

The EyeMitra Optician Programme: Vision for Livelihood through Vision Care

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Jahid Ali is from the village of Kehriyan Jawahar near Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh. Till last year, like many of his peers, he was an unemployed 25 year old. It was a typical case where education could not sustain his interest and with unpredictable rainfall, agriculture did not secure a livelihood. Yet, like his elder brother, he became one of the many disguised employed on the family's already overburdened small agricultural land. In the hopes of finding alternative employment, he travelled to the city but the living conditions of his friends with 'city' jobs dispirited him.

*In a chance encounter, Jahid bumped into Usman – an ex classmate, who introduced him to the EyeMitra¹ (EM) Optician Programme. **EyeMitra Opticians, as the name suggests, are friendly neighbourhood opticians trained to create awareness on vision impairment and equipped to manage independent optical stores within their communities.** Usman had completed the EM Optician Course in Rampur and had a flourishing shop about 10 kilometres away. Impressed and inspired by Usman's profession, particularly the respect enjoyed by him in his village, Jahid enrolled for the programme.*

Jahid is a certified EyeMitra Optician since August 2014 and has a stable monthly income in the range of INR 12,000-15,000. He has conducted over 30 vision screening events, with average footfall exceeding 100. His shop remains open from 9 am to 8 pm, and he boasts about not having shut it for a single day till date. To set up this shop, Jahid raised INR 40,000 by convincing his family to sell 20 eucalyptus trees. The family had planted these trees foreseeing expenses for Jahid's sister's wedding. However, Jahid's savings from the EM Optician practice more than made up for the price of the eucalyptus trees; his sister got married last month.

Today, when you talk to Jahid, you can hear the confidence and euphoria. He is satisfied with his work and exhibits relevant knowledge. Amongst Jahid's first customers was his own mother, whose vision had declined rapidly in the past 3-4 years. All she needed was a pair of spectacles with the correct power of -5.5, aptly recommended by her son! Since then, Jahid has corrected the vision of seven elders in his own family.

Jahid proudly shares about the young client, whose high cylindrical power deterred him from pursuing higher education, until he used the prescribed spectacles. Jahid does not

¹ EyeMitra is a Hindi word meaning 'friend of the eye'.

hesitate to add that since this was a complex case, he sought help from his teachers² - Shah Nawaz, Pankaj, Nishant and Shahji, who are always available on call. In the same breath, he tells us about his marketing techniques and how he has added sunglasses³ to the product mix.

Talking excitedly about the future, Jahid informs us that the government is setting up electric poles in the vicinity and his shop will soon be electrified⁴. Post that, he wants to purchase an auto refractometer (AR) - a computer-controlled machine used for objective refraction - costing INR 1.5 lakhs. Jahid also plans to enroll his older brother in the programme and has already found a suitable place for his shop. All his cousins and even distant relatives now seek career advice from him. Towards the end of the conversation, he meekly adds that what makes him really happy is the number of quality marriage proposals coming his way.



Jahid Ali – An EyeMitra Optician

2 Teachers, who are part of the EyeMitra Optician Programme, have degrees in Optometry.

3 From a clinical perspective, increased usage of sun glasses is pertinent in rural areas because damage to eyes caused by sun and ultraviolet (UV) rays is maximum among those engaged in agriculture.

4 Jahid's shop is currently powered by solar energy.

1. Introduction

Impaired vision, primarily from lack of vision screening and an appropriate pair of glasses is one of the most widespread disabilities in the world. It affects people across ages and ethnic groups; most being unaware that they need vision correction. India with nearly 550 million people (about half of its population) having vision problems, sees a loss of USD 37 billion (approx. Rs. 240,000 Crore) in annual productivity (Vision Impact Institute). The second leading cause of blindness in India is uncorrected refractive error, with four out of five cases being treatable/ avoidable (Sight Savers India). Yet, there is only one optician per 250,000 people in rural India (Essilor). The colossal numbers indicate the need for trained professionals, inclusive public health strategies and collective efforts.

“At the heart of this problem is a lack of access to eye care services, many developing communities are missing enough skilled practitioners to perform eye examinations, prescribe appropriate glasses, and provide a referral for more serious conditions when necessary, in an accessible location with the resources to dispense ready-made or custom-made spectacles.” Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI)⁵

The prospect of aligning an opportunity (demographic dividend of rural youth) to overcome a distinct problem (lack of awareness and access to vision correction) within the same socio-cultural and geographical environment gave birth to the EyeMitra Optician programme. **The objective of the programme is to provide sustainable livelihoods through rigorous training in optical services that have a high success rate in terms of visual acuity⁶, while being affordable, good quality and culturally acceptable.**

The EM Optician programme is an initiative of 2.5 NVG (New Vision Generation) - the inclusive business division of Essilor International⁷, and is currently executed in partnership with five community based organizations (CBOs) in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha.

The lead partner is B-ABLE (BASIX Academy for Building Lifelong Employability Limited) - a pan-India skill training organization with a vast rural network. This study focuses on the evolution, programme

⁵ BHVI is a premier non-profit non-governmental organization with an international focus on eye care research and vision care delivery.

⁶ ‘Visual Acuity’ is acuteness or clearness of vision, such as the ability to distinguish details and shapes of objects.

⁷ Essilor International is the world’s leading ophthalmic optics company, engaged in designing, manufacturing and marketing a wide range of lenses to improve and protect eyesight. Essilor entered the Indian Market in 1998.



EyeMitra Optician Programme Trainees

model, challenges, impact and scale-up plans of the 2.5 NVG and B-ABLE partnership.

