

## **Vision for Change**

“It's not what the vision is, it's what the vision does”. (Peter Senge)

### **Case Study Methodology**

This case study focuses on how an activist investor and philanthropist applied an entrepreneurial mindset to the vision impairment issue. The research explores how he built strategic approaches to create a sustainable business model that can identify and solve this problem locally and be replicated globally. The case is based on textual analysis of online artifacts and sites along with in-depth interviews and focus groups with key members of the family philanthropy. A case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-based. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic, program, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action.

In this case study we use a triangulated research design for maximum validity. While many cases use just one source (usually the interview), we aver that it is vital to obtain differentiated data by engaging several data collection and analysis methods. Strategically collecting and analyzing multiple data sources enables the validity measure of triangulation, where different data sources converge to corroborate and validate the findings that emerge from another data source, generating insights within the data set that otherwise might be missed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The theoretical and methodological frameworks that inform how the authors have approached this case study is drawn from theories of decolonizing methodology, critical rhetoric,

intersectional post-colonial theory<sup>1</sup>, and affective economies (Ahmed, 2004). The social identities of two of the authors, Dr. Reima Shakeir and Gul Rukh Rahman, whose backgrounds are rooted in the global south, informs this research. Gul Rukh Rahman spent the past several years building the Empower Families for Innovative Philanthropy (ERFIP) platform; an initiative of the Edmond de Rothschild Foundations. ERFIP's<sup>2</sup> mission is to reassess the context of global development and more actively engage private philanthropy and family business across Frontier Economies and emerging markets. The platform is rooted in the notion that development through innovation, cross- sector collaboration and private-public partnership should not begin and end in the offices of international development agencies. Rather, it requires building closer financial and technical cooperation with local philanthropy, well positioned to advise on and implement sustainable solutions (Ladak,2014). The cases are supervised by methodological expert, Dr. Sharon Ravitch whose professional work has for many years been anchored in regions such as India, Nicaragua and more. Dr. Ravitch's work emphasizes intersectional allyship and a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals and/or groups of people.

In critical case study, a tradition that situates case studies to effect social transformation, the primary goal is to examine audio/visual texts as concrete philanthropic activity and practice that is anchored in its own specificity (religious, cultural, values-based) and not as adjacent objects to the milieu of Western development initiatives in which they exist. These cases are narratives of private families who leverage their intimate knowledge of realities on the ground to address social

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<sup>1</sup> Research has been a cite of colonization. The location of the researchers is a push back and decolonization of case study research that has been done on frontier philanthropy by Eurocentric, White researchers.

<sup>2</sup>ERFIP (Empower Families for Innovative Philanthropy) is a unique platform for Frontier Philanthropists and business people. It gathers principals, professionals and practitioners in an intimate and thoughtfully structured environment to build and share knowledge to address some of the most pressing social and economic challenges of our time.

challenges and implement sustainable solutions. In addition—because of the material-discursive intersections of this project—the theoretical and methodological tools we draw on are interdisciplinary and cross-contextual. It is in fact an ultimate push-back against mainstream case study methods that only allows for tokenized inclusion of global south philanthropic research. Perhaps it is symptomatic of how philanthropy research itself is institutionally moving toward a focus on binary/ neocolonial frameworks that is missing critical interrogations of how power reproduced hierarchies of race, class, caste, ethnicity, geography, and so on. Thus, the decolonized intersectional framework is a counter-hegemonic strategy against the imposition of structures and methods that adopt frameworks and design logics developed through neocolonial hierarchies that have not been adequately unpacked or examined in honest relation to global south everyday contexts.

This study utilizes a phenomenological case study approach. The primary purpose of phenomenological case studies is to illuminate the specific phenomenon in context, to identify phenomena precisely through and within how they are perceived by the actors in a situation or setting, in this case a family philanthropy. This requires a specific approach to data gathering and analysis wherein gathering ‘deep’ information and layered perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation is the focus. It then requires specific phenomenological data analysis that retains a fidelity to the emic, or spoken, terminology of the focal participants. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the inner perspective of the individual, ‘bracketing’ taken-for-granted assumptions and usual or normative ways of perceiving<sup>3</sup>. Humanist and feminist researchers refute the possibility of starting without preconceptions or bias, and emphasize the value of illustrating

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<sup>3</sup> (<https://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/F50603E0-41AF-4B15-9C84-BA7E4DE8CB4F/0/Seaweedphenomenologyresearch.pdf>)

how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings, as well as making the researcher visible in the ‘frame’ of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer (e.g., see Plummer 1983; Stanley & Wise 1993). Thus, narrative inquiry is invoked to address these validity issues. This case study emphasizes,

The researcher who engages in narrative inquiry is interested in determining the meaning of a particular experience or event for the one who had it, and tells about it in a story...to further particularize the narrative and to enhance perspective, the narrator not only "tells" the story from a point of view but also situates it in a particular social, cultural, or political context. (Kramp, 2004, p. 108)

As well, a narrative approach helps the researchers to critically explore the embedded stories of the philanthropists’ visions, their giving strategies, and their specific philanthropic experiences within the country in which they developed and they currently operate in. In particular, the research explores the socio-political and cultural specificities that pertain to their giving practices. This is vital since these family philanthropies emerge from local needs and resources. The mediating variables and realities of each context are an important part of a philanthropy’s journey story as well as their implementation plans and responsive organizational developments over time.

