The purpose of IAPB Briefing Papers is to inform IAPB members and others about important and emerging issues affecting VISION 2020: The Right to Sight.

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Abstract:
This paper provides guidance to IAPB Members and their development partners, on IAPB’s strategy for engagement with the World Bank Group

Introduction
During the meeting of the IAPB Board of Trustees in Cairo (17-19 March), the Secretariat was requested to provide a short speaking note for Trustees to use in engaging with World Bank Executive Directors (and Governors) in advance of the Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group/IMF which will be held in Washington on April 24-25 April, 2010. The aim is to persuade the World Bank to enhance its operational support for the elimination of avoidable blindness.

Context
If an approach to the Bank’s Governors and Senior Management is to be effective, we need to demonstrate an understanding of current Bank policies towards the health sector. The key document in this regard is the Bank’s Strategy for Health, Nutrition, and Population which was published in April 2007 (replacing an earlier strategy prepared 10 years previously). This sets out 4 key strategic objectives for Bank support:
1. A continued focus on MDGs, in particular Nos.1b, 4, 5, 6.
2. Prevent poverty due to illness (by improving financial protection).
3. Improve financial sustainability of the health sector through sound fiscal policy.
4. Improve governance, accountability, and transparency in the health sector.

The report highlights the enormous change which has taken place in the international architecture for development assistance for health (DAH), and notes a significant decline in Bank engagement in the health sector. That said, the Bank has supported the international efforts to combat river blindness in Africa, and has also funded a large scale cataract programme in India.

But, reading between the lines, a very clear message emerges about where the Bank feels it can now add value: this is in the areas of strengthening health systems, health financing, and exercising “selectivity in engagement with global partners”. And in one area of interest to us, the strategy is unequivocal, stating:

“Strengthening health systems may sound abstract and less important than specific-disease control technology, or increased international financing, to many people concerned about achieving health outcomes. But well organised, and sustainable, health systems are necessary to achieve results”. It goes on to comment “There is a consensus that a major, urgent, effort must be made to strengthen health systems if financial commitments enabled by the new DAH architecture are to succeed...”

**Conclusion**

Against this background, the Bank is unlikely to be responsive for calls for it to upscale vertical efforts to eliminate avoidable blindness in order to meet the VISION 2020 objectives. Apart from its own preference to act, as one document suggests, as “the glue holding the whole system together”, it will also hide behind the internationally accepted Paris Principles on Aid Effectiveness, agreed in 2005, which require donors to respond to needs as articulated by developing countries themselves, rather than impose new initiatives upon aid recipients. Thus one element of the Bank’s response to an IAPB call for additional resources is likely to be that we should direct our efforts, at country level, to persuade developing country governments to give greater priority to blindness in articulating their own priorities for donor assistance.
However, we can, and should, adopt a more subtle approach which seeks to align our own advocacy messages with some aspects of the Bank’s philosophy. In particular, we should seek to exploit 3 strands of Bank thinking:

- Their emphasis on strengthening health systems also recognises the importance of mobilising additional health workers;
- They continue to pay lip service to the MDGs, and acknowledge the importance of “mainstreaming disability into development”;
- They appear to accept that, potentially, eye care interventions can achieve a very high economic rate of return.

Trustees will find attached a short briefing Note, entitled “Eight ways in which the World Bank Group could contribute more to the recognition of the importance of combating avoidable blindness”, which offers lines to take with senior Bank executives. The Note does not cite the academic literature in detail, because Bank staff will be highly familiar with such studies.

References

1 See http://siteresources.worldbank.org/HEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION for the Report’s Executive Summary. A copy of the full Report and a PowerPoint presentation is also available.

1b: full employment; 4: reduce child mortality; 5: maternal health; 6: combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.

1 Despite evident Bank concerns about the effectiveness of many of its health interventions, it acknowledges that its Riverblindness eradication programmes have achieved economic rates of return of between 17-20%, and have added 1 million additional productive years to the economies of beneficiary countries.