



Evaluation Report VisionSpring: Eye Care for the Base of the Pyramid

Prepared by MANAUS Consulting for
Opportunities for the Majority at the
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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of an independent evaluation conducted by MANAUS Consulting of VisionSpring's business model to provide affordable eye care to low-income communities in El Salvador. VisionSpring is a New York-based non-profit organization with extensive experience working with eye care models for the base of the socioeconomic pyramid (BoP). The organization forms networks of micro-entrepreneurs, called Vision Entrepreneurs, who carry a small business toolkit in a bag, containing multiple styles of eyeglasses and screening equipment. Through Vision Entrepreneurs, the organization is able to reach low-income communities to provide eye care services.

The implementation of VisionSpring's model in El Salvador was made possible by a US\$200,000 non-reimbursable grant (technical cooperation project) from the Inter-American Development Bank's Opportunities for the Majority (OMJ) initiative. OMJ works with private sector partners to identify business models that serve the base of the socioeconomic pyramid and that are scalable and have potential to be replicated. By providing a grant to Vision Spring, OMJ sought to test the feasibility of the model and help lay the foundation to scale vision programs for low-income populations throughout Latin America.

VisionSpring anticipated investing US\$145,000 of its existing financial resources and US\$70,000 in in-kind contributions to implement the model in El Salvador.

The objective of this independent evaluation was to determine whether the activities implemented and resources spent by VisionSpring fulfilled those outlined in the technical cooperation project, which defines the use of OMJ grant resources. Additionally, the evaluation assessed the outputs and results achieved in the project. Consultants reviewed key project documents and conducted a five-day field visit to El Salvador to gather the perspectives of main

stakeholders. MANAUS Consulting also reviewed baseline data and collected new information; interviewed the OMJ team leader, Elizabeth Boggs Davidsen; and analyzed established project indicators where possible.

Overall, project activities were implemented and the hub-and-spoke distribution model adopted by VisionSpring achieved its expected results. The following are the most relevant conclusions of the assessment:

- **Financial Sustainability.** Although VisionSpring's overall operations in El Salvador are not yet profitable, the income statements of individual stores show that older, more established stores record a positive net income. The organization's expansion efforts in El Salvador have impacted its profitability, but the model itself is sound and sustainable. The organization has experienced a significant increase in sales and a decrease in its dependency on grant contributions (as a percentage of total revenue). Revenue increased by more than six-fold from 2010 to 2011 and income derived from grants decreased from 48% in 2010 to 14% in 2011.

VisionSpring is also taking steps to address other factors affecting profitability, such as the cost of acquiring lenses from local laboratories and staff turnover. By lowering operating costs, the company hopes to increase profitability and boost expansion efforts. VisionSpring expects the model to be profitable by the second quarter of 2013.

- **Provision of eye care services to low-income populations.** The hub-and-spoke model is a feasible model to provide eye care services to underserved communities in El Salvador. In 2011 alone, the project had trained 33 Vision Entrepreneurs, created 35 new full-time jobs, served over 35,000 patients, and sold over 23,000 eyeglasses. Since launching the project, over 45,000 eyeglasses were sold to beneficiaries.

VisionSpring services also provide an alternative to vision healthcare at affordable prices in El Salvador. Low-income communities have few options to access vision diagnostic services and eye care products. VisionSpring offers free consultations and products that tend to be half the price of those sold at standard optical stores. Additionally, VisionSpring serves hard-to-reach communities that otherwise cannot access eye care services, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, saving patients the need to travel long distances.

VisionSpring has also engaged in partnerships with several organizations throughout Latin America. These partnerships are intended to either replicate the concept of the Vision Entrepreneur in other countries or expand VisionSpring's distribution channels. As a result, VisionSpring was able to replicate the model in four countries, create over 60 new Vision Entrepreneurs, and expand distribution channels through wholesalers and other nonconventional distribution partners.

- **Job creation and improved working conditions.** Most Vision Entrepreneurs working for the organization were previously unemployed. On average, entrepreneurs make between US\$800 and US\$1,000 a month, four times the minimum wage in El Salvador. Vision Entrepreneurs also find their work emotionally rewarding, as they are motivated to be part of an organization that improves the health of underserved communities. By the end of 2011, VisionSpring had created 35 new full-time jobs for Salvadorians.
- **Resource Allocation.** Despite adjustments to the amounts spent in various activities, resources were invested in each of the planned implementation phases of the project. By the end of the project, VisionSpring had opened five stores, increased its networks of Vision Entrepreneurs, and established partnerships with several organizations in the region to expand and replicate the model. Resources invested in implementing these activities surpassed the projected allocation of resources, totaling an investment of US\$380,000 in the implementation of the model (US\$35,000 more than originally anticipated). VisionSpring committed the additional resources for the implementation of the model.

