



Seeing the Light

The Alliance to Fight Avoidable Blindness
Islamic Development Bank



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
AIDA
Arabia/Asia International Development Agency



مؤسسة البصر الخيرية العالمية
NADI AL BASSAR INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION
لعيون تُبصرُ الأمل



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Our alliance against avoidable blindness is restoring sight and enhancing life for tens of thousands of men, women and children in sub-Saharan Africa...

Dr Ahmad Mohamed Ali, President, IDB



Wèdaogo Habibu is a pastor at a church in the Burkina Faso capital, Ouagadougou. His wife Taita had double cataracts; one eye was operated on in 2010 and the other two years later. Now she can care properly for their son, Ezekias.

The Islamic Development Bank and a new Alliance

Imagine not being able to look into the eyes of your family, not being able to spot danger, not being able to find your way around, *not being able to see*. How do you cope with daily life, especially in old age? Who will take care of you? Work, study and much of what there is to enjoy in life fades as your world darkens. Literally.

This is reality for some 40 million blind people among nearly 300 million worldwide who are visually impaired, the overwhelming majority in low- and middle-income countries that cannot offer anything like adequate treatment. In most of these countries, blind people rely on family members to help them negotiate city traffic or country roads, avoid open cooking-fires, and tackle other hazards. Children are kept out of school to guide parents or grandparents, one blindness marring two lives.

Globally, up to 80 per cent of visual impairment and blindness is treatable. Many eye conditions, especially the watery clouding of the lenses in the eyes known as cataract, are reversible with surgery. About half the blindness in the world is due to cataract, and it can be cured through a simple surgical procedure lasting a mere 15 minutes. But in Africa, due to the cost and a shortage of ophthalmologists, only few people who need it can afford the treatment and recover their sight. This is where the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) found inspiration for a new alliance.

Half of all blindness is due to cataract, curable through simple surgery lasting 15 minutes



The Alliance goes well beyond eye surgery – it is truly inspiring

The first steps

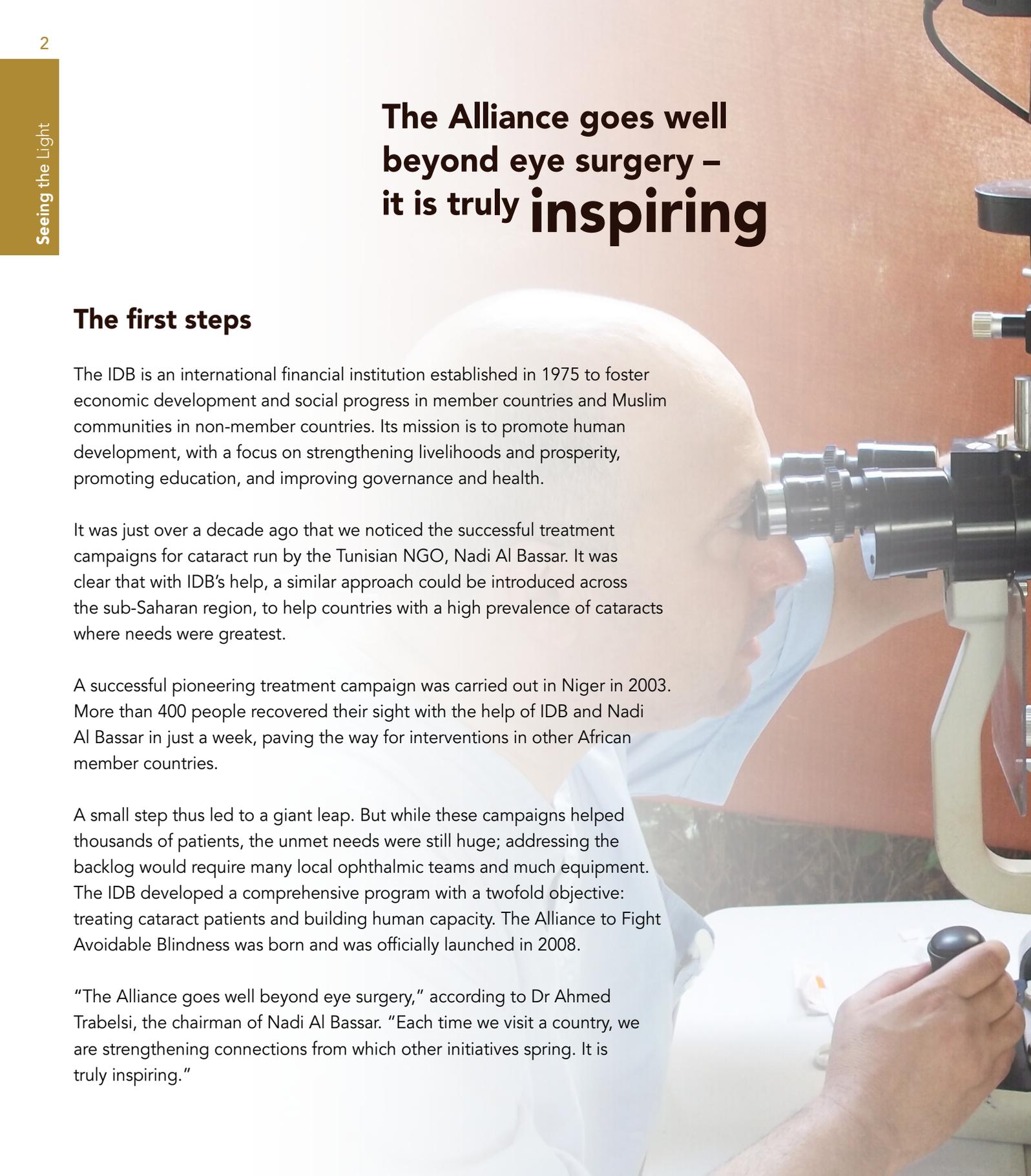
The IDB is an international financial institution established in 1975 to foster economic development and social progress in member countries and Muslim communities in non-member countries. Its mission is to promote human development, with a focus on strengthening livelihoods and prosperity, promoting education, and improving governance and health.

