

Foreign Policy White Paper: Vision 2020 Australia response

Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the new Foreign Policy White Paper. Vision 2020 Australia's response relates to improving foreign policy outcomes in relation to the delivery of global eye health and vision care services.

Summary of recommendations

Vision 2020 Australia has four recommendations:

1. That the Australian Government takes up its unique opportunity to implement and strengthen innovative and lateral approaches to the delivery of foreign aid, and particularly the delivery of eye health and vision care services in our region.
2. That the Australian Government continues its leadership role in tackling avoidable blindness and providing vision care in the Asia Pacific region; particularly in relation to the delivery of initiatives which promote disability inclusiveness and gender equality.
3. That the Australian Government recognises that foreign aid should sit equally alongside diplomacy, trade and security as a strategic imperative and a crucial part of our foreign policy in creating a global environment which enables Australia's interests to be advanced.
4. That the Australian Government ensures alignment of our foreign policy to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

About Vision 2020 Australia

Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB).

Vision 2020 Australia is the Australian peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, leading advocacy efforts to governments within Australia and globally, and raising community awareness about eye health and vision care. We provide a collaborative platform for our members – representing over 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye care, health promotion, low vision support, rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.

In addition to the four recommendations made in the following submission, Vision 2020 Australia supports the submissions put forward by our members, including but not limited to CBM Australia and the Australian Council for International Development.

1 Global eye health and vision care

It is estimated that globally, 191 million people are vision impaired and 32.4 million are blind.¹ Recent estimates suggest that up to 80 per cent of vision impairment and blindness is avoidable through the appropriate implementation of cost-effective prevention and treatment strategies.²

Extrapolations at a global level have shown that a successful global VISION 2020 eye care program could prevent more than 100 million cases of blindness between 2000 and 2020, with savings of at least USD 102 billion, which would otherwise be lost to reductions in productivity associated with blindness.³

For instance, programs in Vietnam and Morocco have shown that sustained effort by governments, international agencies and the eye health and vision care sector, has led to the elimination of trachoma, a blinding eye disease, as a major public health problem.⁴ In Cambodia, 90 per cent of post-operative cataract patients who responded to a survey said their quality of life had improved after sight-restoring surgery, that they were more independent and no longer needed anyone to look after them, and that they could assist in cultivating crops and working around the house, highlighting the impact of eye health and vision care programs on individual as well as broader community wellbeing.⁵

Additionally, studies have demonstrated that vision impairment is both a cause and consequence of poverty. At the global level, the prevalence of blindness is five times higher in low-income than in high-income countries.⁶ People in low-income countries living with a disability are even more likely to experience barriers to accessing appropriate housing, clean water and sanitation facilities. Facilitating access to clean water and sanitation is critical to ensuring the elimination of avoidable blindness and vision impairment, particularly in efforts to eliminate trachoma in the Pacific. Eye health and vision care initiatives should therefore be made inclusive and accessible for people with disability as a priority.

Strategies to better prevent and treat eye diseases can also contribute to Australia's existing development priorities in supporting women's economic empowerment and leadership. Surveys reveal that women are affected by blindness and vision impairment to a much greater degree than men, making up approximately 64 per cent of the total number of blind people globally, and that in some areas women are half as likely to be able to access eye care.⁷ Women with disability face a double burden, and experience even greater exclusion and marginalisation due to the intersection of disability and gender. They experience discrimination, marginalisation, and are often excluded from communities, public health services and development programs.⁸ This exclusion further

¹ Stevens, G.A., et al., Global prevalence of vision impairment and blindness: magnitude and temporal trends, 1990-2010. *Ophthalmology* 120,12 (2003): 2377-84.

² **'Visual Impairment and Blindness'** World Health Organization, modified August 2014,

³ Frick KD, Foster A, 'The Magnitude and Cost of Global Blindness: An Increasing Problem The Can Be Alleviated,' *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 135 (2003):471-476.

⁴ Vision 2020 Australia, International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, 2010, **'Vision for Africa: A plan to eliminate avoidable blindness and vision impairment in Sub-Saharan Africa'**.

⁵ The Fred Hollows Foundation, 'Report on the Socio-Economic Impact Survey of Post-Operative Cataract Surgery Patients in Three Provinces of Cambodia', March 2004.

⁶ Resnikoff S, Pascolini D, Etyaále D, Kocur I, Pararajasegaram R, 'Global Data on Vision Impairment for the Year 2002', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 82 (2004): 844-851.

