

A conversation with Tony Hulton, Graeme MacKenzie, Jennifer Chen, Gladys Choy, and Charleen Cannone, November 1, 2018

Participants

- Tony Hulton – Chief Executive, Vision for a Nation
- Graeme MacKenzie – Director of Research, Clearly
- Jennifer Chen – Asia Lead, Clearly; Director of Philanthropic Engagement, Legacy Advisors
- Gladys Choy – Senior Philanthropy Officer, Legacy Advisors
- Charleen Cannone – Fundraising consultant, Clearly
- Josh Rosenberg – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Amar Radia – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Tony Hulton, Graeme MacKenzie, Jennifer Chen, Gladys Choy, and Charleen Cannone.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Hulton, Mr. MacKenzie, Ms. Chen, Ms. Choy, and Ms. Cannone as part of its investigation into the distribution of glasses to improve worker productivity. Conversation topics included the impact of glasses distribution on worker productivity, Vision for a Nation’s work on primary eye care, Clearly’s work on eye care, Vision for a Nation’s sources of funding, and other relevant groups and individuals.

Impact of the distribution of glasses on worker productivity

Evidence base

Most non-profits that distribute glasses to workers operate on the assumption that the service provided has a positive impact. Data is not collected in a robust or detailed manner, which prohibits its publication in peer-reviewed literature and makes systematic collection of follow-up data unfeasible.

In order to more conclusively determine the impact of glasses distribution, randomized-controlled trials (RCTs) analyzing workers over long periods of time must be conducted. However, RCTs are costly to undertake. Only recently has RCT evidence begun to emerge—for example, the PROductivity Study of Presbyopia Elimination in Rural-dwellers (PROSPER) study sponsored by Clearly, which sparked GiveWell’s interest.

Emphasis on near vision

Multiple approaches can be taken to improve workers’ eyesight:

- **Correcting distance vision** – Poor distance vision has a negative impact on workers such as drivers, although the condition may have complicated causes and treatments.

- **Correcting near vision** – Poor near vision can generally be corrected with reading glasses, which are inexpensive to distribute and have an immediate, measurable impact. For these reasons, it is likely that future work to improve workers’ eyesight will largely focus on correcting near vision.

Most individuals will experience near vision loss (presbyopia) beginning from age 35 to 45. By age 60, most individuals completely lose their near vision. Individuals with short-sightedness are less likely to develop significant issues with near vision.

Presbyopia can be found at varying rates of prevalence and intensity across the world, although some of the areas with particularly high prevalence include Africa, South America, and India. The prevalence of presbyopia in China is expected to decrease modestly in the near future as the rate of short-sightedness increases.

Distribution of reading glasses to correct presbyopia should focus on workers from sectors that require strong hand-eye coordination and visual discrimination, such as tailoring, weaving, tea harvesting, and quality control.

Vision for a Nation’s work on eye care

Organizational overview

Vision for a Nation (VFAN) is a charity based in the United Kingdom and founded by James Chen. It is registered as a foreign non-governmental organization (NGO) in Rwanda and Ghana. VFAN’s team is currently composed of four staff in London, eight in Rwanda, one in Ghana, and an eight-member board of trustees. Over the next three years, it plans to rapidly expand its operations and staff in Ghana.

Process

VFAN does not directly implement services, but instead works with government health service providers to make systemic changes to primary eye care service delivery. In going beyond the initial aim of the distribution of glasses to target primary eye care as a whole, VFAN is able to communicate to donors that its program directly impacts the quality of life of a large section of the population through delivery of a comprehensive suite of eye care initiatives. These include glasses distribution, preventative treatment for avoidable blindness, and eye health awareness raising.

