Using a Systems Thinking approach to build Global Partnerships

A contribution from The Fred Hollows Foundation

Introduction

International NGOs are increasingly looking to new approaches to positively influence development outcomes. A systems thinking approach is one such framework The Fred Hollows Foundation is using to translate lessons learned on the ground to influence global health policy dialogue and practice.

The vision of The Foundation reflects that of the late Professor Fred Hollows, and is a world in which no person is needlessly blind and Indigenous Australians exercise their right to good health. As we approach our 25th anniversary, The Foundation’s work now spans 25 countries throughout Asia, East Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific, as well Australia, and focusses on helping some of the poorest people while advocating globally for an end to avoidable blindness, and building the national and community capacity of eye health services.

In 2011 The Foundation took the lead on behalf of a number of international eye health organisations, in commissioning PwC to source the best available global data to estimate the costs and benefits of ending avoidable blindness. The results were both alarming and energising. The research suggested that over a 10-year period, approximately US$394.2 billion of additional spending was required to eliminate avoidable blindness.¹ Two-thirds of the money would be absorbed by high cost developed countries such as the USA, UK and Australia to “fix” health system inefficiencies. However, the real story lay in the enormous potential of eliminating 90%² of the world’s avoidable blindness by investing in the eye health systems of low and middle income countries. These include the countries of Africa, Asia and the Pacific where The Foundation has been active for more than 20 years.

PwC estimated that in low and middle income countries, an investment of US$128.2 billion was needed over 10 years, with an expected return of US$4 for every US$1 invested.³ With proven, scalable eye health interventions such as cataract surgery, along with the high-cost benefits of restoring sight, the path toward our organisational vision was achievable. But where would the money come from? And how much of our success depended on what was happening in other areas of health and government spending?

Herein came two key lessons learned by The Foundation on the ground, which have significantly influenced our organisational and programming practice:

- Eye health care strengthening activities influence and are influenced by the broader health system. Our programs must therefore consider how they link to and strengthen the broader health care system.
- We cannot achieve our ambitions alone. Inter and intra-sectorial partnerships are critical to realising The Foundation’s vision.

The road ahead – Partnerships and the strength and role of our country operations

True to the legacy of Professor Fred Hollows, The Foundation’s country operations are fundamental to what we do. By restoring sight to individuals in ever increasing numbers, and strengthening health

³ Ibid 1
systems by training more health workers, we can build more clinics and establish stronger local and national health networks. Critically, we are also able to maintain faith with our donors by meeting their expectation – “we’ve given you $25 and you’ve made sure people’s sight is restored”.

Our country operations are also where we learn – where we uncover emerging disease patterns, effective treatments, health financing options, key points of influence, and the impacts of population ageing, globalisation, migration, urbanisation, changing family structures and patterns of workforce participation. These lessons are important in our contribution to national and global level policy and practice.

However, our country level operations are not in themselves going to deliver our vision of ending avoidable blindness. Ensuring the provision of sustainable eye health services is ultimately the job of national governments and sharing the world’s precious health resources is the joint responsibility of these governments. The Foundation, like all agencies, must recognise that our organisation has a partnership role to play.

Operationally, The Foundation must contribute to service delivery, partnership and network development, and health system strengthening. We also play a role in encouraging systems thinking and modelling across and beyond the eye health sector. To borrow from Trochim et al⁴, The Foundation seeks to influence the emergence of systems-oriented local and global organisations and networks by itself focusing on eight ‘rules’ for managing and encouraging complex and adaptive systems:

1. expand cross-category funding;
2. support dynamic and diverse networks;
3. use systems measures and models;
4. inspire integrative learning;
5. explore systems paradigms and perspectives;
6. show potential of systems approaches;
7. foster systems planning and evaluation; and
8. utilise system incentives.

As part of our responsibility to share our lessons, we also look for global systems influencers with whom we can align our strategic efforts and outcomes.

Sustainable Development Goal 17, ‘strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development’, provides the impetus and opportunity for all governments and civil society groups to leverage a global partnership approach. This approach is increasingly being applied by large global funds to mobilise and create action across multiple regions and disease themes. We recognise that other organisations, including many agencies of many governments, are ahead of us in taking this approach, however we are determined to fulfil our role.

The following case studies aim to demonstrate examples through which The Foundation, as a single organisation with a global vision, seeks to model systems thinking and capitalise on strategic global partnerships as a means of extending our reach and influence to end avoidable blindness.

