

Innovation in schools

The children of Almora district experienced new ICTs through an innovative off the curriculum education initiative. Within a span of two years there was phenomenal change in their awareness and perspectives.



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“You talk of development and planning, my village does not have a pucca road, we walk two kms in summer to fetch drinking water, we have never seen our village on a map. You talk of making maps of big cities, how about a map of my village?” –when Suman Arya raised this question before 200 delegates comprising of senior government official and policy makers and international experts in the National Spatial Database Infrastructure (NSDI) Conference, in Agra, India, 2003, she definitely pointed at the government’s inadequacy in the delivery of basic infrastructure in villages. However what the 15-year-old student of Government Intercollege, Shitakhet, Uttaranchal, Suman, also pointed out was that youngsters like her are also a part of the community who are effected by the constraints and have to cope with the hardships that is a part of the everyday life in the remote hill areas where she belongs. She also highlighted the fact that there is a whole group of youngster like her who are concerned of the issues that their community faces and are keen to work towards improving their situation.

Young people are citizens in the municipalities and regions in the same way as other age groups and must therefore be given the opportunity to participate and contribute to their community’s well being. The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local level is essential if we are to build more democratic and inclusive societies. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the



support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society. It is important and necessary to hear the voices of the youth, and reaffirm and promote their role in the development of democratic society in particular in public life.

It is essential that young people learn about participation and democracy while in school where they not only spend a considerable proportion of their lives and undertake a formal education, it is also a place where many of their views and perspectives on life are developed and



Village school girls learn tracking the path to the village in Bhagtola, Hawalbagh, Almora

shaped. However school must also be a place where young people experience democracy in action and where their participation in decision-making is supported, promoted and is seen as effective.

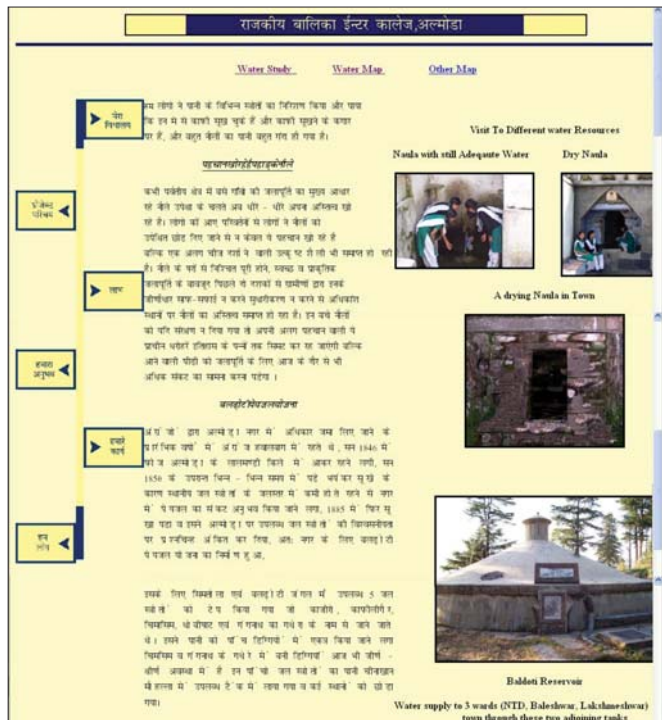
Education in schools should help the youth feel more connected to their community, particularly to their school. Knowledge gained through education should foster in each individual a stronger sense of responsibility and increase

awareness in each individual of the world around her/him. Education should not only improve attitudes toward learning and improve basic academic skills but also encourage the development of better, more productive social skills so as to improve communication with peers and adults.

Conceptualized as an alternative learning experience “Mapping the Neighbourhood” project had attempted to move from a ‘strategy-structure-systems’ approach to a ‘purpose-people-process’ approach through the use of ICT and community maps. The project initiated by the Centre for Science, Development and Media Studies (CSDMS) and supported by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, was implemented in schools of rural and urban schools of Almora and Nainital district of Uttaranchal, India.

Through this programme, young minds are let to nurture their existing knowledge base and at the same time value-add on their intellectual prowess, by learning practically relevant technology tools. In the process, they develop essential skill sets to analyze conditions relating to environmental, ecological and social set up of their immediate surroundings.

With an aim to create an enabling context for the youth to live, grow, learn, participate, decide, analyze and change, the programme empowered the youth of the mountain areas by exposing them to



Youth website documenting local resources and issues of concern in local language



Mapping for advocacy: Children share their findings with the local elected representative in village Chitai, Hawelbagh, Almora

Geo-ICT tools were used by school children to generate and analyse relevant information of their local areas that can be used for decision-making for development.

technology tools in this case Geo-ICT tools to generate and analyse relevant information of their local areas that can be used for decision-making for development. Through an active learning environment where learning is in harmony with the local environment as well as ever changing global realities, about 400 youth members from schools learnt to use ICT to their advantage to not only generate locally relevant information that was lacking in the area and use the same for promoting local awareness for conservation of resource and action for resolving local issues.

In order to help these youngsters develop their understanding, they were encouraged to engage in extensive discussion with community members and leader, local development authorities and researchers. The discussions complemented with extensive field visits and field studies were a real eye opener for these young students. Field visits included study of local resources, areas of depletions and areas that are in need of conservation. Issues ranged from depletion of springs (the main water source), non-maintenance of water lines, deforestation and drying of mountain streams in rural area to lack of waste management and adequate dustbins, lack of parking areas, non-maintenance of roads depleting green areas in urban areas. A study and analysis of these issues developed in them a scientific insight of local issues and a logical mind frame to analyze these issues.

Today environmental and local awareness developed in these children has induced a value system, which has not only developed a sense of responsibility within these youngsters but has also opened up a wide perspective horizon for them, incorporating the ideal qualities of conscious citizens. Today, the youth in this hill region of India are leading the way, although through small steps, to change attitudes and the improve situation. This is heralding a new era of participatory democracy with youth spearheading the process. ■