

# Child Policy in Uttarakhand and Children's Roles in its Implementation

**MCF Annual Workshop  
Supported by SBMA/Plan Uttarkashi**

**18-21 May 2007  
Almora, Uttarakhand**



**Mountain Children's Foundation**

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### **Introduction:**

The 2007 MCF annual state-level Workshop took place in Almora from 18-21 May. It was supported by SBMA/Plan. Logistical arrangements in Almora were provided by MCF partner organization SUDHA (Almora). The Workshop included 110 children representing 14 MCF partner organizations and was held at the Hawalbagh Public Training Center. It also marked the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Mountain Children's Forum May 21, 2002.



This gathering was the third statewide workshop involving young people on the subject of developing a child policy for the State of Uttarakhand. The process started a year ago with an MCF conference in Dehradun in May 2006 that helped initiate the conversation on writing the state's child policy. That conference was attended by then-Governor H.E. Sudarshan Agarwal and the Secretary of the Uttarakhand department of Women Empowerment and Child Development, Ms. Radha Raturi, as well as other senior government officials. During this statewide meeting, the children prepared a list of recommendations for the state's child policy which they presented to the government officials. This document was circulated by the government as well as among all the members of the MCF. (See <http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/rights06.htm> )



The success of that initial statewide conference led the Uttarakhand government to hold another in November 2006, in conjunction with the MCF partners, in which young people from around the state met with officials from the major government departments: Education, ICDS, Swajal, Rural Development, Forest, Panchayati Raj, Water and Sanitation, Police, Samaj Kalyan, Disaster Mitigation and Management, etc. to discuss the concerns and needs of children and learn how each department was working to further the interests

of children. (See <http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/policynov06.htm> )

Leading up to this 2007 Workshop in Almora, a grant received by SBMA/Plan to promote a child policy for Uttarakhand enabled 15 MCF partners to hold village, block, and district level consultations with the young people as well as adults in 10 districts to discuss the state's child policy and to ask for more adult support at different levels.

Unlike the two previous child policy gatherings, which took place in the State Capital, Dehradun, the MCF and its partners decided to hold this one in Almora, which helped bring the discussion of child policy and child rights out of the offices and hotel conference rooms of Dehradun and into the rural areas where it is to be implemented. It also helped bring the Kumaon region of the state in as a more active participant. Although, the distance from Dehradun kept most government officials from attending, two members of the legislative assembly from the Almora

area, along with several local officials and journalists, did attend. While the media did cover the event, their attention tended to focus on the adults rather than on what the children had to say, highlighting the need for much more participation by and advocacy for children in this area.

Unfortunately, two partners were unable to attend the Workshop at the last minute. Vimarsh, Nainital, did not attend because a young girl in the village of Khurpatal was sexually assaulted by a 35-year-old man. When the local police were unwilling to act on the case, the children of the Mangoli Bal Panchayat (children's group) along with the Mahila Mangal Dal of Khurpatal sent a report to the DSP and eventually the case was registered. The MCF's Dehradun partner was not able to attend because of the death of the facilitator's mother just as they were leaving for Almora.

### Workshop Details:

Participants arrived at the training center on the 18<sup>th</sup> evening, some having traveled from the far ends of the state. After they had been allotted their rooms and given time to rest, they regrouped for an informal introduction and to establish the ground rules. The children agreed to a three-day timetable starting with tea at 6:15 a.m. and ending with lights out at 10 p.m.

### Day 2: 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2007

The 19<sup>th</sup> of May dawned bright even as the rain the night before kept the temperatures low. Tae Kwon Do started at 7 a.m. and the children learned warm-up exercises and some self-defense moves, particularly aimed at helping girls protect themselves. The instructor emphasized that Tae Kwon Do is for self-defense and not aggression but he said he believed the children were aware enough to know the difference.



At 9 a.m., the participants gathered in the hall to sign the register and received a notepad and pen. Then they were treated to a visit from Jokhim Chacha, a talkative puppet who has been a part of these yearly workshops since the beginning. He helped break the ice and introduce the children to one another. While most of the Almora participants were new to this kind of statewide MCF meeting, there were some who had attended previously and were also able to provide the connecting thread.



