

Enhancing Vision Health Access for Syrian Refugee School Children in Beqaa, Lebanon

Project Overview:



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Addressing the critical gap in vision care for Syrian refugee school children in Beqaa, Lebanon.

Funded by WCO General Grant Program:

Mrs. Rana Diab, a member of Vision Care Association, a country member at the WCO, received the grant.

Generously Supported by WCO & World Optometry Foundation:

- WCO offers two types of grants: General Grants & Education Mentor Grants.
- The grants are supported by the charitable arm, the World Optometry Foundation.
- WCO Grant Program (formerly known as the Fellowship Program) supports projects advancing the role of optometry in healthcare systems.

Objectives:

- Conduct comprehensive vision screenings for 600 children.
- Provide spectacles through local optical shop partnerships.
- Raise awareness about the importance of vision health.

Key Features:

- Equity & Inclusion: Open to all regardless of gender or religion.
- Community Empowerment: Engaging local stakeholders for sustainability.
- Advocacy: Pushing for systemic improvements in refugee healthcare

Timeline:

- Preparation: April 1 - April 14
- Vision Screening: April 15 - April 30
- Spectacle Provision: May 1 - May 14

Outcomes:

- Improved Vision Health
- Increased Spectacle Accessibility

- Community Empowerment
- Advocacy and Awareness

Acknowledgment:

- Generous support from the World Council of Optometry and World Optometry Foundation.

Conclusion:

- By screening, providing spectacles, and raising awareness, we aim to improve the lives and educational opportunities of Syrian refugee children in Beqaa, Lebanon.

Detailed Report

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1. Introduction:

The Syrian refugee crisis has led to significant challenges for displaced families, particularly in accessing essential healthcare services. Among these services, vision care remains largely unaddressed, posing a barrier to educational opportunities and overall well-being, especially for school children. This report presents a detailed account of the project aimed at enhancing vision health access for Syrian refugee school children in Beqaa, Lebanon, funded by the World Council of Optometry (WCO) General Grant Program.



Figure 1 Syrian refugee - This image was sourced externally and is not part of the project content.

2. Background and Context:

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has led to one of the largest humanitarian crises of our time. Millions of Syrians have been displaced, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries like **Lebanon**. The influx of refugees has strained resources and infrastructure, leading to challenges in accessing healthcare services. Among these challenges, vision care is often overlooked, leaving many refugees, especially children, with untreated vision problems that affect their daily lives and educational opportunities.



Figure 2 Refugee camp - This image was sourced externally and is not part of the project content.

3. Project Objectives:

- To conduct comprehensive vision screenings for approximately 600 Syrian refugee school children in Beqaa, Lebanon.
- To establish a sustainable pathway for the provision of spectacles to identified children through partnerships with local optical shops.
- To raise awareness about the importance of vision health among refugee communities and local stakeholders.

4. Project Implementation:

4.1. Planning and Preparation:

- Collaborated with local NGOs such as **Vision Care Association**, schools, and community leaders to identify target schools and coordinate logistics for vision screening sessions.
- Obtained gatekeeper approval from the Ministry of Higher Education through Vision Care Association since it is a registered NGO in Lebanon to conduct vision screenings in selected schools.
- Conducted stakeholder meetings to garner support and ensure the smooth execution of the project.
- Trained Optometrists for the screening campaign, including sessions on vision screening techniques, equipment usage, and data recording.



Figure 3 Approval form from the Ministry of Education

4.2. Vision Screening Campaign:

- Organized on-site vision screening sessions at selected schools in Beqaa.
- Deployed a team of trained volunteers and eye care professionals to conduct screenings.
- Screenings included visual acuity tests, refraction assessments, and basic eye examinations to detect common vision problems such as refractive errors, amblyopia, and strabismus.
- Identified children in need of vision correction and referred them for further evaluation and spectacles provision.



Figure 4 Vision Screening - Quicksee

4.3. Spectacles Provision:

- Established partnerships with local optical shop (OpticAli) willing to donate their time and resources to provide spectacles at reduced cost.
- Facilitated the fitting and distribution of spectacles for eligible recipients, ensuring proper adjustment and prescription accuracy.
- Provided counselling and education to children and their families on the importance of wearing spectacles regularly and maintaining good eye health practices.



Figure 5 OpticAli Optical Shop

4.4. Community Engagement and Education:

- Conducted outreach activities to raise awareness about the importance of vision health among refugee communities.
- Distributed educational materials and resources on eye care and hygiene practices, including pamphlets, posters, and interactive sessions.
- Engaged with local stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, to advocate for the integration of school eye health programs into broader healthcare initiatives.



Figure 6 Vision Screening - Trial set/Trial Frame

5. Vision Screening Process:

5.1. Methodology:

- Utilized standardized vision screening protocols recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international organizations.
- Screenings included visual acuity tests using Snellen or E chart, cover-uncover tests for detecting strabismus, and trial set and trial frame for refractive error assessment.
- Trained Optometrists conducted the screenings under appropriate lighting conditions and with calibrated equipment.

5.2. Screening Results:

Screened a total of 635 Syrian refugee school children aged between 6 to 16 years. Identified 141 children (23.5%) with some form of vision impairment, ranging from mild to severe.



Figure 7 Vision screening - Autorefractometer.

