

World Congress on Refractive Error

Vision Correction: Broadening
The Development Agenda

20 - 22 Sept 2010
Durban, South Africa



World Conference on Optometric Education

22 - 24 Sept 2010
Durban, South Africa



MEDIA RELEASE

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DEVELOPMENT LEADERS CHALLENGE GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY TO ADDRESS DISABILITY WORLDWIDE

Durban, South Africa, 20 September 2010: Avoidable blindness and vision impairment was the focus of international leaders from the development, human rights, environment, education and eye care sectors at an international conference in Durban today. Addressing the World Congress on Refractive Error (WCRE), the panel of experts argued that vision impairment is not simply a major health problem, but its impact in developing communities is much broader, contributing to poverty and restricting economic development.

The panel including Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, from African Monitor, Lalita Ramdas, Former President of the International Council for Adult Education, social campaigner Zanele Twala from ActionAid International and noted human rights campaigner Noel Kututwa from Amnesty International.

The three day meeting, a part of a twin conference with World Conference of Optometric Education, will see NGOs and the eye care community reporting on progress made and measures necessary to eliminate avoidable blindness and vision impairment globally by the year 2020, a goal of the Vision 2020 Right to Sight campaign, in response to the Millennium Development Goals.

Chair of the Panel discussion today at ICC, Dr Kumi Naidoo, said, "When we hold global conferences in Africa its our way of saying that we are a part of solving global problems."

Sharing his perspective on how eye care fits into the development agenda, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane commented, "Every human being, created in the image of God, should have access to what is required to live".

"From where I come from," he added "it is the moral function of a state to coordinate their resources to assist those in need. We need to have a comprehensive, coherent, coordinated movement with governments, private business, professionals and civil society to ensure that we can live our lives fully and to ensure that we reach the goals of Vision 2020 the Right to Sight."

Zanele Twala from ActionAid International gave a gender perspective on development for those attending the global congress. She noted that gender is still a primary cause of poverty. Women are more likely to be living in poverty. She commented, "Hunger, poverty and equality are entwined. If your children do not have enough to eat they will be unlikely to go to school or access health care."

She added, "We meet at time when our leaders are meeting in New York to discuss the Millenium Development Goals. I know we are unlikely to achieve the first goal to alleviate extreme poverty. I also wonder whether the measures we are taking now will achieve our goals in eye care, but I have hope."

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Noel Kututwa, from Amnesty International spoke passionately about basic human rights and how they are linked, "All human beings should enjoy all human rights, economic, political, social rights including the right to enjoy good health. All rights must come together at once – not social rights without political rights or economic rights."

But it was Lalita Ramdas, activist and Former President of the International Council for Adult Education who drew together the economic hurdles that prevent eye care from achieving its critical goal of reducing avoidable blindness and vision impairment by 2020. She asked those attending, "Why is it and what is it that prevents us from finding the solutions to eye care problems worldwide, when we can find the money to bail out banks or bid for sporting events, why can't we find the \$5 billion dollars to eradicate blindness and vision impairment that Professor Holden, CEO of ICEE, suggests could resolve the problem?"

To address the issue of providing eye care to more than 670 million in need of an eye examination and glasses to see clearly, most in the developing world, she suggested, "We need awareness but it has to come from both sides; education in the NGO and eye care industry so we know that we need to reach out and resolve the issue and then the education with those who need to access eye care."

"It is still a sad fact that numbers are increasing of those suffering from malnutrition, poverty, literacy issues and, of course, the need for eye care," she added. "We must get our priorities right", she said. "We need greater awareness and partnerships to bring this together."

The link between avoidable vision impairment and poverty is well-established. The disability has a major impact on people's lives, creating profound economic disadvantage, affecting education and employment opportunities and creating social isolation.

With the country's attention on the ANC annual conference, also taking place at the International Convention Centre today, the joint staging of the WCRE and World Conference on Optometric Education (WCOE) is drawing the spotlight onto the tragedy of avoidable blindness and vision impairment affecting so many lives in South Africa and throughout the world.

Chair of the Panel discussing the theme "Broadening the Development Agenda, Dr Kumi Naidoo said, "History teaches us that change takes place and we move forward when decent men and women say enough is enough and when things are far too serious for it to be business as usual approach."

Chair of this morning's panel, Dr Kumi Naidoo concluded, "Whether its alleviation of poverty or blindness and vision impairment the biggest thing we can do is to commit to a life time of involvement and to achieving the goal."

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