

Bringing the Right to Information to the Grassroots through the Children

A concept note presented by the Mountain Children's Forum

India's 2005 Right to Information Act (RTI) is one of the most ambitious and proactive sunshine laws in the world. It provides Indian citizens with unprecedented power to ask questions of their government at every level. It also holds the potential—by improving accountability for delivery of services—to make visible, possibly immediate, changes in the quality of life for many marginalized communities.

At a time of extraordinary growth and prosperity in India, many communities and innumerable children are being left further and further behind. There are myriad government schemes and programs designed to uplift India's poor, but too often they simply don't make it to the target population, their resources lost to corruption and inefficiency.

The RTI has the potential to change this by helping people understand the opportunities and resources available to them so they can hold government officials accountable for providing those resources. But no sooner was the RTI act passed than efforts were underway to amend and weaken it. There is a powerful motivation among those who would like to see the RTI rendered ineffective. Unless the common people of India find an equally strong motivation to stand up and fight to preserve it, its ability to withstand this onslaught is in doubt.

We believe the surest way to strengthen and preserve the RTI is to spread it broadly and deeply into the villages, to make it such an intrinsic part of local communities that the people will staunchly resist any effort to destroy it. It is also necessary to do this without creating needless animosity between the people and government officials; instead encouraging people to use the RTI for the benefit of all. But as yet, many people in rural India barely know what the RTI is. Few have used it or would even know how to go about filing an RTI application.

This is where the children come in. It is a widely accepted fact that young people are usually the earliest adapters. The Mountain Children's Forum (MCF) has also found that children are a powerful force for spreading information and awareness into local communities. With the support of our partner organizations, the young people can be empowered to teach the people in their villages about RTI and how to use it to improve their communities and discourage waste and corruption, and do so in a way that furthers interaction and cooperation between the community and the government.

The MCF has been working with children (mostly teenagers) in rural mountain communities in the Indian state of Uttarakhand since 2002. Over the past 5 years we have built an extensive network of young people and voluntary organizations that is deeply rooted in those communities. At the same time the MCF has worked to build bridges based on trust and shared purpose between the young people, NGOs, and various government entities.

Asha has built a global network of volunteers and experts on a variety of issues, including the RTI. Through its volunteers and the projects it has supported, Asha has a depth and breadth of experience and knowledge about politics and governance issues that is essential to any effort to promote the RTI.

A partnership between Asha and the MCF can create the perfect synergy to strengthen the RTI and build awareness in rural populations about how they can use the act to improve their lives. It can also generate a wealth of data on the condition of education in rural mountain communities. It is a complex task requiring delicate handling, but the MCF's grassroots base and Asha's resources working together have the potential to create something dramatic and unique: A new model for development that taps the energy of the youth to bring about real and lasting change.

Proposal:

While the essentials of the RTI can probably be conveyed in a few hours, integrating RTI into the civic life of the community will take considerably more training and effort. A state-level children's workshop that brought together young people from different communities in each of Uttarakhand's 13 districts would light a spark of RTI awareness in those communities, but if we give the young people something tangible to focus their attention, such as using RTI to improve their schools, and back it up with active support from our local partner organizations, the message is much more likely to take hold.

The following elements can help maximize the effectiveness of the RTI awareness campaign:

- **Capacity building of partner organizations.** The adult facilitators in each area must understand the importance of the RTI and how it works so they can support the children. An RTI workshop in Dehradun with one facilitator from each MCF partner organization would train them in the RTI as well as sensitize them to the potential difficulties and pitfalls. It would also provide a chance for partners to develop a coordinated strategy for working with the young people in the villages.
- **Local information gathering.** Both to identify the community's needs and to measure the impact of this effort, some sort of baseline information is necessary. The logical place to start is with an inventory of the educational facilities in each community. The young people and our partner organizations can gather information such as the kinds of schools available, their distance from the village, how many teachers are assigned to the school and how often they attend, how many children go to school, how many rooms the school building has, what type of educational materials they receive, etc. Asha and the MCF could collaborate on creating the data collection form and on compiling these reports into a snapshot of the current state of education in rural Uttarakhand.
- **Statewide workshops.** A statewide workshop in Dehradun with the participation of government officials, such as Uttarakhand PIO Dr. R.S. Tolia, and RTI experts from organizations such as JOSH and Parivartan will generate excitement and energy around the campaign as well as generate publicity for the children's efforts. Ideally, we would have one such workshop to launch the program and a

similar workshop at the end, in which the young people and our partner organizations can share the results of their attempts to use the RTI.