When analyzing the allocation of financial resources for each phase of the project, the major difference between planned and actual resources invested was related to the expansion of VisionSpring within El Salvador. With the original project envisioning the opening of three stores in El Salvador and two stores elsewhere in the region, more resources were utilized to test the model locally. The overall expansion cost totaled US\$306,000, about 15% more than the anticipated costs.

It is worth noting that the budget allocated for the dissemination of lessons learned was not entirely utilized. Although VisionSpring participated in several workshops and dissemination events, resources intended for this phase were later used for activities related to monitoring and evaluation of the project. Monitoring and evaluation activities included tracking project indicators, creating progress reports for OMJ, and conducting a field visit to assess the implementation of the project.

Beyond these adjustments and differences in funding allocation, it can be asserted that VisionSpring utilized resources to conduct the activities outlined in the technical cooperation project. Furthermore, invested resources accomplished the outcomes and results anticipated for the project. Finally, according to VisionSpring management, OMJ's support was essential for the organization to test the model and prove its commercial viability and social value.

Introduction

VisionSpring's technical cooperation project was approved in 2010. With OMJ funding, the organization began expanding its operations in El Salvador by opening three stores in Santa Ana, San Salvador, and San Miguel. In 2011, VisionSpring opened two new stores in Ahuachapán and Sonsonate. MANAUS Consulting visited El Salvador and conducted an independent evaluation of VisionSpring's technical cooperation project during the fall of 2012. This report is the result of this evaluation, which looks at the activities implemented and outcomes and results achieved by VisionSpring as part of its efforts to expand eye care services to low-income populations in El Salvador.

The report first presents an overview of VisionSpring, describing the business model in El Salvador and its expansion. The second part of the report outlines the evaluation methodology and includes a description of the desktop review conducted, the five-day field visit to El Salvador, and the stakeholders interviewed during the visit. The third part of the report presents the results of the evaluation, including a discussion on: the project's resource allocation, the model's profitability and sustainability, and other specific results of the project. The report then outlines lessons learned and includes recommendations provided by project implementers and beneficiaries to improve VisionSpring's activities and services. Lastly, the report presents the main conclusions of the assessment.

Opportunities for the Majority

Opportunities for the Majority (OMJ) is an Inter-American Development Bank initiative launched in 2007. OMJ works with private sector partners to identify business models that are scalable and have the potential to be replicated. Through loans, guarantees, and grants, OMJ seeks to increase productivity, bring the poor into the formal economy, create jobs, address market failures that raise costs for those least able to afford them, and bring quality goods and services to the 360 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean who are at the base of the socio-economic pyramid. OMJ's portfolio reached over US\$250 million in authorizations at the end of 2012.

VisionSpring

VisionSpring is a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing poverty and generating opportunities in the developing world through the sale of affordable eyeglasses. The organization is based in New York and has operations in 11 countries throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The main operating mechanism of the organization is the micro-franchise model. The model consists of providing micro-entrepreneurs (or Vision Entrepreneurs) a business toolkit containing all the products and materials needed for marketing and selling eyeglasses. Entrepreneurs receive training in sales, marketing and business skills, as well as continual support from local staff. This small toolkit and the support from Vision Spring allow Vision Entrepreneurs to reach remote communities, provide eye care services to these populations, and earn an income through their activities.

The VisionSpring micro-franchise model was formally launched in El Salvador in 2004.

During the following five years, the organization provided eye care services in the country only through their network of Vision Entrepreneurs. Although this initial model was successful in reaching underserved communities, it was a challenging model to scale.

According to VisionSpring's Chief Operating Officer, Peter Eliassen, the difficulty in scaling the micro-franchise model was also impacting the organization's long-term sustainability in El Salvador. Among other things, some communities did not see Vision Entrepreneurs as legitimate vision care providers and did not trust the organization's services. Additionally, Vision Entrepreneurs could not provide in-depth eye care services in the field, so their work was limited to simple vision assessments. These factors limited the capacity of the original model to readily boost sales and be sustainable.

