



# Northern India Hotspot Annual Report 2020



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## 1. Operating context

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During the first six months of 2020, the northern India hotspot program was deeply affected by the covid-19 pandemic. In March, India was badly-hit by the virus and by the related country-wide lockdown. The crisis brought immense additional pressure to already deprived and vulnerable populations in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, with the greatest challenge posed by the millions of migrants returning to their villages. The pandemic has deepened vulnerabilities of the most marginalized communities. School closures have adversely impacted poor children who lack access to digital learning and may never to return to school. There are also some concerns that the increased supply of cheap labour will fuel labour exploitation generally, with lower caste members more likely to get exploited.

By early July, the general lockdown was gradually eased with movement becoming easier (though still hampered by much reduced train and plane schedules) and a return to work – in line within social distancing rules – becoming a near prospect. By October, most restrictions in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were lifted. Schools, however, remain closed.

In Bihar, in addition to the pandemic, the notoriously flood-prone state faced the dual challenges of rising infection cases and serious flooding.

As a result of these restrictions and a constantly changing context, Freedom Fund partners in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were forced to put their projects on hold, in particular their outreach to the project communities. However, as the pandemic took hold of the region, arising needs as a result of the lockdown and the large numbers of migrants returning to their homes, partners recognised this opportunity to raise their concerns with relevant authorities, work that they were able to do remotely, via phone or using the internet. The use of virtual communication tools became increasingly common amongst hotspot partners during this time.

The Freedom Fund's hotspot team was also forced to resort to working from home throughout this period, unable to visit partners or communities. Virtual partner meetings and virtual monitoring calls, sometimes even with community members, were successfully trialled. While the hotspot was planning to start a new strategy phase on July 1, this transition was postponed, allowing time to assess the implications of covid-19 for the new strategy. Partners and the Freedom Fund team have found that, while the covid-19 crisis and consequent lockdowns hit vulnerable communities hard, it also served as a stress test that demonstrated their resilience and capacity to drive change beyond their communities.

By September 2020, partners had resumed their normal activities and the program started looking towards the next strategy phase. Regulatory changes resulted in delays in the new program start but in December 2020, the Freedom Fund issued 18-month grants for partners to address three drivers of child labour: lack of access to schemes on education, healthcare and rural employment; and ensure that child labour prevention activities are led by local government and communities at district and panchayat levels.

## 2. Hotspot Outputs & Outcomes

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### 2.1 Headline Results

**131,999 people were linked to new government services** particularly those that are proven to reduce vulnerability to exploitation like job cards, labour registrations, health cards, food welfare etc. Much of this was through ERF grants where partners were encouraged to make sure that relief recipients were also connected to government entitlements.

**116,495 people in 165 communities were declared free from trafficking and bonded labour** as they had reached a stage where they were free from exploitation, able to access rights and prevent exploitative practices in their communities. These communities will now be at the forefront of the new strategy to drive down child labour throughout the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

**50,00 individuals received emergency support to address needs resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.** Partners provided critical emergency relief, including food aid, Covid-19 prevention materials and hygiene packs and micro-grants. These grants helped several hundred families start their own businesses to earn an income during times when their regular livelihood strategies were no longer an option due to covid-19 restrictions.

### 2.2 Progress towards hotspot objectives

#### Hotspot Objective 1: Reducing the prevalence of human trafficking and slavery

Years of work empowering communities is now showing transformative impact among those previously vulnerable to exploitation. Notably, survivors and communities are initiating rescues themselves without the direct support of civil society partners. For example, during the national covid-19 lockdown, the survivor group Azad Shakti Abhiyan (ASA) coordinated the rescue of 34 children, who were originally from Bihar, working in a textile dyeing unit in Gujarat. As a result of this rescue, other parents whose children had been similarly trafficked, independently approached the authorities and secured the rescue of their own 65 children from factories in Gujarat.

Throughout the hotspot, community resilience developed by Freedom Fund partners has also become evident as self-help groups and community vigilance committee members actively working to ensure that vulnerable and excluded communities gain access to basic entitlements. For instance, in Sitamarhi media reports described a village champion in a BMVS-supported community raising awareness about the importance of 100% registration of labourers<sup>1</sup> as this then qualifies them to receive monetary benefits. A few days later the District Magistrate reiterated this demand and called on wards that were lagging behind to improve. BMVS has noted a 25% increase in labour registration in their project area which they attribute to awareness through media and government networking.

