

National — U.S.

# Asha-SV Funds NGO Inspiring Children as Agents of Change



Kids in a role-playing exercise.

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Special to India-West

SAN JOSE, Calif. — The successful impact of the Right to Information campaign launched last year by the Mountain Children's Foundation, a Dehradun, India-based non-profit, motivated Asha-SV to extend its support for 2010-2011 to the foundation, which works with young people to improve their lives by giving them a say and a role in the development of their community.

MCF works in the rural mountain districts of Uttarakhand by tapping into the energy and resourcefulness of youth aged 12 to 18 by creating broad-based change in their attitudes so they can shed their sense of apathy and helplessness in changing their lives. Targeting gender bias and casteism helps them to improve the physical, economic, environmental and social health of their community.

The institution also works on

child rights, advocacy, education, gender equity, health, sanitation, and natural resource management.

MCF has collaborated with 30 local NGOs to reach out to over 13,000 children and nearly 700 village groups over the past eight years. The foundation connects children with NGOs and others, and helps represent their concerns to the government and development forums.

With the financial support of \$17,000 from Asha-SV this year, MCF will help 1,950 young people tap into the power of India's RTI Act. It will include 65 village-level workshops between May 2010 and April 2011 where young people will learn to file applications and follow up on unsatisfactory answers through the RTI appeal process.

In mid-June, a facilitator's workshop took place in Dehradun in which 13 partner organizations participated.

"Children can be powerful



Children with Right to Information materials.

agents of change, because they can influence the attitudes and beliefs of entire communities. Also, in a few years, they will be the adults in the community," MCF president Aditi P. Kaur said.

"A partnership between Asha and the MCF—a first of its kind in India—creates synergy to strengthen the RTI and build awareness in rural populations about using the act to improve their lives. It also generates extensive data on the condition of education in rural mountain regions.

"It is a complex task requiring delicate handling, but the MCF's grassroots base and Asha's resources have the potential to create a new model for development

that taps the energy of the youth to bring about real and lasting change."

RTI applications submitted by the children "have resulted in significant changes and the simple act of asking for information has spurred government officials to correct long-neglected problems. Complaints that were previously ignored, are suddenly getting prompt attention because officials know they are being watched and held accountable," Kaur added.

Some of the children's successes include getting a teacher to attend a school, getting pipes cleared from the main road, improving infrastructure and others.

For example, the children of the

Khel Bal Panchayat in Tehri used the RTI to help a widow secure her pension and another community member with an electricity bill issue. After the children submitted RTI requests, in at least four villages in four different districts, electricity has been restored or voltage improved. In Dehradun district, five major roads have been repaired, streetlights have been fixed, and garbage has been cleaned up.

Dr. R.S. Tolia, the chief information commissioner of Uttarakhand who was initially skeptical about the value of teaching children to file RTIs, now says that he believes it is one of the best ways to promote RTI awareness.