

Vision 2020: The Global Initiative for Right to Sight

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Introduction

‘Vision 2020: The Right to Sight’ is a global campaign with the objective of eliminating avoidable blindness by the year 2020. The World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with various international, non-governmental and private organisations launched it worldwide on February 18, 1999.

Rationale for a global initiative to combat avoidable blindness

Despite half a century of efforts, commencing with organized trachoma control activities, the global burden of blindness is growing largely because of the population growth and aging. For example the life expectancy at birth for an Indian 20 years back was approximately 50 years but now this has increased to 63 years. It has been projected that in countries like India, the elderly population is likely to double in the next two decades implying a significant increase in visual impairment and blindness based on current levels of service. Already the backlog of blindness is very high and moreover the existing resources in terms of infrastructure, human resources, etc are not enough to meet the eye care needs. The gap between eye care needs and service levels is on the increase day by day. If additional resources are not urgently mobilised and efforts are not made to curb this trend, by 2020 the global burden of blindness can double with the developing countries bearing the brunt.

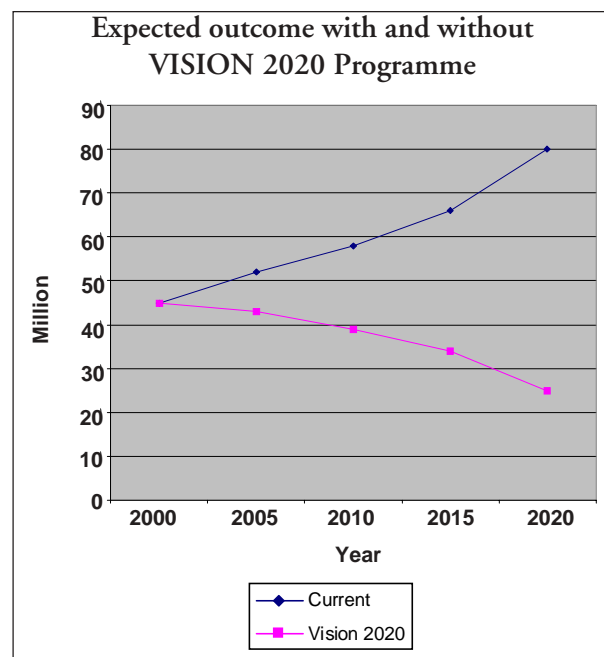
According to WHO, about 80% of blindness is avoidable as it results either from conditions that could have been prevented or controlled by applying the available knowledge and interventions (e.g. trachoma and onchocerciasis) or it can be successfully treated with sight restored (e.g. cataract). Blindness has profound human and socio-

economic consequences in all societies. The costs of low productivity, rehabilitation and education of the blind are a significant economic burden, particularly in developing countries. Hence a concerted global campaign that aims to combat the major causes of blindness and give everyone in the world, particularly the millions of poor people, the right to sight was required. The idea of VISION 2020 came from USA, from the Director of the American CBM member association. The idea was well accepted by the WHO and other aid organisations, which joined forces to support this worldwide campaign.

Some of the facts and challenges associated with the Global Initiative are:

- There are **45 million blind people** throughout the world and 135 million with low vision
- **90 percent** of all blind people live in developing countries
- In **India**, at least 9 million people are blind, in **China** 6 and in **Africa** seven
- 80 per cent of blindness on earth is **preventable**
- People in the developing world are **ten times more likely** to become blind than people in industrialised countries
- The world over, every five seconds one person goes blind and a child goes blind every minute
- Every year, at least **7 million people go blind**
- By the year 2020, a total of **100 million** people are to be saved from going blind
- Blindness costs the national economies an annual worldwide sum of around **25 billion US dollars**

These statistics alone should be reason enough for such a global initiative. With “Vision 2020,” the number of blind people will drop to about 25 million in the year 2020 and without the programme; it



would rise to almost 80 million from the current 45 million blind people.

What does 'VISION 2020' stand for?

In the USA, 20/20 stands for optimum eyesight. At the same time, it also denotes the year 2020. The objective "VISION 2020" is that no one should be needlessly blind any longer by the year 2020.

How is it different from existing strategies?

Vision 2020 is an initiative with a common objective, which will allow people cutting across nations, to work in a focussed and coordinated manner to help raise global awareness about blindness and mobilise additional resources to prevent or treat avoidable blindness. Vision 2020 will further develop and strengthen the primary health/eye care approach to the problem of avoidable blindness. This will be done on the basis of the invaluable international and national experiences already gained through the ongoing national programmes. Finally, the initiative will seek broad regional alliances and eventually a global partnership for eye health. These partnerships are indispensable in establishing worldwide the fundamental right "Right to Sight" and thus save future generations from the tragedy of needless blindness.