Jokhim Chacha, or “risky uncle” (as he calls himself), helped provide context for the Almora gathering by talking to the children about previous meetings and the children's work under the banner of the MCF. The Workshop was formally opened by the Hawalbagh Block Pramukh, Mr. Ravinder Singh Bisht, the ICDS district program officer, Mr. P.S. Brijwal, and the principal of the training center, Mr. Khati.

Each guest received a copy of the MCF's *PABAM* magazine with coverage of the child policy meetings

held by the children, along with the list of recommendations the young people of the MCF developed in the May 2006 Child Policy workshop and presented to the Governor and other senior officials. (See [http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/rights06\\_dec.htm](http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/rights06_dec.htm) )

MCF facilitator Sudhir Bhatt told the guests about what the children had been doing and they responded by welcoming the children to Hawalbagh. The block pramukh, Mr. Bisht, welcomed the children and said he was very happy that a program such as this was taking place in Hawalbagh and was proud that children from all over Uttarakhand had come to his block. (He was told about the water shortage problems at the workshop site and he took the issue up with the authorities.)

The ICDS District Program Officer, Mr. Brijwal, was so interested in what the children had to say that he enquired if he could come back just to see what the children were discussing, not as a VIP but as a participant. He said that he was very impressed with the number of children present and the fact that they were from all over the state. He did come back and spent the rest of the morning listening to the children.

Following further morning introductory presentations and discussions about ways to communicate came a game involving sharing names and drawing pictures to get the children acquainted. There was a lot of laughter when the drawings were displayed, building a sense of camaraderie and helping the participants quickly get acquainted. Then there was lunch.

The post-lunch session started with a song on the environment sung by Ankita and Rakesh, of MCF partner Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Almora.

Then members of each Bal Panchayat spoke about their work and achievements over the past six months and the hurdles they had faced. This provided an opportunity for the participants to learn from each others' experiences as well as gather ideas and inspiration for their own work.

### **Summary of Bal Panchayat (children's group) Reports by District**



#### **Pithoragarh District**

(Partner – ARPAN) Uchaakoti Bal Panchayat.

The children had first discussed child rights at the village level. Then they held a large meeting at the block level with children from several different villages during which time they were able to talk about the issues with children who were previously unaware of their rights. During this meeting, the children also discussed what the state's child policy should contain. Organizing a block-level meeting

with block officials was their biggest challenge as they could never meet with the officials. Eventually they sent letters to each official and finally they met with the officials from the block. The children also sent a 5-member delegation to meet with the district magistrate (DM) during the "DM Court," where he meets with his constituents. The DM listened to what the children had to say and agreed that they had rights and should work to make sure those rights are respected, but they must also remember their responsibilities and adhere to the policies of the Bal Panchayats.

## District Chamoli

Gairsain (Partner - SBMA/Plan)

A total of 73 Bal Panchayats had gotten together at the village level to discuss child rights. At the block-level meeting they discussed the state's child policy and the problems faced by children. They sent a delegation of 28 members representing their Bal Panchayats to Gopeshwar to meet with the district authorities, but despite attempts over 3 days the young delegates were not able to meet with anyone except briefly the District Education Officer. The children then decided to go to 7 different schools and spoke to more than 1,200 children about child rights and the proposed child policy for the State of Uttarakhand.

Deval, Chamoli (Partner – SIMAR)

In Deval Chamoli, the meetings were only held at the village level, where they discussed child rights and the child policy for the state.

Gopeshwar, Chamoli (Partner - Jakheswar Shikshan Sansthan)

They had held village-level meetings in many different villages. They found that no one in those villages knew about any organization that was working for their rights. So they talked about the MCF platform. When the children spoke to their village pradhan about child rights, he agreed that it was important to ensure child rights but that the children must also remember their responsibilities, citing the example of a tap in the village that had been broken by some children. Although it was challenging to get a meeting with the DM, 11 children were able to go to his office and meet him. He had seemed very impressed with what the children had to say and presented each child with framed photographs of Badrinath.

