities. Restrictions on movement have made people fearful of interrogation by the DfA and less likely to go out in public,

"A few days ago, my son was coming from the sports centre and the Taliban stopped him at the checkpoint and asked him, " What are you doing at that time? So, he told them that he came from the sport centre, and to prove his word, he did a few jumps exhibition. So, as I stated previously, the problems for youths are increasing day by day." ⁵⁴

At the same time, many reported that once parents were exposed to the MMCC's work, they were more accepting of sending their children, and realised their prior reticence had been based on unfamiliarity. Families also recognise that the social and behavioural skills acquired by being in school are replicated in the social circus for those who are out of the traditional school system.

At another level of child protection, the MMCC has deterred engagement in child labour. Child labour was reportedly common among families with no male head of household, or who are orphans. Children who fail to enrol in school often end up working. Some who do attend school still beg in the streets afterwards.

Social circus activities protect children from engaging in child labour by providing an alternative, stimulating, and valuable activity for children who are not in school. It affords them opportunities to learn (traditional subjects as well as creative) that would otherwise not be available. In addition to learning opportunities, the activities provide alternative incentives to working. Winning competitions in the circus activities is usually accompanied by a prize, such as money or food. These serve as motivators for many of the children, especially for those in more precarious situations who would be going back to work if it wasn't for the MMCC.

"Let me tell you that a lot of children are interested in getting enrolled in the circus. For example, two boys in a family may want to take part in a circus, but since the place and facilities are limited in the circus, one of them cannot. Instead, one of the children has to sell water or plastic bags. But if they are enrolled in the circus, they will learn something. It makes them happy when they learn new things." ⁵⁵

On the other hand, some families have no choice but to rely on their children's' income- they want their kids to invest in employment building skills. One mother explained, *"I want my son to work instead of joining the circus because now our need is to work because we are poor and the need of this community is employment."*⁵⁶ For members with this perception, although they see the benefits of the circus (in confidence, happiness in their children), they would rather see their children work instead of joining the circus. Some brought up a desire to connect to humanitarian aid through the MMCC (something that happened in previous years).

The MMCC provides alternatives to children who may otherwise be working, out of the school system for varying reasons, and who may be therefore engaging in other habits like drug use. Participants report that the MMCC is the only place with safe activities where parents can send their children. In the absence of other programming in this context, the **MMCC centres offer a lifeline.** Most parents say that children feel safe attending, and that it is **a safe space for children that deters them from engaging in other activities that may otherwise cause them harm.** An alternative opportunity for at-risk youth is seen as a positive, *"no one creates any problem for us, rather*

⁵³ FGD 1

⁵⁴ FGD 3

⁵⁵ FGD 5

⁵⁶ FGD 7

*they encourage us to continue to do activities as it will help the children to be busy and get rid of being vulgar in the streets.*⁵⁷

The MMCC activities have allowed communities to witness these impacts and become more aware of children's rights and the importance of making their aspirations count. Public awareness of their activities in a time where other opportunities for children and youth have waned is a feat in and of itself.⁵⁸ As the international community's support has withdrawn since the removal of foreign troops, **the MMCC's ability to outlast this change makes them one of the only outlets for community and creative learning for youth and children.** This demonstrates both their strength as an organisation, but also highlights the need for support to sustain and develop further programming that is essential to a generation's development.

An impact on migration decision making – an indicator to track for future impact assessments

Participation in the circus has rekindled a semblance of hope for the older children involved in the MMCC. Some of those that wished to migrate seem to have been given increased reasons to stay in the country because of the opportunities offered by the MMCC. As one mother of an MMCC child admitted,

*"To be honest, lots of things have changed, as previously he was very depressed and was getting medications; besides that, he was planning to go abroad illegally. But after joining the circus, he is now very calm and cool, and his behaviour toward the people in the community has changed a lot. Overall, these types of activities can play such a vital role in children's mental and physical health that all parents need to enrol their children in the circus to ensure proper growth and a bright future."*⁵⁹

CONCLUSION: Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Returning to the main evaluation questions, this section highlights five key lessons learned and eight best practices to maintain sustainability and growth.

