

When Marcus Swalwell returned to the UK in 2007 after a long and successful career with Novartis and CIBA Vision he was looking for something fulfilling, worthwhile and uplifting. He settled on the idea of getting involved with the optical charity Vision Aid Overseas (VAO). 'I know about optics and I know about Africa,' he says, so it seemed an ideal opportunity to apply his many years of experience to helping the charity increase its impact.

One of the things that attracted him to VAO, apart from the difference it makes to those in the developing world, is its approach. 'It's not just a cheque, it's people giving their time and offering to go and bash about in a Land Rover in difficult places and work like stink for two weeks. As soon as I saw VAO I thought, "I like this", so I became a trustee.' A little under a year later Swalwell has taken on the chairmanship of VAO and is helping to plan its future.

'I'm really proud to be the chairman of VAO in its 25th year of action. So far over one million people have received spectacles who would otherwise not be able to see and there are many more who are receiving spectacles because of the training given to others. We aim to expand that dramatically,' he says, pointing out that there are 670 million people worldwide without access to decent eye care.

VAO's legendary outreach projects offer the experience of a lifetime. 'The membership is our power base. If taking part in an outreach project provides someone in Croydon with the experience of a lifetime just think of the effect on the person they are dealing with,' he says.

Thinking bigger

Primarily known as an organisation that provides people-to-people help, VAO is rapidly changing its outlook. While it wants to maintain that human touch, it also knows that to make an impact on a problem of this magnitude it has to be more strategic and think bigger. Swalwell wants to see VAO moving much more into a consultative role with local agencies to build eye care services that offer ongoing access for patient.

To do this VAO has to make new contacts and engage optometrists and other optical professionals in the UK to help train those on the ground.



VAO's legendary outreach projects offer the experience of a lifetime

Power to engage

Vision Aid Overseas' chairman Marcus Swalwell says the optical charity is changing its focus to make more of a difference

Under the new model, outreach services will help support trainees, and UK professionals can help build a training regime to furnish those on the ground with the skills they need to care for their countrymen. Many more people can be helped by training optical nurses to perform tasks such as refraction and building optical labs to manufacture spectacles.

He hopes to engage a new group of volunteers with the training modules. 'I think this will put us in touch with a new group of people. There will always be the outreach services, but there's also the opportunity to be a teacher, that's amazing. Optometrists are good communicators.'

Business skills

As a former managing director of CIBA Vision UK and a successful manager with one of the world largest multinationals, Swalwell has business skills to bring to the charity. These include clarity and measurement of the key performance indicators that allow the charity to judge its performance objectively.

He says this includes metrics such as the number of people who benefit from VAO's services, the numbers screened and the numbers referred. Increasingly, those success criteria will include measures such as the numbers trained and the number of spectacles that

can be manufactured. This is already happening in Ethiopia, where a new Vision Centre has recently been built.

For those wishing to help VAO there are many ways to get involved, says Swalwell. 'Opticians can continue to volunteer for outreach projects or they can get involved in training. Another way of helping is by raising awareness and money in their own practice. They can get involved in recycling through the collection of spectacles and the recovery of materials. While the emphasis has moved away from reusing complete pairs, this activity builds great engagement and gets the patients involved.'

Then of course there is fundraising. 'Something that has definitely been upped by the new chief executive Natalie Briggs,' says Swalwell.

Raising money from companies is arguably trickier now than it has ever been but Swalwell believes he brings a real difference here. 'I understand how these companies work and what they need. By working with companies there are opportunities for us to use old products or get their people involved in outreach projects. I can find opportunities, that fulfil their needs, and help us. It's a very special organisation that goes out to Africa and makes a difference.'

● www.vao.org.uk