In 2009, VisionSpring decided to complement the micro-franchise model with physical stores that would support the work of Vision Entrepreneurs in the field. In 2010, with the support of a US\$200,000 grant from OMJ, VisionSpring dramatically expanded its services by opening five optical stores in the country. Beyond working as optical stores for urban customers, the storefronts support the work of Vision Entrepreneurs in hard-to-reach communities and offer other services to VisionSpring customers, such as in-depth eyesight consultations, that entrepreneurs cannot provide in the field.

The combination of the micro-franchise model with the optical stores resulted in the so-called ‘hub-and-spoke’ model. The five stores function as urban “hubs” and the network of now 50 Vision Entrepreneurs as the powerful “spokes” that give the model reach into rural and peri-urban underserved communities.

A Closer Look at the Hub-and-Spoke Model

The three largest and oldest optical stores—San Salvador, Santa Ana, and San Miguel—provide eye care services to customers, are used as offices for management and Vision Entrepreneurs, and have a “bodega” that holds large amounts of inventory. Although the newer stores in Sonsonate and Ahuachapán have a similar structure and provide the same products and services to customers, these stores are largely dependent on the older stores for product restocking, accounting, and marketing support.

The principal products delivered by VisionSpring are reading glasses and prescription glasses. The organization manufactures its reading glasses in China and purchases prescription glasses from various local lenses laboratories. Stores are also stocked with brand name frames, like Hugo Boss, to ensure they have a diverse product mix, especially for the urban clients that demand it. These frames are donated by brands, which allows VisionSpring to keep prices low. On average, a pair of reading glasses at VisionSpring can cost US\$5 to US\$9 and prescription glasses start at US\$15—approximately 50% less than the market price for similar products.

Even with the opening of new stores, Vision Entrepreneurs still serve as the means to reach remote communities and introduce VisionSpring’s products and services. Vision Entrepreneurs are also responsible for 70 to 80% of VisionSpring’s total sales. To introduce VisionSpring, each entrepreneur must identify and contact communities and institutions to organize eye care campaigns, where onsite vision consultations take place. In some cases, campaigns are simply preventive consultations where Vision Entrepreneurs give patients guidance on how to avoid vision problems. But in most cases, campaigns provide both preventive and diagnostic care. Campaigns can vary in size and location. They can be organized at a local church, a government agency, or a private company. Regardless of the size or location, vision examinations at campaigns are free and product prices are the same as in-store prices.

To prepare for their fieldwork, Vision Entrepreneurs receive classroom and practical training. The classroom training consists of an introduction to the anatomy of the eye, general refraction issues, and common eye infections, among other topics. This first training phase lasts approximately 16 hours. Vision Entrepreneurs then must accompany and support more experienced entrepreneurs during approximately four campaigns (around 16 additional hours of training). After this training process, Vision Entrepreneurs must begin identifying communities and establishing contacts to organize campaigns. According to VisionSpring senior management, it takes about three full months for a Vision Entrepreneur to be ready to work on his or her own.

Entrepreneurs receive a base salary plus commissions on their sales. The commission system is based on number of units sold, revenue figures, and number of referrals to VisionSpring stores. Beyond the salary incentives they receive, entrepreneurs with significant experience in the field can be promoted to supervisors, managers, or even hold other positions at the office. This promotion system motivates Vision Entrepreneurs to stay in and grow the organization.

Technical Cooperation Project Overview

The technical cooperation primarily aimed at improving and expanding VisionSpring's business model by opening three optical stores in Santa Ana, San Salvador, and San Miguel. Through the improvement and expansion of the model, OMJ sought to test its feasibility and assess the possibility of expanding the model to other markets in Latin America by opening two additional stores beyond El Salvador. To do this, the technical cooperation project was divided into the following phases of implementation:

Phase 1. Mapping the market gaps and network organizations working in the region. This phase of the project aimed at identifying potential markets in the region that would benefit from the VisionSpring model, as well as several network organizations with an interest in partnering with VisionSpring to distribute eyeglasses through the Vision Entrepreneur model.

Phase 2. Testing the feasibility of the hub-and-spoke model in El Salvador. Activities during this phase aimed at opening three VisionSpring stores in El Salvador with the potential to quickly reach commercial viability. This phase also looked to launch partnerships with network organizations with capacity to scale the hub-and-spoke model.

Phase 3. Exploring other distribution and manufacturing opportunities. This phase aimed at assessing other viable options to locally manufacture reading glasses at competitive prices and identifying nonconventional distribution channels to expand VisionSpring's business model to other markets in the region.

Phase 4. Dissemination and lessons learned. The technical cooperation project also sought to develop activities to promote innovative business models that improve the access of low-income people to better products and services. These activities include creating technical notes, developing databases on potential manufacturing and distribution partners, and implementing workshops to present and disseminate the lessons learned throughout the implementation of the model.