Building on the success of a three year pilot started in 2012, the programme aims to develop 10,000 entrepreneurs (75 percent through the partnership with B-ABLE) skilled in the optician trade, resulting in equipping seven million new spectacle wearers, by 2020.

2. Programme Model

The EM Optician programme is designed as a social enterprise/ inclusive business model. The programme imparts technical and entrepreneurial training to rural youth and supports them to set-up and run individual optician shops within their communities. These shops are established as a network of micro-franchisees of 2.5NVG, rather than stand-alone shops. The training and set-up cost incurred at the onset by 2.5NVG, is designed to be recovered from the profits of the micro-franchisees over a period of time, thus building the foundation of a scalable and sustainable development intervention.

At an individual level, EM Opticians create awareness on preventive care through free vision screening events. EM Opticians, in general, do not charge consultation fee and if required, spectacles are made available at an

affordable price of INR 300-400. While EM Opticians are trained to dispense spectacles, complex cases are strictly referred to specialized hospitals like Dr. Shroff's Charitable Eye Hospital.

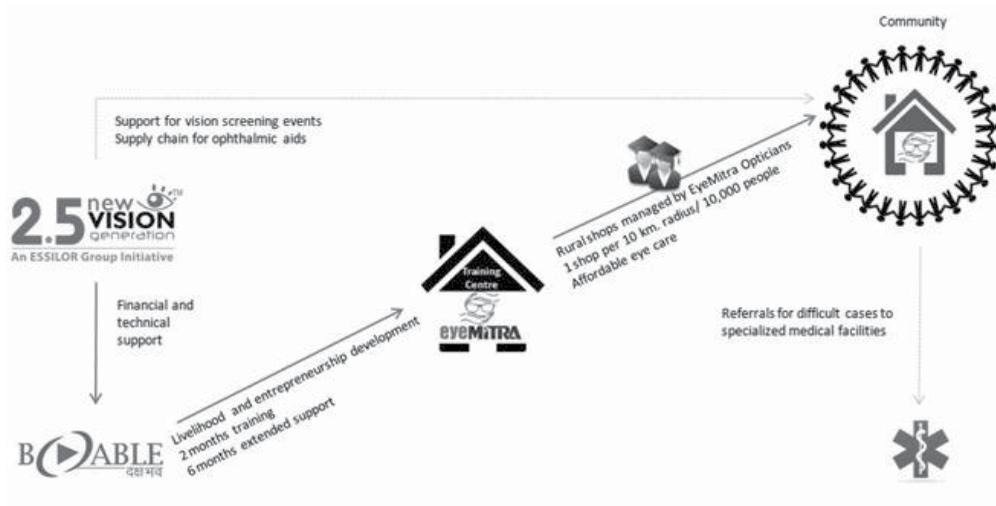


Figure 1: The EyeMitra Optician Programme Model

3. Key Stakeholders

- 2.5 NVG** - the inclusive business division of Essilor International⁸ is the champion of the EyeMitra Optician programme. The mission of 2.5 NVG is to develop innovative, scalable and profitable inclusive business models that provide accessible eye care and affordable spectacles to combat the problem of preventable impaired vision/ blindness. The threefold strategy adopted by 2.5 NVG encompasses awareness generation, affordable and accessible optical solutions, and product innovation. Essilor, through its corporate social responsibility arm (Essilor Vision Foundation), also provides free spectacles to the poorest of poor. i) **Financial Role:** Programme roll-out, continued investment in research (in product/ technology, marketing and distribution). ii) **Technical Role:** Training curricula, training of trainers, training equipment, innovations in product and technology testing. iii) **Channel Role:** Provision of spectacles at competitive prices to the EyeMitra Optician micro-franchisee network.
- B-ABLE** is the strategic partner involved in all aspects of programme execution, and also serves as advisor to other 2.5 NVG partners. B-ABLE

⁸ Organisational charts of Essilor International and B-ABLE are detailed in Annexure 1

is a subsidiary of BASIX Limited - a pioneering organisation in micro-finance and livelihood promotion with presence across 20 states and over 2.5 million stakeholders. B-ABLE was launched in 2009 with a model skill training campus at Dehradun and since then has extended its reach to 23 states, impacting 75,000 youth. B-ABLE provides aspiration-based vocational education and training using technology and partnerships in a range of sectors including Rural Farm and Non-Farm trades, Healthcare, Hospitality and Manufacturing (Electrician, Welding etc.) i) **Execution Role:** Community mobilization, training, franchisee set-up, post-training support, data collection, management information systems (MIS) and monitoring; Team of over 100 people dedicated to the EM Optician programme. ii) **Strategic Role:** Capacity building of other partners, financial linkages for franchisees, government and community level advocacy, awareness campaigns and marketing

- **Youth**, i.e. certified EM Opticians gain exposure and access to an aspirational career choice, with significant scope for upward financial mobility within one's own community. The programme is open to men and women in the age group of 18-40 years, with minimum qualification being Secondary School Certificate (10th pass), but preference is given to 12th pass.
- **Communities** within which EM Opticians operate get access to trained vision screening professionals and affordable spectacles within the community, resulting in reduced out-of-pocket expenses on health care and preventive treatment⁹.
- **Specialized Bodies** are brought in the loop in complicated cases or problems extending beyond the training of EM Opticians. These professional bodies also ensure programme quality by providing master trainers and carrying out regular audits.

4. Financial Investment, Franchisee and Fees

2.5 NVG invests approximately INR 1,50,000 per EyeMitra Optician. From this, INR 70,000 is invested through B-ABLE for on-field execution activities (mobilization, training of trainers, training, awareness camps, industry and financial linkages, advocacy, MIS and monitoring). The remaining INR 80,000 is the capital expenditure incurred on machinery, including the initial equipment kit (costing about INR 30,000) given to each EM Optician to set up their shop.