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<sup>1</sup> Media reports are [here](#)

This grassroots-led work places the program in a strong position for success in the new strategy phase where communities and survivors will be at the forefront while implementing partners play a facilitating role.

## Hotspot Objective 2: Widening the enabling environment for freedom and improving the effectiveness of government

Despite the many challenges of 2020, the Freedom Fund program contributed to policy change as well as better policy implementation at various levels of government.

### Improving Policy Implementation at the State Level

The State of Bihar issued a directive to police that children should not be engaged in culturally-entrenched dance troupes (which serve as an entry point for child sexual exploitation): In January our partner Nirdesh made recommendations to the Bihar Minister of Culture Pramod Kumar for strict monitoring of dance troupes and closure of troupes that employed children.<sup>2</sup> The Minister passed along these recommendations to the Chief Minister and top bureaucrats in Bihar.<sup>3</sup> In February, the Bihar Home Ministry issued a letter based on these recommendations to the Head of Police.<sup>4</sup>

The State of Bihar deters traffickers through targeted policies: In March, the Inspector-General of Bihar,<sup>5</sup> as a result of outreach by our partner JVI, issued a directive to all 38 Bihar districts for stringent laws to be applied against child traffickers to prevent easy access to bail.<sup>6</sup> This [Times of India](#) news report highlights the importance of the circular which also includes an important directive that men who exploit children for profit should be arrested and prosecuted, an important first step in deterring demand.

Improving the State government's response to bonded labour: In March, the Bihar government issued a circular calling for change in the way bonded labour cases are handled specifically the prompt release of interim as well as final compensation, time-bound case disposal, perpetrator accountability, prompt rehabilitation of bonded labourers and rights-awareness.<sup>7</sup> The circular is the result of previous outreach to the NHRC by our partner JVI. Impact of the NHRC outreach was also seen in Uttar Pradesh where MSEMVS reported government-led training and rehabilitation of bonded labourers in non-project areas in Bhadohi.

Improving the State of Uttar Pradesh's response on child protection: Freedom Fund partner ROSA was successful in convincing Azamgarh District to adopt its village-level child protection model across 1,874 villages. Later in the year, the State Government directed all 75 districts across Uttar Pradesh to implement ROSA's model. Recognizing ROSA's leadership, the State also directed the districts to seek any necessary inputs from ROSA.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Photographs of the meeting are [here](#)

<sup>3</sup> The letter is [here](#)

<sup>4</sup> The letter is [here](#)

<sup>5</sup> A highly ranked police officer

<sup>6</sup> The English translation of this order is [here](#)

<sup>7</sup> The circular is [here](#)

<sup>8</sup> The State government order is [here](#)

Partners address healthcare-related debt, a key driver of debt bondage: Throughout the hotspot, partners made a concerted effort to increase access to government-funded health insurance schemes which have the potential to reduce debt bondage.

As part of this effort, almost half a million people from vulnerable communities received access to health insurance in Uttar Pradesh. Data-driven government outreach by our partner ROSA<sup>9</sup> resulted in [this](#) State-wide directive that all 75 districts in Uttar Pradesh make a concerted effort from December 15 to December 31 to connect vulnerable communities to healthcare insurance. To ease implementation, the letter also assigned roles and responsibilities to officials. Data from the Uttar Pradesh government's website demonstrates the effectiveness of this directive.

By December 31, the total number of health cards issued had risen by 438,460.<sup>10</sup> Following the success of the initial campaign, the State of Uttar Pradesh, noting that coverage had reached 33% of the eligible population, extended the date of the camps (via [this directive](#)) until 15 January 2021 to cover the rest. In Azamgarh district alone, ROSA was able to verify that 16,325 cards were created in 15 days.<sup>11</sup> This is the first step for millions to be able to gain access to healthcare insurance and reduce vulnerability to debt bondage.

Some partners also took steps towards mainstreaming program learnings that healthcare-related debt is a driver of child labour and debt bondage. In particular, Nirdeh held events with high-level stakeholders like the Bihar Minister of Culture as well as a Bihar Member of Parliament, both of whom publicly acknowledged a link between vulnerability to child labour and predatory loans driven by health care needs. This event received media coverage<sup>12</sup> and the MP shared updates with her facebook followers.

