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*Since 2003 Panalpina and the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) have been working together to combat poverty-induced blindness in Ghana. Thousands of people have already been cured of eye disease and saved from blindness. However, the need is great and the fight goes on.*

# “Vision First” – Working together against poverty and disease

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“Vision First” is the name of an aid programme initiated by the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) in Ghana. The objective is to reduce poverty-induced blindness, which is very common in the poorest regions of the world. Those affected are offered practical assistance locally in the form of prevention, education, the treatment of eye disease and the provision of training for opticians and ophthalmologists.

To make all this possible, adequate financial resources are required as well as a clear plan of action. “Vision First” is financed by contributions from a number of different partners. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) provides 40 percent of the programme’s budget, another 31 percent is supplied by the SRC campaign “Altgold für Augenlicht” (“Old gold for eyesight”, which raises money for eye care by collecting unwanted jewellery), 22 percent comes from Panalpina’s sponsorship programme and 7 percent is covered by general donations.

## Impressive results

“Since we began working with Panalpina we have been able to achieve a great deal and make a huge difference to the quality of life of thousands of people in Ghana,” explains Josef Kasper, Programme Coordinator at the SRC. In actual figures, this means that over 320,000 patients were treated in the community and cured of eye problems between 2003 and 2005. In addition, over 5800 operations were carried out in regional and district hospitals, mainly to remove cataracts. This condition, which causes clouding of the lens of the eye, is particularly common in older people: untreated, it leads to blindness. “A simple operation can give these patients their sight back – for only 50 Swiss francs per eye,” says Josef Kasper.

Much has already been achieved in the areas of prevention and protection from disease. “We found a doctor who was prepared to undertake specialist training in ophthalmology. He is now working for us,” adds the SRC Programme Coordinator. In addition, four ophthalmic nurses

and an optometrist have been trained, and the SRC worked jointly with the Ghanaian Ministry of Health – one of its major partners – to set up a training centre for optical technicians. This centre trains 15 people a year, who then go on to assist with projects or find jobs in the private sector. More than 1500 volunteers have also been trained in their own villages with the assistance of the local Red Cross organization – another important partner.

### Volunteers are vital

The “Vision First” programme could not exist without the help of the numerous volunteers, who carry out a wide range of useful tasks. They are responsible for identifying people with eye problems and informing them about the possible treatments. If someone is unable to get to the eye clinic by themselves, their helper will take them by bicycle or accompany them on the bus and support them while they recover from the treatment. Through this work, the volunteers act as links between the rural population and the trained specialists in the hospitals and health centres. There is a perfectly straightforward answer to the question of what motivates people to do this invaluable, unpaid work: they do it out of love and concern for the people in their village.

This concern for others is essential to the future of the programme, as there are plans to expand it to two further

## Joint campaign against poverty-induced blindness



Every five seconds someone in the world loses their eyesight, and a child goes blind every minute. About 40 million people are affected worldwide. Almost half of all cases of blindness are caused by cataracts. Most of the victims live in Africa or Asia, and lose their sight because of poverty and lack of medical care. The Swiss Red Cross (SRC) works to prevent, treat and cure poverty-induced blindness. Panalpina has been supporting this aid programme for the past five years.

For further information please visit: [www.redcross.ch](http://www.redcross.ch)

districts in the northeast of the country. And since an eye care programme was also started in the heart of neighbouring country Togo in 2003, there's no risk of the SRC

**“Panalpina’s financial support helped us to succeed.”**

*Josef Kasper*

Project Coordinator getting bored. “The success of our work is partly thanks to the financial support we receive from Panalpina,” says Josef Kasper, who is looking forward to many more rewarding experiences with “Vision First”. 🐶



Poverty-induced blindness is also widespread among children. In a bid to identify vision problems at an early stage, the programme is reaching out to 300 teachers in Ghana to make them aware of the issue and encourage them to cooperate with local eye care workers



SRC project manager Josef Kasper tells reporter Astrid Steiner about the major successes that have been scored with Panalpina’s support