

Inquiry into the strategic
effectiveness and outcomes of
Australia's aid program in the Indo-
Pacific and its role in supporting
our regional interests

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade

June 2018

About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia was established in October 2000. We are part of *VISION 2020: The Right to Sight*, a global initiative of the World Health Organization and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. As the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, Vision 2020 Australia's role is to ensure that eye health and vision care remains high on the health, ageing, disability and international development agendas of Australian governments.

Vision 2020 Australia represents around 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support. Partnerships and collaboration provide the opportunity to pool member resources and competencies to deliver better aid outcomes on the ground. Members also work together to harmonise efforts and align with partner government priorities. This ensures local community ownership and creates mutual accountability for strong results. Working in partnership and collaboratively allows for better results for those most in need.

For further information about this submission, please contact Vision 2020 Australia on info@vision2020australia.org.au or 03 9656 2020.

Summary of Recommendations

Strategic and development goals

Recommendation 1

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the Australian Government prioritise funding for health, education and societal aid initiatives that address systemic poverty cycles, to enable sustainable economic growth.

Recommendation 2

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that eye health and vision care programs in the Indo-Pacific are reinstated as a priority area for the Australian aid program, acknowledging the profound poverty alleviation effect of these programs.

Building influence as a trusted development partner

Recommendation 3

Vision 2020 Australia recommends the Australian Government increases the Official Development Assistance budget to the internationally agreed upon figure of 0.7% of GNI.

Recommendation 4

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that Australia's aid program utilises the strong interpersonal linkages available through the eye health and vision care sector to re-confirm Australia's position as a regional leader and trusted partner.

Recommendation 5

Vision 2020 Australia recommends aligning aid spending, investment and reporting with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, to help guarantee implementation of the universal goals.

Fostering confidence, stability, sustainability, capacity, community-determined goals and best outcomes, particularly by utilising local procurement and smaller/local entities

Recommendation 6

Vision 2020 Australia recommends increasing funding for eye health capacity building programs, to build upon past successes and continue the sustainable development of the health workforce and capability in the Pacific.

Innovation in Australia's Aid program through the innovationXchange

Recommendation 7

Vision 2020 Australia recommends exploring new technological advancements that extend the reach of aid programs into previously inaccessible areas and ensure no one is left behind.

Increasing the participation and engagement of women in private sector development opportunities

Recommendation 8

Vision 2020 Australia recommends increasing funding and oversight for inclusive aid programs, which prioritise gender empowerment and social inclusion.

Introduction

Vision 2020 Australia's submission focuses on the important role eye health and vision care programs have played in delivering the strategic outcomes of Australia's aid budget in the Indo-Pacific, which has delivered profoundly positive impacts for individuals and partner countries.

Vision impairment is both a cause and consequence of poverty. 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)¹. Globally, 89% of people with vision impairment live in low and middle income countries², and eye health and vision care are important factors in working towards poverty alleviation.

Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the Indo-Pacific and its role in supporting our regional interests. Our submission focuses on five of the nine Terms of Reference that are most relevant for the eye health and vision care sector.

Strategic and development goals

The current strategic and development goals of the Australian Government's aid program are focussed on ensuring the prosperity, security and stability of the Indo-Pacific, in line with Australia's national interests. While there have been major strides made within the spheres of developing trade interests and private partnerships, more work is required to provide the necessary pre-conditions for sustainable and equitable economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Rates of vision impairment in the Indo-Pacific remain at unacceptably high levels, with an estimated 33% of people who are blind living in the East Asia and South-East Asia region³. When the Oceania and South Asia regions are also included to fully represent the Indo-Pacific, this number climbs to 64% of the global population with vision impairment⁴. The prevalence of blindness directly affects Australia's strategic interests with China and India, two of our largest trading partners, accounting for 45% of the world's total vision impairment⁵. The rise of myopia,

¹ Gooding, K, *Poverty and Blindness: A survey of the literature*, Sight Savers International 2006, <http://www.icoph.org/downloads/povertyandblindness.pdf>.

