

The SMILES Project

Background

Globally, an estimated 314 million people are visually impaired, 80% of whom are avoidable and 90% of them living in low-income countries. In Ghana, approximately 332,000 suffer from severe visual impairment mostly caused by cataracts. In Upper West Region, an estimated 9,600 have severe visual impairment which are disproportionately more common in rural areas due to limited access to eye care services. There is no resident Ophthalmologist, 29 Ophthalmic Nurses and an Ophthalmic Nurse Specialist located in 8 out of the 11 districts. Thus, eye surgeries are performed by visiting Ophthalmologists occasionally. In districts without Ophthalmic Nurses, access to eye care services is virtually non-existent, highlighting a critical gap defeating the Universal Health Coverage and the VISION 2020's RIGHT TO SIGHT INITIATIVE. Outreach services are useful in closing such gaps.

Objectives

1. Identify individuals with visual impairment who require intervention by eye screening.
2. Conduct community outreach programs for eye screening in under-served areas.
3. Collaborate with organizations that support eye care interventions and sponsorship to train eye care workers.
4. Improve access to quality eye care services and facilities in rural communities.

Methods

- Case search - Public awareness campaign, radio engagement, screening at site, community, referrals
- Outreach service - community-based outreaches
- Collaboration - stakeholder recruitment -Friends Eye Centre, Himalayan Cataract Project, Virtue Foundation, Humanity First and the Regional Health Team, Wa East Member of Parliament
- Service quality - free healthcare and glasses distribution, assisted operations, discharge education, follow-up reviews

Key Achievements

- Case search -
 - Five radio campaigns and public education
 - Over 10,000 individuals screened
 - 5,000 people identified with visual impairment
- Outreach service - 35 community outreaches conducted
- Collaboration -
 - 150 received free reading glasses,

- Eye clinic in Funsì revitalized,
- New clinic constructed to accommodate expanded services,
- Junior nurses mentored: two trained as Ophthalmic Nurses
- Service quality -
 - 4,500 underwent successful surgical interventions,
 - 500 received free eye medications,
 - Over 100% of surgical cases had positive outcomes,
 - Improved quality of life for all beneficiaries,
 - Surgery provided at no cost, just smiles

Conclusions and Recommendations

The SMILES Project demonstrates that with the right partnerships and community-centered strategies, vision can be restored—and lives transformed.

The burden of visual impairment is projected to increase due to population growth and an ageing demographic. To address this, stakeholders are encouraged to:

- Develop and fund community-based eye care initiatives
- Invest in the training of more Ophthalmic Nurse Specialist, Ophthalmic Nurses and Ophthalmologists for rural deployment
- Expand infrastructure and mobile eye care services to under-served districts
- Foster partnerships to sustain and scale the impact of projects like SMILES

End of project