



Mountain Children's Foundation (MCF)
Statewide Right To Information (RTI) workshop
Right to Information and the Children of Uttarakhand
DATES: **11th and 12th October 2009**
LOCATION: **Surabhi Hotel, Dehradun**

For Immediate Release

"After the RTI law was passed in 2005, many organizations offered training to rural communities, but it didn't have the same impact because adults tend to be afraid of stirring things up. Children are far more idealistic – and they are not afraid of taking on injustice. The spirit has not yet been beaten out of them by corruption and apathy."

--- Aditi P. Kaur, MCF President

Dehradun, India – Children from around the state will gather in Dehradun in the North Indian State of Uttarakhand to celebrate their success with the Right to Information Act (RTI) on October 11-12, 2009.

Dr Toila – Chief Information Commissioner for Uttarakhand will be Chief Guest on the 12th of October at 11am.

The workshop caps a 1-year campaign by 20 organizations that trained 3,682 children in 104 villages on how to use RTI to solve problems in their community. To date, the young people have submitted more than 461 applications, with some astounding results:

RTI requests by the children have resulted in roads being built and repaired, electricity restored, and teachers finally attending school regularly.

Equally important, the project is helping change the very nature of governance by empowering young people, and through them their communities, and making local officials realize that they can be held accountable for their performance of their duties.

"Until now I thought if you had a problem with the government, it could only be solved by working through a politician or someone in the government. Now I know that with RTI we can solve many problems for ourselves." --- **Devrat Varma**, 16, Horrawala village near Dehradun

A few of the dramatic results:

- In a remote village in Thati, a young member of the MCF filed an RTI request asking how often the teacher of a primary school should be present. In that village, the teacher attended school an average of 10 days per month and had also been withholding scholarship monies from some of the students. Although the adults of the village had complained about the problem, nothing was done. **But this RTI request brought 12 officials from the block-level education office to the village.** Finding the teacher absent on the day of their visit, they sent for him and publicly reprimanded him and ordered him to attend to his duties. Thanks to this brave youth, the primary school is now functioning properly and the children have received their scholarship money.
- In at least 4 villages in the districts of Pithoragarh, Dehradun, Nainital, and Gairsain, an RTI inquiring about problems with the electricity supply have resulted in the electricity being promptly repaired and restored.
- The young people have also been using the RTI to help adults in their village with such problems as getting widow and old-age pensions and repairing a broken electricity meter that was running up outrageous bills.

"In our district, nobody understood the RTI. But through this campaign we filed 80 RTI requests, and the entire block was shaken. Now that people have seen what an effect it

has, we have decided to teach not just the children, but also the women's groups and local panchayat officials about it." --- Sudhir Bhatt, Child Rights Coordinator of Shri Bhuvaneshwari Mahila Ashram (SBMA) in Gairsain, an MCF partner organization.

In fact, the success of the children has been so spectacular that Dr. R.S. Tolia, Chief Information Commissioner for Uttarakhand, who was initially skeptical of the value of teaching children how to use RTI, now believes working with young people is one of the most important ways of promoting RTI awareness in rural areas.

While some of the children have received exemplary responses to their RTI requests from the information officers involved, the MCF and its partners have found many cases in which local officials themselves do not understand the RTI or who is responsible for providing the information. As a result, the organizations have found that they have to educate not just the children, but also the local government bureaucracy on the RTI.

Project Funding and Support:

The project was funded by the Silicon Valley chapter of the US-based non-profit organization, Asha for Education. The project also received extraordinary support from the Uttarakhand Information Commission, which provided information and expertise for the creation of the RTI brochure and other materials and helped train facilitators from the participating organizations. Most of all, the success of the project is due to the tireless efforts of the 19 partner organizations who supported the children's efforts locally.

About RTI:

India's Right to Information Act is one of the most unique and progressive sunshine laws in the world, enabling any citizen to ask questions of the government and requiring that the information officer responsible for that department respond in a timely manner or face fines.

However, though the RTI Act has been in place for four years, research has shown that there is very little understanding of the law or how to use it in rural areas or how to apply it for the betterment of their community. According to the Information Commission of Uttarakhand, 2007-2008, 99% of RTI applications filed were from urban areas, and 99% of the applications were about personal questions such as pensions and transfers.

About the Mountain Children's Foundation:

The MCF strives to empower young people in rural communities to work together to improving their entire community as well as their own lives by helping them see themselves as the agents of change.

For More Information about the workshop or program please contact MCF:

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