It was just over a decade ago that we noticed the successful treatment campaigns for cataract run by the Tunisian NGO, Nadi Al Bassar. It was clear that with IDB's help, a similar approach could be introduced across the sub-Saharan region, to help countries with a high prevalence of cataracts where needs were greatest.

A successful pioneering treatment campaign was carried out in Niger in 2003. More than 400 people recovered their sight with the help of IDB and Nadi Al Bassar in just a week, paving the way for interventions in other African member countries.

A small step thus led to a giant leap. But while these campaigns helped thousands of patients, the unmet needs were still huge; addressing the backlog would require many local ophthalmic teams and much equipment. The IDB developed a comprehensive program with a twofold objective: treating cataract patients and building human capacity. The Alliance to Fight Avoidable Blindness was born and was officially launched in 2008.

"The Alliance goes well beyond eye surgery," according to Dr Ahmed Trabelsi, the chairman of Nadi Al Bassar. "Each time we visit a country, we are strengthening connections from which other initiatives spring. It is truly inspiring."



A 'South-South' partnership

Partnership is at the core of the Alliance, which weaves a network of international and local expertise to provide sustainable solutions for the treatment of avoidable blindness. But ours is a partnership with a difference: it builds relationships between countries *in the South* that stretch beyond ophthalmology – and these connections will continue to bear fruit for many years to come.

It also includes financial partners like (in alphabetical order) the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, the Azerbaijan International Development Agency, the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation with Africa, and the OPEC Fund for International Development.

The Alliance brings together health ministries' programs for the control of blindness, NGOs, training centers, donor institutions and volunteers. Its primary aim is to reduce the prevalence of cataract and improve access to eye care in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Guinea, Mali and Niger.

This South–South cooperation, a unique aspect of the IDB and thus of the Alliance, promotes the exchange of resources, knowledge and technology among member countries. It embodies a sense of solidarity that is now the lifeblood of the Alliance.

The Alliance model is also founded on volunteerism as well as teamwork and collaboration among stakeholders. Its strong partnership approach encourages skill and knowledge sharing, while taking into account the needs and priorities of the beneficiary countries and their people. Says Dr Lamia Fekih, also of Nadi Al Bassar: "Volunteering for these campaigns is a huge sacrifice: we leave behind our regular patients, students and families. But it is so satisfying. Truly, it becomes addictive!"