## Rudraprayag District

Jakholi (Partner - GRASS)

The village-level meetings were described as good and they were able to get support from two village pradhans who offered to let the children use the panchayat bhavan for their activities and even open a library if they wanted. The block level meeting was more challenging as they found the government officials were not very interested in what they had to say. But they persevered and met with the Block Development Officer and a few more officials. At the district level they met with the District Program Officer, District Education Officer, and the Chief Medical Officer. This was exciting for the members of the Bal Panchayat because they had not previously had the opportunity to interact with adults in positions of authority especially at the block and district levels. The children said they felt empowered now that they had spoken to people at different levels of authority in the district.



## Almora District

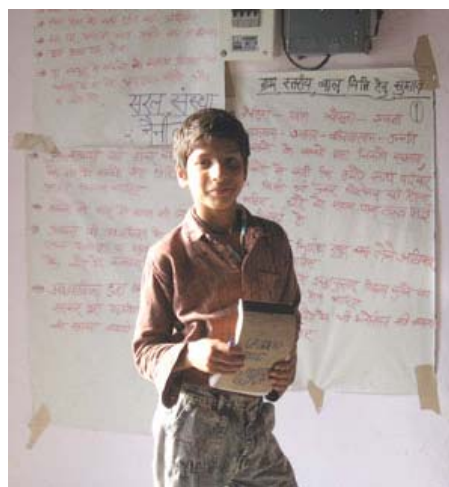
Basoli Bal Panchayat (Partner - SUDHA)

The pradhans in the different Bal Panchayats have been very supportive and have discussed the children's problems and concerns with them. The children also spoke about substance abuse and

that many children run away from school to smoke. The children also enacted a play on substance abuse in the village.

A member of the Umang Bal Panchayat, also of Almora, stepped up at the Workshop session to discuss an issue that they could not solve: A woman in their village was being abused by her drunken husband and asked the children to help. The Bal Panchayat said they would support her but when they asked her to make a formal complaint to the Bal Panchayat she recanted and said there was no problem in the family. This failure in their very first efforts towards helping their community was disheartening. Other children at the Almora Workshop, when asked, advised members of the Umang Bal Panchayat to focus first on small, achievable projects that can help win the community's confidence. They said taking on alcoholism and domestic abuse was praiseworthy but those are problems that society has been struggling with for years without success. The children also advised using innovative and creative ways to combat such social issues, citing the story of Laxman, a Bal Panchayat member from Gairsain, who drew cartoons depicting an alcoholic man in the village, which so embarrassed the man that he promised to give up drinking..

(Partner - Gyan Vigyan Samiti Bal Panchayat) .After the statewide November child policy meeting in Dehradun, the young people had returned to their village and went from house to house talking to all the children and their parents and to the village pradhan as well, but did not get much support. They even tried to contact their MLA (member of the legislative assembly) with little success. So they set about rallying support locally: They staged street plays and planted trees. Currently they are talking about child labour and have found 51 children working in the town of Almora; the Bal Panchayat is trying to help these working children by collecting money so they can go to school.



However they expressed the need for more adult support as their group has many girls and no one is taking them seriously. They have not yet started talking about child rights. (Gyan Vigyan Samiti is a new MCF partner and was not part of the SBMA/Plan child rights partnership so had not received funding to take the issue of child rights to different levels of the district. They also created a newspaper of the Almora Workshop days' events.)

### **Nainital District**

(Partner - CHIRAG)

The children talked about child rights and child policy at village and block level meetings. Eight children went to meet the district government officials in Nainital and for the first time they saw the district headquarters and got to meet the Chief Medical Officer. They were unable to meet the DM as she was busy in Haldwani. (Recent elections have caused a lot of shifting of bureaucrats in the district.)

(Partner – Saral)

In the Devidhura area of Nainital the children said that they had so far received very little support from parents and teachers but their pradhan was very supportive.