6. Spectacles Provision:

6.1. Partnerships with Local Optical Shops:

- Established partnerships with local optical shop in Beqaa, Lebanon, (OpticAli) willing to provide spectacles at reduced or no cost.
- Negotiated agreements with optical shop for the provision of spectacles, including frame selection, lens cutting, and fitting services.



Figure 8 OpticAli Optical Shop

6.2. Fitting and Distribution Process:

- Organized follow-up visits to the optical shop for eligible children to receive their spectacles.
- Provided personalized fitting sessions to ensure proper alignment, comfort, and vision correction.
- Distributed a total of 103 spectacles to children identified with vision impairments.



Figure 9 Dispensing eyeglasses.

6.3. Follow-up and Monitoring:

- Conducted post-distribution follow-up visits to monitor the usage of spectacles and address any issues or concerns.
- Provided additional support and adjustments as needed to ensure optimal vision correction and comfort.

7. Community Engagement and Education:

7.1. Outreach Activities:

- Organized community awareness event in collaboration with local community center and schools.
- Conducted interactive sessions on the importance of vision health, common eye conditions, and preventive measures.
- Distributed educational materials, including brochures, posters, and stickers, to reinforce key messages.



Figure 10 Vision Screening

7.2. Impact Assessment:

- Assessed the impact of community engagement activities through pre- and post-event surveys.
- Notable increases in knowledge and awareness of vision health were observed among participants.



Figure 11 Optometrists on duty

8. Outcomes and Impact:

8.1. Improved Vision Health:

- Identified and addressed vision problems in 141 Syrian refugee school children.
- Improved visual acuity and comfort for children wearing spectacles, leading to enhanced academic performance and quality of life.



Figure 12 Happy kids after their eyes got checked up by the Optometrists.

8.2. Increased Spectacle Accessibility:

- Provided spectacles to 103 children at reduced or no cost, removing financial barriers to vision correction services.
- Ensured proper fitting and prescription accuracy, resulting in effective vision correction.

8.3. Community Empowerment:

- Fostered community ownership and sustainability through engagement with local stakeholders.
- Empowered refugee communities to advocate for their vision health needs and access available resources.

8.4. Advocacy and Awareness:

- Raised awareness about the importance of vision health among refugee communities and local stakeholders.
- Advocated for the integration of school eye health programs into broader healthcare initiatives, contributing to systemic improvements in refugee healthcare.



Figure 13 This is our happy place!

9. Challenges Faced:

9.1. Equipment Shortages:

Limited availability of equipment (Lensometer, Autorefractometer, projector, trial set and trial frame) necessitated the need for multiple screening clinics to cover the target population adequately but

since Vision Care Association is a country member in world council of optometry, they offered us all the equipment free of charge.

9.2. Language and Cultural Barriers:

Language barriers and cultural differences posed challenges in effectively communicating with refugee communities, requiring the use of interpreters and culturally sensitive materials.

9.3. Logistical Challenges:

Logistics, such as transportation and venue arrangements, presented challenges, particularly in remote areas with limited infrastructure.

9.4. Budget shortage:

The project faced budget challenges due to receiving significantly less funding than initially requested. Without VCA's assistance in providing the screening equipment free of charge, securing rental equipment would have become extremely difficult, impacting the ability to conduct screenings effectively.



Figure 14 Vision screening - Quicksee

10. Lessons Learned:

10.1. Flexibility in Planning:

Importance of flexible planning to adapt to unexpected challenges, such as equipment shortages, gatekeeper approval, and ensure the smooth execution of the project.

10.2. Importance of Community Involvement:

Significance of community involvement in ensuring the sustainability and success of vision health initiatives, emphasizing the importance of engaging with local stakeholders.

10.3. Sustainability and Long-term Planning:

Need for sustainable approaches and long-term planning to address ongoing vision health needs and ensure the continued impact of interventions beyond the project duration.



Figure 15 Vision Screening - Autorefractometer

11. Budget Utilization:

A detailed breakdown of the budget utilization is provided in the attached Excel sheet, ensuring transparency and accuracy in budget allocation. The allocated funds were utilized effectively to cover logistics, transportation, and community outreach.

12. Sustainability and Future Plans:

Plans for sustaining the project's impact beyond its duration include:

- Continued partnerships with local stakeholders and optical shops to ensure access to vision care services.
- Advocacy efforts to integrate school eye health programs into broader healthcare initiatives.
- Capacity building and training of local healthcare providers and volunteers to conduct vision screenings and provide basic eye care services.

13. Acknowledgments:

The successful implementation of the project would not have been possible without the support and collaboration of various individuals and organizations. We would like to express our gratitude to:

- The World Council of Optometry (WCO) for their generous support and funding through the General Grant Program.
- Local NGOs (Vision Care Association) for affording the medical equipment, schools (UDH), and community leaders for their cooperation and assistance throughout the project.
- Chair of the Education Committee of the World Council of Optometry (WCO), Dr. Yazan Gammoh, for his support.



Figure 16 Vision Care Association Logo

14. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the project has made significant strides in enhancing vision health access for Syrian refugee school children in Beqaa, Lebanon. By conducting comprehensive vision screenings, providing spectacles, and raising awareness, we have improved the lives and educational opportunities of vulnerable populations. The impact achieved underscores the importance of continued support for such initiatives in improving the well-being and opportunities of displaced communities.



Figure 17 Group photo of the school children with the optometrists on duty.