² Flaxman, S, Bourne, R, Resinkoff, S et al. *Global Causes of Blindness and Distance Vision Impairment 1990-2020: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, The Lancet Global Health 2017, 5(12): 1221-1234, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(17\)30393-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(17)30393-5/fulltext).

³ Op. Cit. Flaxman, S, Bourne, R, Resinkoff, S et al. 2017

⁴ International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, *IAPB Vision Atlas: Regional Estimates of Distance-Vision Loss* 2017, <http://atlas.iapb.org/global-burden-vision-impairment/gbvi-regional-estimates-of-distance-vision-loss/>.

⁵ International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, *IAPB Vision Atlas: Country Estimates of Distance-Vision Loss* 2017, <http://atlas.iapb.org/global-burden-vision-impairment/gbvi-country-estimates-distance-vision-loss/#table4>.

more commonly referred to as short-sightedness, is increasing at an alarming rate in both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea. In a study of school-aged children in the Chinese province of Guangzhou, over 50 per cent of children between the ages of 13 to 15 years old were identified as living with myopia without access to treatment⁶. This number is only set to increase unless effective intervention strategies are implemented to increase access to necessary treatment or aids such as a pair of spectacles.

Vision impairment can perpetuate inequalities and entrench poverty cycles when appropriate treatment and support is not available. The burden of caring for family members with preventable blindness enforces poverty cycles that restrict access to economic opportunities. Uncorrected Refractive Error's account for over 50 per cent of all blindness cases in the Indo-Pacific⁷, a number that is significant due to its preventability. Uncorrected Refractive Errors are easily treated, with most cases requiring a simple low cost intervention such as spectacles. This places a significant burden on family members and further hampers economic growth and development.

With every \$1 invested in eye health and vision care development programs, an extra \$4 is produced in economic growth⁸. This is a compelling argument for the Australian Government to consider when determining priorities for its aid program. With the Government's focus on ensuring the prosperity for the Indo-Pacific, it makes sense to prioritise the promotion of initiatives to treat preventable blindness within the aid program. The integration of eye health initiatives into Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) program, acts as a force multiplier, that when utilised in conjunction with complementary programs improves the effectiveness of poverty alleviation outcomes. The impacts of these low-cost outcomes are also easily measured and reported⁹, assisting the Australian Government in delivering greater transparency and value for money because of its aid program.

The work undertaken by the eye health and vision care community to combat vision impairment should be an integral aspect of Australia's aid budget through its ability to alleviate many pre-conditions of poverty.

⁶ Guo, L, Yang, J, Mai, J, Guo, Y, Li, P, Yue, Y, Tang, D, Lu, C and Zhang, W-H, *Prevalence and Associated Factors of Myopia Among Primary and Middle School-Aged Students: A School-Based Study in Guangzhou*, The Scientific Journal of The Royal College of Ophthalmology 2016, 30(6): 796-804, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4906452/>.

⁷ Flaxman, S, Bourne, R, Resinkoff, S et al. *Global Causes of Blindness and Distance Vision Impairment 1990-2020: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, The Lancet Global Health 2017, 5(12): 1221-1234, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(17\)30393-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(17)30393-5/fulltext).

⁸ PricewaterhouseCooper, *Investing in Vision: The Costs and Benefits of Ending Avoidable Blindness* 2014 <https://www.hollows.org/getattachment/au/What-We-Do/Ending-Avoidable-blindness/Research/PwC-Investing-in-Vision.pdf.aspx>.

⁹ Vision 2020 Australia, *Inquiry into Australia's Overseas Aid and Development Assistance Program* 2014, http://www.vision2020australia.org.au/uploads/resource/102/SenateInquiryintoAidDevelopment_Submission-FINAL.pdf.

Recommendation 1

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the Australian Government prioritise funding for health, education and societal aid initiatives that address systemic poverty cycles, to enable sustainable economic growth.

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Building influence as a trusted development partner

Eye health and vision care initiatives have long been at the forefront of Australia's leadership in global health and foreign policy arenas. Australia is internationally recognised for playing a leading development role in our region, with a well-established history of delivering eye health and vision care initiatives through partnerships with Australian non-government organisations (NGOs).