## **Introduction**

Philanthropists from around the world have been donating considerable amounts of money and time to causes they feel strongly about. Family philanthropists, like other kinds of givers, often do not have in-depth knowledge of the issues and populations they support. What distinguishes James Chen, an innovator and engaged investor, from many other philanthropists is his in-depth, iterated knowledge of that issue. 2017 marked one of the most inspiring years in the world of philanthropic giving when 14 of the richest individuals from around the globe signed what is

famously known as the “Giving Pledge,” in which they pledged to donate at least half of their wealth to philanthropy to solve large-scale social problems.<sup>4</sup> Many of these issues such as poverty, hunger, and childhood mortality and others are encapsulated in what is known as the United Nation’s “Sustainable Development Goals” or as they are commonly referred to, the SDGs<sup>5</sup>.

Irrespective of the fact that in 2019 over 2.6 billion people around the world cannot see properly and half of the cases are easily treatable<sup>6</sup>, uncorrected poor vision<sup>7</sup> is not part of the SDGs. Vision correction does not have the level of global awareness that it deserves and requires if we are to eradicate this medical and public health issue<sup>8</sup>. While not an SDG, sight issues rise to a level of urgent concern because, as Chen shares,

Poor vision is the largest unaddressed disability in the world today, but for decades it has been at best forgotten and at worst ignored. Governments, the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO) – none have done enough to acknowledge this problem and act on it. (Chen, 2017)<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the vision issue remains unaddressed yet the solution is readily available, accessible and increasingly affordable.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.cnbc.com/2017/05/31/14-billionaires-signed-bill-gates-and-warren-buffetts-giving-pledge.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/31/14-billionaires-signed-bill-gates-and-warren-buffetts-giving-pledge.html)

<sup>5</sup> [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html)

<sup>6</sup> <https://visionimpactinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WHO-World-Report-on-Vision-2019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> In the eye sector, avoidable blindness, vision impairment, uncorrected poor vision describes different parts of the funnel. Until recently, the eye sector focused on avoidable blindness and uses the term poor vision or uncorrected poor vision rather than the more technical term “Uncorrected Refractive Error” (URE).

<sup>8</sup> A key problem is that vision is perceived in health silo and low/bottom priority compared with people dying of disease or more emotionally heart tugging issues.

<sup>9</sup> Chen, James. “Clearly: How a 700-year old invention can change the world forever.” Biteback Publishing. Kindle Edition. Section 43.

## **Background and Context**

James Chen is a Hong Kong based visionary activist investor whose family has deep history in philanthropy in Hong Kong. Chen, 58, lives in Hong Kong, has spent his formative years in Nigeria where his family owned and operated a number of different manufacturing businesses. After moving to Hong Kong from China his grandfather started to expand his business in different countries and eventually consolidated his businesses in Nigeria. Chen's father decided to move the family there. At 10 years old, he was enrolled in a Jesuit boarding school in Lancashire, England. At the age of 13 he emigrated to the United States with his family where he completed his high school and went on to study Liberal Arts at the University of Chicago. He also attended Columbia Business School in New York but did not finish his degree as he found the business school experience to be uninspiring.

Chen's family's tradition of philanthropic giving began locally with Chen's father, Robert Yet-Sen Chen. Yet-Sen Chen became recognized for investing in the community in which he was born and raised. Over many years, starting early 1980s, he contributed heavily to the development of the rural and under-served communities of Qidong, Jiangsu Province by building roads, hospitals, and educational institutions.

Yet-Sen Chen depended heavily on a former local mayor and party secretary, for counsel on strategy as well as to advise him on how to build and maintain good relations with the authorities, which is vital given how local and state authorities often control the way non-governmental organizations function in many of these countries. Importantly, once this former official stepped back, it became increasingly difficult for Yet-Sen Chen to perform proper due diligence on the multitude of funding requests that were coming through his pipeline. Challenges grew as Yet-Sen Chen relationship with the local and state authorities took a decisively strained

turn when the state privatized a hospital that he had funded by contributing to 50% of the construction costs. A disheartened and concerned Yet-Sen Chen was ready to walk away from philanthropy when his son James stepped in. James Chen had his own visionary ideas that were deeply rooted in business, innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. What distinguished Yet-Sen Chen from many other philanthropists of his time was that he didn't simply write checks for philanthropy but was deeply involved in the causes he supported. James Chen incorporated his dad's philosophy of deep involvement with his own business discipline and due diligence to take the family philanthropy to the next level. For Chen part of the due diligence process is to ask a set of key questions:

- are we solving the right problem?
- do we understand the problem well enough to come up with good solutions?
- do we have a good enough and most cost-effective solution for the problem at hand?
- can we measure the impact of solving a problem and
- is the impact of solving the problem quantifiable?

