OVERVIEW

It was all about eye health at the UN during the week of 18 November. First, we launched the World Report on Vision at the UN on 19 November. This was the first in the series of launches of the World Report planned over the next 12 months. Over 60 Ambassadors, UN staff and civil society representatives gathered in conference room 7 to hear about the report’s recommendations, and crucially its implications for advancing the SDG agenda. In recognition of the increasing importance of the issue of eye health at the UN level, the President of the General Assembly President, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande closed the event and acknowledged that not enough attention has been paid to eye health.

In an attempt to raise this attention, we took over the UN Secretariat Lobby on 21 November for the Eye Health Exhibition and Vision Screening. The exhibition was designed to be multi-purpose, providing free screenings or exams to anyone who might need them, whilst also providing information relevant to all those working to advance the SDG agenda at the United Nations. We screened over 400 Ambassadors and UN staff and spoke to countless more about the various ways governments can enable greater access to eye health in their own countries.

WHO WORLD REPORT ON VISION UN LAUNCH

Host Organisations: Mission of Antigua and Barbuda to the United Nations, The World Health Organization, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, Sightsavers, the Fred Hollows Foundation, Clearly and Vision Council of America.

This was the largest meeting of the UN Friends of Vision to date and it was clear that the partnership with the WHO and the UNGA President’s provided additional legitimacy and profile. Over 60 people from around 30 countries were in attendance including Japan, Indonesia, Rwanda, Costa Rica, UK, India, Canada, Australia, and a large number of Caribbean nations.
The event was chaired by Ambassador Webson and included remarks from the PRs of Bangladesh and Ireland as well as Dr. Silvio Mariotti, Senior Medical Officer of the WHO and one of the authors of the World Report on Vision.

Peter Holland, Chief Executive of IAPB, Dr Agnes Binagwaho, former Health Minister of Rwanda and Jennifer Gersbeck, Director - Global Partnerships and Advocacy at The Fred Hollows Foundation also spoke. Sadly, Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary General, was unable to attend due to a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The event was closed with a speech from Tijjani Muhammad-Bande of Nigeria, the new President of the UN General Assembly. He stated “there is no question that the issue of healthcare for the world is critical, and within it, not enough attention has been paid to eye health”. This was significant as Tijjani Muhammad-Bande and his office will be critical to obtaining a UN Resolution on eye health in 2021.

The most important contributions from the floor came from the PRs of Rwanda and Indonesia. Ambassador Dian Triansyah Djani of Indonesia spoke about his country’s commitment and leadership (together with Australia) to the World Health Assembly Resolution in May. He encouraged his fellow Ambassador’s to support this initiative. Ambassador Valentine Rugwabiza of Rwanda, attending a Friends of Vision meeting for the first time, spoke about her shock when learning about the number of people without access to eye health services and admitted her ignorance about her own country’s leadership. It was clear from her statement that she had been told to attend the meeting by her capital and had been well briefed. She used her statement to confirm Rwanda’s commitment to school eye health at CHOGM and said she was aware that there would be an
event during CHOGM on eye health. Following the event, she confirmed that although it was not public yet, we could be confident of hearing about our event in the near future. This was further supported by an email from the High Commissioner in London who had been in touch with her counterpart in New York.

**EYE HEALTH EXHIBITION AND VISION SCREENING EVENT - UN LOBBY**

**Host Organisations:** Mission of Antigua and Barbuda to the United Nations, The World Health Organization, the UN Office of Support Operations (UN Medical Office), the International Association for the Prevention of Blindness, Clearly, Sightsavers, the Fred Hollows Foundation, the Vision Council of America, OneSight and Vision Spring.

The eye health exhibition and vision screening event was proposed by the Bangladesh Mission to the UN at an early UN Friends of Vision meeting. The screening was held in the UN Secretariat Lobby which is the main staff entrance to the UN building. This meant we had a very large footfall and all those coming into the building on the day saw the Friends of Vision branding and World Report on Vision video.

This event was a real collaboration with almost 50 team members on hand including four optometrists, a number of NGO staff, the WHO and UN staff. OneSight and Vision Spring in co-ordination with Vision Council of America demonstrated the range of screening options one might encounter around the world, including comprehensive eye exams.

In addition to the screenings, the Fred Hollows Foundation had a sight simulator allowing those attending to type in any address in the world (e.g. a country landmark) and see it through the eyes of someone with glaucoma, cataract or diabetic retinopathy. This was an important exercise to ensure that the whole spectrum of eye health was represented. We also had both hard copies and electronic versions of the World Report on Vision available, a short film on the World Report on Vision and the Glasses for Classes campaign, and UN Friends of Vision material including flyers and banners. We also encouraged those visiting the exhibition to try on a pair of silly glasses and hold up vision statistics for social media use which we produced in the six official UN languages: French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese and English.

Before the event we had hoped to screen 100 people but ended up screening and giving prescriptions or reading glasses to around 400-500 people. Everyone from Ambassadors to Chefs to Security Guards to Cleaners and
everyone in between attended. 15 Permanent Representatives (Ambassadors) came during the day including: Nigeria, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Fiji, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Bangladesh and a number from Caribbean nations.

Out of those examined, close to 90% needed glasses, with the vast majority needing the multifocal correction/progressives. 10% of people said that this was their first eye exam. Two individual cases particularly stick out. First, a lady who came complaining of a ‘U’ shaped shadow on one of her eyes. The eye doctors in attendance realised she had a torn retina and sent her straight to hospital to see an ophthalmologist. Second, a lady came in the morning complaining of headaches from looking at her screen. She was prescribed glasses and later in the day she approached us in tears to say how grateful she was and that her headache had almost immediately gone. These are just two cases, but show even in a building like the UN, the importance of access to sight tests.

Ambassador Webson commented at the end that we had screened around a third of the UN staff in the building that day, indicative of the need around the world. It was clear that many of the UN staff did not have access to eye health services due to a lack of medical insurance and or insufficient funds. There was a genuine need for the screening and many people asked when we would come back for another screening and thought it should be an annual event. The WHO New York office have similarly expressed an interest in making this an annual initiative and offered their support.
The screening event even featured in the UN Secretary Generals’ ‘week ahead’ email to all UN staff and press.

Spanish-speaking radio interviewed a number of PRs in the morning. CNN filmed footage for a montage they are putting together on the UN to be used in December. We also hired a videographer to take photos and video footage that can be used as part of the UNGA campaign/lobbying work. You can see the full deck of photos taken from the event here: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9btcgwszf4dbgzy/AABZwGZ24WZ8r2_w21oqtvTXa?dl=0

**Follow Up/ Next Steps**

Ambassador Webson plans to write to all Ambassadors and UN senior officials about the screenings event in the new year and set out the Friends of Vision plans for 2020 and his intention to obtain an UNGA Resolution in 2021. We intend to use the video footage to create a campaign video for the UNGA Resolution (to be released in the new year). The WHO New York office have expressed an interest in developing closer links with the UN FoV Group and supporting the activity next year.

*16 December 2019*