

Keeping the future in sight for young and old

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On a recent visit to Zambia I witnessed firsthand what the loss of sight could really mean for someone living in a developing country.

People lined up outside the building, filling the courtyard in small family groups, all patiently waiting for the first eye clinic to be held at Chikuni Mission Hospital.

I had travelled to Zambia eager to visit a programme where our work was only beginning. This would allow me to see what losing sight could really mean in rural Africa, where poor eye health is one of the most common health problems.

In the crowd waiting, a small, smiling face stood out. Dr Monze, the ophthalmologist heading up Sightsavers' Lusaka to Livingstone Eyecare Programme bent down to examine the little girl. "This is why eyecare services are so desperately needed here" he explained. Lweendo (age seven), had been playing with her friends when she felt something hit her eye. Her mother was breastfeeding a younger brother and there was no-one to take Lweendo for treatment for four days.

Without anyone trained in eyecare, all the local clinic could do was refer Lweendo to the local hospital and there again she sat for a week before being referred to the district hospital. There, Lweendo had her first piece of luck, she was examined by Nurse Rita Duuka, who has been trained in eyecare as part of the Sightsavers' project.

Zambia fact file



Population:

12.62 million (Ireland 4.04 million)

Land area:

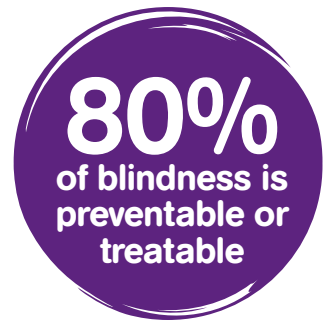
752,610 sq km (Ireland: 70,270 sq Km)

Under-5 mortality:

192 per 1,000 (Ireland: 6 per 1,000)

Life expectancy:

43 years (Ireland: 77 years)



Lweendo waits patiently with her aunt Maina

Dr Monze examining Lweendo's eye



Tom McDonnell/Sightsavers

90%
of children
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visually impaired do
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“If her eye had to be removed, this beautiful little girl’s face would not grow properly and her life would be changed forever”.

girl’s face would not grow properly and her life would be changed forever. “It has been nearly two weeks and I won’t be able to save her sight but I will do everything I can to save her eye”, he promised.



Lweendo after her operation

The next day I flew home to Dublin and waited anxiously for news of Lweendo. Two weeks later an email from Dr Monze arrived with a picture of Lweendo. Not only had her eye been saved, the impossible had happened - she had regained some of her sight. Lwendo’s story will stay with me forever as an example of how poor access to vital eye care facilities can cause needless sight loss. A devastating reality for a seven year old child and her family.

Lweendo was finally getting the treatment she needed, but the news was not good. Dr Monze explained that after such an injury the eye is normally completely removed if left untreated for more than three days. If her eye had to be removed, this beautiful little

Noria Moonga is a 78-year-old grandmother with cataract who travelled over 400 miles to Lusaka to get treatment. As a widow seeing only shadows made things very difficult for Noria as she was unable to farm her small piece of



Tom McDonnell/Sightsavers

“Sometimes I cut the crops instead of the weeds. When I get my sight back I will also be able to look for other means of support for my family” Noria Moonga

Noria with her family



Tom McDonnell/Sightsavers

land to survive. Yet, for her there was a much bigger problem than not being able to support herself. She explained that three of her daughters and their husbands had died of AIDS, leaving her as the sole carer to 15 grandchildren. Only five grandchildren were in school, two in primary and three in secondary. She could not afford to send the others to school as she is the only breadwinner in the family.

“I will be very happy to be able to see again because when I get my sight back I will also be able to look for other means of support for my family” she explains.

Seeing Noria’s smile as she saw clearly again after her surgery I couldn’t help but think of her 15 grandchildren, all of whose lives will be affected so directly by this one cataract surgery.

Saving someone’s sight in Africa can not only change someone’s life, it can also save the future of a whole family. ■

For further information on our work in Zambia please visit www.sightsavers.ie

The real cost of loss of sight in Africa

- In Zambia, eye infections are the fifth most common reason for people to visit healthcare facilities.
- Numerous studies have shown that people who are visually impaired are more likely to be poor, unemployed, and excluded from education, healthcare and social networks.
- The World Health Organisation estimates that in Africa, no more than 30 per cent of those in need have access to eye health services, and in many countries, the figure is far lower.
- 80 per cent of blindness is preventable or treatable.
- 90 per cent of children who are blind or visually impaired do not get the chance to go to school.
- According to the World Bank, 20 per cent of the world’s poorest people have a disability.