Each partner brings unique expertise. NGOs send volunteer doctors who work under very basic conditions in hospitals, but are deeply committed to both their patients and local eye-specialists; donor institutions including IDB provide funding; health ministries build on existing knowledge of their countries' needs and priorities to make their own commitments in terms of human resources and facilities; IDB also coordinates and monitors. This is teamwork that can light up lives.

So far, the Alliance has conducted more than 40,000 **sight-restoring** cataract operations on men, women and children

Restoring sight

So far, the Alliance has conducted more than 200,000 eye examinations and 40,000 sight-restoring cataract operations on men, women and children. In a single week, nearly 500 patients might be examined and operated on in an Alliance campaign. To put this in perspective, hospitals in member countries would only be equipped to treat about 10 cataract cases a week.

The Alliance's work prioritizes patients with double cataracts and tries to reach the most vulnerable people. It concentrates increasingly on rural areas, using mobile teams to bring cataract surgery to the people who need it most – a strategy that avoids the cost and risks they would face by travelling to the city.

"Now we can help those who need us the most," says Dr Boubacar Kadri, deputy director of the Programme National de Lutte Contre la Cécité in Niger. "The Alliance has taken into account our true priorities: the rural people who cannot afford to travel to the city."

Nadi Al Bassar's Dr Abdelkader Daoud adds: "If there is one thing that keeps drawing me back to the Alliance campaigns from family and work in Tunisia, it is the double-cataract

patients. I do these campaigns for all patients, but especially for them. It is incredible to be able to give someone their sight back!"

Each cataract treatment campaign has three phases. Public awareness is raised through announcements in local newspapers, on radio shows, and at local markets, mosques and churches, as well as by word of mouth, through town criers. Patients are then examined and undergo screening by health teams; cataract operations are performed by the visiting eye surgeons, working with the local ophthalmologists from the national blindness-control programs. Finally, patients get a post-operative examination by the visiting team, then two more check-ups by the local team about one week and one month later.

Mrs Bamba, 85, came in with her son, who translated for her and waited while she was treated. She had been completely blind for several years and used a heavy wooden staff to get around. Although she appeared thin and frail, she had a strong grip and a hearty laugh – she had no intention of fading into the darkness.



