



A submission into Australia's International Development Policy

Prepared for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector.

We represent almost 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.

We work with members to prevent the 90% of blindness and vision loss that is preventable or treatable if detected early enough and the full participation of people who are blind or have low vision in the community.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of health systems around the world and reinforced the interconnectedness of people and planet. Governments must learn from the lessons of the pandemic and ensure that these are used to build better, stronger and more resilient health systems that can better manage future health challenges. It is important that these lessons are reflected in the Australian Government's new international development policy and that the policy is adequately resourced to achieve its goals.

Vision 2020 Australia has prepared this submission in consultation with members of our Global Policy Committee, which is made up of ten members working in international development including improving access to eye health and vision care in the region.

Globally, over 1.1 billion people live with vision loss (the majority residing in neighbouring countries), simply because they do not have access to quality, affordable eye care. This costs the global economy \$410.7 billion annually in lost productivity as people with vision loss and their carers are unable to participate in education and the workforce. Women, children, rural populations, and those with a disability are disproportionately impacted, experiencing blindness and vision loss at higher rates than other groups.¹

It is predicted that by 2050, 1 in 2 people will require eye care services due to population ageing and lifestyle changes. We will not be able to meet the needs of this population without an increase in financial investment in eye health.

The good news is 90% of vision loss is preventable or treatable if detected early enough and eye care interventions such as cataract surgery and a pair of spectacles are some of the most cost-effective in the health sector, providing a return of \$4 for every \$1 invested.²

Australia is internationally recognised for playing a leading role in the delivery of eye health and vision care initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, through partnerships with Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) and leading healthcare providers. As a leader in the region, Australia should continue efforts to eliminate avoidable blindness by supporting countries to implement integrated people-centred health services (IPCHS), ensuring everyone has access to quality health care, including eye care when they need it.

Integrated people centred health systems ensure a continuum of health interventions covering promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation that is coordinated across the entire health system and a persons life. It works collaboratively with eye care and affiliated partners, to strengthen the health care workforce particularly in primary care, ensuring high quality, cost-effective services are accessible and systems are robust and equipped to deal with challenges.

When we improve eye health we unlock human potential that can be life-altering for the individual and their family. The benefits contribute both directly and indirectly to achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including reducing poverty and improving work

¹ Burton, M J., et al. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020, The Lancet, published online February 16, 2021

² 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>.

productivity, general and mental health, gender equality, education and equity and combats climate change.³

The United Nations recognised this in 2021 when it formally adopted the resolution *Vision for Everyone: accelerating action to achieve the SDGs*. The resolution, which was co-sponsored by the Australian Government, recognises eye health as critical to achieving the SDGs and sets a target for vision for everyone by 2030.

Australia also led the way in championing the 2020 World Health Assembly resolution to end avoidable blindness, urging member states to take action to implement integrated people-centred eye care in health systems and develop global eye health targets.⁴ As such, addressing avoidable blindness is an area of comparative advantage for Australia and one for which there is strong public support.

With its reputation for delivering successful blindness and non-communicable disease prevention and treatment programs in the region and long-established local networks, the eye health sector is well placed to support the Australian Government in strengthening health systems in the region and delivering integrated people centred health care.

Vision 2020 Australia and its members suggest the following recommendations should be included in the new international development policy.

Recommendation 1

Include a long-term health strategy for the region that focuses on prioritising health system strengthening for health security.

Recommendation 2

Prioritise investment in integrated people-centred health care to address the growing burden of non-communicable disease, achieve gender equity and disability inclusion targets and contribute towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recommendation 3

Invest in workforce development, technological innovation and health care system strengthening and partnerships.

Recommendation 4

Ensure meaningful participation and leadership of local actors is prioritised.