### **Vision Impairment Problem in the Context of the SDGs**

In 2015, United Nations member nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal call to accomplish 17 integrated global development goals. Among these agreed upon priorities are ending poverty, alleviation of hunger and starvation, providing quality education, and achieving gender equality by 2030. The integrated nature of the goals are clearly illustrated as following:

As stated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals 2030 report, "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which

are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests....The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.<sup>10</sup>

There is a clarion link between poverty, hunger, access to education, job training and skills development, and the ability to live a dignified life. To end poverty and hunger, in an intentional and sustainable manner, member countries must create dignified employment opportunities through education and job training. In considering the importance of the success of the 2030 SDGs, James Chen poses a question that cuts through the clutter: “How can you succeed in eradicating poverty and hunger when billions of people around the world cannot even see properly?” (Chen, 2017). Many of these SDG initiatives are expected to be carried out in so-called developing and under-developed countries wherein uncorrected poor vision has a much more severe impact on the population as compared to well served developed countries. As research suggests,

Globally more than 2.2 billion people have vision impairment. Of those at least 1 billion people have vision impairment that could have been prevented or has yet to be treated. As usual, this burden is not borne equally: it weighs heavily on people from low- and middle-income countries, women, older persons and those from ethnic minorities.<sup>11</sup>

Unless the vision impairment issue is globally addressed with coordination and intention, it will serve to undermine efforts to end poverty. As Chen avers,

Leaving poor vision issues untreated is costing us all trillions of dollars a year in health costs and lost productivity. Imagine the huge benefits if all those people without proper

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<sup>10</sup> [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html)

<sup>11</sup> [www.iapb.org/news/WHO-launches-the-world-report-on-vision/](http://www.iapb.org/news/WHO-launches-the-world-report-on-vision/)



sight could use computers, read books or carry out mechanical tasks that poor vision prevents them from doing today. (Chen, 2017, p. 222)

With this history, context, and set of progressive understandings about human development in mind, Chen has dedicated 15 years of his life to developing an in-depth understanding of the uncorrected poor vision issue. Parallel to that, he has been working on developing strategic approaches to create a sustainable business model that can identify and solve this problem locally and be replicated globally.<sup>12</sup>

### **Demonstrating a Sustainable Business Model through Vision for a Nation (VFAN) in Rwanda**

Since poor vision issues are more prevalent in underdeveloped countries, it was vital to select an underdeveloped country to run a pilot program. At the first glance, Rwanda might not seem the most appropriate venue for this kind of pilot program. Only 26 years ago, the country was plagued with instability and violence. In 1994, one of the most horrific acts of genocide was carried out in recent memory by Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups against each other. This genocide received worldwide attention and claimed more than 800,000 lives.<sup>13</sup> Given this background it is hard to imagine why Chen would select Rwanda to conduct the proof of concept and eventually demonstrate a sustainable business model.

For this to work, there had to be stability on the ground, successful cooperation with the government, access to local resources and facilities as well as domestic infrastructure in place to reach those in need. The key question is does Rwanda satisfy these conditions. The approach is

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<sup>12</sup> [www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2016/05/20/james-chen-the-vision-man/#18815caf72ef](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2016/05/20/james-chen-the-vision-man/#18815caf72ef)

<sup>13</sup> [www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/historical-background.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/historical-background.shtml)

very similar to conducting due diligence using Cultural, Administrative, Geographic and Economic (CAGE) Framework<sup>14</sup> to evaluate the suitability of a specific country or region to operate a business. Using this framework one can measure the “distance” factors that can be interpreted as the degree of difficulty or ease to run a business in a new location. The following distance factors from CAGE Framework are the most relevant to the Rwanda experiment.

Administrative Distance	Geographic Distance
Political hostility	Physical remoteness
Government policies	Lack of sea or river access
Institutional weakness	Size of the country
	Weak transportation or communication link

Our goal is to evaluate the suitability of Rwanda using the above distance factors. Countries with political instability, excessive bureaucracy and regulation, and lack of transparency are signs of inefficient governance which makes it difficult for businesses to operate in that environment.<sup>15</sup> It should not come as a surprise that Rwanda is absent from the list of countries that suffer from poor governance structure. In recent years Rwanda’s government has put forth a range of aggressive national schemes for economic and social development. Vision 2020, put forth by the Rwandan government under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, is one of the most important

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<sup>14</sup> Distance Still Matters, The Hard Reality of Global Expansion, by Pankaj Ghemawat, *Harvard Business Review*, Page 5.

<sup>15</sup> [www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/07/efficient-government/](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/07/efficient-government/)

sustainability initiatives to create a prosperous and inclusive economy.<sup>16</sup> Rwanda also has extensive partnerships with the International Monetary Fund(IMF) and the United Nations(UN) to accomplish various economic and social development initiatives linked with the SDGs.