⁹ This is particularly pertinent in a country like India, where an estimated 74 percent of health expenses are paid out-of-pocket (World Health Statistics 2011).

A candidate pays INR 3,000 as security deposit at the start of program against which s/he gets stock and branding material. On the completion of training, the candidate pays an additional INR 3,000 as the franchisee security deposit to 2.5 NVG, as a two years renewable contract.

The key to the success of the social enterprise model is that the franchisees find it profitable to sell 2.5 NVG products as against other competing products that are currently available or may enter the market in future. 2.5 NVG ensures this by making quality affordable spectacles available at the doorstep of the franchisees.

Given that the villages are spread-out, often with limited infrastructure, 2.5 NVG's traditional model of dealers and sub-dealers was not feasible for the EM Optician programme. The adapted model includes a network of business development executives (in contract with 2.5 NVG), stationed at each of the B-ABLE training centres, who pool demand from neighbouring villages and procure products from authorized 2.5 NVG distributors. This is then supplied at the doorstep of each EyeMitra Optician. The programme also enables supplies from other manufacturers to cater to customer choice, thus taking active measures to check the risk to programme viability, resulting from product competition.

5. Training Delivery, Content and Certification

The EM Optician programme is possibly one of the first of its kind to adopt an eight month blended training model. The training is built on a foundation of two months of intensive classroom teaching (in basic vision testing, edging and fitting spectacles, dispensing spectacles and entrepreneurship skills)¹⁰, followed by six months of on-field training (marketing, customer interaction and trouble shooting) to set-up a viable rural optician business. The course is designed by 2.5 NVG's technical team, following the qualification pack of Health Sector Skills Council¹¹. Each EyeMitra Optician is certified by

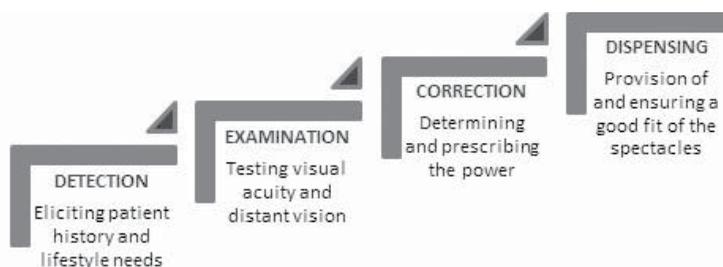


Figure 2: Technical Capabilities of EyeMitra Opticians

¹⁰ For the detailed EM Optician 60 Days Course Outline, refer to Annexure 2.

¹¹ The Healthcare Sector Skill Council is a not-for-profit organization, promoted by Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and financially supported by National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC). Its objective is to create a robust eco-system for quality education and skill development in paramedics and allied healthcare in the country.

B-ABLE, 2.5 NVG and NCVT (National Council on Vocational Training). The curriculum encompasses all topics under two NCVT courses - MED 122 (Optician) and MED 123 (Optometrist). The training equips EM Opticians to perform the following technical activities:

6. Distinctive Elements and Success Factors

6.1 Promotes Dignified Non-Migratory Livelihood

A critique of the current skill development sector in India is that it increases rural migration to congested urban areas. Many such migrants are unable to settle in cities, drop out of their jobs and frequently migrate back. Moreover, vocational education is often equated with blue-collar and/or 'low status' jobs.

The EyeMitra Optician programme provides youth a dignified livelihood option in their villages with a promise of upward financial mobility. Furthermore, the independent franchisee structure gives EM Opticians adequate opportunities for career expansion. The success of this is reflected in the retention rate of over 90 percent, i.e., nine out of ten youth continue



An EyeMitra Optician Shop in Rural Rajasthan

working as EyeMitra Opticians one year after training, as compared to the current vocational training sector's estimated 50 percent¹².

6.2 Goes Beyond Skill Training

The traditional education system in India, including vocational training, emphasizes attainment of theoretical knowledge rather than practical application of technical concepts. Compensating for this imbalance, EM Optician programme fuses classroom teaching with 'real world' experiences. This is done by creating a theoretical foundation supplemented by practical training, followed by on-field mentorship, which reinforces and amplifies the former. The extended training period also instils greater faith among prospective students.¹³ Further, the programme provides an opportunity to be a part of a network of entrepreneurs supported by a renowned international organisation.



An EyeMitra Optician Training in Progress

6.3 Incorporates Inclusive Business Strategy Leading to Sustainability

As a strategic investment, 2.5NVG's business interest (of penetrating the rural market) is aligned to the objectives of the programme, ensuring that it remains relevant and survives managerial changes within the corporate. This is further reflected in the program model; EM Optician shops are not stand alone shops but form a network of micro-franchisees of 2.5 NVG India, complete with technical support, skill up-gradation and supply chain benefits. This inclusive business strategy also ensures that program scale and sustainability is built in the design of the programme.

¹² Based on anecdotal evidence, personal experiences and informal interactions with sector experts.

¹³ The NCVT recently recommended shortening of skill training programmes to increase the student turnover. However, research shows that students lose confidence in programmes that are of such short durations and hence do not opt to enroll for the same (Centre for Civil Society).

7. Challenges, Risks and Mitigation Strategies

- **Challenge:** *Mobilizing youth for a livelihood (optician) with no apparent demand*
- **Mitigation:** *Creating a market for vision care through community awareness and role models*

The EM Optician programme, unlike traditional skilling models, does not conduct a market assessment to determine the demand for particular skills but creates a market for a currently faint but necessary need.

“A little lower eyesight hasn’t killed anyone, and with such little income and more grave illnesses, I don’t see anyone paying for spectacles.”