³ Burton, M J., et al. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020, The Lancet, published online February 16, 2021

⁴World Health Organisation Seventy-Third World Health Assembly 2020, *Integrated people-centred eye care, including preventable vision impairment and blindness*, https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_R4-en.pdf

Recommendation 1

A long-term health strategy for the region that focuses on prioritising health system strengthening for health security.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of health care and the failure of systems to cope with health emergencies. It taught us that without strong, resilient health systems we are all vulnerable, some more so than others. There is a need to invest in the lessons learnt from the pandemic to rebuild, innovate and strengthen health systems to achieve health security in the region.

Robust health systems are essential for preventing future large scale disease outbreaks and protecting people's health and wellbeing. By strengthening all pillars of a health system and ensuring integrated people centred health care through a framework such as the WHO health system building blocks (key components include service delivery, workforce, health information systems, medical products, financing and leadership and governance) equitable and sustained improvements can be achieved. However, health security cannot be reached when a vital element, protecting and restoring eyesight, does not have the resources necessary to meet population needs (e.g. access to corneal donations for waiting corneal transplant recipients). Lifestyle changes and ageing populations mean that almost everyone will need access to eye care services in their lifetime. Without a scale up of investment now, we will not be able to meet demand, leaving many people needlessly blind or vision impaired.

Primary health care is the foundation of an effective health system and is critical for health security. It addresses most of the health needs throughout a person's lifetime and provides the foundation for countries to effectively respond to public health emergencies and the broader effects such as system-wide interruptions to essential health services.⁵ It is therefore critical that primary health care be prioritised in efforts to strengthen health systems, with integrated people-centred care a key focus.

As a leader in the Indo-Pacific and the biggest donor of overseas development assistance, Australia has a responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of people beyond its borders, an expectation that is strongly supported by over three quarters of the Australian population.⁶

Significant gaps and inequities have emerged in health care provision over the course of the pandemic. Through the development of an Indo-Pacific long-term health strategy that prioritises integrated people centred health care, the Australian Government can work alongside partners and member states to address and prioritise investment in key health system strengthening components. This will contribute to a healthier, more secure, stable, and prosperous region.

Recommendation 2

Prioritise investment in integrated people-centred health care to address the growing burden of non-communicable disease, achieve gender equity and disability inclusion targets and contribute towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Integrated people-centred health care is an effective pathway to supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, building the capacity of primary health systems in neighbouring countries to ensure they are appropriately resourced to meet the health needs of their population will support Australia's contribution towards the achievement of SDG 3 'Good

⁵ Linhart C, Craig A, Rosewell A, Beek K, Pardosi J, UNSW, *Investing in our Future: Building Strong and Resilient Health Systems in the Asia-Pacific Region*, May 2022

⁶ YouGov, nationally representative sample of 1027 interviews with Australian voters. Surveyed between 10-13 August 2021.

Health and Well Being for All', particularly the target to achieve Universal Health Coverage. As countries progress towards universal health coverage, they will also advance towards other health-related targets and goals, such as eliminating poverty (SDG 1), improving educational outcomes (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5) and economic growth (SDG 8).

Prioritising health care for women and girls through an integrated people-centred health care model will benefit individuals and communities. Women bear the greatest burden of blindness and vision loss, accounting for approximately 55% of all people who are blind globally. Ensuring access to eye care services is available when needed will increase school participation and performance and improve economic participation and opportunities. When this is achieved as part of an integrated health system model, the development of community-owned and operated primary care centres is supported, providing workforce opportunities for women that allow them to remain close to the home.⁷

Integrated people-centred health services also provide an opportunity to improve efficiency and decrease health expenditure. Ageing populations, an increasing prevalence of chronic disease and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to expanding healthcare budgets. Increasing efficiency in health care delivery through the integration of people-centred health services can be cost-effective while improving patient experience through enhanced coordination and continuity of care.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for approximately 70% of all deaths in the Indo-Pacific, most of them premature and preventable. Risk factors such as ageing and obesity are contributing to rising death rates.

Diabetes is the biggest health concern in working age populations, with prevalence increasing rapidly in middle- and low-income countries. The Indo Pacific is now home to the some of the highest rates of diabetes in the world. This imposes large and often preventable pressure on health care systems, communities and budgets.