⁷ Courtright P, Lewallen S, 'Gender and Eye Health', *Community Eye Health Journal* 22, 70 (2009): 17-18.

⁸ CBM, *Introducing: Disability Inclusion in Eye Health Programs*, 2013.

increases women's vulnerability to poverty, and creates a vicious cycle of poverty and disability.

Further, Australia has a long history supporting the work of governments and local stakeholders in the Asia Pacific region and Vision 2020 Australia encourages the Australian Government to take up its unique opportunity to implement and strengthen innovative and lateral approaches to the delivery of foreign aid, particularly the delivery of eye health and vision care services, in our region.

In the face of mounting evidence that foreign aid, delivered through eye health and vision care initiatives, can have a strong impact on our region, Vision 2020 Australia strongly recommends that the Australian Government ensure that Australia's future foreign policy recognises aid as a strategic imperative, alongside diplomacy, trade and security. Vision 2020 Australia believes that Australian foreign aid remains a critical and cost-effective tool for advancing Australia's interests in the region, enabling the alleviation of poverty and improving regional security by addressing health outcomes and their underlying social determinant factors amongst the world's poorest.

Overall, Vision 2020 Australia congratulates the Australian Government for its commitment to strengthening Australia's foreign policy, and remains committed to working alongside the Australian Government and stakeholders to deliver foreign aid initiatives related to inclusive eye health and vision care. Vision 2020 Australia encourages the Australian Government to continue its leadership role in tackling avoidable blindness and providing vision care in the Asia Pacific region; particularly in relation to the delivery of initiatives which promote disability inclusiveness and gender equality.

2 The future direction of Australian foreign policy

As a member of the Group of 20 (G20), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations (UN), it remains essential that Australia invests appropriately in global efforts and honours its international commitments towards poverty alleviation.

Appropriately, Australia is internationally recognised for playing a leading development role in our region, where two-thirds of the world's poor – approximately 800 million people – reside, yet receive less than one third of global aid.⁹ Lifting people out of poverty fosters peace and sustainable local economies, protects Australia from regional conflicts, and lowers the threat of other regional issues such as potential health pandemics.

Vision 2020 Australia therefore strongly encourages the Australian Government to recognise that foreign aid should sit equally alongside diplomacy, trade and security as a strategic imperative and a crucial part of our foreign policy in creating a global environment which enables Australia's interests to be advanced. Vision 2020 Australia also believes that in practice, the Australian aid program should be granted the legitimacy and budgetary protections allowed to the diplomatic, trade and defence portfolios.

Inclusive eye health and vision care is an effective use of Australian foreign aid

Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) have a long history of partnering with the Australian Government to tackle blindness and vision impairment in developing countries and globally. Coupled with Australia's leading role in development and commitments to eye health and disability inclusion through the foreign aid program, the expertise of Australian NGOs in reducing blindness and vision impairment is crucial to improving health outcomes and strengthening health systems.

Vision impairment is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Globally, the prevalence of vision impairment is five-times higher in low-income countries than in high-income countries.¹⁰ Further, there are direct links between vision impairment and lack of access to opportunities such as education, employment, and social inclusion, and to basic needs such as health services, good nutrition, safe housing and clean water and sanitation.¹¹

Inclusive eye health and vision care programs are effective and are also proven to produce tangible results. At a program level, outcomes from cataract surgery, provision of spectacles and other interventions can be easily measured and reported. The potential lost productivity resulting from the global burden of uncorrected refractive error has been shown to be over USD 225 billion dollars annually and at an individual level, productivity gains are immediately realised once sight is restored.¹²

⁹ Based on the DFAT publication 'Performance of Australian Aid 2013-14'.

¹⁰ Resnikoff S, Pascolini D, Etyaála D, Kocur I, Pararajasegaram R, 'Global Data on Vision Impairment for the Year 2002', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 82 (2004): 844-851.

¹¹ Gooding K, *Poverty and Blindness: A survey of the literature*, Sight Savers International, 2006.

¹² Smith, TST, Frick, KD, Holden, BA, Fricke, TR & Naidoo KS, 'Potential lost productivity resulting from the global burden of uncorrected refractive error', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 2009.

Furthermore, programs seeking to strengthen the capacity, knowledge and skills of in-country stakeholders, and that facilitate regional and cross-country collaboration as well as peer to peer exchange, have proven to be particularly successful in supporting health systems strengthening and advancing inclusive eye health and vision care outcomes in the region.