“Only my 80 year old grandmother wears spectacles.”

These were the common arguments heard by B-ABLE’s staff when they started mobilizing youth for the EM programme. The perceived low risk associated with uncorrected vision and the high cost of vision screening (often requiring travel to nearby cities) meant negligible demand for such services. To add to the resistance, the training sounded too technical and though it came with the promise of a viable business, it did not guarantee a job. Moreover, there were no role models in the locality and the nearest optician stores were often more than 100 kilometres away.

To overcome these obstacles, B-ABLE creates market demand for vision care by addressing behavioural and physical barriers. The former are addressed through public awareness campaigns that talk about the adverse effects of neglected eye care, and through vision screening events that demonstrate solutions for better sight. In addition, door-to-door counselling is used to clarify misconceptions/ lower concerns arising from ignorance, fear and indifference. These campaigns are designed keeping in mind the socio-cultural context of each community, and incorporate folk music, theatre, local celebrities and themed awareness drives. Recently, community mobilisers have also used tablets to engage wider audiences.

The physical barriers are addressed by providing access to opticians and affordable spectacles within the respective communities.

The programme, in a new geography, sees the most significant upsurge in aspiration for training when students from the first batch become successful entrepreneurs. This is made possible by encouraging the early adopters, i.e. first few EM Opticians to share their experiences during the mobilization drives. The response is very positive when established EM Opticians from similar backgrounds talk about their individual journeys, emphasizing the support from B-ABLE and 2.5NVG in market creation and business set-up.



An EyeMitra Vision Screening Event

These EM Optician role models identify with potential trainees and thus, are able to better understand and more convincingly address their concerns.

The above approach can be understood as the marketing mix for the EyeMitra Optician programme, i.e., the 4Ps (Product/ Service, Price, Place and Promotion).

The above marketing strategy has given a fillip to the momentum, resulting in exponential growth. It took about four months to mobilize the first batch



A Community Based EyeMitra Optician's Shop

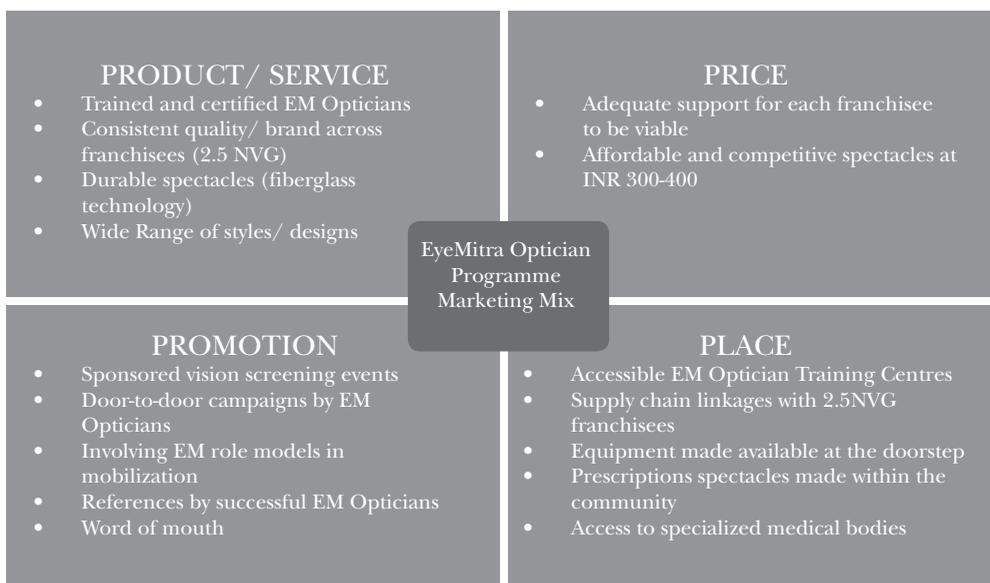


Figure 3: EyeMitra Optician Programme - Marketing Mix

of just three candidates in 2012, despite repeated visits by a team comprising of mobilisers, faculty and senior members from 2.5 NVG and B-ABLE. Currently, each batch of about 20 students takes less than two weeks days to fill up! In some mature districts, the program is even more than two-fold oversubscribed.

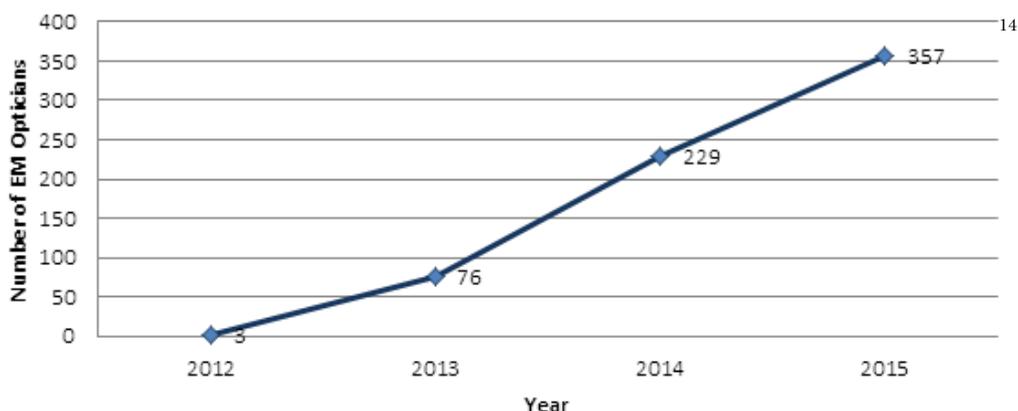


Figure. 4: Year-on-Year Growth of the EM Optician Programme in Uttar Pradesh, under the 2.5 NVG and B-ABLE Partnership