Tehri District: (Partner -Gramin Kshetria Vikas Samiti (RADS))

They held several meetings and rallies at all levels—village, block, and district—and along with child policy and child rights they also spoke about female feticide and its impact on the community and also about the Right to Information Act (RTI) and how children can use it to benefit their communities.

### **District Uttarkashi**

SBMA/Plan

Himani from SBMA/Plan Uttarkashi said that they were 100 Bal Panchayats and that they had spoken at length about the child policy and child rights. They are yet to meet with the block and district level authorities.

(Partner – Gramin Mahila Vikas SamitiGMVS)

In the village of Purola, Uttarkashi, the children had planted nearly a 100 trees to help save the environment. They also discussed concerns about their education since schools were far from the road and often had only one teacher. In one case the teacher would ask the girls to come an hour earlier to school and fetch water and wood and cook for him.

### **Discussing Gender Equity**

After the Bal Panchayats had finished sharing their activities, MCF facilitator Sudhir Bhatt asked all the boys to stand. He asked the young people what they did to in their own lives to ensure that all children get their rights. With questions such as “Who does more work at home?” and “If both boys and girls come back tired from work and water is needed in the house, who is sent out to fetch it?” and “Who gets to eat first?” He highlighted the gender inequality that is pervasive in the mountain villages. But when Sudhir asked the boys to pledge that they would respect all girls like they do their sisters., there was some confusion as the boys felt that all girls could not be their sisters. So Sudhir clarified by explaining that only when society learned to respect girls and women would practices such as female feticide and infanticide stop.

To conclude the session, the children from each Bal Panchayat were asked to put up their charts displaying all they had done in taking the Uttarakhand child policy forward.



At 7 p.m. the evening cultural program began with the Ramnagar MCF group (which is working with MCF partner organization, World Wildlife Fund, Nainital) presenting a short play depicting child labour and child marriage. Because there were very few children from Ramnagar, the rest of the cast consisted of children from the other groups. A lot of laughter could be heard during rehearsals. This became a trend where the children from different MCF groups from all over the state worked

together to put on a play for the cultural program each evening.

### **Day 3: 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2007**

The third day of the Workshop was marked by several distinguished visitors: two MLAs (members of the state legislative assembly) and the two SBMA/Plan Program Managers—Suresh

Balodi from Gairsain and Gopal Thapliyal from Uttarkashi—who came to discuss the issues with the children.

Jokhim Chacha also stayed the day and talked to the children about the case of the young girl from Khurpatal who had been molested (which is why the MCF members from Mongoli, Nainital were not able to attend) and about the rights of the girl child.

He then introduced a guest from France, Fanny Passeport, who was volunteering with the MCF. Fanny and one of the girls from Pithoragarh discussed the different status of girls in France and India. They concluded that girls in India have very little freedom to do what they feel is right, while Fanny felt that she had much more freedom in her life growing up in France.



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Gopal Thapliyal, Program Manager, SBMA/Plan Uttarkashi, then spoke about the importance of including every child in the village in the Bal Panchayat's work. He asked if all the children's groups were aware of how many challenged children there were in their village and what steps they were taking to make their voices also heard. He also asked the children to ensure that all segments of the community were represented in their Bal Panchayats and that there was no discrimination on the basis of caste.

Gopal also asked the children for examples of pradhans and other adults in their community who were now listening to the children. Siddharth from Rudraprayag said their village's pradhan has promised to give the MCF group space in the panchayat building for their activities. Manish from Jakheshwar Shikshan Sanstahn in Chamoli said the DM had met with their group. Sunil from SBMA/Gairsain said that they stopped a man beating his wife. And Kavita from SBMA/Plan Sarkote, Chamoli, said that they successfully advised the adults on how to stop an epidemic of dysentery in their village, and as a result the community is listening to them much more attentively.

Gopal further reminded the children that it was important for them to work towards building more MCF groups in other villages to help ensure that every child had the advantage of being a member of a Bal Panchayat and, therefore, the right to participation.

Suresh Balodi, Program Manager, SBMA/Plan Gairsain, then spoke about the United Nations Alternate Report. Every year the UN asks one country to report on the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as it is being implemented in that country. In 2008, India will be presenting its status report on the CRC to the UN. In addition to the official government report, the UN has requested an alternate CRC status report from non-governmental organizations working with children in India.