Vision 2020 partners

Besides the World Health Organization (WHO) the founding members of Vision 2020 include CBM International, The International Agency for Prevention of Blindness, Helen Keller International, ORBIS International and Sight Savers International. Vision 2020 is also supported by various non-governmental organisations from around the world.

Strategies for implementing Vision 2020

- 1. Control and prevention of major blinding diseases and disorders:** Cataract, Trachoma, Onchocerciasis, Childhood Blindness, Refractive Errors and Low Vision have been identified as immediate priorities based on the burden of blindness they represent and the feasibility and affordability of interventions to prevent and treat them.
- 2. Training of human resources:** Adequately trained human resources are a key factor for achieving the goals of Vision 2020. Training will need to be provided to ophthalmologists, refractionists, and managers of national/regional prevention of blindness programmes. In India the target is to have one ophthalmologist per 50,000 population from the present ratio of 1 per 100,000.
- 3. Strengthening the existing eye care infrastructure:** Under the Vision 2020 – the estimates of the current status of infrastructure and the global targets have been listed under four highly inter related dimensions as illustrated in the following table:

	Current Status	Vision 2020 Targets
Availability	50%	95%
Accessibility	40%	90%
Utilisation	25%	90%
Coverage	25%	90%

In the global scenario it is clear that the current infrastructure has to be significantly increased in terms of eye hospitals, beds, equipment and manpower. While establishing new infrastructure the issues of accessibility and coverage can be addressed by the following factors:

- Location
- Range of service
- Barriers to access
- Utilisation

4. Use of appropriate and affordable technology

Rapid advances are being made in the field of ophthalmology in the diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases. The same is happening in the specific focus area of Vision 2020, which are cataract, trachoma, childhood blindness, refractive errors and low vision. Here the challenge in "Technology" is not so much innovating but adapting the new developments to the local economies in a cost-effective manner. Initiatives that aim at transfer of technology so that manufacturing of high quality equipment and consumables at low cost by developing countries will be supported and promoted by Vision 2020. So the whole challenge is really in technology management. The technology management has to have a comprehensive approach and the various elements in such an approach are listed below:

- Making it affordable
- Developing skills in using them
- Infrastructure for new technologies
- Developing commercial infrastructure
- Community awareness

Mobilisation of resources

The very first steps towards Vision 2020 will be a global campaign to raise awareness among people and governments about societal implications of blindness as well as to mobilise a strong long-term political and professional commitment to eliminate avoidable blindness. In the next millennium the economies are likely to grow at a fairly rapid rate in the Asian countries. Regardless of the economic changes, it is likely that the Government and the NGOs' spending in eye care is likely to reduce considerably due to competing health and developmental needs. The competing health needs will come from the elderly population, which is expected, to double in the next two decades. There

will be sharp increase in life style related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension etc which will be brought about by changes in diet, physical work pattern, and literacy. All this will demand additional resources. Against this scenario, the patients will increasingly become the major source of revenue. This can be supplemented to some extent by local and national charities, which will need to be more aggressively developed and cultivated. As the patients become the major source of revenue, there will be greater accountability as they will be more demanding and will want good value for their money. Several models of this are already emerging in countries like India, Nepal and Pakistan in which all economic groups within the service population are served through a system of internal cross-subsidy. In order to achieve this paradigm shift, the focus will need to shift to quality, patient satisfaction and patient centered systems.

How will it be implemented?

Vision 2020 will be implemented through four 5 year plans, the first one starting in 2000. The three subsequent phases of implementation will commence in 2005, 2010, and 2015 respectively. During the ongoing preparatory period, priority is given to issues of advocacy, regional planning, and resource mobilisation. The choice of the countries where Vision 2020 will be implemented is to be regionally prioritised on the basis of burden of blindness and of available resources. Much of the philosophy of Vision 2020 lies in the recognition that by working together we can achieve what was previously not possible for individual agencies.

Funding

Presently the international community spends about 80 million dollars each year on the prevention of blindness. This amount has to be at least doubled if the targets set by Vision 2020 are to be achieved. Vision 2020 will also encourage governments and the United Nation agencies to increase funding for programmes in specific areas.

Spread awareness and make 'Vision 2020: The Right to Sight' a universal achievable basic right for everyone. Your active involvement today will help the people in 2020 AD to be with perfect vision - 20/20.