14 The data for 2015 is for the first seven months, i.e., from January to July.

- **Challenge: Ensuring high quality healthcare service delivery**
- **Mitigation: Designing a training and delivery model to address all inherent risks**

The biggest risks of vocational skill development in the health care sector are those that arise from a medical perspective. However, the work that the EyeMitra Opticians do, i.e. primarily measuring and dispensing spectacles, is relatively low-risk (Europe Economics). The following measures are taken to further minimize the inherent risks of the optical profession.¹⁵

Table 1

Risk	Description	Mitigation Strategy
Clinical	Risks to patients arising from the nature of diseases or conditions, and the associated consequences.	The scope of EM Opticians' work covers only vision screening and spectacle dispensing. However, they are taught the basics of other common vision related conditions and trained to strictly refer such ailments to specialized institutes/ hospitals.
Competency	Risks resulting from practitioners lacking the necessary skills or knowledge to diagnose and manage diseases/ conditions or to use appropriate equipment.	The programme has a comprehensive eight months blended training program, comprising 60 days of classroom teachings and an extended six months of on-field training, trouble-shooting support, provision of standard instruments, refresher courses. Regular training of trainers also ensures up-gradation of skills and incorporation of new knowledge in the sector. These trainers are qualified optometrists (4 year degree) and on the payroll of B-ABLE.
Conduct	Risks stemming from the behaviour of practitioners, such as negligence, unnecessary prescriptions or inappropriate communication.	The social stigma and reputational risk of malpractice within one's own community acts as a deterrent, particularly in the close-knit rural communities that the EM Opticians operate in. This is also checked as part of the regular audits conducted by qualified optometrists, independent of the trainers.
Contextual	Risks arising from inherent features of the environment in which a practitioner operates that may influence the severity/ likelihood of other risks; for example, lack of other EM Opticians (in a 10 kilometre area) leading to unregulated costs to beneficiaries.	The EM Opticians centres are not stand alone shops but part of the larger 2.5 NVG franchisee business, thus necessitating the observance of pre-set standards and guidelines.

¹⁵ Table adapted from 'Risks in the Optical Profession' by Europe Economics.

- **Challenge: Acceptance of previously unemployed local youth in the optician profession by the community/ Government**
- **Mitigation: Demonstrating quality of service and ongoing advocacy**

The EM Optician programme faced initial resistance because the target population was unwilling to accept that the unemployed youth from their own community could pursue a profession (and that too after a short training course) commonly understood to be practiced only by doctors. Moreover, as the programme design restricts number of EM Opticians in a given geography, it led to jealousy from other unemployed youth. There have been instances where disgruntled community members complained to local authorities and disrupted vision screening events.

To counter this, EM Opticians are encouraged to work in partnership with the local panchayats and gain their trust, which positively affects community's willingness to accept the EM Opticians.



An EyeMitra Community Mobilisation Drive

8. Impact

The impact of the EM programme encompasses socio-economic aspects but since the programme is fairly new, with only 3.5 years of history, the data is limited. Consequently, a combination of quantitative data and anecdotal experiences (from interviews with key personnel, candidates and community members) has been used to better understand the impact of the programme.

The primary impact of the programme, as a livelihood intervention, is the increase in income of trained EM Opticians, mainly through their micro-franchisees. The following graph, based on data from a batch of EM Opticians

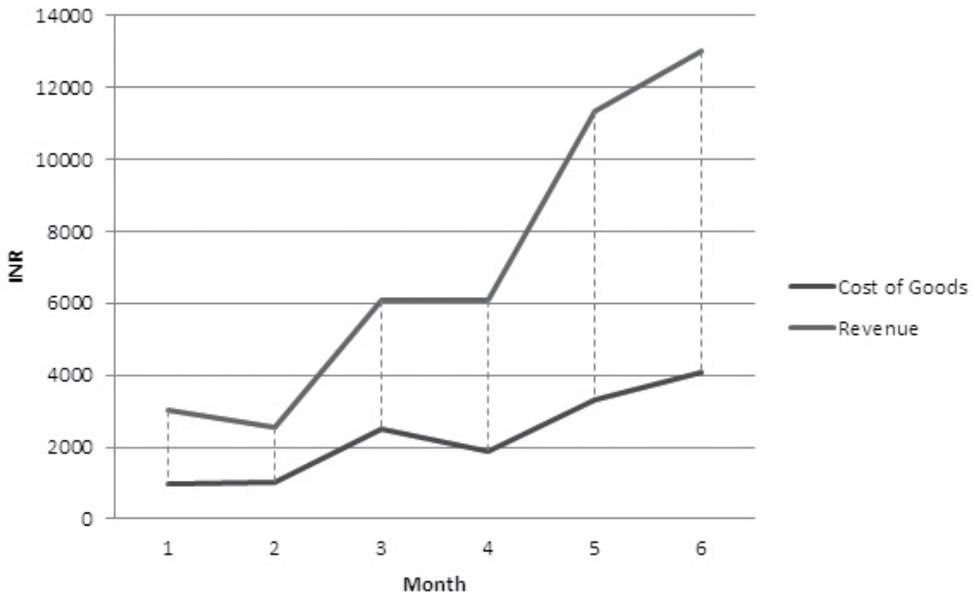


Figure 5: Representative Financials from a Batch of 20 EyeMitra Opticians in Uttar Pradesh who finished training in December 2014, shows a 400 percent plus increase in revenue in the first six months.

A certified EyeMitra, on an average, earns monthly revenue of INR 12,000, with the cost of operation being less than 35 percent. The more experienced and enterprising youth earn up to INR 65,000 per month.