The MCF partners and SBMA/Plan believe that we can take this a step further in Uttarakhand by having the children at the village level contribute directly by making a status report for child rights in each of their communities. This can then be pulled together into a statewide report to be sent to the UN as well as the state government to demonstrate how many of the principals of the CRC are actually in effect in the villages. In this way we can measure how the real effectiveness of the CRC rather than just relying on assumptions.

During the discussion on child rights that followed, Dev Singh a representative from the village of Deval, Chamoli, told the group about a school that had been under construction in their village for the past seven years. The person who donated the land for the school was given the contract to build it as well as all subsequent government construction contracts in that village, but the school still had not been built and the land was never officially written over to the village government. Dev Singh asked what they could do to speed up the construction. In response, Suresh Balodi advised the village Bal Panchayat to collect as much information about the situation as possible and to write to the state education department with a copy to the district and block education officers asking about the situation of the school and what could be done. In this way they can address the issue without making it a direct confrontation within the village. He also suggested writing about the problem in *PABAM* magazine.

### MLA Vist

The next session was a visit by Karan Mahra, member of the state legislative assembly. After introducing him to the MCF and the purpose of the Workshop, the children showed Mr. Mahra their posters depicting their MCF groups' work and accomplishments over the past six months, especially the meetings about child rights, which they had held at the village, block and district levels. He stayed more than two hours and paid close attention to what the children were saying.



Mr. Mahra, who is himself quite young, said he had a “hunger” to hear what the children had to say and to connect with what he realized was a very important part of his constituency: the young people. He said that what the children had told him showed a far greater level of consciousness and social awareness than he and his peers had as children, and was very impressed by their confidence and passion. He promised that their voices would be heard in the legislative assembly as he felt that it was his duty now—given all that the children had put

into this effort—to take the issue of child rights and child policy to the assembly. He also said that many of the issues that concerned the children were being worked on, but required monitoring, which was an area in which the children could help. He said the government's new program to open child-care centers in each village would include provisions for each center to provide an information window on the various government programs for children and how the community could access them. They would also provide career counseling.

Mr. Mahra also said that the children could play an important role in helping the village set its priorities. He said that too often villagers ask for things such as land to hold cultural or religious events over asking for help in getting clean water, or other more important priorities. It is up to the communities – and the children's groups – to make sure the village's requests to the government actually align with the community's most pressing needs, he said.



Mr. Mahra emphasized that when Panchayat budgets are allocated a certain amount should be earmarked for children's activities. This is very important as it would force the government and

village panchayats to put a certain amount of their resources into children's issues and would also create the opportunity for the children to have a say in how the funds were spent.

After a break for lunch, the children were divided into 4 groups and each group was asked to discuss and present on the following question:

*When the Child Policy is passed, what should be the role of children in its implementation?*

Following the two hours of animated group discussion that took place outside in the sunshine, the children returned to the hall and each group assigned someone who had not yet spoken before the entire group the task of presenting their conclusions. These included:

1. We will write letters to the appropriate authority and United Nations about child rights
2. We will participate in gram sabha open meeting and will discuss child policy, while pensions should be provided to widows, challenged children and old persons
3. We will present a list of current birth to the Gram Pradhan and panchayat. We will be in regular contact with the VDO and DM so that the process of birth registration can be regularized
4. A letter will be issued for the Gram panchayat about orphaned children
5. We will generate awareness about child policy through street shows and folk songs and from time to time we will try to publish in the newspapers major achievement so that awareness can be generated amongst the community and the officials
6. We will have meetings with others Bal Panchayats about child policy
7. Bal Panchayats will take special care of challenged children
8. We will promote water and sanitation
9. We will generate awareness for increasing birth registration
10. The Bal Panchayats will clean water sources, plant trees to save the environment and will encourage people to stop the usage of polythene
11. The Bal Panchayats will sensitize parents, teachers and Gram panchayats about quality education and pressure the education committee for quality of education
12. Bal Panchayats will act as a pressure group to prevent alcoholism with the help of Mahila Mangal Dal and also oppose dowry
13. Bal Panchayat children will try to provide financial support to the families who depend upon their children's earnings
14. Bal Panchayat children will contact the appropriate authority that toilets should be made in the remote schools