It is imperative for Australia to continue to foster relationships and reach out with foreign aid to re-establish its position as a leader in the Indo-Pacific and protect our national interests through the projection of soft power. The importance of demonstrating regional leadership is continuing to deepen as China's aid footprint grows throughout the Pacific. If conducted in an open and transparent manner, an increase of Chinese aid would be a welcome addition to the Indo-Pacific. Unfortunately due to a lack of transparency combined with implementation that excludes the procurement of local suppliers and services, there is concern that this is creating an increasing debt burden for Pacific nations. This is not consistent with principles of providing sustainable economic assistance¹⁰. Australia's ODA program must continue to address the fragility of States in the Pacific to ensure that development is achieved sustainably and will not be subject to backsliding¹¹.

The enacting of an inclusive aid program that seeks to redress systemic socio-economic inequalities will create extensive interpersonal linkages between members of the Australian community and their regional neighbours. The Australian Government is considered to have a strong voice on matters of development on the international stage, with consistent advocacy efforts focused on small developing island nations and the Indo-Pacific. However, the aid budget must be restored and aligned within the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure the Australian Government maintains its position as a global leader in international development and preserves its ability to have influence in the Indo-Pacific. Australia is uniquely positioned in the region to provide the necessary resources,

¹⁰ Pyke, J, *The Bad - and Good - of China's Aid in the Pacific*, The Interpreter January 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/bad-and-good-china-aid-pacific>.

¹¹ Dornan, M and Brant, P, *Chinese Assistance in the Pacific: Agency, Effectiveness and the Role of Pacific Island Governments*, Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies 2014, 1(2): 349-363, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/app5.35>.

knowledge and enthusiasm to drive successful implementation of the SDGs and guarantee the guiding principle of 'no-one left behind'.

There are however, aspects of Australia's Aid policies that erode the hard work being undertaken in the region. As a member of the Group of 20 (G20) and a signatory to the SDGs, Australia has international obligations to the poor and vulnerable. The decline of Australia's ODA budget is well documented and draws international attention. Further condemnation is to be expected, with the ODA budget set to fall to 0.19% of Gross National Income (GNI) by 2020-2021¹², well short of the international benchmark of 0.7% agreed upon in the Addis Ababa agreement¹³. Commitment to this agreement would fulfil Australia's obligation to offer appropriate aid and support to the world's most vulnerable citizens.

The eye health and vision care sector is distinctively positioned to assist Australia's aid program in delivering the SDGs ambitious objectives. With extensive regional expertise and long established networks, the elevation of preventable blindness in Australia's aid objectives will further bolster Australia's influence in the Indo-Pacific. The restoration of sight is a powerful force, widely accepted as not only cost effective but also a profoundly life-altering aid initiative.

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¹² ACFID, *ACFID Analysis of the 2018-19 Federal Budget 2018*, https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/ACFID%20Federal%20Budget%20Analysis%20FY2018_19.pdf.

¹³ United Nations, *Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on financing for Development 2015* <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/07/Addis-Ababa-Action-Agenda-Draft-Outcome-Document-7-July-2015.pdf>.

Fostering confidence, stability, sustainability, capacity, community-determined goals and best outcomes, particularly by utilising local procurement and smaller/local entities

Capacity building has become the cornerstone of Australia's aid program, encouraging sustainable long-term development that supports the internal advancement of integral social, economic and political institutions. Capacity building is also a critical component to helping those who are blind or have low vision in the Indo-Pacific.

Case study

Australian Government Funded East Asia Vision Program (EAVP)

Throughout the 3 years of the program implementation, a total of 277 new eye health personnel were successfully trained. These included; ophthalmologists, cataract surgeons, ophthalmic nurses, orientation and mobility specialists and spectacle technicians¹⁴. The training occurred in countries of significant strategic interest to Australia: Cambodia, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. The EAVP, facilitated by the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium, was also able to increase the capacity of existing members of the eye health community with over 4,000 different training events held throughout the three countries.