In recent years both the UN<sup>17</sup> and the IMF<sup>18</sup> have praised Rwanda for staying focused and accomplishing good economic results as well as making progress towards solid governance structures. In addition, there is an emerging trend of private-public partnerships to collaboratively solve a range of social, economic and environment issues.<sup>19</sup> Although the vast majority of Rwanda's population lives in remote villages, it is relatively easy to travel to different parts of the country. This mobility creates a useful operating environment to test out a pilot initiative across regions of a country. All of these factors combined made Rwanda a good fit for conducting the proof of concept that Chen's VFAN team developed. As Chen (2017) states,

It was the country's growing reputation for competent governance, as well as its established health infrastructure and relative ease of travel to most parts of the country from the capital Kigali, that convinced my close colleagues and me that it was the right place to try. We were massively helped by the fact that the Ministry of Health already had in place a network connecting Kigali with all hospitals and then on to the health centers. This was here before we arrived and without it we would have been in serious trouble. Indeed, our achievements may not have been possible.<sup>20</sup>

Given Chen's business background it is not hard to imagine that he might have used such a framework to evaluate the suitability and select Rwanda. It is easy to understand the overwhelming need for vision care in many countries including Rwanda. Chen and his team could have encountered serious challenges due to lack of resources and infrastructure.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.sida.se/globalassets/global/countries-and-regions/africa/rwanda/d402331a.pdf](http://www.sida.se/globalassets/global/countries-and-regions/africa/rwanda/d402331a.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [www.oecd.org/countries/rwanda/41105593.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/countries/rwanda/41105593.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [www.compactwithafrica.org/content/dam/Compact%20with%20Africa/Countries/Rwanda/1RWAEA2019001.pdf](http://www.compactwithafrica.org/content/dam/Compact%20with%20Africa/Countries/Rwanda/1RWAEA2019001.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/africa-could-be-about-to-wipe-out-hunger-for-good/](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/africa-could-be-about-to-wipe-out-hunger-for-good/)

<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Section 1634.

## Ground Reality

In 2010 when Vision for a Nation started to explore the possibility of conducting the pilot program in Rwanda they were faced with the several challenges and these had to be integrated into the strategy of the pilot initiative. The challenges were:

- There were only 7 Ophthalmologists in the entire country.<sup>21</sup>
- Population-to-ophthalmologist ratio was over a million to 1.
- There were only 502 functional health centers around the country.<sup>22</sup>
- A total of over 5,000<sup>23</sup> nurses served in those health centers.<sup>24</sup>
- 90% of the population did not have access to local or affordable eye care.<sup>25</sup>
- Initial estimate was that hundreds of thousands of people were suffering from poor vision.

In Western countries reading glasses can be purchased over the counter. Most local pharmacies, grocery and retail stores carry standard reading glasses and nowadays sell them without prescriptions. In a country like Rwanda, people still needed to go an ophthalmologist to get a prescription for reading glasses. This process creates a lot of pressure on a very small number of ophthalmologists. It also creates high barriers for ordinary people who need simple reading glasses. Furthermore, it is simply not possible to run a system where for every million patients there is only one physician. James Chen realized that in order to operate and succeed in this environment he had to come up with an innovative and outside of the box solution. The upside

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<sup>21</sup> [www.icoph.org/ophthalmologists-worldwide.html](http://www.icoph.org/ophthalmologists-worldwide.html)

<sup>22</sup> [www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/93/6/BLT-14-143149-table-T1.html](http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/93/6/BLT-14-143149-table-T1.html)

<sup>23</sup> They trained over 2500 nurses in the vision protocol, at least 4 nurses (of typical 10) per health center

<sup>24</sup> Clearly, Section 265.

<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Section 648.

was that if he succeeded this could be considered as a thoroughly tested solution since many of the underdeveloped countries are expected to have similar ground realities.

### **Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Local Reform Save the Day**

James Chen credits his entry into the eye-care field to his love for innovation and a chance encounter with a visionary from Oxford University named Professor Josh Silver (Chen, 2017, p. 252). Professor Silver came up with the idea of a fluid-filled adjustable lens that can be easily operated. In underdeveloped countries it is often difficult for people to make follow-up visits with ophthalmologists. This particular design allows patients to adjust the lens on their own with little or no training. Excited by this innovative solution to a worldwide problem, Chen began to consider how this product could be delivered to and within developing countries. He saw great potential in this innovation, so much so that he decided to invest in the invention and form a company called AdLens<sup>26</sup> to produce glasses with fluid-filled adjustable lenses.

Chen also formed a non-profit arm to sell their products at an affordable price point to the poor communities and populations. By 2007, he oversaw the production of adjustable lenses, and, further, strategically attempted to draw the attention of funding organizations such as the World Bank as well as other eyecare charities. Chen was surprised and frustrated by the lack of interest from these organizations. Out of frustration, he registered a UK-based charity called Vision for a Nation<sup>27</sup> to serve the underserved communities and nations that are so in need of visual aids. As Chen states,

My one journey on vision at this point became two parallel journeys for me: one the development of the adjustable power lens technology as a for-profit (sustainable) enterprise

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<sup>26</sup> [www.adlens.com/](http://www.adlens.com/)

<sup>27</sup> [visionforanation.org/](http://visionforanation.org/)

and the other a not-for-profit charitable enterprise focused on finding answers to the issue of access to vision correction in unserved or underserved communities. (2017, p. 1642)