In March, the Raxual administration, as a result of outreach by the Duncan Hospital, issued an important order<sup>13</sup> fixing the responsibilities of government officials to assist communities in online applications for healthcare insurance. The order notes specific times for registration and introduces accountability for officials for failure to register communities including the possibility of dismissal if registration remains low. Similarly, TSN worked with the Block Administration to issue an order to engage village level leaders in registration under the Ayushman Bharat scheme.<sup>14</sup>

70-year old Suraj Das fell ill and was in urgent need of treatment for a bladder stone. With a family of 10 to feed and no regular income, his only option to access healthcare seemed to be an extortionate loan which would be paid off through debt bondage. However, the drive towards healthcare insurance in the program ensured that people like Suraj Das were made aware of their right to free healthcare. Awareness alone is not enough. Ease of access is critically important: through a Community Vigilance Committee, supported by BMVS, the district of Sitamarhi in 2019 had made it easier for people like Suraj Das to receive the healthcare card which provide cashless health benefits. In November 2020, Suraj Das received free treatment worth Rs. 30,000 (approximately USD 415).

As a result of the program, throughout Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, hundreds of thousands of families like Suraj Das's are receiving support to access their legal rights to healthcare and

<sup>9</sup> ROSA conducted a study in their 60 project villages, submitted this data to the District as well as the State.

<sup>10</sup> Data as of 23 November is [here](#) and data as of 5 January is [here](#)

<sup>11</sup> The government official who provided ROSA with this information is Mr. Ajay Pratap Singh, IT Ayushman Azamgarh

<sup>12</sup> The media report is [here](#)

<sup>13</sup> The order is [here](#)

<sup>14</sup> The order is [here](#)

Partners expedited compensation to child labour survivors. Following outreach by the FF Program Advisor and TSN, the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights has directed the officials of three districts to expedite payment of compensation.<sup>15</sup>

### Hotspot Objective 3: Increasing Civil Society's Capacity for Sustained and Effective Anti-Slavery Action

The program fulfilled Objective 3 by strengthening partners' efforts on safeguarding, support to government and media, and collective action on entitlements. In addition, one of the survivor collectives in the hotspot was formally registered.

Safeguarding: All partners completed their Safeguarding Policies, identified Safeguarding focal points and are continuing to receive training and guidance on implementing best practices.

Partners in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar collectively worked to ensure strong impact of an emergency scheme called the Garib Kalyan Yojana, which provided food grains and government-supported employment to the most vulnerable communities. Partners reached out to the Nodal Point Person in the district and provided feedback on enhancing the effectiveness of the program. As a result, rate of access to entitlements, especially rural employment, increased. Partner support was critical in ensuring that the benefits of the Schemes reached the most vulnerable people during a time of extreme crisis where most of them were in danger of debt bondage.

As part of Emergency Response Fund projects our technical partners Chase and Swaniti trained partners, survivors and community leaders to engage effectively with government stakeholders and the media to mainstream findings that covid-19 is deepening vulnerability to debt bondage and child labour.<sup>16</sup> Technical expertise included a media handbook, virtual workshops for survivors and partner staff, and connections with Members of Parliament and reputed media outlets. The combined reach of the news reports is around 135 million.

The Freedom Fund partner network, Human Liberty Network, supported the Tamil Nadu Alliance in gathering information about returning migrant workers who were owed wages in Tamil Nadu. They also supported the Tamil Nadu Alliance in collecting around 22,000 signatures as part of the campaign to urge the government to provide a subsidy to vulnerable families.

Registration of a survivor collective: The nascent survivor movement is moving towards sustainability. The Azad Shakti Abhiyan survivor collective was formally registered.

### Hotspot Objective 4: Supporting rigorous research and evaluation in the hotspot

In 2020, Freedom Fund released a study on the experiences of survivors of bonded labour and trafficking in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The study, carried out by University of Nottingham and Praxis India, interviewed 88 survivors of trafficking to better understand their realities post-liberation. The study identified choice, decent income, freedom from debt, and self-representation as critical components of survivors' ability to prevent

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<sup>15</sup> The orders are [here](#)

<sup>16</sup> The program conducted a rapid assessment survey which led to the findings

themselves from re-entering conditions of exploitation. Community organising was seen as essential to work for better rights. ([press release link](#)) ([pdf link](#))

Over the past two years, North India partner organisations have also been collaborating with the Freedom Fund in the development and piloting of the Pathways case-management system. Funded by the United Kingdom Home Office, Pathways is a dedicated case-management system, designed and supported by Praxis India for use by anti-trafficking organisations across India. The Pathways system is designed to promote integrated, survivor-centred care and to capture the complicated journeys for individuals and communities leaving exploitation. North India partners have input into the system design and are currently trialling its roll-out.