The impact of the EM programme, in bridging the delivery gap in vision care, is reflected in the number of corrected vision cases. An EM Optician, on an average screens 80 people per month, i.e., almost 1,000 annually.

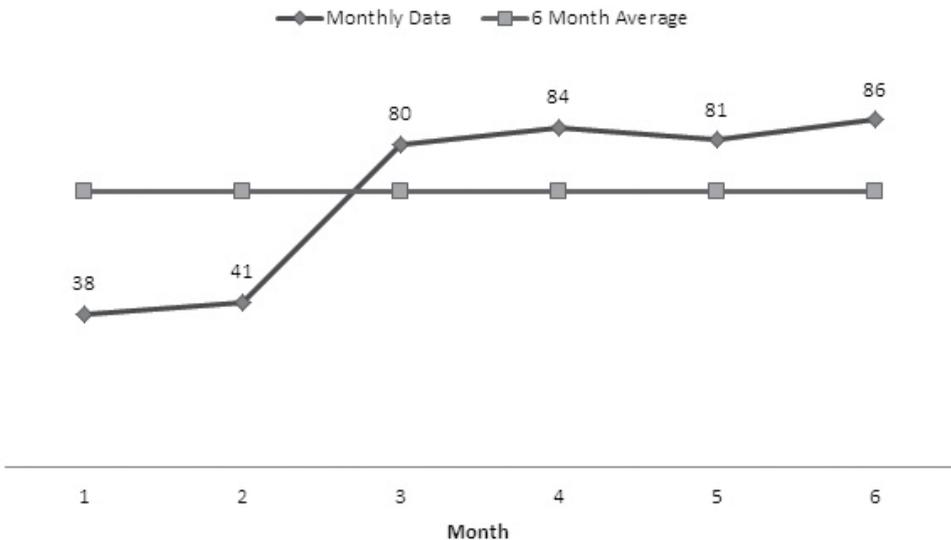


Figure 6: People Screened by an EyeMitra Optician in First Six Months of Practice

The need for EM Opticians is pronounced; evident by the detection of refractive errors in over two-thirds of the population screened as part of the program.

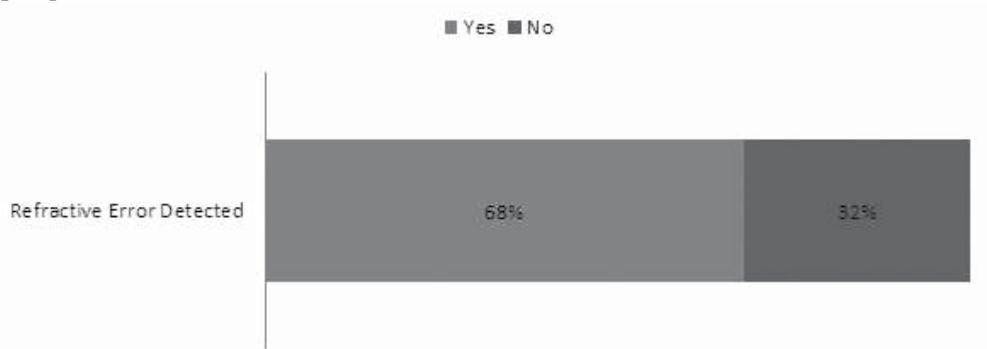


Figure 7: Refractive Errors Detected by EyeMitra Opticians in Screened Population

The community’s growing trust in EM Opticians and recognition of their contribution is reflected by the rapidly spreading voluntary participation in the vision screening events, depicted in the following graph.¹⁶

This access to EM Optician within the convenience of own community, as well as timely low cost treatment results in reduced out-of-pocket expenses on health care. Furthermore, early referrals for complex cases to specialized institutions results in higher curative care and reduced medical expenses in the long term.

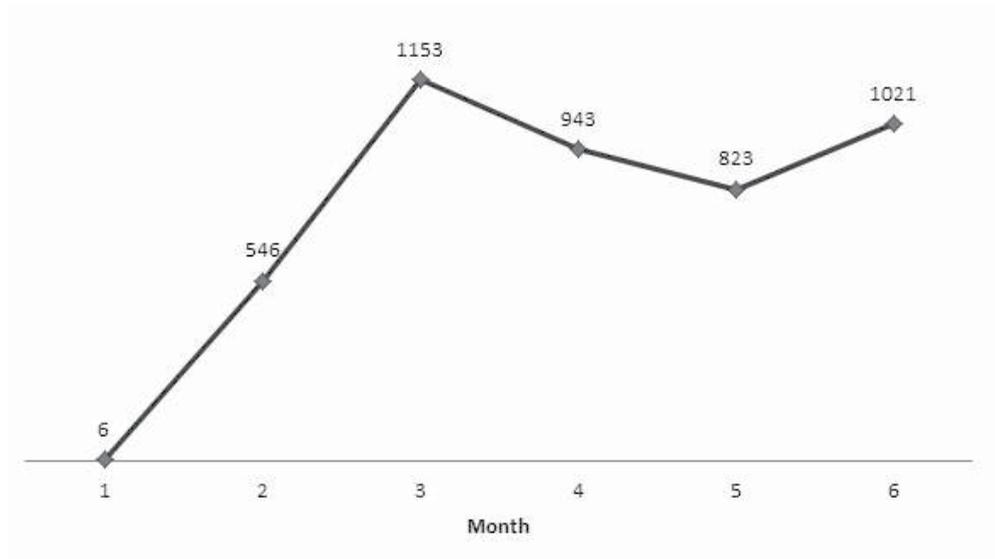


Figure 8: Participation in Vision Screening Events Conducted by a Batch of EM Opticians

16. The data in the graph is from January-June 2015, for a batch of EM Opticians in Uttar Pradesh. Since majority of customers are rural residents engaged in agricultural activity, the dip in participation during months 4-5, i.e. April-May, can be attributed to peak agricultural season/ rabi crop harvesting months.