In 2010, with the support of Dr. Agnes Binagwaho, Minister of Health and an internal government champion for VFAN's proposed program, Rwanda's government passed a reform that would allow nurses serving at the nation's 502 healthcare centers to provide basic eye care screenings amongst other supportive measures. This came as a saving grace since it is considerably more practical to train 2500 nurses who can provide basic eye care screening than to depend on 7 local ophthalmologists or to recruit ophthalmologists from overseas to come as temporary volunteers. VFAN Rwanda program was able to form a timely partnership with the Rwandan Government to pilot the program. Under this partnership VFAN was given full access to the government run healthcare centers and the nursing staff. They were also given access to government's distribution channels so that they can reach the remotest patients. Chen wanted to use this opportunity to establish a sustainable model<sup>28</sup> able to reach bottom of the pyramid patients for other countries. With that goal in mind he came up with the following action plan for the pilot program:

1. Work within the Department of Health to leverage the network of 502 service centers and their distribution network.
2. Develop a standard training program to train 2500 nurses on basic eye-care screening. They will have the ability prescribe and sell low cost reading glasses and highly subsidized adjustable lenses. They will make referrals for complex cases.
3. integrate the vision screening protocol into curriculum to the nursing schools

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<sup>28</sup> The VFAN Rwanda model is not a self-sustaining business model but is sustainable within the health service after the initial scaling up of training the 2500+ nurses, embedding training protocol in curriculum of all nursing schools and building community awareness and benefit by taking the screening and glasses to all 15,000 villages in Rwanda. Revenues from sale of glasses went into a MOH fund to pay for costs of treating serious eye diseases

4. Create awareness about the service by sending nurses to do screenings and sell glasses in all 15000 villages<sup>29</sup>.
5. Generate revenue from the reading glass sales to achieve sustainability.

As part of the business model, Chen secured an extremely low-cost supply of reading glasses from China to sell for a profit. The price of adjustable lenses was set at \$1.50 which was equivalent to 5 days of disposable income for an average Rwandan (Chen, 2017, Section, 1648). People belonging to the lowest 20% income range in the country received free glasses. To kick-off the initiative, Chen provided £1.5m funding followed by £3m by the end of 2017. As the pilot program started to gain popularity on the ground and locals started to reap the benefits of free or low-cost glasses, Chen was able to secure the following additional funding over 4 years period (Chen, 2017, Section, 1690):

- \$330,000 from the UK's Department for International Development
- \$400,000 from USAID
- \$1,400,000 from UBS Optimus
- nearly \$550,000 from other private donors

During the early years Chen was frustrated by the lack of interest from well-known institutions to fund the initiative due to 3 primary reasons. 1) vision issue is not considered life threatening, 2) organizations like to support initiatives with proven impact and 3) lack of research available on the impact of poor vision. In Chen's view lack of funding led to no research interest and no research interest meant no funding. He described this as the vicious cycle<sup>30</sup>. Chen continued his quest for

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<sup>29</sup> Utilizing community health workers and radio campaign was an initial idea to drive traffic to health centers for eye screenings, but it failed to drive enough understanding and motivation for those in need to walk up to 5 kilometers to Health Centre for eye screening, so they sent the nurses to every village which worked well.

<sup>30</sup> Clearly, 1683.

funding nonetheless. Once he was able to get the operation up and running and demonstrated success, institutional donors started to show interest and it eventually led to securing the above mentioned funding. However, in Chen's view family philanthropic high-risk capital allowed VFAN the opportunity to test new ideas, learn from failures and successes to improve the hypothesis and model in order to ultimately develop the successful formula. By 2015 VFAN was fully integrated within the government healthcare system. Until then Chen had continued to fund the initiative and solicit support for institutional donors. Chen's goal was to end direct involvement of VFAN by 2017 and have the Rwandan government take complete charge of the program.

## **The Outcome**

“Rwanda is leading the way in Africa by providing all its people with affordable eye care. This has been made possible by the great collaboration between the Government of Rwanda and Vision for a Nation, and an innovative approach to integrate local eye care services into our health system. The impact of this initiative has been enormous.”<sup>31</sup> –

Diane Gashumba, Former Minister of Health, Rwanda

For James Chen, Vision for a Nation in Rwanda initiative is a good example of how to use innovation, entrepreneurship and high-risk family philanthropic capital to tackle a pressing social issue. It is also a great example of what is possible if there is public-private collaboration and joint ventures. Following summarizes the success of the Vision for a Nation Rwanda program:

In just five years, the ministry and VFAN have completed the development, implementation and integration of a nationwide primary eye-care programme, the first of its kind in the world. By March 2017, they had trained over 2,500 nurses nationwide working at all 502 centres, four in each. By the end of July 2017, they had provided over 2 million screenings, dispensed over 1 million eye drops for common problems such as conjunctivitis, dispensed 50,000 glasses – primarily simple and inexpensive reading glasses – and referred more than 200,000 patients for specialist treatment, often vision-saving surgeries.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <https://visionforanation.org/our-work/rwanda/>

<sup>32</sup> Clearly, 1696.