Investing in inclusive eye health and vision care supports economic development

Australia's economy, as well as the economies of neighbouring countries, will be hampered if chronic poverty and instability persist or increase in our region. In a global economy, the success of Australian business and investment depends on the strength, stability and health of the nations with which we work. Asia is home to some of the fastest growing economies, but there remain unacceptably high numbers of people in poverty, and huge gaps between the rich and poor. In order for the Government to promote economic development and pursue consistent economic diplomacy, it must first invest in strengthening the necessary pre-conditions to sustainable economic growth and poverty alleviation, such as peace and security, health, education, rule of law and environment.

The Australian foreign aid program has an essential role to play in promoting sustainable economic growth and poverty alleviation in recipient countries, and also in protecting Australia's own national and economic interests. The economic report commissioned by The Fred Hollows Foundation and prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), *Investing in Vision*, indicates that eye health and vision care programs are among the most cost effective public health interventions available and provide an economic return of \$4 for every \$1 invested.¹³

Further, the benefits of investing in eye health and vision care go beyond economic benefits, extending to social gains. *Investing in Vision* states that an additional USD 394.2 billion is needed globally to eliminate avoidable blindness over 10 years. But only 33 per cent of that amount, USD 128.2 billion over 10 years is required to eliminate avoidable blindness and ensure sustainable and inclusive eye health services for people living in developing countries.¹⁴ This further investment represents both the cost of providing additional primary and secondary health services each year as well as the 'capital' investment required to increase the primary and secondary health workforce and infrastructure systems in line with the workforce ratios recommended by VISION 2020.¹⁵

Improved access to eye health and vision care services will help address gender inequality

Gender equality has been a feature of aid and development programs for a number of years. In addition to the clear social and development benefits of tackling inequality, actively broadening the benefits of economic growth to include women and girls can work to increase the pace of economic progress in developing countries. Further, Vision 2020 Australia believes that it is important

¹³ The Fred Hollows Foundation, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2014 '[Investing in Vision: The Costs & Benefits of Ending Avoidable Blindness](#)'.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

to recognise that the links between gender equality and blindness is definitely contributing to protecting the rights of women and girls.

Addressing eye health and promoting good vision care for all is a contributing factor towards ending gender inequality, and it has a significant impact on addressing inequity of opportunities.

When women are denied equal access to health services, education and employment, their ability to care for themselves and their families is significantly impeded. In 2004, the WHO reported:

The costs associated with health care, including user fees, are a barrier to women's use of services. Women's income is lower than that of men, and they have less control over household resources. They may not be able to pay for treatment unless there is agreement from senior members (whether male or female) of the household. Women's workload in the home and their caregiving roles when other family members are ill are also significant factors in delaying decisions to seek treatment. In areas where women have limited mobility, they may be unable to travel to health centres.¹⁶

Vision 2020 Australia congratulates the Australian Government for focusing on gender equality in its foreign policies. Women account for approximately 64 per cent of all blind people globally.¹⁷ Therefore, Vision 2020 Australia believes that by supporting the delivery of eye health and vision care services, the poorest and most vulnerable, including women and girls, will benefit and lives can be transformed. Ensuring that measures to address systemic gender inequality are included in the delivery of eye health and vision care programs through Australian foreign aid will assist in tackling current challenges.

In some areas, women and girls are only half as likely as men to be able to access eye care services. For example, population-based surveys from five Asian and African countries show that women account for between 53 per cent and 72 per cent respectively of all people living with cataract.¹⁸ In addition, women are not receiving surgery at the same rate as men, and are much less likely to have cataract surgery as men.¹⁹ Trachoma was also found to be more common in women than in men.²⁰ As women and girls are the primary childcare providers, they often acquire active trachoma from young children. Surveys carried out in trachoma-endemic areas demonstrated that 75 per cent of all adults with in-turned eyelashes (the stage of the disease that leads to blindness) were female.²¹

Furthermore, the care of a blind or vision impaired relative often falls to another member within that same family unit and usually a young girl, effectively reducing both her education and employment opportunities. Women with disability face a double burden, and experience even greater exclusion and marginalisation due to their disability and gender. They experience

¹⁶ ['Chronic Diseases and Health Promotion: Gender inequality. Spotlight: Blindness in women'](#) World Health Organization, accessed March 2, 2017.