Phase 5. Monitoring and Evaluation. This final phase of the technical cooperation aimed at understanding whether the activities of the project were carried out as planned, as well as identifying the outcomes and results of the technical cooperation project.

Methodology

This independent evaluation is a qualitative assessment to determine whether the planned phases of the VisionSpring project were implemented and whether they achieved expected outcomes and results. The assessment used two main approaches to make these determinations:

- **Desktop Research.** Consultants reviewed all documents related to the technical cooperation project, including the original project proposal, preliminary and final reports, final budget, progress reports from VisionSpring, and data for metrics collected throughout the project. This desktop research helped consultants understand the project's background, main challenges identified and resolved during implementation, and project outcomes and results. The review also helped MANAUS Consulting staff prepare for the field visit, which aimed at evaluating the implementation of the technical cooperation project first hand.
- **Field Visit.** A consultant from MANAUS Consulting visited El Salvador in October 2012 to conduct interviews with stakeholders, including VisionSpring's corporate and local staff, Vision Entrepreneurs, store employees, and VisionSpring's clients. The visit provided the consultant with an in-depth understanding of the implementation process, accomplished results, and overall outputs. For a complete list of the 26 interviewees, see Table 1 in the Appendix.

Evaluation Results

Resource Allocation

To evaluate the investment of resources associated with the technical cooperation project, this section compares the planned budget for the project to the actual resources used by VisionSpring throughout the implementation of the hub-and-spoke model. The comparison is based on the budget outlined in the original project proposal and the actual allocation of resources provided by OMJ and VisionSpring.

The following table shows the distribution of resources per project phase:

Financial Resource Allocation: Planned vs. Actual Invested Resources

Project Phase	Planned Resource Allocation			Actual Resource Allocation			Difference between Planned vs Actual Invested Resources
	Total	IDB Funding	VS Funding	Total	IDB Funding	VS Funding	
1. Mapping the market gaps and network organizations working in the region	\$20,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	-	-\$10,000
2. Opening the stores and testing the feasibility of the business model.	\$265,000	\$135,000	\$130,000	\$306,000	\$176,000	\$130,000	\$41,000
3. Exploring other distribution and manufacturing opportunities	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$48,000	\$3,000	\$45,000	\$33,000
4. Dissemination and lessons learned	\$40,000	\$40,000	-	\$1,000	\$1,000	-	-\$39,000
5. Monitoring and Evaluation	\$5,000	\$5,000	-	\$15,000	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$10,000
	\$345,000	\$200,000	\$145,000	\$380,000	\$200,000	\$180,000	\$35,000

Overall, VisionSpring invested resources in all phases as outlined in the technical cooperation project. The implementation of the hub-and-spoke in El Salvador model utilized US\$380,000 in resources, about 10% (US\$35,000) more than the planned total investment of US\$345,000. When looking at the allocation of resources per project phase, significant differences between planned versus actual spending were identified in the following areas:

- **Opening new stores.** The technical cooperation project proposed opening three stores in El Salvador and expanding to new markets. This plan was later adjusted and VisionSpring decided to open a total of five stores in El Salvador and not expand to other countries. As a result, VisionSpring allocated additional resources to open and staff the two newer stores. Expanding the model cost US\$306,000, approximately 15% (US\$41,000) more than the projected investment for this phase of the project. According to VisionSpring's Chief Operating Officer, the additional resources came from the other phases of the project. For example, resources initially allocated to entering other markets were redirected for expansion of the organization within El Salvador.
- **Mapping potential markets to expand the model.** VisionSpring hired an external consultant to assess which markets in Latin America were the best fit for the organization's expansion. The consultancy cost US\$10,000, but after considering several logistical and legal factors, VisionSpring decided to delay the expansion to other countries and instead consolidate its presence in El Salvador. The remaining 50% of resources allocated for the international expansion were redirected to opening new stores in El Salvador. VisionSpring expects to continue expanding in El Salvador in the near future before establishing an organizational presence in other markets in the region. Meanwhile, VisionSpring has forged partnerships with like-minded entities to replicate the Vision Entrepreneur model in Latin America. Details of these partnerships are described later in the report.
- **Disseminating lessons learned.** This area of work originally aimed at tracking the implementation process of the hub-and-spoke model as a way to promote and scale distribution platforms that benefit the base of the pyramid. Although VisionSpring participated in several workshops and events to showcase the results of the project, not all of the originally planned dissemination activities were carried out. In part, this was due to the need to redirect resources toward the expansion within El Salvador.
- **Monitoring and evaluating the project.** A total of US\$15,000 was allocated to monitoring and evaluation activities, US\$10,000 more than what was originally planned for in the technical cooperation proposal. This investment allowed VisionSpring to monitor project activities and report to OMJ on disbursed resources, implemented activities, and indicators on the progress of the model. Additionally, OMJ commissioned this assessment of VisionSpring's hub-and-spoke model upon completion of the project to determine whether it delivered on expected results. The results of the evaluation will be used to inform decisions regarding investments in pre-commercial models.

