

DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL: THE FIGHT TO END CATARACT BLINDNESS

Statement to the 50th Session of the Commission on Population and Development (CPD50)

HelpMeSee

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Subscribing to the United Nations 2030 Agenda to combat poverty and leave no one behind, which calls for:

- Committing to help Member States to achieve this critical goal.

We call on member states, private, public and civil society partners to:

1. Eliminate human suffering and economic loss by preventing the increased disability caused by visual impairment and blindness, mostly due to age related cataract.
2. Scale up human resources in delivering essential surgical care.
3. Reduce time and costs needed for surgical skills training using advanced simulation technology modeled on the success in aviation training.
4. Eliminate the current shortage and meet the growing demand for surgical services in remote and impoverished communities.
5. Establish sustainable and market based, high-quality surgical services which provide universal access to eye care.

Cataracts are the leading cause of preventable blindness, and a burden on families around the world. In spite of many advances in medicine, it remains a disease of the poor, with the World Health Organization estimating 90% of those blinded by cataracts live in developing countries. Although cataracts can occur at any age, visual impairment and blindness is most often developed later in life, with nearly half of those over the age of 65 expected to experience vision loss caused by cataracts within their lifetime.

As the global population continues to grow and the percentage of adults above working-age increases, cataracts will also increase in parallel with the evolving population age structure. In 2010 the World Health Organization estimated that at least 20 million people already suffer from cataract blindness, and that number can be expected to grow with a rapidly aging population. Women are disproportionately impacted by cataracts, just as they represent the majority of persons over age 65. According to the 2015 World Population Prospects report, persons aged 65 and older will more than triple in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – including in developing countries where cataract treatment is needed most.

Even as this backlog of patients awaiting treatment grows, the number of skilled cataract specialists available to provide treatment has remained stagnant. In many developing countries, there simply are not enough trained specialists available to restore sight to the millions in need of cataract surgery. Unless significant action is taken to train the thousands of surgeons needed, the global health crisis of cataracts will only grow worse in the years to come.

HelpMeSee’s mission is to train cataract specialists in the developing world to perform a cost-effective, high-quality treatment for cataract blindness which restores visual acuity lost to cataracts. Based on the success in using simulation technology to train pilots in commercial aviation, HelpMeSee is able to scale training through simulation techniques which standardize safety and efficiency in treatment.

Today HelpMeSee, along with the cataract blind and their families, are calling on the United Nations Commission on Population and Development, member states, NGOs, and civil service organizations to adopt this strategy of increasing access to treatment for a rapidly aging population by training thousands of cataract specialists. HelpMeSee’s strategy of training specialists to perform a single procedure can help reduce the backlog of patients awaiting sight-restoring cataract surgery, even as the global population continues to grow older.