15. We will ensure that education, health, water and sanitation and forest officials be included in our village level's meetings
16. We will participate in the programmes held by NGOs and all others social organisations
17. We will stop child labour and child marriage
18. We will encourage drop-out children to go to school through Bal Panchayats and provide support in the pulse polio campaign
19. Time to time presentation will be given about child policy in front of block, district and State levels government officials
20. We will conduct a survey for birth registration and contact the registrar and sensitize people towards its importance
21. We will organise a cleanliness movement in the nearby places with the help of Gram panchayats and Nagar Palika
22. We will have debates, essay writing between children in every stages for their holistic development
23. Awareness will be generated about epidemic diseases through rally and street shows



The presentations were enlivened by questions from the other groups and after the discussion MCF facilitator Sudhir said that they needed to remember that the implementation of anything required solid data, inclusion of every child in the village, and active, consistent monitoring.

With that the day's official session was closed. Before dinner the children came back to the hall for an informal cultural program in which they sang and danced and recited poems.

The first poem of the evening was by one of the boys who clearly resented the oath to respect all girls like their sisters that Sudhir had asked them to take earlier in the day. He recited a poem saying that if girls did not "do fashion" the boys would not get fresh with them. This incident demonstrated two things of concern:

1. The boys present appeared not to buy into the oath that Sudhir asked them to take and they resented being put on the spot, and
2. Despite the workshop and the MCF's ongoing efforts, the underlying prejudices about girls were still very much in force.

The MCF team felt it was necessary to deal with this issue because open discussion and participation is central to the success of this Forum. So when Aditi P. Kaur, as leader of the MCF, was asked to speak she said that she was very sorry to hear that the boys felt they were being forced to take an oath in which they did not believe. Then she stressed that they must not allow themselves to be pushed into doing something with which they disagree. However, she went on to say that she was saddened to hear the poem because it showed that one of the most essential values of the MCF— respect for one another—was not getting through and that even something as small as a careless lighthearted poem like this one can have damaging and harmful effects on girls and their sense of self.

**Day 4: 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2007**



There was again no water for bathing so all the children went back to river to bathe before the morning field trip to the Golu Devta temple, which is famous in Almora and the surrounding areas. Although the MCF does not espouse or advocate any religion, temples are an important historical and cultural part of mountain life and the children hugely enjoyed the outing, singing all the way there and back in the two buses.

On returning to the training center and after a late breakfast, the children broke into 5 groups to write letters to the senior officials in the Uttarakhand government:

- The Governor
- The Chief Minister
- The Minister of State for Women Empowerment and Child Development
- The Secretary of Women Empowerment and Child Development department.
- The Additional Secretary of the Women Empowerment and Child Development department.

Each group wrote a letter to one of the officials about their work on child policy. After the letters were discussed and finalized by the entire group, all of the some 110 children attending the Workshop signed each of the letters.

After lunch, the children received a visit from Manoj Tiwari, a member of the legislative assembly from the Hawalbagh area of Almora.

He, too, was welcomed by the children who showed him their posters and told him about their work. He stopped and discussed each group's presentation in detail and asked them questions about what they had written and how they had conducted their activities.

He welcomed them to the cultural, religious, and political center that was Almora saying, "You are the future of this country and I hope that your efforts are successful."



When he spoke to the children, he said he was very sad that he couldn't have spent all three days at the workshop with them. He expressed amazement at the great store of knowledge at such a young age and said that this visit has enabled him to understand the importance and reality of the child policy and when the issue comes up in the future he will be able to be a more effective advocate for it. He said that because Uttarakhand is a new state without established policies, all the state's policies should be made through such conferences in which the people's needs and concerns

and ideas are taken into consideration.