Focusing on more than just health providers, the EAVP also provided training to school health staff and teachers to identify and screen for refractive errors. Uncorrected vision loss represents a substantial barrier to educational and socio-economic mobility for low and middle-income countries¹⁵. These endeavours demonstrate the crosscutting nature the provision of eye health can enable, enabling the continued equitable access to education which is a critical element for poverty alleviation.

To guarantee the sustainability and stability of the EAVP, the Ministries of Health in each country were actively involved in the process and all actions were aligned with national eye health policies and frameworks. Extensive actions were also undertaken to develop relationships with local stakeholders to foster local ownership and utilise expertise when designing program activities. Aligning objectives with national priorities guarantees that delivered programs aim to serve the interests and needs of the local population.

Australia's Avoidable Blindness Initiative (ABI) also played a vital role in supporting the training of Pacific Ophthalmologists at the Pacific Eye Institute (PEI) in Fiji and sustainable services delivery models in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The PEI is the first training facility for eye health professionals in the Pacific region, delivering training specifically focused on eye care in Pacific

¹⁴ Bell, V, *Global Consortium East Asia Vision Program: Eye Health Workforce Development and Training Evaluative Review 2016*, http://www.vision2020australia.org.au/uploads/resource/242/EAVP-Combined-Completion-and-Year-Three-Annual-Report_submission_Report-and-annexes_Final_for-website.pdf.

¹⁵ Hannum, E and Zhang, Y, *Poverty and Proximate Barriers to Learning: Vision Deficiencies, Vision Correction and Educational Outcomes in Rural Northwest China*, *World Development* 2012, 40(9): 1921-1931, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4655323/>.

conditions¹⁶. This sustainable local approach promotes the independence of PNG and Pacific nations and allows for the development of tailored educational courses and appropriate services to respond to the Pacific's unique eye health needs. Furthermore, it promotes regional interpersonal linkages and empowers Pacific eye health professionals through capacity building enterprises.

The EAVP and ABI demonstrate the enduring benefits the eye health and vision care community can create through Australia's ODA. Through capacity-building at the local level, both initiatives have been able to achieve community-determined goals that have entrenched sustainable eye health practices in three of Australia's key strategic partners.

Recommendation 6

Vision 2020 Australia recommends increasing funding for eye health capacity building programs, similar to the East Asia Vision Program, to build upon past successes and continue the sustainable development of the health workforce and capability in the Pacific.

Innovation in Australia's Aid program through the innovationXchange

Technology and innovation are paramount for the future of the eye health and vision care sector and integral to Australia's ODA. The improvement of information, communication and technology (ICT) services and technologies is allowing for increased access to eye health screenings within the developing world.

Case study

Artificial Intelligence Diagnostic Assistance System - Centre for Eye Research Australia

Irreversible vision impairment from diabetic complications is now the leading cause of new cases of irreversible blindness in the world. If the disease is detected early and treated appropriately, diabetic retinopathy is treatable in 98 per cent of cases. This is a staggering number when approximately 1/3 of the 415 million adults with diabetes, are expected to develop the potentially blinding condition.

To help combat this growing problem the Centre for Eye Research Australia (CERA), in collaboration with national eye care programmes in the region and the Fred Hollows Foundation, are developing an artificial intelligence diagnostic assistance system (the system). The system analyses high quality pictures to diagnose blinding conditions such as diabetic retinopathy and several other leading causes of preventable blindness. In remote low resource areas of the Indo-Pacific, the system has the potential to reach people outside of urban centres who do not have access to either optometrists or ophthalmologists. The system can diagnose eye diseases with 91.9 per cent accuracy, providing a verifiable and trustworthy service to people outside of easily accessed geographical locations.

¹⁶ The Pacific Eye Institute, *The Pacific Eye Institute: What We Do* 2018, <http://www.pacificeyeinstitute.org/>.

To successfully upscale the project, greater access to high quality fundus cameras is required, but with advancements expected over the next few years it is expected low quality fundus imagery will also be able to be analysed by the system. With technological advancements in both, artificial intelligence and medical imaging, the Australian eye health and vision care community are uniquely positioned to revolutionise and increase the accessibility of sight saving medical treatment and diagnoses into the Indo-Pacific. This will not only improve the quality of life for countless people but will also help preserve and deliver Australia's own national interests in the region.