Lessons Learned

#1: The need for safe and inclusive spaces is critical for children's development

Parents increasingly want children to join the MMCC, causing a lack of space to meet the demand. Some good practices have also emerged in areas where girls' participation has been encouraged through families hosting activities in their own homes and gardens, including in cities like Kabul.

#2: Girls participation requires adaptation and trust building

Young girls cannot participate in some areas and the restrictions are unclear, thus causing more fear and hesitation around participation, or alternatively posing risks to those who do choose to participate. This has been addressed by the MMCC through the awareness raising and trust building led by women leaders, gaining the trust of families and communities.

#3: Aid withdrawal reaffirms the relevance of the light resource model of the MMCC

While the lack of financial flexibility has stifled opportunities to increase programming to respond to needs, gather more equipment, and to contribute to children's futures, the MMCC model provides a sustainable way forward. It was built on the need to use the least amount of external resources, to invest more in community, and individual resources.

#4: The decentralised model requires strategic communications

There is a pattern of miscommunication endemic in a decentralised model, between the centre and other programme sites. Discrepancies arise between compensation, leadership scoring systems, rules and regulations

⁵⁷ SSI15

⁵⁸ SSI 6

⁵⁹ FGD3

that differ from the DfA by location. There is a need for streamlining of information, specifically restrictions and changes, to encourage more creative design, adaptation and agility in building and expanding the model.

#5: Health is a foundation for children's participation

Health must be incorporated into programming. Participants arrive hungry from lack of adequate water and food in impoverished sites, informal settlements and IDP camps where the MMCC intervenes. Being able to provide food and clean water at the activities would not only provide more incentive for participation, it would nourish participants (a basic human right) and deter them from participating in other (unhealthy) activities such as child labour.

Best Practices

#1: The MMCC maintains positive and consistent visibility within communities

As a result of public performances and witnessed individual and community impacts, the various circuses have cultivated positive word of mouth within the Afghan population. Youth leaders actively advertise and advocate for the MMCC with influential community members, marginalised groups, in schools and in camps. Although activities decreased under the DfA, the MMCC actively organises public and televised shows for their community - for all Afghans, including its diaspora. Each circus site also increases their reach and visibility through dedicated social media pages.

#2: The MMCC has a positive impact on social and psychological development in children

The MMCC communities increase the confidence, morals, and ethics of child participants. The activities and leader-driven lessons at the MMCC teach participants respect, eagerness to learn, religion, personal hygiene, teamwork and supportive behaviours.

#3: The MMCC is positive for future thinking

It provides children with ways to develop and achieve their hopes and aspirations, and deterring them from getting involved in other idle activities that can lead to drug addiction etc. Circus serves as a "beacon of hope".

#4: The MMCC creates opportunities for girls' participation and fosters creativity

Deconstructing gender harmful norms, roles and stereotypes, notably in terms of boys' and girls' ability to interact and play together, has increased girls' confidence. On International Women's Day, girls performed and spoke to their groups. They now show an interest in learning and aspirations for challenging and impactful careers (doctors or teachers etc.).

#5: The MMCC has a multidimensional positive impact on the youth leaders

Youth leaders develop leadership skills, and give back to their community while also exploring their creativity and self-expression. For many, the MMCC has become a dedicated passion. Many of these leaders joined MMCC as children, and were thought to aspire and dream bigger.

#6: The MMCC provides a pathway to humanitarian aid

In the past, the MMCC used to provide communities with access to humanitarian aid through their programming. While this no longer takes place, the space MMCC creates allows for connection to other community programmes and provides a pathway for more synergies between development and aid programmes through community initiatives.

#7: The MMCC provides a space for alternative education and growth:

The MMCC offers an education when many students cannot access the traditional system. At a time when informal education pathways are increasingly being explored, the opportunities created by the MMCC are vital.

#8: The MMCC has cultivated a self-sustaining culture:

Owing to their decentralised approach, the example they set, and the obvious ambition and passion they create in children, active recruitment of new youth leaders is not necessary. This process is organic, as children grow into leaders themselves and or present their friends for positions. The organisation's ability to expand membership and programming in a natural way, despite limited resources in a restricted environment, evinces its strong impact and future potential.