By January 2018 the Rwandan government took full responsibility and began to finance and manage all aspects of this program as part of their nationwide eye primary-care initiative.<sup>33</sup> Vision for a Nation Rwanda has been recognized for its success and also received multiple awards such as The UK Charity Awards (2016) and The Bond International Development Awards (2018) for applying innovative approaches to solve a pressing social issue. Despite these strides, the overall inaction from the governments and global organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization to raise awareness about vision impairment has been disappointing (Chen, 2017).

As a high-risk taking philanthropic investor and now subject matter expert on poor vision issues, Chen has dedicated years of his life and resources to proving a sustainable primary eye care model for low resource countries to solve the vision impairment issue globally. It is now time for other organizations and governments to take this model and implement it globally at scale. Chen's "pioneering model provides a template for other nations to rapidly address this global public health and productivity issue"<sup>34</sup>. VFAN has been working with London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Foundation Ophthalmologique Adolphe de Rothschild, France in order to assess the impact and effectiveness of the program. This would create further research interest leading to funding opportunities. The results of such research would provide crucial evidence that will inform the impact potential of vision correction to other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with the hope that many nations on these continents would be interested in replicating VFAN's successful approach in Rwanda.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <https://visionforanation.org/our-work/rwanda/>

<sup>34</sup> Clearly, 1758

<sup>35</sup> Clearly, 1758

## Entering the Advocacy Phase

Many well-known not-for-profit organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have been focusing on fighting hunger, infectious diseases, vaccination, preventing child mortality and literacy to name a few. As a result of their close alignment with the UN's SDGs they have been able to form partnerships with global organizations and leverage already established and well-functioning channels to carry out their work. This close alignment also allows them to highlight their accomplishments on the global stage. Chen believes that unlike many of the world's pressing problems riven with complexity and lacking viable solutions, the solution to uncorrected poor vision is known and relatively easy and cost effective to solve. Yet there is very little or no efforts to elevate the level of awareness about solving the uncorrected poor vision problem and its impact on achieving the SDG's to policymakers in the international community.

Chen is bewildered that many of the organizations that support childhood literacy will not support initiatives intended to address childhood vision impairment. His question remains a clarion call to action "How can we expect people to learn if they cannot even see properly?" Many global organizations tend to focus on efforts to prevent death. It is possible that since vision impairment does not cause death, it has not received as much attention as it should<sup>36</sup>. Irrespective of the fact that it does not cause death the human cost in terms of quality of life and also the loss of productivity resulting from vision impairment is undeniable. Chen is of the opinion that global issues such as vision impairment require global campaigns and initiatives. He believes that the key is to capture the attention of the world leaders, many of whom wear glasses, so that this

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<sup>36</sup> Clearly, 1683

issue is no longer ignored. In an effort to mobilize a global campaign to raise awareness and enable access to eye care globally James launched Clearly<sup>37</sup> in 2016. As Chen explains,

[M]y experience of funding and leading Vision for a Nation in Rwanda – encouraging though that was – taught me that if we are to tackle this issue at the global level, we need a global campaign to keep the pressure on the international community and ensure that this issue can no longer be forgotten. So, in the years ahead, expect to hear from me and the Clearly campaign as we try to raise the profile of poor vision. (Chen, 2017, p. 2695)

In 2016 Chen also initiated Clearly Vision Prize<sup>38</sup> initiative in order to stimulate best ideas from around the world to address the vision problem. As part of this initiative \$250,000 prize money is given out to encourage innovative solutions to this problem<sup>39</sup>. The program attracted over 100 serious submissions from dozens of countries around the world. In 2018 Chen utilized the Commonwealth Summit in London, that brought together heads of state from 53 countries, to initiate conversations among those leaders and encourage them to commit to addressing the vision impairment issues in their respective countries. He described the outcome of the advocacy efforts during the Commonwealth Summit as following:

Following the leadership of these Commonwealth nations, I'm pleased to say that the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is the first global gathering to put 'vision for everyone' on the agenda – and onto the global stage. In the last year, leading politicians from across the political divides in the UK, including former Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Sir John Major, have got behind our cause – for example highlighting the opportunity to address this vital issue at the Heads of Government meeting.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly initiated the “Friends of Vision at the UN” group as Chen strongly believes that in order to make significant progress international organizations must be targeted first and secure commitments from them to prioritize the uncorrected poor vision issue. The good

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<sup>37</sup> <https://clearly.world/our-mission/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://clearly.world/news/winners-clearly-vision-prize/>

<sup>39</sup> The top 3 received largest prizes and, at least 15 initiatives were awarded prize money.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/the-commonwealth-has-put-vision-for-everyone-on-the-worlds-agenda-now-we-must-act>

news is that the urgency of the poor vision issue appears to be gaining momentum. Recently the World Health Organization working with the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness<sup>41</sup> developed and launched The World Report on Vision. It has also declared the second Thursday of every October to be the World Sight Day which is intended to draw attention to the vision problems. The WHO intends to shape the global agenda on vision by raising awareness about vision impairment.<sup>42</sup>

Further, Clearly sponsored a random controlled trial PROSPER (PROductivity Study of Presbyopia Elimination in Rural-dwellers)<sup>43</sup> of 750 mostly female tea pickers in Assam, India. It explored the link between clear vision and productivity for the first time. The study highlighted the transformative impact of glasses on the productivity of manual workers demonstrating their role as a vital tool for global development. The study revealed that reading glasses provide, on average, a 21.7% boost to productivity for over-40s, rising to 31.6% for over-50s. If glasses were given to everyone who needed them in India's entire crops sector, it would mean an extra \$20 billion from productivity gains alone. The effect on productivity is larger than that shown by any other health intervention.

If organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization take an active role in raising awareness and fighting vision impairment, James Chen's goal of making "sure that everyone, no matter where they are in the world, can get a sight test and

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.iapb.org>

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.who.int/blindness/world\\_sight\\_day/en/](https://www.who.int/blindness/world_sight_day/en/)

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.visionmonday.com/latest-news/article/new-prosper-study-published-this-week-affirms-eyeglasses-boost-to-worker-productivity/>

an affordable pair of glasses”<sup>44</sup> could one day in near future become a reality. The legacy of the Chen family’s philanthropy is a beacon of hope, a true vision into the future.

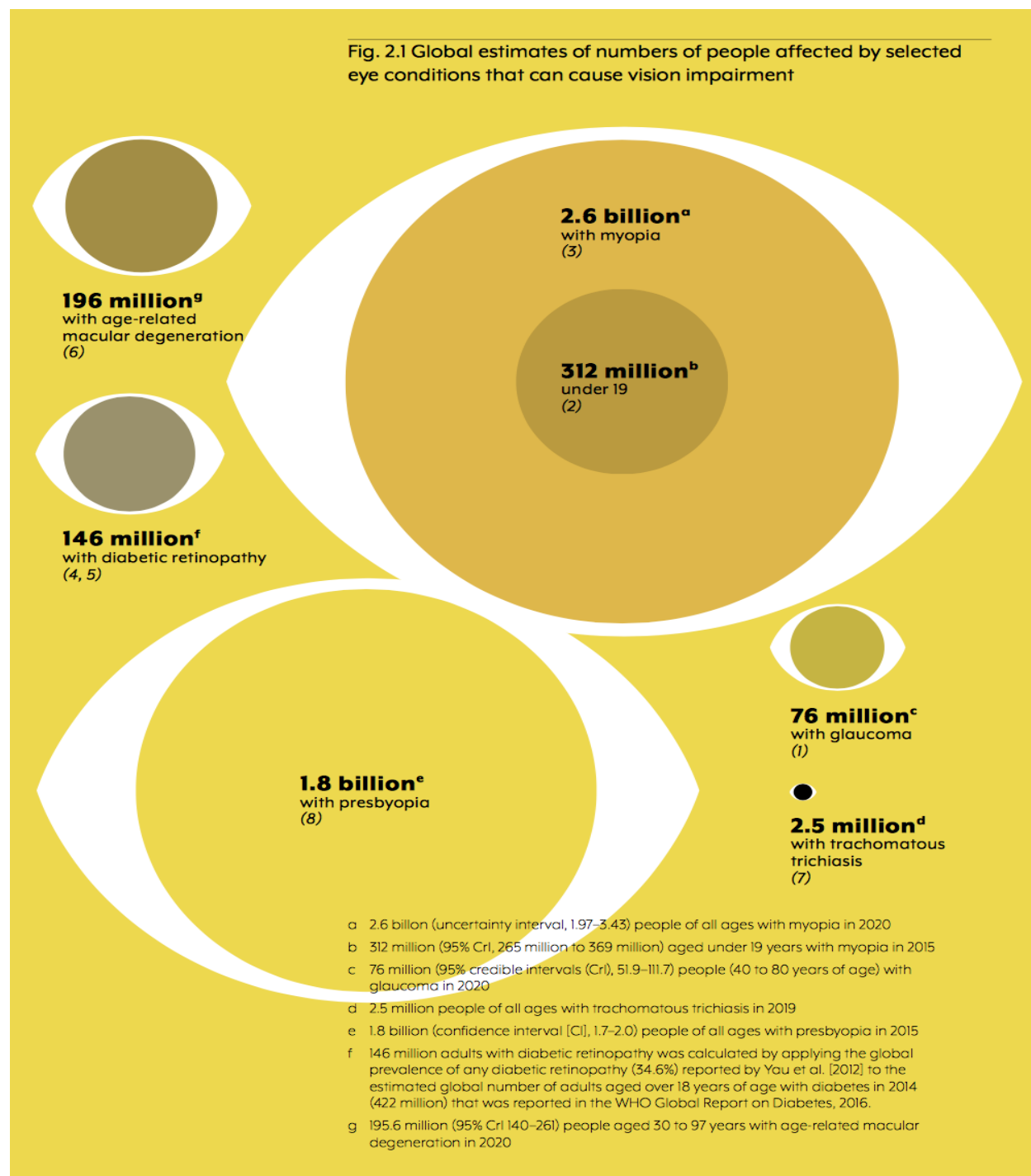
Most high net worth donors engage in providing passive charitable donations or patronage. For activist Philanthropists, they start with a passion and a hypothesis to improve their community or even the world and apply their business skills to social returns rather than make a profit. But to build upon their hypothesis towards success, a risk-taking mindset must exist to test the hypothesis and build up domain expertise through experimentation, failure and success. Impactful philanthropy requires a disruptive mindset, innovative thinking, a philosophy driven by entrepreneurial insights and creative opportunities. In addition, it is about willingness to deploy risk capital with appetite to endure not only financial loss but potential reputational damage. As we have seen, James Chen, in order to disrupt the status quo, drives philanthropy at tremendous scale, and develops long-term economic vitality through giving. He applies the same models for success in his philanthropic endeavors as he does in his business. In short, philanthropy requires disruption. Chen’s disruptive mindset hinges on a practice of Entrepreneurial Philanthropy, which is designed to support innovation that creates sustainable, thriving economies in communities with tremendous need.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://clearly.world/our-mission/>