As technology continues to develop, barriers of mobility will continue to be eroded, allowing larger portions of the developing world greater access to diagnoses and treatments¹⁷. These innovations need to be harnessed through DFAT's innovationXchange program to further Australia's technological investment and increase the reach of these life-altering advancements into the Indo-Pacific. Initiatives like Peek Vision allow Australia's aid program to utilise our technological and medical expertise for the betterment of those less fortunate in our region. This not only fulfils our international and moral obligations but also frames Australia as a regional leader capable of providing greater economic and social security throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Recommendation 7

Vision 2020 Australia recommends exploring new technological advancements that extend the reach of aid programs into previously inaccessible areas and ensure no one is left behind.

Increasing the participation and engagement of women in private sector development opportunities

Aid programs and initiatives have taken a leading role in fighting for gender empowerment, to increase equitable access to supports and services to catalyse poverty alleviation. In addition to the clear social benefits of tackling inequality and actively including women and girls in education and health programs will increase the pace of economic progress in developing countries. It is important to recognise the links between gender and increased rates of blindness and low vision, further entrenching gender disempowerment and poverty cycles.

Women are disproportionately affected by blindness and vision loss, accounting for approximately 55% of all people who are blind globally¹⁸. There are systemic social and economic barriers that prevent women and girls from accessing eye care in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, workshops facilitated by the International Agency for Preventable Blindness (IAPB) and Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI) focussed on gender and service delivery in Papua New Guinea,

¹⁷ Bastawrous, A, *Increasing Access to Eye Care... there's an app for that. Peek: Smartphone Technology for Eye Health*, International Journal of Epidemiology 2016, 45: 1040-1043, <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/45/4/1040/2951695>.

¹⁸ Bourne, R, Flaxman, S, Braithwaite, T et al. *Magnitude, Temporal Trends, and Projections of the Global Prevalence of Blindness and Distance and Near Vision Impairment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, The Lancet Global Health 2017, 5(9): 888-897, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(17\)30293-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(17)30293-0/fulltext).

noted that women in highland rural areas face mobility barriers when attempting to engage vision services, due to a lack of financial capital and appropriate information. Lack of mobility is not the sole barrier for access; fear of treatment, waiting times, and health staff attitudes have also been cited as impediments¹⁹. Some of these can be and are currently addressed through initiatives implemented by Australia's eye health and vision care community.

The EAVP encouraged greater participation in both the training and screening for women in Cambodia, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. Over half of the eye health professionals who were trained in the program were females, increasing both their earning capacity and the likelihood of women and girls accessing appropriate screening and health professionals when seeking treatment for vision loss²⁰. To support the efforts of the EAVP, training resources were disseminated in local languages teaching aspects of gender and disability inclusion. This demonstrates the force multiplying outcomes that effective and cohesive aid programs can inherently produce.

Vision 2020 Australia commends the work the Australian aid program has undertaken to place gender as a central component. To effectively combat gender inequality, women and girls need to be further empowered through equitable access to healthcare, education and economic fulfilment. Access to these is further restricted for women and girls who are blind or have low vision. This reinforces that eye health and vision care aid initiatives are of primary importance when tackling gender inequality

Recommendation 8

Vision 2020 Australia recommends increasing funding and oversight for inclusive aid programs, which prioritise gender empowerment and social inclusion.

Conclusion

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that robust investment in eye health and vision care initiatives in the Indo-Pacific will enable the Australian Government to meet their strategic interests in the region. While promoting prosperity and economic development are integral elements of poverty alleviation, they require a healthy and protected populace to sustainably and equitably reap the benefits. The empowerment of people who are blind or have low vision to fully participate socially and economically within Pacific nations has the capacity to generate profound economic and societal development.

¹⁹ WHO, *Gender Inequality Spotlight: Blindness in women Preventing Chronic Disease: A vital investment* 2004, http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/part2_ch2/en/index4.html.

²⁰ Op. Cit. Bell, V 2016.

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