- **Local workshops.** Since only a few kids from each area can attend the state-level workshop, local workshops organized by MCF partner organizations will expose a greater number of young people to the RTI. These 2-day workshops will enable our partners to mobilize the youth to talk about RTI to the adults within their community, gather data, and identify areas in which their community could use the RTI.
- **A dedicated MCF facilitator:** Although much of the local follow-up for the RTI will be done by the partner organizations, a dedicated facilitator will ensure regular communication with partners and be responsible for collecting the data that is gathered by the children. The facilitator will be based at the MCF office in Dehradun but will travel for 15 days of each month, meeting with the young people, helping troubleshoot problems, and following up on RTI applications.
- **Printed materials:** A colorful well-designed brochure or poster is very useful in getting people's attention and providing the information in an accessible way.

Project Rollout:

The project would be involve four phases:

1. **Groundwork:** This includes the facilitators' training workshop and the data collection by the children. Following the 2-day facilitators' training in Dehradun, the facilitator from each partner organization will return to his or her working area with the survey form developed by the MCF with help from Asha, especially its RTI experts in India, and work with the children's groups to gather information about the current situation in their villages. And: to start the discussions on what kind of information the community might seek through RTI.
2. **Launch:** This would consist of the state-level children's workshop, which would include RTI experts from organizations such as Parivartan and JOSH, as well as Uttarakhand government officials and the media. The purpose of this workshop is to create a buzz around the effort, get the early support of the government by making them part of the process, and energize the young people so that when they return to their communities, they can help our partner organizations share information about the RTI with their communities. Some RTIs will be filed during this workshop based on the earlier discussions and data gathering by the young people.
3. **Grassroots activities:** During this phase, the partners will hold village-level workshops for the young people. As part of these workshops, the young people can also meet with the adults in their community to educate them about the RTI and the purpose of this workshop. Some 2700 young people will directly participate in these workshops, though the actual effect on the community will be even greater. This will also be the time when the greatest number of RTI applications are completed and submitted.
4. **Wrap-up:** A final state-level workshop will provide an opportunity for the partners and young people to share their experiences with the RTI, and report to the government the issues and difficulties they may have encountered.

Measures of Success:

- Number of RTI applications filed
- Number of workshops held/children participating, including data from feedback questionnaires
- Level of awareness of RTI in the communities after the 1-year campaign
- Tangible changes brought about in the community as a result of RTI applications.

Conclusion:

By leveraging the energy and innovation of the young people, we can make the power of the RTI accessible to rural communities as never before. In the process, we can set an example that can be emulated across the country.

Although this could be tried in a smaller way, for example in a single village or through a single MCF partner organization, our experience suggests that building momentum and buzz is critical. The young people draw energy and inspiration from one another and government officials and other important people are far more likely to take notice of and support a broad-based, statewide effort than one that is limited to a single village.

However, the RTI is a complex, politically charged issue. The MCF is too small an organization to go it alone in on this campaign in any meaningful way. We need Asha's experience and vast network to help support and propel the effort. Both the MCF and Asha bring very different skill sets and capabilities to the table and we should see this project outside the usual funder-grantee paradigm. To succeed, this effort must be an active partnership and two-way collaboration between Asha and the MCF.

This is a new direction for both organizations, and yet this project's goals—of improving the lives and opportunities of children and their families in a significant and sustainable way—are in keeping with the missions of both Asha and the MCF. And in the process, we stand to make a significant impact that is likely to extend beyond both the parameters of this particular project and what we can achieve individually.

For more information about the MCF, please see: www.mymountains.org
or contact Smita or Dave: smita@mymountains.org ; dave@mymountains.org

To learn more about the Right to Information Act (RTI)**Government of India Websites:**

<http://rti.gov.in>

<http://righttoinformation.gov.in>

Arvind Kejriwal's citizen movement, Parivartan, Delhi*

www.parivartan.com and www.parivartan.com/rti.asp

Joint Operation for Social Help (JOSH), Delhi :

www.josh4india.org

Association for India's Development:

<http://rti.aidindia.org>

Among RTI blogs:

<http://indiarti.blogspot.com>

www.rtiindia.org

Among other news and opinion RTI updates:

www.thesouthasian.org

There are, indeed, thousands of Google search sites listed for Arvind Kejriwal. And many thousands under the Google heading of "RTI India."

Quoting from Arvind Kejriwal August, 2006 interview:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/rti>.

Among Arvind Kejriwal's most recent (2006) Bay Area speeches:

October 16, 2006-- public meeting, Milpitas . Hosted by AID-Bay Area chapter and co-hosted by Friends of South Asia (FOSA), Asha for Education-Bay Area chapters, and People's Resolve to Act for Justice and Accountability (PrajaNet). Video of Kejriwal's talk and question-and-answer period:

<http://www.aidsfbay.org/calendar.php?section=2006>.

** Note: Parivartan site has recently been unavailable*

(DLG for MCF, updated 11/28/07)