



# Kick-starting eye care businesses in rural Bangladesh



Partnership period  
**2017 - 2020**

Financial investment  
**AUD 1.3 m**  
(AUD \$380k DFAT)

### Results:

New eye care businesses:  
**250 businesses**

Trained eye care professionals:  
**400 people**

People with access to eye care:  
**10 million**



## A partnership with impact

Globally one in three people cannot see clearly and 90 per cent of these people live in developing countries where they often lack access to eye care. This Business Partnerships Platform (BPP) partnership reduced the investment and risk for global eye care company, Essilor to expand a sustainable commercial model in Bangladesh to address a lack of access to eye care.

The BPP partnership brought Essilor, MART, a training organisation and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) together to train rural youth to fit glasses and do basic eye testing and referrals, acting as "Eye Mitro" (friend of the eye) in Bangladesh.

In two years, over 400 primary vision care providers have been trained, providing nearly 10 million people with access to vision care.

The Australian Government helped to provide credibility to the partnership and accelerate Essilor's presence and growth in Bangladesh. For the Australian Government, working with the private sector allowed it to explore new ways of engaging with different partners in support of Australia's focus on health care, skills development, and economic opportunities in Bangladesh.



An Eye Mitro shopfront in rural Bangladesh

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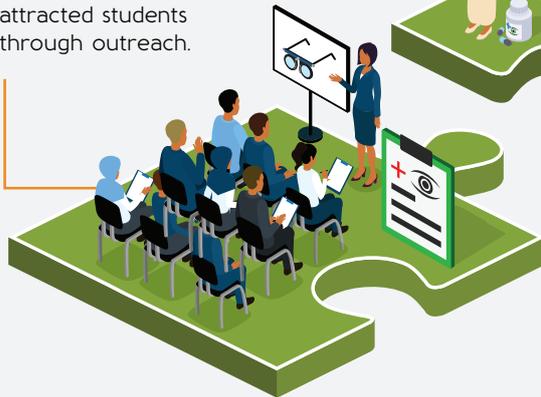


## Key contributions from partners



### MART

MART contributed its training expertise and attracted students through outreach.



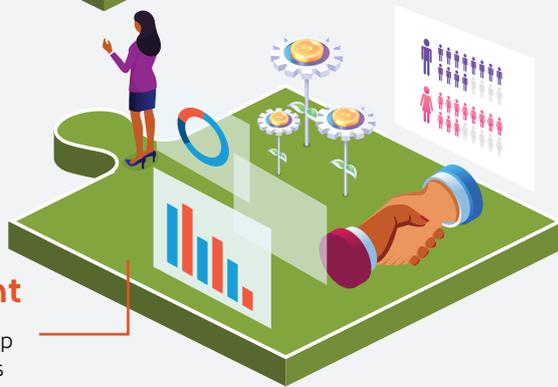
### Essilor

Essilor brought the Eye Mitro program and supplies the stock.



### Australian Government

Contributed catalytic funding to help Essilor establish an inclusive business and prove the viability of the venture.



## An adaptive partnership

The partnership took a flexible and adaptive approach, allowing partners to leverage their mutual capabilities and value. Early efforts to develop a shared ways of working and to overcome implementation challenges led the partners to build a collaborative approach which they now describe as a "well-oiled engine", and a strong mutual understanding of each partner organisation's objectives and contributions.



## Localising a regional concept

While the Eye Mitro program had previously been successful in India, the process of establishing a similar program in Bangladesh came with challenges. Essilor worked hard to gain government accreditation of its training program, including ensuring that Eye Mitro were actively connecting patients to other local health services, documenting the importance of front-line eye care in rural areas and the value of referrals made to government hospitals for more serious conditions.



In two years of implementation, Eye Mitro have identified around **22,000** cataract patients and referred them to nearby hospitals.



## Complex challenges



Import duties on eyeglasses remain high, and are an ongoing commercial risk to the partnership, particularly in its goal to provide low-cost vision care to rural populations.



Salaried roles are often preferred to entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, giving MART the challenge of adapting their outreach and training to match local expectations, and of demonstrating the value of entrepreneurship training for students.



The partners worked with local organisations to understand how to encourage students to join the training program, and how to market to students most effectively to gain family and community approval.



## COVID Impacts

As a result of COVID-19, partners are supporting Eye Mitro through health insurance and tools to continue providing eye care safely, and there is further ongoing work to support the business sustainability of Eye Mitro beyond COVID-19.



*Through the Eye Mitro optician course, I can learn how to measure a person's eye power, how to insert lens into eyeglasses based on that power, cutting and fitting eyeglasses and managing an eyeglass dispensary and sales.*

Ria Khatun, trainee from Kushtia, Bangladesh.



## Promoting women as “Eye Mitro” business owners

Despite intentionally targeting broad outreach, women were poorly represented in the first few cohorts of the Eye Mitro program in Bangladesh. The BPP supported partners to conduct a gender analysis, which revealed barriers to entry such as housing, course fees, and family and community expectations. The program hired a female teacher, who stayed in the accommodation with students, and targeted older, married women who could more easily source the course fees.

Partners also ensured that all outreach was communicated equally to the female student and

her family, and showed examples of successful female Eye Mitro when speaking to prospective students. As a result, at the end of the program women represented about 22% of students approached about the program and 10% of successful Eye Mitro.

While these figures remain low, the work of the partners to increase this from the baseline demonstrates the value of adaptive approaches in proactively addressing barriers as they are identified.



## Commercial sustainability

While the focus of the Eye Mitro program is eye care, trainees also must be able to ensure their commercial success when they begin practicing in rural communities. Essilor and MART collaborated to provide Eye Mitro with business skills training, and ongoing support to improve business practices, drive demand through eye screening events, market new products, and connect to a professional network. Recognising that Eye Mitro, particularly female Eye Mitro, often have trouble financing bonds or down payments on retail space, the partners are now considering ways of providing gap financing for Eye Mitro to ease this transition from student to entrepreneur.



## Wider impact

The Eye Mitro generally find that 60 per cent of their sales are repeat orders, meaning that they are sustainably able to operate their business. This also indicates a cultural change in areas with Eye Mitro services, as people begin to regularly check their vision, and use corrective lenses.



## What's next?

The partners have a long term view of the opportunities for the Eye Mitro program in Bangladesh, and are concentrated on increasing both trainees and practicing Eye Mitro, reaching more communities across Bangladesh with the goal of further decreasing preventable vision loss through corrective lenses.



## About the BPP

The Business Partnerships Platform supports partnerships between the Australian Government and inclusive businesses to create lasting social impact. With BPP support, businesses are creating sustainable change by:



Develop and adapt products and services that improve lives



Create more inclusive and productive value chains



Expand inclusive business practices

## Partnership is the key defining feature



Partners bring their unique skills, contributions and resources together to address key challenges.



The urgent challenges of climate change and COVID-19 recovery require government, business and NGO partners to forge new and enduring partnerships