Issouf Ouedraogo

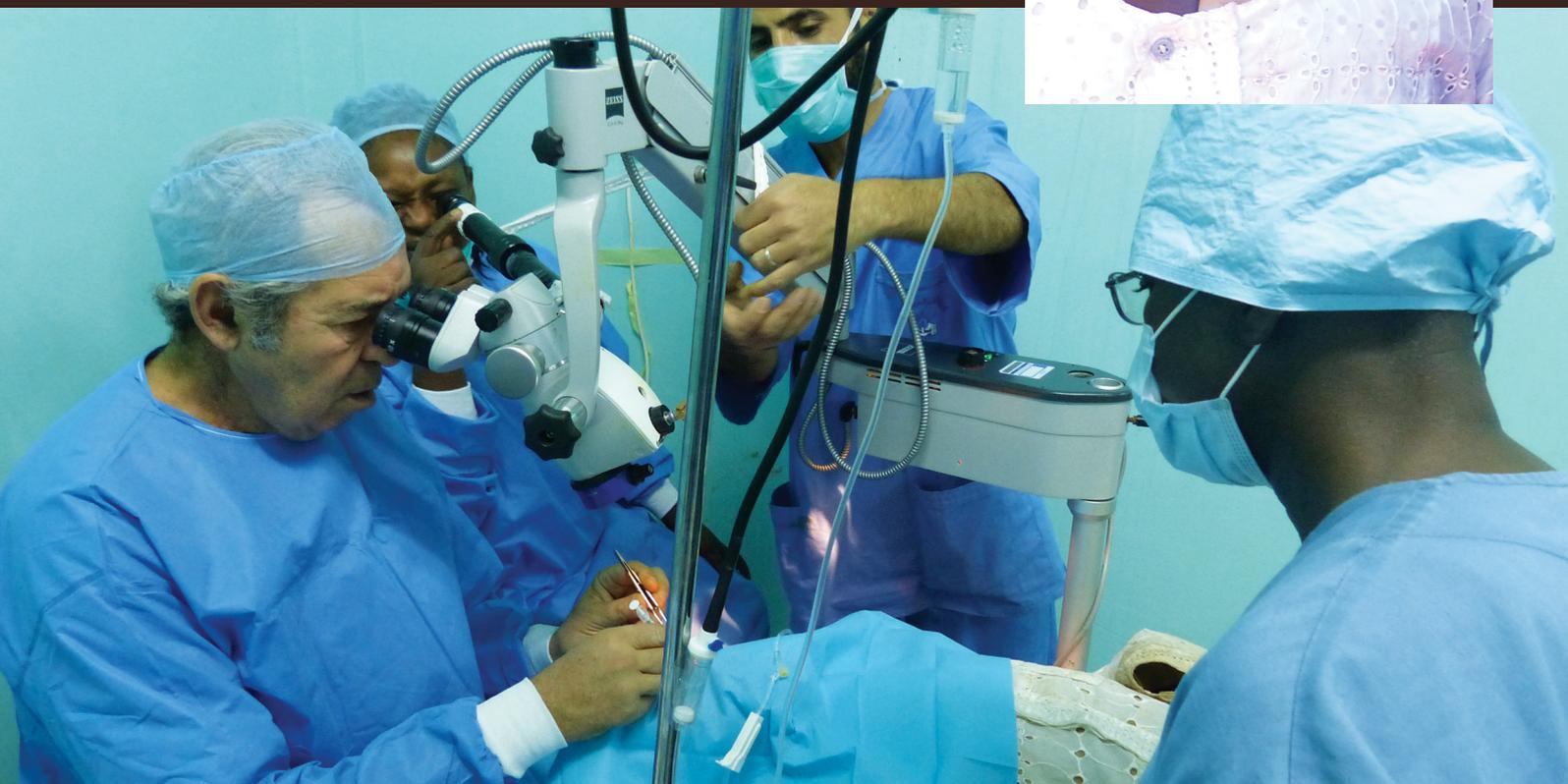
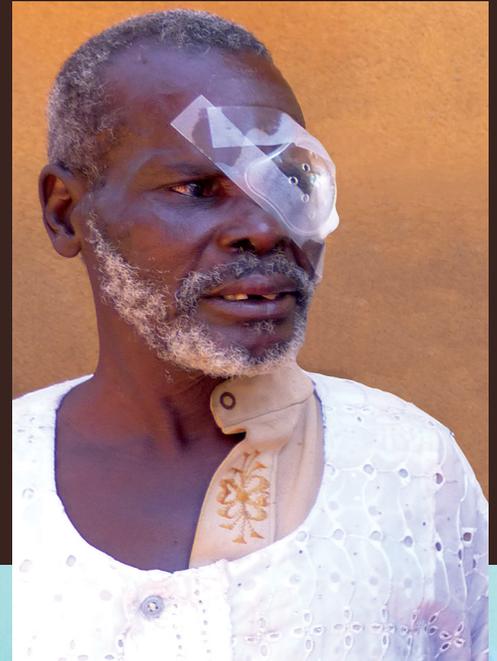
Issouf Ouedraogo stood at the edge of his field, testing the panicle of a millet stalk in his fingers. Decades of experience told him it should be ready to harvest, but he could only stand there with a heavy heart. Two years ago, his fading eyesight had finally left him in complete darkness. He had to hire others to work his fields. Worry about how to support his family consumed him.

His daughter Adia could never go far from his side, as he needed her to guide him by hand around the homestead. When she ran to him with the news about the free cataract treatment campaign, the 55-year-old farmer did not hesitate. "We are going to Ouagadougou," he said. When they heard these words, Ouedraogo's family could hope for a brighter future...

Issouf (pictured right, and below being operated on by an Alliance surgeon) waited patiently at the hospital, going through the various stages: the examination, eye drops to dilate his pupils, and local anaesthetic before the surgery. The cataract operation took less than 15 minutes for each eye. In two days, Issouf emerged from complete darkness into the light.

Suddenly, life was back to normal. He could walk through his fields on his own and see the quality of his crops. His daughter Adia was also free to focus more on her children and the household. Most importantly, Issouf could farm his own land and continue to support his family as he had always done.