### 3. Emergency Response Fund

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In April, the Freedom Fund established a covid-19 [Emergency Response Fund](#) to offer immediate small-scale funding to over 100 frontline partners working with vulnerable communities in India, Nepal, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Thailand and Brazil. The Fund supported three types of interventions to bring immediate lifesaving support to those in greatest need: 1. Emergency relief to affected groups; 2. Surge capacity for NGO advocacy and 3. Microgrants to savings & loans groups, self-help groups, and other existing community structures

With the support of ERF grants, partners in northern India provided critical emergency relief, including food aid, Covid-19 prevention materials and hygiene packs and micro-grants. Over 50,000 people received some kind of support to help be able to cope better during this emergency and safeguard themselves against having to take on extortionate loans. The grants also enabled several hundred families to start their own businesses to earn an income during times when their regular livelihood strategies were no longer an option due to covid-19 restrictions.

Partners supported sustainable ways of providing direct relief so that vulnerability would not surge back once funds were exhausted. Communities were encouraged to set up grain banks managed by Self-Help Groups where vulnerable persons including migrants, female-headed households etc. could “borrow” food grains during the emergency and return the grains to the bank when their financial situation improved. Communities have found these grain banks to be useful even after the pandemic to provide support to people who might otherwise become vulnerable to extortionate loans and debt bondage. In some MSEMVS-supported communities, the self-help groups have developed a process to “grow” the grain banks and have even received support and donations from village leadership.



Throughout the emergency, Freedom Fund partners worked diligently to connect vulnerable families and communities to government entitlements, further helping them access much needed support during difficult

times. Much of this effort was led by Community Vigilance Groups and Self Help Groups, who played a pivotal role in helping communities access their rights. For example, in Northern Bihar, where many communities were devastated by floods, members of the Community Vigilance Groups led the outreach to local government, mapped families entitled to flood relief, and supported the government in making sure compensation was paid to flood-affected people.

Alongside these efforts, partners also reported these realities to with government and media outlets to highlight the impact of covid-19 in communities and how the pandemic has increased vulnerability to child labour.

The emergency has not only deeply affected our project communities but also the functioning of our partner organisations. Frontline workers especially have had to balance concerns about their own families while working to support communities with wide-ranging movement restrictions. With the support of the ERF, we were able to hire a mental health consultant who offered group and individual counselling sessions to help partner staff cope during times of severe anxiety.

The support of these ERF grants in combination with increased community resilience as a result of our long-term intervention protected project communities from devastation which could have overturned much of the progress made over the past six years of the program. As a result, the hotspot was well-positioned to begin its new strategy phase.



## 4. Supporting a community of practice

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The new strategy phase has aligned all partners' programs and partners come together in monthly action planning meetings to discuss priorities and plans. Partners share feedback and learnings and there is also a structured effort to enable partners to share powerful achievements and how these were accomplished so that others are spurred on to similar action.

All partners are currently engaged in data collection and as the program progresses to the next few stages, partners will collectively (at State and district level) reach out to government and support the adoption of solutions to reduce child labour.

## 5. Case study

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The pandemic had a devastating impact on the education of children from vulnerable communities. Public schools, especially those in vulnerable communities, could not make the shift to online learning as students lacked digital devices and connectivity. Apart from learning, schools provide nutrition and an indispensable safety net against exploitation. School closures increased deepened vulnerability to child labour.

Investment by the program in previous years has provided communities with the capacity to back their resolve to remain free of child labour despite school closures. Our partner, MSEMVS, has invested in the education of children from India's most vulnerable communities – the Musahar community. Many of the project participants, who were supported through remedial learning, are now in higher education or have access to decent work. These participants, once at risk of exploitation, took the lead in preserving the gains made by their community against child labour. They took turns in teaching Musahar children in batches making sure the children continued to have structure in their lives, were building on their education and



importantly, were in a safety net. This initiative was entirely led by the children – it was they who thought of and designed the intervention without any support from MSEMVS. It's one of the many examples of the sustainability of work that is anchored in communities' desire to be free from exploitation.





**Hannah de Ville**

Senior Program Manager

The Freedom Fund

London

+44 203 777 2206

[hdeville@freedomfund.org](mailto:hdeville@freedomfund.org)

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**The Freedom Fund (UK)**

Lighterman House  
30 Wharfdale Road,  
London, N1 9RY  
United Kingdom  
+ 44 203 077 2222

**The Freedom Fund (U.S.)**

214 Park Avenue South  
Floor 11  
New York, NY 10003  
USA  
+1 (929) 244-9722

[freedomfund.org](http://freedomfund.org)