Model Profitability and Sustainability¹

Even though revenues increased more than six-fold from 6,074 glasses sold in 2010 to 23,354 in 2011, VisionSpring's operations in El Salvador are still not profitable. This is mainly due to the expansion efforts of the organization. VisionSpring senior management expects that the model will reach break-even or even be profitable by the second quarter of 2013. This highlights VisionSpring's potential and ability to be a sustainable business model. The following are the main reasons identified for why the model is not yet profitable, along with the strategy VisionSpring is putting in place to achieve financial sustainability:

- **Expansion of the hub-and-spoke model.** Although revenues from sales increased significantly from approximately US\$75,000 in 2010 to almost US\$490,000 in 2011, operating costs also increased considerably. Total operating expenses increased from approximately US\$137,000 in 2010 to around US\$474,000 in 2011. According to VisionSpring's Chief Operating Officer, in 2011, the organization invested nearly US\$100,000 (about 21% of total operating expenses) in opening new stores in Ahuachapán, Sonsonate, and San Miguel.

Nonetheless, when looking at the profitability of individual stores, the older, more established stores in Santa Ana and San Salvador do show positive net incomes. As an example, the table below compares the financials of the older store in San Salvador to those of the newer store in Sonsonate, and shows the profitability of the San Salvador store. Income generated by older stores is helping support the expansion, which shows that the model can achieve profitability.

- **Cost of acquiring lenses from local laboratories.** VisionSpring currently purchases lenses for prescription glasses from a mix of local providers. According to VisionSpring's Chief Operating Officer, these purchases represent approximately 25% of total monthly costs, cutting into the organization's profit margins. In an effort to increase profitability, VisionSpring has decided to acquire its own lenses laboratory. The organization estimates that a simple laboratory can cover 50% to 60% of their current demand for prescription lenses and the rest can continue to be sourced from local suppliers. VisionSpring expects to have its lab fully functioning by March 2013.

Financials of San Salvador and Sonsonate Stores (Sep 2012)

Store:	San Salvador	Sonsonate
Sales	\$22,393.30	\$9,156.37
Cost of Sold Goods	\$9,611.00	\$3,503.49
Gross Profit	\$12,782.30	\$5,652.88
Total Operation Costs	\$9,357.88	\$5,771.09
Net Income	\$3,424.42	-\$118.21

1. Some of the VisionSpring financial figures quoted in this section have not been audited by a third-party firm. Numbers may be different from numbers stated in audited financial reports.

- **Vision Entrepreneurs turnover levels.** The turnover level of Vision Entrepreneurs is another factor affecting the profitability of the hub-and-spoke model. By the end of 2011, 37% of Vision Entrepreneurs that were hired had left the organization and by mid-2012 the turnover ratio was around 30%. During the field visit, store managers explained that it usually takes about three months to fully train a Vision Entrepreneur and for them to begin fulfilling sales targets. Nonetheless, Vision Entrepreneurs are paid during these three months. Payroll expenses per entrepreneur during the three months of training are a minimum of US\$600, excluding commissions and other work-related costs (i.e. transportation or training time invested by managers).

In 2011, payroll expenses accounted for 42% of total operating expenses and Vision Entrepreneurs comprised about half of the total staff. At the same time, Vision Entrepreneurs bring in approximately 70% to 80% of total sales. When the organization loses an entrepreneur, costs and sales are adversely impacted, thus affecting profitability. As discussed later in the report, VisionSpring implemented a new hiring process for Vision Entrepreneurs to reduce turnover levels (see Improved Training for Vision Entrepreneurs).