**School Eye Health**

In Cambodia, our country team identified an opportunity to form a closer relationship with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to seek to embed eye health and vision screening within school health programs. The initiative also fostered collaboration between the Ministries of Health and Education. More than 15,200 teachers were trained in basic eye health and more than 660,000 children

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participated in eye health education classes, resulting in significant improvements in their knowledge of eye care.

The project demonstrated evidence of the impact of school eye health education and provided a model which could be replicated in other countries. It was a highly effective initiative and we are sharing the lessons with our country programs throughout Asia and Africa.

This local collaboration also led to a broader working relationship with The Global Partnership for Education (GPE). The Foundation and GPE went on to build a partnership model that jointly advocates and champions the critical importance of children’s good health and vision for improved educational retention and outcomes. School health is now embedded in GPE’s global strategy for ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all.

Healthy Ageing

The Better Vision, Healthy Ageing Program in Sri Lanka was developed by The Foundation in partnership with Burnet Institute and local government and civil society partners, to contribute to the evidence base on the importance of investing in healthy ageing and eye health among vulnerable elders. The program’s goal was to improve the health, vision and quality of life for elders. A critical lesson learned in this project was that the needs of older women were often neglected in international development efforts. Women are 1.5 times more likely to be affected by vision loss than men⁵, and yet they are less likely to access cataract surgery⁶. Older women are often the forgotten heroes of the family unit despite their vital social and economic roles and contributions. Empowering older women and recognising their role in the family and the community is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

So where are the global influencers with whom we can share this lesson, align our strategic goals and enhance our impact?

The Foundation and the Burnet Institute initiated an event at the fourth Global Women Deliver conference in Copenhagen in May 2016 and with sponsorship from the Australian Government joined with HelpAge International. Our goal was to highlight the issues of older women in this forum. The key objective of the partner event - ‘Older Women Deliver Too – A Life-Course Approach to Women’s and Children’s Health’ - was to form a global partnership to promote the rights, needs and contributions of older women. This is a work in progress. We know that to make a real difference partnership is essential. The Foundation will continue to work with global partners to advocate for the inclusion of older women in global efforts focused on securing the health and wellbeing of women and girls.

Diabetic Eye Disease

In 2010-11 our country managers sounded the alarm around the rising global challenges of obesity, poor nutrition and diabetes. Currently, one in 11 people worldwide have diabetes, 75% of whom live in low and middle income countries. Approximately one-third of people with diabetes develop some form of eye damage and by 2040, it is estimated there will be more than 642 million people living with diabetes⁷. Every one of them will need an eye examination once a year. That is around 35 eye

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examinations every second. The global health workforce will not cope. It was clear that we would need to think differently.

The International Diabetes Federation (IDF) is an umbrella organisation of more than 230 national diabetes associations in 170 countries and territories, and has been the leading voice of the global diabetes community since 1950.

In 2013, the IDF and The Fred Hollows Foundation entered into a 10-year partnership to raise the profile of diabetic retinopathy as a largely avoidable complication of diabetes and increase the influence the two organisations can have collaboratively to prevent and reduce the impact of diabetic eye disease.

The partnership provides a global platform to advocate for better and more effective management of eye health for people living with diabetes, particularly in low resource settings. It aims to strengthen work on diabetic eye disease in the areas of advocacy, workforce development, research, technology development, and community awareness.

In December 2015 the IDF and The Fred Hollows Foundation launched *Diabetic Eye Health: A Guide for Health Professionals* ([www.idf.org/eyehealth](http://www.idf.org/eyehealth)) at the World Diabetes Congress in Canada. It is a practical informative document for primary health professionals on managing diabetic eye disease, in response to the growing numbers of people with diabetes in low and middle income countries. It points to the need for collaboration across diabetes, eye and primary health sectors. Ensuring all people with diabetes have access to diabetic eye health services requires new innovative approaches in service provision and cross-sectoral collaboration, and from local lessons, a global response.

**Conclusion**

The Fred Hollows Foundation has been energised by a systems thinking approach and recognises the absolute importance of forging global partnerships across different sectors to achieve our goal. Critically, we have an operationally-focussed public health role to play, but also see a responsibility to influence the emergence of systems-oriented local and global organisations and networks. The Foundation actively seeks to build collaborations with like-minded organisations from the eye health sector such as Sightsavers and Helen Keller International. We are also developing broad global partnerships, such as with the Global Partnership for Education and the International Diabetes Federation, as a platform for sharing experiences, resources and joint advocacy efforts.

Our learning is that credibility stems from the ability to walk the walk, and that achieving our global vision of ending avoidable blindness is only possible with effective and collaborative action and global partnerships.