



# Tracking to Zero, Part V

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Drops Across the Border with Nepal

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up to 300

children per day vaccinated  
at each of 41 crossing points  
365 days of the year.

306,447

children vaccinated  
every month at Indo-  
Nepal borders in Bihar  
and Uttar Pradesh in  
2014 alone

Sep 2010

Bihar's last case of  
polio was in Dhaka  
village, on the Indo-  
Nepal border

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powered by

**L**ife is always unpredictable on India's northern border. Thousands cross into India or to Nepal through the Jogbani border crossing between India and Nepal every day, through a narrow checkpoint straddling a busy market street. Bright bunting criss-crosses from building to building over the heads of travellers, obscured by rising fumes from rickshaws and buses.



Thousands cross into India or to Nepal through the Jogbani border crossing between India and Nepal every day, through a narrow checkpoint straddling a busy market street

Not everything crossing the border was seen: from 2009 to 2010, poliovirus crossed from India to Nepal and back to India again, hitching a ride inside an unsuspecting body – and paralyzing children on arrival.

“It was a time of very deep concern for all of us,” says Sadique Ahmad, who coordinates Communication for Development activities including Polio in UNICEF’s Bihar Office. “It was like a being the victim of a surprise attack. And it was even more surprising, because we were already immunizing children crossing the border. Four teams are stationed there 365 days of the year.”

With polio on the run in its other traditional strongholds – Uttar Pradesh and its conservative neighbourhoods, the remote and waterlogged Kosi River Basin and the tangled slums of West Bengal – the polio partners turned their attention to Jogbani and the other 41 crossing towns strung along the Nepali border.

But as it turned out, vaccinating every child on the border wasn't as easy as it had seemed. "They said they had no trouble vaccinating Indian nationals at the crossing," Ahmad recalls. "These families knew the campaign well – from the television, from the CMCs and from all the work we have done to familiarize them."

The difficulty lay in immunizing Nepalese children. Without exposure to the same intense mobilization effort, they were like Indians of the 1990s – wary and suspicious.

"They would not stop for us," says Ratna Das, a vaccinator stationed at Jogbani border-crossing for the past six years. "And if we tried to reason with them they would protest and say – what are you doing? Get away from my child!"

Immunizing Nepalese children living inside Jogbani and its wider district, Araria, was no easier. Over 90 percent of the area is rural, containing a broad mix of ethnicities, religions, migrant groups and ideologies. Nepalese families did not always appreciate seeing strangers with no connection to their own culture turning up at their doorsteps as part of polio mobilization work.

"There was no trust – and sometimes not even a common language between Indian mobilizers and Nepali families," says Shadan Ahmed Khan, a Sub-Regional Coordinator for the SMNet, responsible for Jogbani. "And this was a huge problem. With a house we can come back and try again. But once a child has crossed the border – that's it, they're gone. You only have one chance."





A member of the border team vaccinates a child against polio at the Jogbani border crossing. ©UNICEF/Claire Hajaj

## A cross-border recruitment drive

Khan called his team together and discussed an alternative strategy: recruit Nepalese community mobilizers living in Morang District, on the Nepali side of the border. With no restrictions on Nepali's crossing into or working in India – it would only be a matter of persuasion, and training.

Soon afterwards, the first Nepalese young women joined India's polio eradication effort.

A four-year veteran of the programme, Sudha Dangol, just 20 years old (at time of writing, would spend hours each day working at Jogbani railway station during the polio campaigns, talking to Nepalese families and explaining the campaign to them. In-between campaigns, Sudha walks on foot daily across Jogbani border to visit Nepali families – a task she finds both rewarding and stressful.

“Some Nepalese people here take some time to understand why we come again and again, particularly if they are poor,” she says. “They don't have the same kind of exposure to all this information. I tell them it's a medicine to help their children grow nicely. If they say their child already took it – I say – take it again because it's beneficial, not harmful. “

The hardest part of Sudha's job is her railway station shift, which lasts five weary hours. “We have to ask people again and again, and give them the same information, and check all the children coming past – it's very tiring,” she says. “But at the same time I feel so close to the other girls here, the Nepalis and the Indians too. We are completely one team.”