- **Lack of resources for publicity and marketing.** According to VisionSpring's 2011 income statement, the organization invested just over US\$15,000 in marketing its stores and services (about 3% of total sales). Both staff and clients interviewed during the field visit explained that VisionSpring is still not a well-known organization in the communities where they operate, making the sales process more challenging. This is particularly the case for newer stores. VisionSpring is aware of the need for an improved marketing strategy and has already hired a new Executive Director who, among other things, will be responsible for increasing marketing resources. The organization is planning to invest 10% of total sales in marketing. VisionSpring expects that those resources will come from the reduction in costs in other areas of the organization.

Another factor that points to the organization's increased ability to be profitable is its decreasing dependency on grants as an income source. The proportion of revenues derived from grants significantly decreased from 48% in 2010 to 14% in 2011. This change is mainly due to a significant increase in sales from around US\$75,000 in 2010 to nearly US\$490,000 in 2011. According to VisionSpring's Chief Operating Officer, the organization does not expect to seek further grants as they plan on leveraging debt and equity to expand operations in El Salvador.

VisionSpring is putting in place needed steps to mitigate some of the factors that are driving up costs and, although expansion efforts required large sums of investments from the organization, it can be asserted that the hub-and-spoke model is profitable and sustainable. The organization expects the model to achieve positive net income by June 2013.

Results per Phase of Project Implementation

The VisionSpring hub-and-spoke model has proven to be a feasible business model to meet eye care needs of underserved communities and provide job opportunities for entrepreneurs with little to no previous work experience. Since the inception of the project, the hub-and-spoke model sold over 45,000 eyeglasses, with the total number of unique beneficiaries in 2011 alone totaling over 35,000, including clients, staff, and Vision Entrepreneurs.

The following are more specific results of the technical cooperation project according to its phases of implementation:

Phase 1: Mapping market gaps and network organizations in the region

In order to map market gaps and identify potential network organizations in the region, VisionSpring conducted a two-phase assessment in collaboration with Fairbourne Consulting. The assessment looked at the eye care market in five countries in Latin America: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. The first phase provided a general assessment and scored countries based on population, demand characteristics, competitive landscape, infrastructure, and regulatory environment. Fairbourne Consulting later ranked countries based on these scores and conducted an in-depth assessment of Mexico and Peru, the two highest ranked countries.

The second phase consisted of a thorough analysis of population statistics and current eye care services in the Mexican and Peruvian markets. The assessment concluded that Mexico had the most favorable operating environment for VisionSpring's expansion plans given its large market, strong existing infrastructure, and favorable regulatory environment.

This comprehensive market assessment led to the following results:

Redirection of resources to generate greater social impact in El Salvador. The experience VisionSpring obtained starting operations in El Salvador and other countries proved this expansion process was costly and time consuming. VisionSpring's management learned that conducting research and assessing the best market entry strategy could take six to nine months. This meant that most of the budget for the first year is invested in these activities rather than in providing eye care services. Therefore, VisionSpring considered that expanding within El Salvador was a more effective way to invest the resources of the technical cooperation project as opposed to expanding into new markets. This redirection of resources allowed VisionSpring to open two additional stores in El Salvador.

VisionSpring will continue to expand in the country after the second quarter of 2013, when the organization expects to be profitable. The ultimate goal of the organization is to have an optical store with its network of Vision Entrepreneurs in each department of El Salvador, totaling 14 VisionSpring stores.

Creation of partnerships for future expansion. The assessment also helped VisionSpring develop partnerships to distribute VisionSpring's glasses in other countries without the organization having a physical presence in those markets. VisionSpring has launched partnerships with several organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Pan American Silver in Bolivia, Mas Kapital in Mexico, Clinton Giustra Foundation in Peru, Fonkoze in Haiti, and Fundacion Paraguaya in Paraguay. These partnerships entail providing training and the support material necessary to replicate the figure of the Vision Entrepreneurs within these organizations. In this way, partners can create new job opportunities, impact low-income populations, and VisionSpring can continue to expand the reach of the model.

As explained later in the report, these partnerships have resulted in small networks that have the potential to benefit those at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. For instance, Mas Kapital (Mexico) has formed a network of 20 Vision Entrepreneurs, the Clinton Giustra Foundation (Peru) trained about 20 female Vision Entrepreneurs, and Fundacion Paraguaya (Paraguay) has trained another 30 female Vision Entrepreneurs.

Phase 2: Testing the feasibility of the hub-and-spoke model

To test the feasibility of the hub-and-spoke model, VisionSpring established a first store in Santa Ana in late 2010. The organization later established the stores in San Salvador and San Miguel. Although the technical cooperation project proposed the establishment of three stores and expansion to a new country, Vision Spring decided to consolidate the model in El Salvador by opening two additional stores in Ahuachapán and Sonsonate, in the southern west region of the country.