The cumulative quantitative and qualitative impact of the EM Optician programme on the trained youth, customers and the broader community is summarized using the Bottom of the Pyramid Impact Assessment Framework.

Table 2

	Sellers (EM Opticians)	Buyers (Customers)	Communities
Economic Situation	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increased and relatively stable income (lower barriers to entry, increase in demand, product diversification) - Low cost of living (no migration) <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Opportunity cost of loss of other income (most were unemployed, some are able to continue with other vocation as well - agriculture/ teaching) -Debt in setting up shop (recovered within one year of operations for majority) 	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Consumer surplus (affordable quality products, accessible) -Improved livelihood prospects -Improved productivity -Improved income <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increase in healthcare expense (eye care previously not in expense mix, except in extreme cases) 	<p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -New businesses (manufacturers and sellers) due to increase in demand -Increased/ Reduced income of current sellers (not clear from current data; could be increased due to increase in awareness, but also reduced due to preference to quality)¹⁷ -Increased interest in other businesses serving the community (franchisee model) -New jobs in the community (2.5 NVG Business Development executives)
Capabilities	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increased technical skills -Increased entrepreneurial, communication and marketing skills -Increased self efficacy and contentment <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increased awareness of self eye care 	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Improved vision -Increased contentment -Increase learning/ education levels -Enhanced livelihood options <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Precautionary measures -Prevention of other diseases through referrals 	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increased awareness about eye care <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Higher job aspirations -Acceptance of new income/ employment avenues

17. For example, though there has been a surge in demand for sunglasses in general (due to increased awareness of harmful effects of prolonged sunlight exposure), the demand for cheap sunglasses from local street vendors reduced, due to access to quality sunglasses from 2.5 NVG at affordable prices.

Relationships	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Respect in family and social circles (successful candidates refer the programme to other youth, gaining their respect) -Increased access to professional and financial networks <p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Better matrimonial prospects 	<p>Major Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Improved relationship with family (less dependence) 	<p>Minor Effect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Improved relationships

9. Scalability and Replicability

The intensity of the problem of vision care is indicated by its significance in global policy. All WHO (World Health Organization) countries have endorsed the GAP (Global Action Plan) to reduce avoidable visual impairment and to secure access to rehabilitation services for the visually impaired. Vision Impact Institute estimates that 41 percent of children (under 18 years), 42 percent of workers, 42 percent of drivers, and 45 percent of elderly in India need vision correction.

It is apparent that the opportunity, i.e., demographic dividend of enterprising rural youth and the problem, i.e., basic vision correction are pervasive, transcending geographical and socio-cultural contexts, thus rationalizing the need for the programme. The programme started in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 and in the past year has set roots in seven additional states. 2.5 NVG aims to train 10,000 EM Opticians by 2020, reaching a population of 100 million, across the country.¹⁸ The programme already has a presence in China and the success in India has also started a dialogue to take it to Africa. The elements determining future scalability of the programme are described below.

9.1 Financial Endowment

The programme is substantially endowed by the lead partner, i.e., 2.5 NVG, to allow for upfront investment, pilot activities, restructuring and an adequate gestation period. In addition to its own financial endowment, 2.5 NVG aims to raise funds from Essilor Social Impact Fund.¹⁹

¹⁸ 1,100 EyeMitra Opticians are expected to be trained by the end of 2015.

¹⁹ The Essilor Social Impact Fund is a registered non-profit with many programmes including 'Vision for Life', which has committed 30 million Euros for the next five years to promote various initiatives for enhancing vision care for people who have not had the privilege to access and/ or afford quality vision care. EM Optician has successfully raised money from the Fund in the past and aims to amplify this in future.

9.2 Partnerships

2.5 NVG has already partnered with five CBOs and envisions numerous such partnerships till 2020. Parallel to this, the plan is to facilitate microfinance linkages for the shop set-up cost of INR 30,000–40,000, which is currently sourced independently by candidates.

2.5 NVG sees a partnership with the Government as a promising way forward. However, it is currently not seeking financial support from the same, but looking at a role as a technical and implementation partner. The Government of India, under the centrally sponsored National Programme for Control of Blindness (NPCB) works with NGOs to screen rural populations for a range of eye diseases including glaucoma, and corneal injuries, but the problem is enormous. Moreover, the focus on cataract in traditional screening camps is limiting. Catering to the same population, the EM Optician programme can play the crucial role of providing vision screening and dispensing appropriate spectacles.



An EyeMitra Optician Providing Vision Screening Service

9.3 Product and Technology Innovation

2.5 NVG is actively engaged in development of technology to reduce the risk of human error in spectacle dispensing, and to improve the quality of spectacles (performance, durability and design), while maintaining/ lowering prices. For example, 2.5 NVG is currently piloting an auto-fit frames and lenses collection, where mechanized pre-made lenses (with different correction powers) can be simply clicked/ fitted in a wide range of pre-designed spectacle frames. 2.5 NVG is also experimenting with mobile applications for refractive error testing/ double-checking.

10. Sustainability

10.1 Macro Level - Programmatic

2.5 NVG expects the programme to break-even by 2020, by virtue of economies of scale and innovation. This shows a long term promise towards the EM Optician programme. Adding to this, an exclusive set of professionals at 2.5 NVG are fully engaged in management of the programme. This human resource commitment ensures quality control through ongoing monitoring and active adoption of corrective measures, if required.

