

Press Release Contact Information:

John Mark
Plan India
Editor
E-12 , Kailash Colony,
New Delhi, Delhi
India, 110048
Voice: 91-11-46558484
E-Mail: [Email us Here](mailto:John.Mark@planindia.org)
Website: [Visit Our Website](http://www.planindia.org)

CHILDREN PREPARE ALTERNATIVE REPORT ON UNCRC

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/24-7PressRelease/ - New Delhi, India, July 18, 2008 - As the Government of Uttarakhand prepares its UNCRC progress report, child representatives of the state, under the Umang Program supported by Plan India and Shri Bhuvaneshwari Mahila Ashram (SBMA) have come out with an alternate report for submission to the UN. They have reported on the ground reality as they see it on some of the government's interventions that are aimed directly at them.

This is the first time ever that children from across 13 districts of a State in the country have been involved in producing an audit of child rights by using media tools which will be submitted to the highest UN body in Geneva. The children have chosen three issues - primary education, birth registration and discrimination - for investigation and have come out with the report.

The Indian Government submits a report to the UNCRC committee that sits in Geneva every four years detailing the progress in child rights made by the country. The 18-member committee also invites alternate reports from civil society and children's groups to compare the situation and then gives its concluding observations/recommendations to each country. The Government is due to submit its next periodic report in 2008.

Background Note on Umang

UMANG (Unique Media Approach of New Generation) came into existence three years back when children groups realized the need to raise their voice for their rights and realized the critical role of media in supporting their cause. UMANG is a state-wide network of child journalists in Uttarakhand that are engaged in Child Right sensitization and advocacy at various levels. This network represents children from all 13 districts of the state and more than 1625 children are associated with the network as child journalists.

Umang is supported by Shri Bhuvneshwari Mahila Ashram (SBMA) and Plan India in improving the lives of the children in Uttarakhand and making the endeavor of child media action a reality.

The children spent a good part of the past six months talking to community members, officials and children while juggling studying, household chores and looking after siblings. The data they have collected is from 10 villages in 1 block (an administrative unit comprising several villages) of each district. The children have been trained in media tools and they have come up with photographs and cartoons that have been used in their report.

The overreaching finding of the children regarding primary education in the state is that the system is as bad as it was despite acknowledging improvements in the physical infrastructure. This is because many of the government's schemes are running aground due to a lack of imagination in their implementation. Teachers for example say they are pressed for time due to demands like census data collection and details of the midday meal—book keeping and a daily inventory which they say take up all their time. They claim money hasn't been put aside to get the rations from the shops to the school, so either they have to arrange for mules in far flung areas or the children are expected to carry rations to school. As some teachers have told the children the money given for cooking gas is not enough and so the meals are invariably cooked on wood. While it may appear to the children that the teachers are to blame for the situation it isn't always as cut and dried as that. They are often also victims of a flawed system. In a bitter indictment of the education system, the children report that most teachers in government schools send their own children to private schools because the education in government schools is so bad.

As far as the improvement in physical infrastructure vis.a.vis. the building of boundary walls and school buildings is concerned the children report that the situation is quite bad. Most schools have half constructed boundary walls. The teachers blame this on insufficient funding. And this is true in many places due to the distance of the school from the road

and that the government has not planned for the additional cost of transportation of material. The availability of water in schools continues to be a major problem. One reason for this can be attributed to the fact that most of the schools are built on fallow land given by the community. The land lay fallow because of little or no water. Today the distance of the school from the village means that in many cases the situation remains unchanged.

The children's research into the situation regarding birth registration has highlighted the utter chaos that exists in the state. Data is all over the place, in the village family registers, in panchayat books, in block offices and there is no systematic approach for the whole state. This can be blamed partly on a lack of awareness among parents and guardians, their refusal or inability to see its importance and a lack of awareness, understanding and commitment on the part of concerned officials. An incidence highlighting typical government induced confusion pits the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) against the government's own efforts to ensure universal birth registration. SSA has set 100% enrolment as its goal. Teachers are instructed to provide education for all so admissions take place based on any relevant information and birth certificates are not required. This accounts for the reports that the children sent in stating that anganwadi and family registers are used in schools instead of birth certificates.

Some progress has been made. Current registrations (within 21 days of birth) are increasing with government and NGOs working together. Delayed registration however remains a long and complicated process which works as a deterrent in many cases and accounts for the data collected by the children showing very poor birth registration rates among school going children. The 2003 Committee recommendations include the deployment of mobile registration offices—these could prove useful in an area like Uttarakhand.

During their investigation of instances of discrimination in the community, the children found that it does exist in several forms. While the Indian constitution guarantees equality between girls and boys, between disabled and well children, between the higher and lower castes, in many places it was found that children are being denied these rights. Discrimination against girls starts in their homes itself and the centuries old caste system is still rampant in most places and that the midday meal is bringing it into the primary schools. Parents are unable to change their mindsets about casteism and so cannot guarantee their children a future that is free from it. Disability is one issue which has remained largely ignored over the years. While in some of the more urbanized areas some schemes are reaching the disabled the children found that most of the disabled children in the remote villages were made fun of and had virtually no hope for the future.

About Plan India

Plan's vision is of a world in which all children realize their full potential in societies, which respect people's rights and dignity.

Plan India is a child-centered development organization that aims to promote Child Rights and improve the quality of life of vulnerable children. Plan India is a part of Plan, founded in 1937 after the Spanish Civil War and currently works in 68 countries. In India, Plan works in 13 states and has directly impacted lives of over a million children and their families since 1979 and empowered them to realize their potential.

Our child centered community development interventions focus on Child Protection and Child Participation, Children in Difficult Circumstances, Health, Education, HIV / AIDS, Early Childhood Care and Development, Water and Environment Sanitation, Disaster Preparedness, Household Economic and Social Security and Community Governance.

The basis of Plan's work lies in its commitment to the principle of equality and rights, developing the capacity of civil society to enable them to meet their needs and replicating successful models that have worked.