Additionally, VisionSpring carried out a number of activities to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of the model. Among these, Vision Spring improved the training program for Vision Entrepreneurs, set prices at competitive yet profitable levels, diversified procurement channels, enhanced marketing strategies, refined inventory management and overall business processes, and enhanced the product portfolio.

These activities led to the following results:

Expansion of the hub-and-spoke model to deliver greater social impact. With five stores opened by early 2011, VisionSpring was able to expand the hub-and-spoke model, consolidating the organization's presence in the western region of the country while jumpstarting operations in the eastern region.

Figure 2. VisionSpring's stores in El Salvador



Resources originally allocated to other project areas (i.e. mapping eye care needs in other markets or dissemination of lessons learned) were redirected to opening additional stores in El Salvador. This allowed VisionSpring to serve more communities and create more jobs.

Creation of an alternative for vision healthcare. In El Salvador, there are few options for vision care services at affordable prices. One of the options mentioned by interviewees is standard optical stores. Interviewees said that an average eyeglass can cost around US\$200 at an optical store, which is a high price considering that El Salvador's average minimum monthly wage is US\$195.²

Vision Entrepreneur
with a client during
a campaign in San
Salvador

Interviewees also mentioned FUEM, a foundation that provides similar services to those of VisionSpring, as another option for eye care services at more affordable prices than typical optical stores. Although FUEM provides affordable services, interviewees stated that FUEM's prices are not as low as VisionSpring's. A pair of reading glasses at VisionSpring can cost US\$5-US\$9, while at FUEM similar glasses start at US\$20. The hub-and-spoke model is therefore a viable alternative for providing affordable vision healthcare to low-income populations.


VisionSpring also offers flexible forms of payment, increasing accessibility to products. Clients can pay for glasses in two or three interest-free installments while the product is being manufactured.

² Minimum wage varies depending on the industry. The minimum wage reported is an average for all sectors, meaning that the minimum wage could be higher or lower than US\$195 depending on the sector. In the case of VisionSpring staff, the corresponding minimum wage is that of services—which is around US\$225 per month.

Interviewees stated that this helped them access the products without forcing them to choose between eye care services and covering basic monthly expenses.

Provision of eye care services to remote, hard-to-reach communities. VisionSpring reaches communities that, because of their location, do not have ample access to eye care services. This is particularly the case for rural and peri-urban areas. As a result of the expansion of the hub-and-spoke model, VisionSpring has been able to distribute over 45,000 glasses to people with eye care needs in isolated, underserved areas of the country.

Interviewees mentioned that optical stores usually do not enter remote communities and patients have to travel to urban centers to find these stores. FUEM, which implements community campaigns similar to those of VisionSpring's, only goes to remote communities if a threshold number of clients is reached. In other words, existing eye care services other than VisionSpring do not always serve hard-to-reach communities, even if there is a significant need for eye care services. In addition to providing lower priced products, VisionSpring enters communities regardless of the number of potential clients. VisionSpring still considers the sustainability and financial viability of the model, but the organization prioritizes communities that are most in need.



The optometrist with a client at a VisionSpring campaign in San Salvador

Patients interviewed during campaigns said it is very convenient to attend campaigns because tests are free and they do not have to miss work, as campaigns usually take place over the weekend or are organized at patients' workplace. When asked where they would go in case the services of VisionSpring were not available, most patients said they would not seek eye care. Others said they would go to an optical store or a private optometrist when they had the money to do so. Other patients mentioned they would go to FUEM.

As VisionSpring primarily seeks to service communities that do not have access to eye care services, the organization's activities have an important social impact. Clients in rural areas usually have never had a vision evaluation before participating in VisionSpring's campaigns. In urban and peri-urban areas, clients often have had vision assessments, but, because these services are expensive, they end up not purchasing the prescribed glasses. Having access to these minimum eye care services and treating eyesight problems allows clients to be more productive at work and carry out daily lives more easily, thus improving their economic potential and standards of living. VisionSpring has provided services to women working in *maquilas*³ and workers in sugar cane and coffee plantations, improving their vision problems.

3. Workers at *maquilas* spent long hours cutting, sewing, welding, among other tasks. These tasks can have adverse effects on health (including vision health) if no protective equipment is worn and no preventive measures and regular health assessments are carried out.

