

PUBLIC POLICY POSITION STATEMENT: CENTRING EYE HEALTH IN THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

BACKGROUND

There are more than 2.2 billion people living with blindness or vision impairment around the world, including 1.1 billion people with a condition that could have been prevented or is yet to be addressed. These are some of the poorest and most marginalized people in society with 90% of avoidable sight loss experienced in low- and middle-income countries. If no action is taken, the figure will rise to 1.8 billion or higher by 2050.

The social development agenda aims to build a more just, inclusive, equitable and sustainable world, acknowledging the urgent need to address profound social challenges, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion that affect every country.¹ Guided by Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Doha Political Declaration of the World Social Summit, social development calls for bold and effective social policies that are woven into a whole-of-government, whole-of-society, people-centred and integrated approaches.

Social development is a process that results in the 'improvement of the quality of life of people...a more equitable distribution of resources...and special measures that will enable marginal groups and communities to move into the mainstream'.² Eye health is about the societal capacity for good vision, good ocular health and good functional ability to contribute to overall health and wellbeing, social inclusion and quality of life. Like the concept of social development, eye health is both a process and an outcome.

Restoring sight transforms lives. Investing in eye health is a realistic and highly cost-effective way of unlocking human potential, enabling children to gain an education and working aged adults to get and keep a job, and improving equality and the full and meaningful participation of all.

ABOUT THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION

The Fred Hollows Foundation (The Foundation) is an international eye health development agency established with the purpose to deliver bold eye health solutions that transform lives. The Foundation continues to seek a world in which no person is needlessly blind or vision impaired.

The Foundation's vision is consistent with the legacy of our founder, Professor Fred Hollows, and his belief that everyone should have access to high quality, affordable eye care, no matter where they live. His specific interest that poorer and more marginalised people all over the world be reached remains a core focus.

For further information on this public policy position statement or The Fred Hollows Foundation more broadly please contact Global Policy and Advocacy at: gpa@hollows.org.

¹ Resolution A/RES/80/5 – Doha Political Declaration of the "World Social Summit" under the title "The Second World Summit for Social Development" [n2529763.pdf](#)

² Jones, J & Pandey, R (1981). Social development: conceptual, methodological, and policy issues. St Martin's Press, New York.

THE ISSUE

The social development agenda calls for a future that is inclusive, resilient, sustainable and just, and importantly with a world free of preventable diseases.³ Addressing avoidable eye health conditions and enabling function and participation of people with vision related disability must be a central component through the full implementation of the social development agenda.

Blindness and vision impairment is not only a matter of unequal access to eye health – it's a critical global development issue. Almost everyone will experience impaired vision or an eye condition during their lifetime and require eye care services.

Unequal access to eye care and unaddressed vision impairment and blindness create significant barriers to learning and employment, slow economic growth and productivity, and reinforce cycles of poverty, inequality and exclusion.

The global cost of unaddressed sight loss is estimated at USD 411 billion annually due to lost productivity. Globally, workers with vision impairment are 30.2% less likely to be employed and poor vision limits income earning potential. 6.3 million years of schooling are lost each year, with potential future economic productivity losses projected at USD 173 billion annually.

THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION'S PUBLIC POLICY POSITION

The Foundation asserts that to tackle the global eye health challenge and advance social development, eye health must be centred in the social development agenda. Eye health can be a foundational driver of social development and promote inclusive development for all – achieving poverty eradication, ensuring full employment and decent work and improving social integration and inclusion.

Addressing vision impairment and blindness creates ripple effects that benefit individuals, families, governments and economies. Investing in eye health across the entire continuum of care leads to more children in and completing school, more working aged people employed and contributing to business productivity and supporting the wider economy and improved health and wellbeing for older adults.

Centring eye health in the social development agenda must begin with universal health coverage and social protection measures for healthcare. Universal access to quality health care is critical to break the intergenerational cycle of inequality and exclusion and encourage social mobility.⁴ Despite the growing challenge, eye health treatments are among the most cost-effective interventions in the world⁵ and appropriate assistive technologies can enable functioning, independence and full participation in a society for people whose vision cannot be restored.

³ Resolution A/RES/80/5 – Doha Political Declaration of the “World Social Summit” under the title “The Second World Summit for Social Development” [n2529763.pdf](#)

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025). Synthesis of key messages on social inclusion to support preparation for the Second World Social Summit for Social Development. Retrieved from [Synthesis-Brief-Social Inclusion.pdf](#)

⁵ IAPB, The Fred Hollows Foundation, Seva Foundation. (2025). “The Value of Vision: The case for investing in eye health”. Retrieved from: [Global investment case - IAPB Vision Atlas](#).

KEY ACTION AREAS FOR EYE HEALTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Foundation calls on governments, the private sector, and civil society and community actors to prioritize action in the following six areas.

1. Embed eye care into universal health coverage responses through cost effective interventions.

There are several strategies to improve universal health coverage for eye care. First, priority and effective services need to be expanded; second, more people need to be covered according to population needs; and third, out of pocket payments need to be reduced. To ensure universal health coverage for eye care is sustainable, services must be integrated into national health strategic plans and budgets.

2. Strengthen the integration of eye health within and beyond the health system.

Including eye care services into health strategic plans and budgets is an important step to increase integration in the health system. Focus should be on incorporating eye health at the primary and community level. By strengthening the integration of eye health in the health system there are opportunities to also link to broader sectors as a way of meeting people where they are, for example integration into school eye health programs or health information shared within workplaces.

3. Implement integrated people-centred eye care (IPEC).

When implementing eye health in country IPEC should be used as the framework for delivery. This requires four strategies. Empowering and engaging people and communities, reorienting the model of care, coordinating services within and across sectors, and creating an enabling environment. Primary care should be an important focus for the delivery of IPEC.

4. Promote collaboration between health and labour sectors to address inequitable access in eye health.

Workplaces are important spaces for integration of eye care services, protection of eye health and support for people living with blindness or vision impairment. Workplaces should ensure they have systems and programs in place to protect workers eyesight, providing protective eye wear, regular eye checks or providing workplace health services for eye health. They also have an important role in ensuring people who are blind or vision impaired do not face barriers to employment.

5. Expand access to rehabilitation services and assistive technology to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all.

Vision rehabilitation and assistive technology support inclusive education for children, increase productivity of workers, and promote the overall wellbeing and participation of people living with vision impairment and blindness at all stages of life. Rehabilitation services and assistive technology should be a core part of universal health coverage and IPEC. This must go beyond the devices and include the enabling environment, including workforce, supply chain, design, and service integration.

6. Ensure eye health is inclusive of everyone, including underserved populations and people whose vision cannot be restored.

Vision impairment and blindness disproportionately impact underserved populations that are most at risk of facing structural discrimination and social exclusion. Progressing social inclusion requires addressing deeply entrenched systems of inequality including racism, sexism, classism and ableism. People with lived experience, their families and representative organisations must be empowered and included in policy design and decision making about their own health.