

# CHAMPIONING CHANGE IN GLOBAL EYE HEALTH

Only by working together can we become true champions of change.

BY M. BABAR QURESHI, MD

**T**hroughout my career as an ophthalmologist and within the broader eye health sector, I have believed that it is only by working together that we can become true champions of change. During my 10 years with the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), we have made extraordinary progress, but our most important work lies ahead. The present moment offers an unparalleled opportunity to enhance the lives of billions by making vision a fundamental economic, social, and development issue. We must integrate eye health into wider health care systems, stimulate consumer demand, and transform the market.

## EYE HEALTH AND POVERTY REDUCTION

The eye care sector's current strategy for ending avoidable blindness, 2030 in Sight, is at the heart of the IAPB's work. Both the World Health Organization's World Report on Vision and The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health highlighted sight loss as a key influence on economic development and the need to integrate eye health into health care systems effectively.<sup>1,2</sup>

Improving eye health can reduce poverty. Optimal vision can improve educational outcomes and employment prospects and increase productivity and gender equity. We must make this argument loudly and repeatedly to overcome barriers to universal access to early detection and

prevention services, eye examinations, treatment, and rehabilitation. Moreover, we must push even harder for wider recognition that improving eye health is vital to achieving the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling its principle of leaving no one behind.

In 2021, working with partners at the UN, the IAPB and our members achieved the first-ever UN resolution on eye health. This resolution, which was unanimously passed by all 194 UN member countries, ties eye health to the Sustainable Development Goals and calls on the international community to help the 1.1 billion people currently lacking access to eye care by 2030. Additionally, it creates expectations for UN institutions and international financial institutions.

## UN RESOLUTION AND SPECIAL ENVOY

Resolutions alone are insufficient to effect change. This is why the IAPB, joined by more than 70 countries and 150 eye health organizations, advocated for the appointment of a UN Special Envoy on Vision earlier this year. The Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Vision would serve as a global champion, catalyzing international action on eye health and ensuring that the necessary resources and technical assistance are provided, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

The letter was endorsed by countries including Nigeria, India, the United Kingdom, China, Antigua

and Barbuda, Bangladesh, Ireland, Brazil, Ghana, and Australia. It states, "This is an opportunity to ensure all people around the world have equitable access to eye health and to tackle a development issue which can be solved this decade." (Scan the QR code to read the letter in full.)



More than 150 CEOs and leaders of eye health organizations worldwide have also written to the Secretary-General in support of establishing an envoy. The letter, coordinated by the IAPB and signed by organizations drawn from professional associations, the corporate sector, nongovernmental organizations, and others, asserts, "Opportunities to spark generational-level change are rare. It requires the right global commitment, strong government and community support, a clear pathway forward, and the right leadership to guide the way. For vision, that moment has arrived."

This vision of the future of our sector arrives at a critical time. The world has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways no one could have anticipated. The experience has provided a new incentive to develop health systems that are resilient and responsive and highlighted the need for equitable and inclusive rebuilding.

### A UNITED VISION FOR THE FUTURE

We must strive to create a world where everyone everywhere has access to high-quality eye health, sight loss prevention is prioritized, and barriers to the full participation in society of individuals with permanent visual impairment are eliminated. As a sector, we need to unite and adopt new approaches. We must collaborate with organizations from other sectors and embrace new ways of working and technological advances. The challenge and opportunity have never been

greater. I therefore encourage everyone reading this article to ensure their organizations are members of the IAPB so that we can work together toward the change we want to see.

As a community of eye health practitioners, we know that population growth and aging and increased urbanization further limit access to eye health services. The Special Envoy could play a crucial role in mobilizing international action on eye health and help ensure that everyone has access to affordable

eye health services. This is a global development challenge that can be resolved by 2030. ■

1. World Health Organization. World report on vision. October 9, 2019. Accessed April 14, 2023. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516570>
2. The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health. Global eye health: vision beyond 2020. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2021;9(3):e489-e551.

---

#### M. BABAR QURESHI, MD

- Vice President and Board Chair, International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness
- [babar.queshi@cbm.org](mailto:babar.queshi@cbm.org)
- Financial disclosure: None