**Now we can
help those**



who need us the most



Anastasia Sompoudou

When Agnes Sompoudou was nursing her three-month-old twins she noticed that something was not right with the girl: she did not react as her brother did. Agnes soon realized that little Anastasia (*pictured*) was blind, born with cataracts in both eyes. To keep her from harm, Agnes had to watch her every move. When Anastasia started walking, she used a small stick to navigate around the homestead. But she was vulnerable, highly prone to scrapes and bruises. And in the wider world lurked worse dangers. "What is her future?" her family wondered darkly.

Then they heard about an Alliance campaign at the regional hospital. Although it was far from their village, they prepared for the journey with new hope.

When Agnes and her family arrived early in the morning at the hospital in nearby Koudougou, they faced a long wait. Hundreds of people, mostly in their fifties but some younger, milled around the waiting area. But their journey paid off: Anastasia was examined and quickly had both cataracts operated on under general anaesthetic.

When they returned the next day to have the bandages removed, the anxious mother looked into her daughter's eyes and was overcome to see her little girl return her gaze for the first time.

Now four, Anastasia can run and play like her brother – and also retaliate when he teases her! She will go to school with him in a few years, and can look forward to a bright future. But for now, she proudly helps her mother prepare meals for the family.





The next generation of ophthalmology specialists

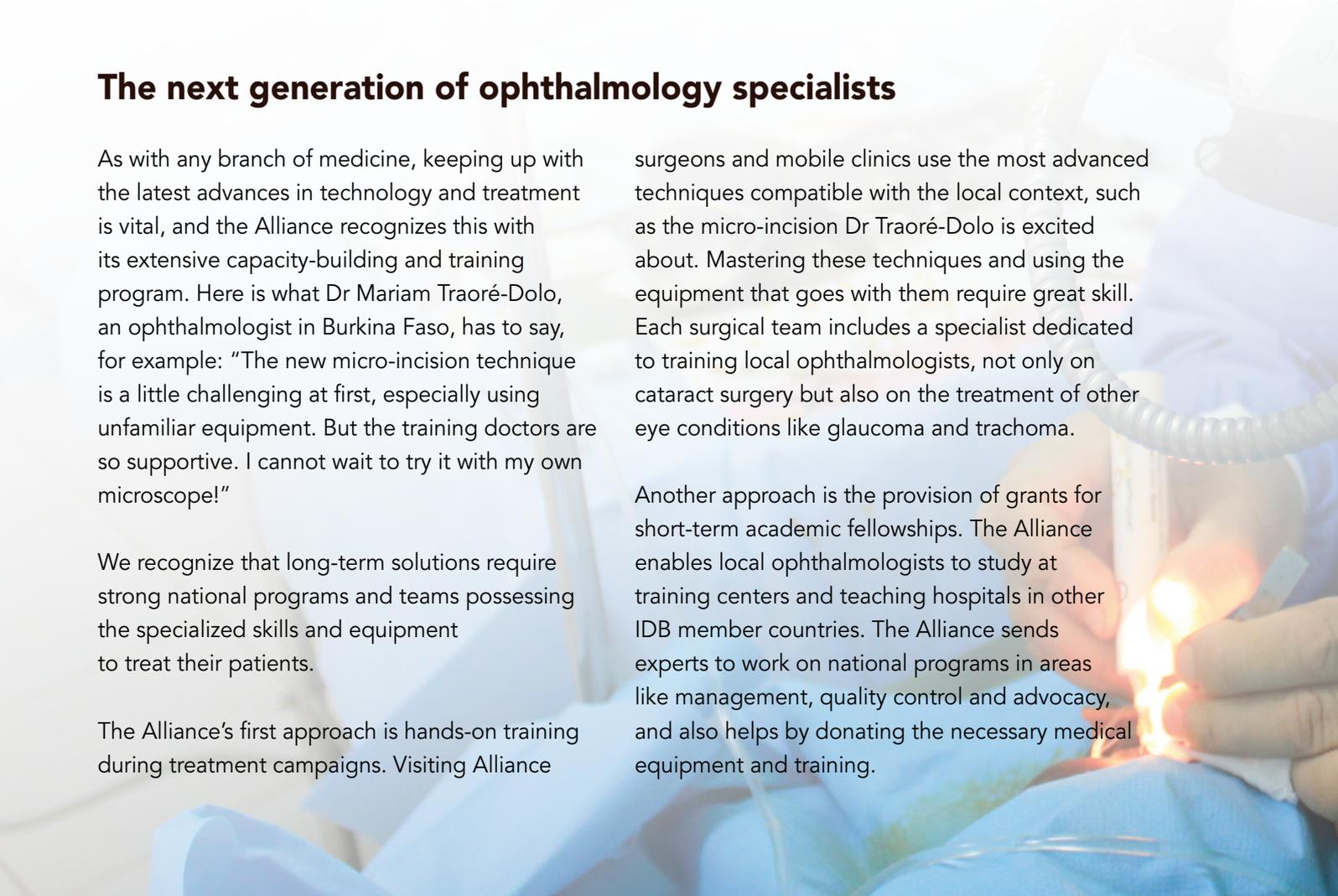
As with any branch of medicine, keeping up with the latest advances in technology and treatment is vital, and the Alliance recognizes this with its extensive capacity-building and training program. Here is what Dr Mariam Traoré-Dolo, an ophthalmologist in Burkina Faso, has to say, for example: “The new micro-incision technique is a little challenging at first, especially using unfamiliar equipment. But the training doctors are so supportive. I cannot wait to try it with my own microscope!”