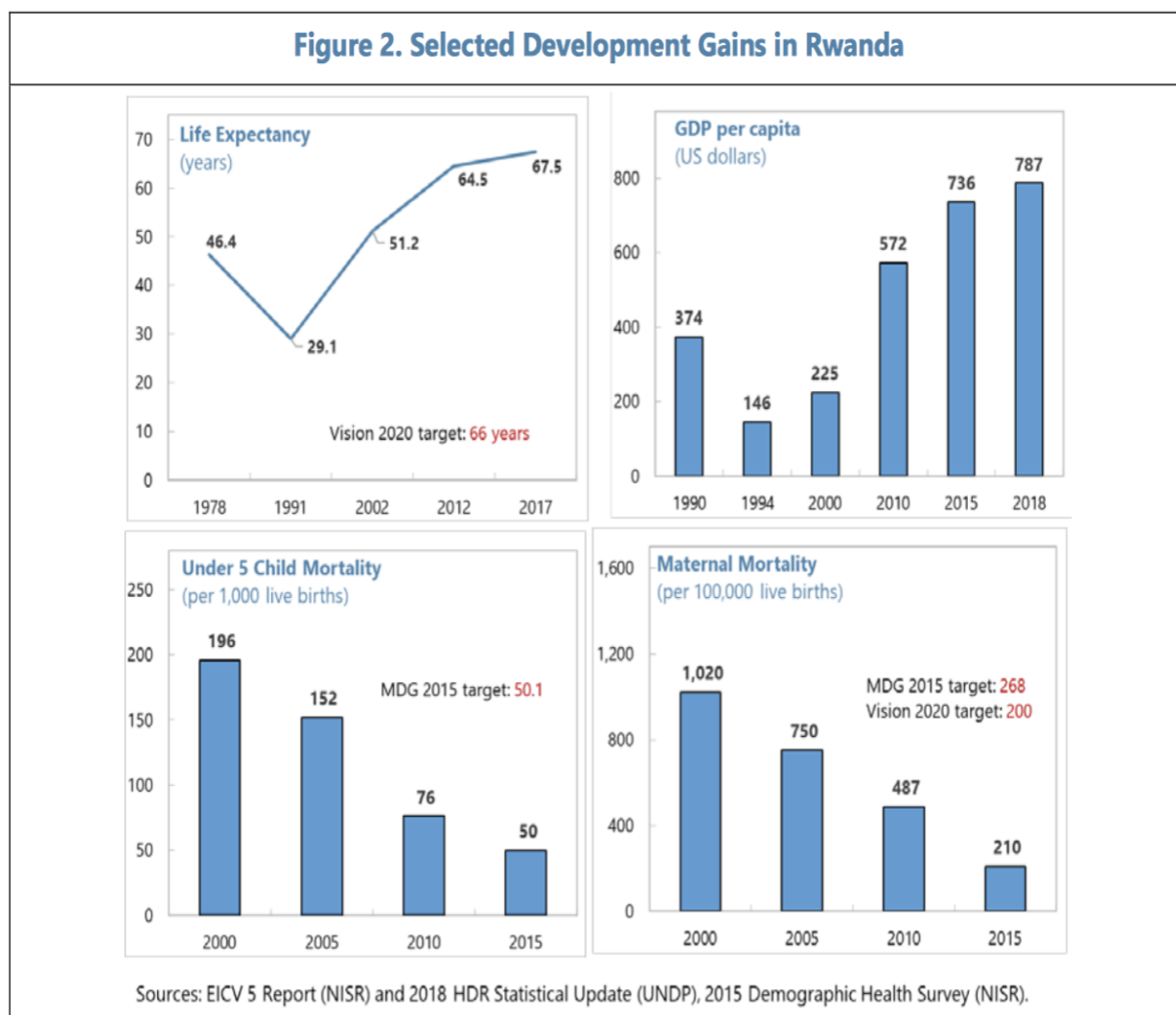
## Appendix A

Fig. 2.1 Global estimates of numbers of people affected by selected eye conditions that can cause vision impairment



<https://visioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WHO-World-Report-on-Vision-2019.pdf>

## **Appendix B:**



<https://www.compactwithafrica.org/content/dam/Compact%20with%20Africa/Countries/Rwanda/1RWAEA2019001.pdf>

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