

THE STORY BEHIND THE RESULTS: WHEN THE CHILD IS HEALTHY, THE MOTHER IS HAPPY

Syeda Sultana Roushan Jahan, a 40-year-old mother of two, has visited the Bangladesh headquarters of the World Health Organization's Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in Dhaka many times. It is where she came to get her first child immunized and now, on this warm and sticky morning, she has come back to start vaccinations for her second baby. With the calm of an experienced mother, she watches as the doctor holds part of the baby's thigh and slowly inserts the needle. The child starts to wail and Syeda laughs and bends her head down to kiss his tears. She knows the vaccine will help to build up her baby's immune system and protect him from deadly diseases. "When the child is healthy, the mother is happy," she says with a smile.

Syeda is one of a dozen mothers at the clinic. The EPI, which was introduced by Bangladesh's government in 1979 with the help of UNICEF, is one of the country's biggest success stories. As recently as 1985, only about 2 percent of Bangladeshi children were vaccinated against preventable diseases. Today, that percentage has reached 82 percent—and is still rising.

The EPI's objective is to eradicate vaccine-preventable diseases. With the support of donors like Canada, the EPI is credited with preventing approximately 200,000 deaths a year in Bangladesh. Its success in achieving and maintaining polio-eradication status, and in staying on course to eliminate measles by 2016, is widely acknowledged all over the country.

"EPI is doing good things in our country," says Syeda. "Everyone is quite pleased with this program because, so far, in the rural areas everyone is completing these free vaccinations. We rarely see someone suffering from polio or tuberculosis, so we are doing well."

Canada's \$12 million multi-year contribution to the EPI (2011-2015) supported the procurement and installation of equipment, such as cold rooms and ice-lined refrigerators, to ensure the proper storage and safe handling of vaccines. This has increased the percentage of children under two who receive all vaccines with the right antigens, at the right time, from 79 percent to 82 percent.

In Bangladesh, as in any country with a high population density, the battle against preventable and infectious diseases is hard-fought. Initiatives such as the EPI contribute greatly to levelling the playing field.