We recognize that long-term solutions require strong national programs and teams possessing the specialized skills and equipment to treat their patients.

The Alliance’s first approach is hands-on training during treatment campaigns. Visiting Alliance

surgeons and mobile clinics use the most advanced techniques compatible with the local context, such as the micro-incision. Dr Traoré-Dolo is excited about. Mastering these techniques and using the equipment that goes with them require great skill. Each surgical team includes a specialist dedicated to training local ophthalmologists, not only on cataract surgery but also on the treatment of other eye conditions like glaucoma and trachoma.

Another approach is the provision of grants for short-term academic fellowships. The Alliance enables local ophthalmologists to study at training centers and teaching hospitals in other IDB member countries. The Alliance sends experts to work on national programs in areas like management, quality control and advocacy, and also helps by donating the necessary medical equipment and training.



The long-term goal? Member countries in a position to take ownership of the program...

Through these different approaches, the Alliance has trained more than 70 new specialists throughout its program area – technicians and administrative staff as well as doctors, helping local teams to be more effective all-round. According to Dr Sankara Paté, chief of ophthalmology at Koudougou Hospital: “Part of the capacity development aspect of the program is to ‘source’ people in the regions who need further training. In this way, the Alliance helps create relationships between urban and rural ophthalmology teams.”

The long-term goal? Member countries, in a position to take ownership of the program, mobilize their own eye specialist teams, and be standard-bearers for the ongoing fight against avoidable blindness.



Whether blindness strikes the very young, the elderly, or adults in their productive years, it robs people of the ability to work, study, play and interact with their peers, turning them into a burden on society. By restoring sight, the Alliance restores not only livelihoods and independence but also boosts confidence.

It is not just the lives of patients that are transformed, but also those of communities and families. Children, who had to guide blind family members, are freed to go back to school and play with their friends; parents can watch them grow up; other relatives can care for themselves and return to work or till their fields.



Frèjius Hema is an 11-year-old boy who was born with cataracts. He says he is a good student and likes studying. But when asked what he wanted to be, he admitted that his dream is to be “a football player”. Now that he’s been operated on, he stands a much better chance of realizing that dream.

Help us give the gift of sight...

Since its launch, the IDB's Alliance to Fight Avoidable Blindness has achieved spectacular results, but with help we could restore the sight of many more people. The Alliance's partners are happy to see that their support has given sight to thousands and helped them gain a new lease on life.

They are among the lucky ones; thousands of others still wait. But all that is needed to change this is additional support and funding to organize more eye-care campaigns, and equip and train local teams to continue our work for hundreds of thousands of others. Join the Alliance to Fight Avoidable Blindness. Help us give the gift of sight.

Our partners

- Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa
- Arab Medical Union (Egypt)
- Azerbaijan International Development Agency
- Basar International Foundation (Saudi Arabia)
- Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation with Africa
- Humanitarian Relief Foundation (Turkey)
- Institut d'Ophtalmologie Tropical de l'Afrique (Mali)
- Nadi Al Bassar (Tunisia)
- OPEC Fund for International Development

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