Core work

Work in Rwanda

In 2012, VFAN began working with the Rwandan government to develop its aim to distribute glasses to individuals across the country. Over the next 5 years, this developed into a comprehensive national primary eye care program integrated into the public health system, which was the product of an effective partnership with Rwanda’s Ministry of Health. The core components of this health systems approach were capacity building (primarily the training of general nurses to provide basic

vision tests and eye health assessments in local health centers), policy advocacy, glasses supply chain development, and a nationwide public outreach initiative, which reached all 15,000 villages in Rwanda between 2015 and 2017.

Work in Ghana

VFAN is launching a primary eye care program in Ghana's Central Region in early 2019, which will begin scaling up across the region in 2020 and then into further regions in the north of the country.

Plans for the future

VFAN hopes to be working in three to five countries within the next five years.

Clearly

Organizational overview

Note: The following text was added by Clearly staff.

"Clearly was founded by James Chen in 2016 with the objective to bring clear vision to the 2.5 billion people worldwide denied it as quickly as possible so that everyone can reach their full potential.

Poor vision is the largest unmet disability in the world today. A third of the world's population suffer from poor vision because they don't have access to a simple pair of glasses – a solution that has been around for over 700 years. This is a huge waste of human potential. Clearly believes clear vision is the golden thread that will help the world reduce poverty, and deliver quality education, decent work and gender equality – all vital Sustainable Development Goals.

The world is on the cusp of a new technological revolution but those without good sight cannot participate in this progress and will fall further behind.

So Clearly urgently aims to get a pair of glasses on the nose of everyone who needs them by:

- campaigning to raise the profile of this issue
- championing innovation that makes sight tests and cheap glasses accessible for all and
- connecting people committed to tackling this issue so we can all be a catalyst for change."

Research

Clearly sponsored the PROSPER study, a 2018 landmark study published in The Lancet Global Health and carried out with VisionSpring and Orbis, which found a transformative impact of glasses on the productivity of manual workers, demonstrating their role as a vital tool for global development.

The trial of 750 mostly female Indian tea-pickers has shown that the provision of a pair of reading glasses improved productivity by 22% over a three-month period,

which is the largest impact yet seen in a trial of health interventions to improve productivity.

On World Sight Day 2018, Clearly sent a letter to over 100 of the world's largest companies outlining the results of the PROSPER study and encouraging the firms to provide free sight tests and affordable glasses to their workers. The letter was reported in The Daily Telegraph UK.

Future research

Clearly is planning new research on the links between vision and improving education, increasing labor participation, and reducing traffic accidents, all of which are vital Sustainable Development Goals. It is actively seeking funding and research partnerships for these studies.

Vision for a Nation's sources of funding

VFAN's largest source of funding is the financial commitment of its founder, James Chen. It also leverages the funding it receives from Mr. Chen to raise funds from other donors, such as USAID, the UBS Optimus Foundation, and Child Relief International.

Other relevant groups and individuals

Organizations that work on increasing access to eye care

- **Sightsavers** – Sightsavers distributes glasses to drivers but does not collect long-term follow-up data on the impact of this program.
- **VisionSpring** – VisionSpring collaborates with companies to provide glasses to workers. It has had success with this model, as it has been able to demonstrate that providing glasses to workers is economically beneficial for firms.
 - **Global development alliance** – VisionSpring is leveraging results from Clearly's PROSPER study to create a global development alliance with USAID and apparel manufacturers including Levi Strauss & Co., Williams Sonoma, and Gap Inc. USAID and VisionSpring will provide workplace sight tests in these apparel manufacturers' East Asian factories and will rigorously collect data. In order to ensure high data quality, Clearly will be involved in conducting an RCT using the data collected.

Individuals and organizations that GiveWell should talk to

- **Professor Nathan Congdon** – Professor Congdon is one of the most prolific researchers in eye care access and has been involved in a number of RCTs on the impact of glasses.
- **Professor Kovin Naidoo** – Senior Vice President of Inclusive Business, Philanthropy and Social Impact at Essilor

- **RestoringVision** – RestoringVision is not exclusively focused on worker productivity but is the largest distributor of reading glasses in the world.
- **Ella Gudwin** – President of VisionSpring

All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>