¹⁷ Abou-Gareeb I, Lewallen S, Bassett K, Courtright P, *Gender and blindness: A meta-analysis of population-based prevalence surveys*, *Ophthalmic Epidemiology*, 8 (2001):39-56.

¹⁸ World Health Organization, 2002, ['Gender and Blindness'](#).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

discrimination, marginalisation, and are often excluded from communities, public health services and development programs.²² This exclusion further increases women's vulnerability to poverty, and creates a vicious cycle of poverty and disability.

Aid and development assistance programs, including eye health and vision programs, are an effective means of ending the cycle of poverty by reaching the poorest and most marginalised members of society. Vision 2020 Australia strongly considers that cuts to these programs could result in a reduction of progress made in gender equality across the region, and affect the number of females in positions of leadership.

Australian foreign aid commitments must support disability inclusive development

People with disability form the world's largest minority group estimated at 15 per cent of the global population, or one billion people.²³ As 80 per cent of people with disability live in developing countries, some of the world's poorest people are often excluded from communities, public health services and development programs.²⁴ This exclusion increases their vulnerability to poverty and creates a vicious cycle of poverty and disability. To end this cycle, all aid and development programs must be equipped to include people with disability. Disability inclusive aid and development policy and practice, ensures that people with disability have equal access to opportunities in education, rehabilitation, as well as livelihoods and social inclusion, assisting in lifting them out of poverty.

Eye health and vision care programs of the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium are committed to improving access to and inclusion of people with disability. Vision 2020 Australia understands that to effectively reach and improve the lives of the poor, all efforts must be made to ensure people with disability have full access to eye health programs. Removing social, economic and physical barriers to eye health services can be achieved through the establishment of counselling, referral pathways, training, consultation with Disabled Peoples Organisations, accessible infrastructure, awareness raising, and the collection of disability and gender disaggregated data.²⁵

As outlined by CBM Australia in their submission to this same inquiry:

Many of the world's global and regional organisations could benefit from an increased qualitative and experience-based understanding of the lives of people with disability. But still too many require support and reform in developing a more robust quantitative knowledge of the state of disability in our world. At present, while the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has long implemented a gender marker code to facilitate the improved tracking of expenditure towards gender equality in member states' aid programs, no such marker for disability inclusion exists. Data on disability-inclusive aid investments is therefore lacking, with no structural mechanism for consistent collection. The establishment of a disability marker, in the form of a DAC code,

²² CBM, *Introducing: Disability Inclusion in Eye Health Programs*, 2013.

²³ World Health Organization/World Bank, *World Report on Disability*, 2011.

²⁴ 'The 2030 Agenda: leave no person with disabilities behind' Our Perspectives, United Nations Development Programme, accessed 2 March, 2017.

²⁵ CBM, *Introducing: Disability Inclusion in Eye Health Programs*, 2013.

would allow for enhanced reporting standards and ensure improved tracking of development assistance that targets people with disability, including by sector breakdown.

Australia's continued engagement in the OECD's Development Assistance Committee is sacrosanct, but this should not preclude us from examining how we can contribute to systemic reform and improvement of this - and other - important global structures to build a more inclusive international community.

Australia can fulfil a leadership role in the Asia Pacific region

Well-targeted aid is a cost-effective means of exercising geopolitical leadership in line with key Australian values and areas of strength, and a crucial pillar in supporting the achievement of overall foreign policy objectives. In economically uncertain times, in which other countries are considering their investments in the region, it is strategically important for Australia to continue to provide highly visible leadership in the Asia Pacific region.

Australia's current position as chair of the World Health Assembly (WHA) Executive Board, and our role as a proposing member for WHA resolutions, demonstrates Australia's leadership role. Australia's leadership position on the WHA has highlighted the importance of eliminating avoidable blindness and the need to build on the significant progress already achieved. Following Resolution WHA66.4 passed in 2013, the WHA endorsed the WHO action plan for the prevention of avoidable blindness and vision impairment, *Universal eye health: a global action plan 2014-19*.

On 23 October 2013, following the endorsement of the Global Action Plan, *Towards Universal Eye Health: A Regional Action Plan for the Western Pacific (2014-2019)* was reviewed and endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific. The endorsement of the Regional Action Plan represents great progress among member states in recognising the importance of addressing eye health and vision care in the region, and the important and influential role of multilateral organisations in development. The Regional Action Plan helped inform the development of Vision 2020 Australia Global Committee's Regional Strategy which guides the work of Australian NGOs in the region.