Recommendations

To support these projects, attention is needed from international donors to support the MMCC's actions in ways which sustain and improve the organisation. Adaptable funding and a model that is embedded in a localised and grassroots modality is crucial in a volatile and changing context.

INTERNAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MMCC LEADERSHIP

Create feedback spaces for kids who participate in these activities to share their opinions and ideas, so that future activities are well linked to their interests and what is feasible in their communities.

Streamline training and spread awareness to all centres to increase central planning and coordination for youth leaders, while supporting decentralised decision making. This will address discrepancies in understanding.

Actively recruit female trainers in order to ensure female students can still participate; and continue and create pathways for current and past female students to become trainers and leaders in the MMCC

Clarify roles and contractual obligations to youth leaders. Retention of members, especially with those who have built relationships with communities is essential and only possible with clear communication.

Expand activities to reach other areas. Due to heightened interest in joining, activities need to expand to include rural groups, host populations. This also creates the opportunity to bring students to different communities to perform and participate in contests. New areas should be recommended by leaders receiving the requests and seeing the demand.

Increase skills training programming (traditional education), or allow youth leaders to have more ability (funding) to add educational programming. Many parents expressed interest in kids learning hard skills and this more often provides an entryway for conservative communities to participate and learn the value of circus arts.

Consider private or MMCC only locations to allow for girls to participate away from the public.

Enhance secure infrastructure by building a centre with a ceiling to allow programming to take place.

Increase transparency on organisational websites. Provide a more complete presentation of the MMCC by continuing to assure that all links are usable, reports downloadable, and work is clearly understandable. This will increase trust and accountability to outside donors.

Adapt circus activities to preserve and sustain Afghan culture. While difficult under current restrictions, including Afghan history, culture, art, and traditions in activities can enhance feelings of pride, identity, and community.

Include speakers and examples of professionals in the arts. Through more international or national connections, bring in professionals who have found a career in the arts to inspire children to harness their skills and display potential future paths.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Fund support for youth leaders to increase activity development and 'add ons'. This could include physical activity like bodybuilding, taekwondo, judo, or health programming like first aid/emergency/ WASH training, or education classes like computer/English/ other skills.

Set up targeted funds for girls inclusion, which means the ability to hire women youth leaders, and to create spaces that are out of public view for girls to practise circus activities.

Facilitate relationships with humanitarian organisations to distribute aid and carry out awareness programs.

Create partnerships with international organisations that can provide trainers who offer outside perspectives (this is requested by participants).

Increase funding for tools and equipment for activities and safety, such as mattresses, theatre and sports equipment.

Invest in long term educational models that allow children and youth to develop the skills needed for an arts-related career. This works towards removing members from the cycle of poverty by providing alternative pathways.

Consult and collaborate with other arts programs focused on at-risk youth that promote the inclusion of arts programming into the education system e.g. (<https://phareps.org/>).

RECOMMENDATIONS – BACK TO OUR STORIES

Within IDP camps in Kabul

Najia, female sports teacher – recommends that :

An additional female teacher is hired to meet the growing demand in IDP settlements for both girls and boys to register.

Classes are increased to daily sessions (currently twice a week) and include a component of pedagogy (alternative to the formal education system)

Equipment continues to be made with the resources that are available locally, and matched with supporting equipment being sent to them.

The MMCC Center in Jalalabad

Muzzamel recommends that:

Competitions continue, within Afghanistan and abroad

Shows are held within communities to showcase to neighbours what the children learn to do

Neighbours can be invited into the center for visitor days to learn more and to showcase their activities

Doctors are shown the value of MMCC for their patients, children who might have heart problems like him

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ABOUT SAMUEL HALL

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and designs policies in contexts of migration and displacement. Our approach is ethical, academically rigorous, and based on first-hand experience of complex and fragile settings.

Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Germany, Kenya, and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study. For more information, please visit www.samuelhall.org.

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