10.2 Meso Level – Supply Chain

2.5 NVG is continuously working towards reducing the cost of distribution, and at the same time penetrating deeper. Since the programme is an inclusive business initiative, each link in the supply chain benefits from the scale. Cognizant of this, 2.5 NVG has established a lean supply chain, which fortifies motivation at each level, while keeping product costs in check.



Second EyeMitra Convention Conducted by 2.5 NVG and B-ABLE at Mathura in 2015

10.3 Micro Level – EM Optician

A critical component determining a sustainable livelihood in any industry is an upward career (and income) trajectory. The EM programme safeguards the financial viability of each EM Optician by allowing only one EM Optician shop within a 10 kilometre radius, catering to a population of approximately 10,000. The programme also promotes product up-gradation and diversification to augment income. Besides, the programme offers opportunities for refresher trainings and up-skilling through the Annual EyeMitra Convention.

11. Conclusion

The EM Optician programme has demonstrated how a corporate led strategy can create a successful scalable skill development model leading to self-employment, while bringing missing healthcare delivery to rural populations.

The committed long-term investment in human capital, enterprise creation, community engagement and innovation has built the foundation for long-term sustainability. Cumulatively, these strategies have resulted in a higher demand for vision screening within the community and consequently, a greater willingness to pursue the EyeMitra Optician course. As a social enterprise model, EyeMitra Opticians get their return on investment within one year, and 2.5 NVG expects to break-even by 2020. The programme has thus diverted from the widespread paradigm of non-profit short-term vocational training models leading to job placements barely assuring minimum wages.

At a broader level, the commercial viability of creating micro-franchisees offering door-step delivery of a healthcare service in rural markets in India has set a precedent for other corporate organisations. The entry of such models is expected to bolster additional meaningful non-farm livelihood opportunities.

Annexure 1

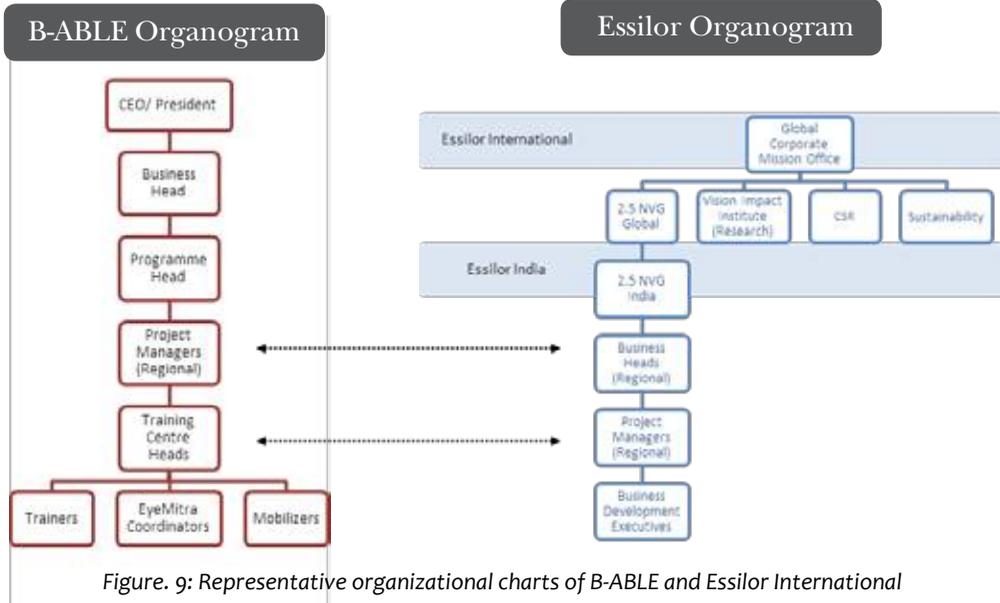
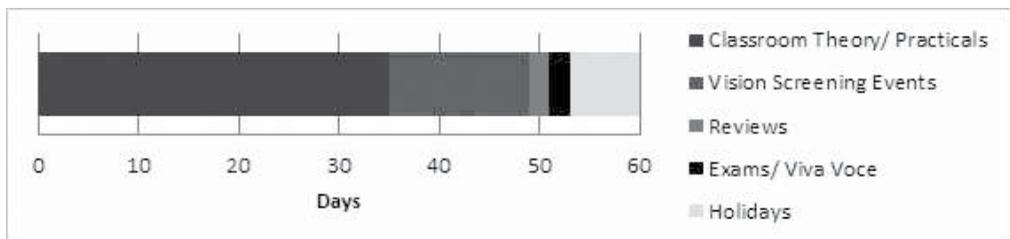


Figure. 9: Representative organizational charts of B-ABLE and Essilor International

Annexure 2

The EyeMitra Optician Course, spread over 60 days²⁰, covers the following topics:

- Anatomy and physiology of eye
- Torch examination and vision screening
- Ophthalmic optics and laboratory
- Refractive errors, presbyopia and correction
- Ophthalmic lenses
- Hand neutralization
- Instruments, frames and contact lens
- Refraction - retinoscopy and various methods
- Prescriptions, medical record safety and confidentiality
- Common eye disorders, referrals and history taking
- Optical dispensing - edging/ fitting
- Soft skills - communication, sales techniques and code of conduct
- Social entrepreneurship/ responsibility
- Planning vision screening events
- Optical management - stocks/ inventory, record keeping and basic computer use



21

Figure 10: EyeMitra Optician 60 Day Course Structure (Classroom Based)

20 Day = 6 Working Hours

21 The image represents various components of the EM Optician Programme training; however, the particular components are not conducted in the above depicted order but are interspersed during the actual delivery.

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