Furthermore, Australia's support for the Global Action Plan and Regional Action Plan for the prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairment (2014-2019) demonstrate our ability to act positively and effectively in this space.

Vision 2020 Australia encourages the Australian Government to continue strengthening its leadership role in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in relation to the delivery of eye health and vision care initiatives that promote improved access to eye health and vision care, disability inclusiveness and gender equality.

Opportunities exist for partnerships and innovation

Australia has a long history supporting the work of governments and local NGOs in the Asia Pacific region. This collaboration enables programs to respond to the needs and context of different countries, particularly seeking alignment with national plans for eye health where they exist.

Vision 2020 Australia recognises that the most significant and sustainable changes for eye health vision care will be made through programs delivered by partnerships between governments and stakeholders. These partnerships must ensure the integration of eye health and vision care into broader health plans and initiatives across the health ministries, education, finance and social services.

Vision 2020 Australia also notes that multilateral organisations can influence countries and resolve an issue in situations where it may be difficult for a single bilateral donor to do so. Multilateral organisations are often better able to deliver programs in areas where Australia does not have a significant presence or where bilateral assistance is not possible.

Vision 2020 Australia also recognises the importance of innovative funding mechanisms and the need to find new ways to solve problems. Innovation can help deliver development solutions that are cheaper, faster and more effective. Innovative healthcare financing and partnerships will certainly enable to extend a broader set of healthcare services to the underserved.

Vision 2020 Australia encourages the Australian Government to take up its unique opportunity to strengthen innovative and lateral approaches to the delivery of foreign aid in our region, and Vision 2020 Australia commits to working alongside the Australian Government to ensure strong partnerships resulting in improved global eye health and vision care outcomes.

Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals is critical

According to the UN, the SDGs are *'universal goals which transcend the traditional North/South divide and involve the entire world, rich and poor countries alike, in a new global compact for the betterment of humanity.'*²⁶ They reflect a truly innovative, planet sensitive, global partnership, applicable to all countries.

This 2030 Agenda for sustainable development includes specific references to persons with disabilities, especially with regards to education, employment, inequality reduction, cities inclusion, and data disaggregation by disability (All together 11 references to disability inclusion under 5 goals and 9 in global indicators).

Analysts of development discourse fall into two broad camps: those who follow the UN in celebrating the comprehensive nature of the new goals, and those who express concern that the SDGs present an onerous and incoherent burden.²⁷

While there is a risk that without appropriate measures and commitment from member states that the SDGs may fail to reach their targets, Vision 2020 Australia's position is to support the SDGs as a framework to pursue our vision of eliminating avoidable blindness and vision loss and ensuring the full participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the community, both nationally and internationally.

Successful implementation of the SDGs will require an ambitious means of implementation and a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. It is anticipated that this partnership will be a combination of

²⁶ United Nations, *Zero draft for the outcome document for the UN summit to adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, 2 June 2015.

²⁷ Day, B. *The SDGs, Kenny Rogers and making choices*. DevPolicy Blog, 2015.

public and private stakeholders, responsible for the security of sharing and using data and assisting countries to foster national strategies for data advancement.²⁸ Successful adaptation of the SDGs will be dependent on available resources, knowledge and the resourcefulness of various stakeholders and partners. Strong political will, significant mobilisation of resources and sound policy frameworks will be essential for in-country implementation of the SDGs.

Vision 2020 Australia encourages the Australian Government to ensure alignment of our foreign policy to meet the SDGs, including strongly acknowledging the SDG focus on disability-inclusiveness.

Conclusion

In order to ensure our international engagement continues to deliver prosperity and security for all Australians, it is critical that Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper reflects and ensures foreign aid remains an equally important pillar alongside diplomacy, trade and security.

Australia has a key role to play in reducing global poverty, and improving people's health and rights. The goals and targets identified in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will stimulate action over the next fifteen years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet. To ensure successful achievement of the SDGs, Australia's foreign policy must be aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

Australia has shown great leadership in tackling avoidable blindness and providing vision care in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in relation to the delivery of initiatives which promote disability inclusiveness and gender equality. It is critical that Australia continues to build and strengthen this leadership role. Further, building strategic partnerships and strengthening innovative and lateral approaches to the delivery of foreign aid will enable Australia to continue to be seen as a model of prosperity in our region.

²⁸ Day, B. *The SDGs, Kenny Rogers and making choices*. DevPolicy Blog, 2015.