Mr. Tiwari also promised to take the children's work and their suggestions forward in the assembly. By attending the Workshop, he said he learned about UBR, health, education, and that children can be effective at research. He then also said the children are our inspiration and have brought these important issues to his notice. He asked for the names of all the young people present who lived in his constituency because he wanted to recognize their work.



After Mr. Tiwari departed, a noisy game with balloons followed, in which each participant had a balloon to protect while trying to pop everyone else's balloon. After a good deal of noise and dust and laughter and running about, the children sat down to discuss how they felt when their balloons were popped and how difficult it is to protect their own balloons while destroying someone else's. (Message: it is better to focus on building rather than destroying.)

To close the day, the children filled out the feedback forms. The most common feedback was:

- The lack of water was biggest problem but some children said it was OK because they got to bathe in the river, which they otherwise wouldn't have done.
- The highlight across the board was the visits from the MLAs because the children felt they were being heard and noticed, particularly by such senior government officials.
- The young people especially liked the interaction with children from other distant areas and the exchange of ideas and learning from one another.
- They also liked the fact that girls and boys could talk and spend time together without fear that it would be looked at askance or misconstrued.



(For a synthesis of the children's feedback, please see Annex 1.)

The day ended with a cultural program again. This time the young man who had recited the poem about girls got up and recited another poem he had written (totally on his own) -- in which he expressed his regret at having caused any hurt to anyone and that he himself would keep to his oath. The rest of the boys appeared to agree when they reiterated their commitment to respecting and furthering the values of the MCF.

## Conclusions

This Workshop was the culmination of a year-long effort to jump-start the creation of a child policy for the State of Uttarakhand. (See <http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/rights06.htm> and <http://www.mymountains.org/workshops/policynov06.htm> ) Ultimately, the writing of that child policy depends on the political will in Dehradun, but this initiative has taken the issue of child rights and a child policy for the state out of complete obscurity and been able to get the people talking and thinking about it in the villages, at multiple levels of the district government bureaucracies, and even at the political level.

The purpose of this gathering was to give children and the MCF partners the opportunity to share the work they had carried out over the previous months in support of child rights and a child policy. The Workshop also served to focus attention on the issue and the work of the young members of the MCF and the MCF partner organizations.

The reports given by the children showed a remarkable reach and the extent of their efforts. Collectively, the MCF groups have spoken to thousands of other children and numerous government officials about child rights. It was an issue that was completely unknown and before these efforts, but the children have now planted important seeds of awareness within their communities and local government officials.

The workshop also provided an important opportunity to share their successes and discuss the challenges and problems the children have faced, and get advice from one another. An important new opportunity for the children to be heard was raised in the form of the Alternative CRC report for the UN, which SBMA/Plan is proposing that the children's groups take the lead in writing the report that is intended to paint a picture of the status of child rights at the grassroots level.

Shortages of water at the training facility where the children stayed and the Workshop sessions held were obvious, but most of the children took the problems in stride and used the opportunity to bathe in the river, which many found to be a new and enjoyable experience. These problems also highlighted the realities of life in the mountains and the challenges of working in these remote areas. The infrastructure is poor and there are few facilities with the capacity to host a meeting with so many children, and even when they exist, often suffer from such problems.

The remote location—Almora is a 1½ -day journey from the State Capital, Dehradun—meant that fewer government officials were able to attend. And while the local media covered the event, they tended to focus more on the adults rather than really listening to what the children had to say, showing just how much more work needs to be done before children can take their rightful places at the table. In that sense, this workshop was an important start in bringing the children's voices and an understanding of the importance of child rights into a region of Uttarakhand where these issues had not previously been discussed or even thought of.

Although the process of creating a child policy does not end with this Workshop, it was another important milestone in the long road to creating an effective and meaningful child policy for Uttarakhand. During this Workshop, the two members of the legislative assembly who met with the children promised they would bring the issue up before the assembly and support the children's efforts towards improving child rights.

Ms. Hemlata Dhondiyal, Additional Secretary of the Women Empowerment and Child Development department, said the young people and the MCF partners had done their bit and that the government would take the issue of the child policy from here.