Four-year veteran of the programme, Nepali mobilizer Sudha Dangol (left). ©UNICEF/Claire Hajaj

Nepalese mobilizers and Indian vaccinators also stand next to each other on the frantic border crossing itself, sweating in the hot sun, vaccines kept cool in any spot of shade. Ratna Das hugs the Nepalese

lady standing next to her, who laughs and then rushes forward to seize a passing rickshaw containing a young child.

“You have to have such sharp eyes,” Das says. “We don’t let a single child pass, even if we have to hold onto the rickshaw until it drags us forward.”

Now that a Nepali mobilizer is working with her, Das’ life has become much easier. “Her community listen much better to her than to me,” she says. “And in fact, there is now one family living across the border – and for every single round them come all the way here to see us and get the vaccine for their child.”

## **A health security operation**

The Jogbani border strategy is a highly complex combination of logistical, communication and security elements. Trying to catch and register families crossing the border at speed, or vaccinate those in transit on the giant railway platform requires the coordinated support of vaccinators, mobilizers, supervisors and India’s Indian Armed Border Security Force. “You should see when the trains come – it’s like a human jam,” says UNICEF’s Ahmad. “You have a split second to find the child and vaccinate them. You need to be almost superhuman.”

According to WHO tallies, 418,314 children were checked at Jogpani border between January and November 2015. Of these, 96,000 immunized at the border – an average of 300 per day. Twenty-two vaccinator teams and 16 mobilizers do this work at the border alone. And across the rest of Jogpani and Araria the normal work of the polio campaigns must also continue – covering high-risk migrant groups, every household and all the areas other transit points.

Rohit Kumar is a Block Mobilization Coordinator supervising the Nepali mobilizers working in the area. “The border is the toughest job,” he says. “At least with house-to-house activities you know what to expect. But numbers crossing the border vary every day.”

Kumar has a list of regular contacts who keep him updated on any unusual border movements. “If one of them tells me that a nomadic group have crossed through, I go immediately to visit them and make a census of their immunization needs,” he says. “In total we have 24 temporary migrant sites and two permanent settlements here. And they are always pleased to see me – because no-one has ever given them anything for free before.”

Kumar and his WHO colleagues all praise the Indian border guard - the Sashastra Seema Bal or SSB – for what they call “indispensable” support.

“These border guards, I consider them fully part of our team,” says Santos Kumar, a WHO Field Monitor at Jogbani. “They are the ones who step in when families refuse, or stop vehicles, and provide the official authority for our work in this very sensitive area. They facilitate everything for us. They really seem to care that the children are vaccinated.”

Neeraj Chand took over as Second in Command of the 56th Battalion at Jogbani when the border strategy was already in full swing.

“I knew about the campaigns, of course, before I arrived here,” he says. “But this was an entirely different level of cooperation between security and public health.”

Chand has travelled to several border crossings in the area to monitor vaccination. It gave him a new perspective, he says, on the dedicated toughness of people who work in this humanitarian field.

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“These vaccinators and mobilizers - they go  
to the remote areas where other  
government programmes do not go.”

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The SSB’s support started as a ground-up initiative, Chand says. “Officers saw the work of the vaccinators and would step in to help where needed,” he said. “It was quite *ad hoc*. But slowly news of how we were helping filtered up to the higher-ups. Eventually our senior officers said: okay, let’s develop an official policy with a rigorous reporting system. And now here we are.”

Chand has taken his own steps to make sure the SSB does its part. “I heard that when the campaigns first started and the SSB’s support was requested, our officers were wary. They weren’t sure this was really their kind of job. But my predecessors and I have the same message – we are here to provide security: personal security, border security and also health security. These are not separate issues – they are all one.”

To help the SSB engage, Chand’s men and women received training from the polio partners – opening new areas of knowledge about health, campaign management and communication. “It’s been helpful for us in surprising ways,” he says. “Particularly because of the amount of stress that we manage. People here are away from their families for a long time and it affects them. The polio work is a different kind of outlet - one that provides personal and social benefits.”

## Standing guard against polio’s return



The Jogbani border cooperation between India's public health system, Nepal's socially conscious female mobilizers and the SSB halted the virus. Bihar's last case of polio was recorded on the border in September 2010, in a town far from Jogbani.

So far, the virus has not returned. India and Nepal are polio-free. And the guards at the border – vaccinators, mobilizers, and officers alike – are still working, 365 days a year. They intend to ensure that both countries remain that way.

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