Papua New Guinea is an example of a country facing rapidly rising rates of NCDs. The country has some of the highest rates of diabetes and diabetes-related adult deaths in the world.⁸ Poorly managed diabetes can lead to diabetic retinopathy, which if left untreated, can result in unnecessary blindness or vision loss.

Although there are proven, affordable and cost-effective interventions for detection and treatment of NCDs, services are limited and inaccessible for many. Integrated people centred health care will ensure a continuum of health interventions covering promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation that is coordinated across the entire health system. Strengthening primary health care will ensure that high quality, cost-effective services are accessible to detect, prevent and treat NCDs, assisting in the prevention of further disease like diabetes related eye disease.

Recommendation 3

Invest in workforce development, technological innovation, and health care system strengthening and partnerships.

The pandemic continues to highlight the shortage of health care professionals, resources, training and career pathways, and the need to strengthen the capacity of existing workers and institutions to effectively respond to future public health crises.

⁷ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Women with Disabilities Fact Sheet, available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/women-with-disabilities-fact-sheet.html>

⁸ International Diabetes Federation 2017, *IDF Diabetes Atlas – 8th Edition*, Brussels.

Investing in integrated people centred health systems will promote collaboration and integration across sectors, organisations, health care settings, providers and users. In particular, it will focus efforts on boosting the role of primary care, shifting skills from the specialised to the non-specialised workforce to build and develop primary care as the foundation of the health care system. Australian Government investment in this area will support countries in the region to strengthen health systems and health security.

In the research '*Health security in the Pacific: expert perspectives to guide health system strengthening*' workforce shortages were identified as a key component of the health system that needed strengthening to improve health security. Participants in the research, who were experts in the field and had experience working in the region, agreed that the existing workforce was limited and investments were needed to focus on training new health care professionals and strengthening the capabilities and capacities of the existing workforce. This was particularly important for primary health care workers, especially those working in remote areas.^{9[10]}

Technological advancements such as telemedicine, mHealth, gene therapy, bioengineered corneas, and artificial intelligence have the potential to extend the reach of health care into previously inaccessible areas and can play a vital role in ensuring no one is left behind and access to services are accelerated. This also places Australia at the forefront of medical research and innovation.

An expansion of service delivery is required to advance universal health coverage and integrated people centred health care, technological advances can help achieve this as they enable task shifting between specialist and non-specialist health workers, enabling them to deliver services remotely and reach marginalised populations such as people with a disability.¹⁰

Lastly, partnerships with NGOs and other healthcare providers (e.g. the organ and tissue sector, or gerontology nurses) is a key element to strengthening systems and services. By working together, duplications are removed, and resources maximised.

Recommendation 4

Ensure meaningful participation and leadership of local actors is prioritised.

Development is most effective when it is led by local actors. The pandemic reinforced the importance of locally-led solutions when people were no longer able to travel to countries to implement and monitor programs, requiring a shift in strategy.

The best way to ensure the success and long-term sustainability of programs is to apply the principle of localisation. Localisation ensures that those who are to benefit most from a proposed initiative are part of the solution, meaning they are consulted during every stage of the project, from design through to implementation.

By amplifying the voice of local actors and engaging them in the solution the sustainability of programs is increased, ensuring organisations are well-positioned to continue implementing and monitoring programs in the long term, despite future travel restrictions. Ensuring the ongoing delivery of health care services is a vital component of an effective and resilient health system.

⁹ Health security in the Pacific: expert perspectives to guide health system strengthening

¹⁰ Burton, M J., et al. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020, The Lancet, published online February 16, 2021

Localisation should be prioritised as part of the new international development policy and considered as a universal model for practice. Australian NGOs, including those in the eye health sector, have strong partnerships with local communities, governments and hospitals in countries throughout the Indo-Pacific that can be utilized to ensure any future development includes the meaningful participation and leadership of local actors.