A child policy is able to influence government action and policies and truly able to impact the lives of children in positive ways. But these will take time and continued advocacy. The children and the MCF partner organizations will keep talking and writing about child rights and the state's child policy to keep the issue in the minds of policymakers and to help people across the state understand why child rights matter and why children should have a voice and an active role in their communities.

## **Annex 1: Synthesis of Almora's Workshop's feedback**

On the last day of the Almora Child Policy Workshop, each participant was asked to fill out a feedback form in which they were asked what they had learned and what they liked most as well as what they didn't like about the workshop. (A full transcript of the children's feedback is also available from the MCF headquarters in Dehradun.) Below is a synthesis of the feedback compiled by Fanny Passeport, an MCF volunteer from France.

### ***Overall perceptions:***

---Solidarity and fraternity emerged from among the children during the Workshop as the older children often helped the younger ones understand the content of the Workshop when it was difficult for them and helped keep them from feeling isolated. The cultural diversity of children from Garhwal and Kumaon was appreciated and the children felt united by their common objectives.

---Many of the children were very social and easily made new friends during the four-day Workshop as it was often effortless for them to approach each other by talking about their Bal sangathans.

---This meeting between children from all over Uttarakhand was very important as children got to know about one another's achievements, discussed the problems they face, and sometimes found solutions or at least ideas that can help them resolve a difficulty. These interactions undoubtedly enable children to become more open-minded and helped the more introverted children to participate more actively. Gender equality was also tackled so boys were made aware about the importance of respecting girls.

### ***Organisation and facilities***

---The children indicated they liked the time schedule of the Workshop. They liked the food and the tea ("because there was something in it") and the training centre's arrangements during their stay. The time devoted to cultural programs was apparently much appreciated.

---However, the toilets and water problems affected most of the children and some children did not like lining up for eating or for drinking water.

### ***What they liked***

- They liked children's charts and presentations and learned a lot from each other about how to present their views in front of others and particularly in front of officials. They liked to learn through games and to let off steam with the balloons.
- Children said they learned how to live in cooperation/cohabitation; they got to know about child rights and serious issues like female feticides/infanticides, environment protection, birth registration, child development, health (through the pulse polio mainly), child marriage, etc.
- They were also taught to respect each other and to take special care of girls, how to keep their point through good sentences and how to write poems. They were encouraged to write articles in MCF's *PABAM* magazine so that it could be printed and thus spread widely all around Uttarakhand.
- Jokhim Chacha helped the children to break the ice; many children said they had fun with "him" and appreciated the content of the puppet's talks.
- The children expressed interest in Tae Kwon Do— in discovering it as a self-defence sport-- and yoga as these are good habits to keep their body healthy.
- They enjoyed performing cultural stages like theatre and songs. These were seen also as a good means to get rid of their hesitations.
- Many children, when they had to go to the river to bathe, said they enjoyed that a lot as it was the first time they had this kind of experience. The outing to the temple was also exciting for many. And coming to this workshop, some said, gave them a chance to visit Almora.

**(Annex 1 continued)**

***What they learned***

- \* The confidence level of most of the children often helped even the shyest one to participate. One child said that “he learned that unity has power because this child policy is children’s expression”.
- \* In this Workshop, the conduct of children was very different in that usually (unlike at school) they could participate actively and without fear of being ridiculed.
- \* They learned how to plan things and work accordingly and how to generate awareness in their villages. Children said they liked the interaction with the officials when they listened to the children and provided their suggestions. And because Mr. Manoj Tiwari, from the legislative assembly as Chief Guest, told the children he was going to provide his support wherever required.
- \* One child from a newly created Bal Panchayat said that the Workshop was a great opportunity to gather lots of information on how to start properly the actions of the sangathan.

***The Future***

Some children said they did not like having to go home and leave everybody behind and indicated they felt sad about leaving but that definitely they would meet again. For following up the Workshop, some children further emphasized they want to organise meetings at different levels in which they are going to call children from different areas and tell them whatever they learned and about what can be accomplished.