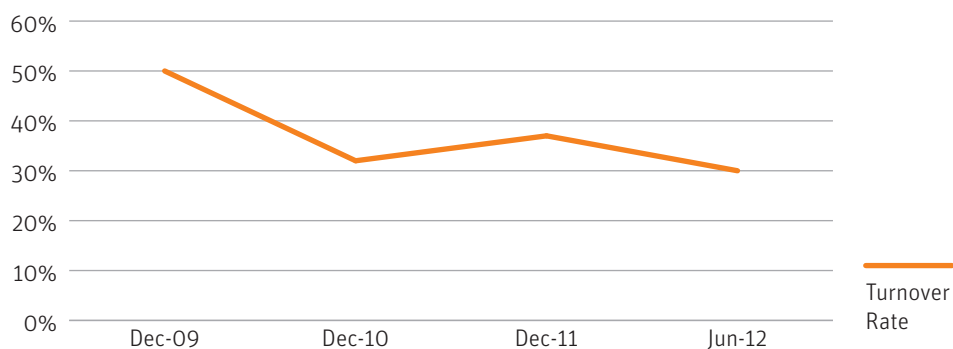
Improved training for Vision Entrepreneurs. VisionSpring has traditionally faced high levels of entrepreneur turnover. Vision Entrepreneurs work mostly in the field, finding contacts and organizing campaigns, which require self-motivation and ability to work under pressure to meet sales targets. All this can be stressful for newly hired entrepreneurs that soon become discouraged.

In order to reduce turnover levels, VisionSpring reformulated the recruitment process of Vision Entrepreneurs in late 2012. Among other things, the new recruitment method provides training to three to five people to fill in a single Vision Entrepreneur position. This new process allows VisionSpring to observe how different candidates deal with the daily workload in the field during the month-long training. Additionally, candidates know they are competing for the job, which allows VisionSpring to select the more committed performer.

While the impact of the new training and hiring process is not yet reflected in the latest turnover ratios reported by VisionSpring, the organization expects that the new process will reduce payroll costs and improve employee retention. However, it is expected that higher turnover levels persist in newer stores versus older, more established VisionSpring locations. According to store managers, low sales at newer stores are discouraging and cause entrepreneurs to leave the organization. As previously stated, new stores do not enjoy the same level of community recognition and visibility as more established stores and this impacts sales numbers.

Enabled job creation and improved working conditions. Vision Entrepreneurs not only play a key role in taking vision services to underserved communities, but their role also creates job opportunities and alternative income for Salvadorians. Since the beginning of the technical cooperation project until June 2012, the hub-and-spoke model created around 70 new full-time jobs between Vision Entrepreneurs and store staff. During field interviews, most of the new entrepreneurs and staff said they had been unemployed prior to joining VisionSpring. Additionally, although the model does not purposely target female candidates, about 90% of current entrepreneurs are women.

Figure 3. Vision Entrepreneur Turnover Rate



In addition to creating job opportunities, interviewees believe they are giving back to the community by working at a nonprofit organization that improves the health of underserved communities. An entrepreneur explains: “I had been unemployed for about three months when I learned about this position. At the beginning it was hard to work in the field, but I felt good because I was helping people get what they really needed.” Other interviewees expressed interest in growing within the organization and some have considered studying optometry to better serve the organization.

Interviewed entrepreneurs and store personnel find working at VisionSpring not only more emotionally, but also financially rewarding compared to previous jobs. Vision Entrepreneurs have a base salary that corresponds to the minimum monthly wage for the services sector, approximately US\$224 per month, plus all benefits prescribed by the law (health insurance, vacation time, sick days, social security, among others). Additionally, Vision Entrepreneurs get commissions on monthly sales (Table 2). Entrepreneurs that meet sales targets (number of products, number of referrals, and number of campaigns) are also eligible for monthly bonuses that range between US\$25 and US\$75. On average, a Vision Entrepreneur makes US\$800 to US\$1,000 a month between base salary and commissions—about four times the minimum monthly wage.

The Vision Entrepreneur

- Is between 20-50 years old
- Earns a base salary plus commissions, totaling an average income of US\$800-1,000 a month
- 90% of Vision Entrepreneurs are women
- Most were unemployed prior to joining VisionSpring

Table 2. Scale of Commissions for Vision Entrepreneurs

Monthly Sales (US\$)	Commission (%)	Additional Income (US\$)
US\$700-1,200	5%	US\$35-60
US\$1,200-1,600	6%	US\$72-96
US\$1,600-2,000	7%	US\$112-140
US\$2,000-2,400	8%	US\$160-192
US\$2,400-2,800	9%	US\$216-252
US\$2,800 and up	10%	US\$280 and up

When entrepreneurs were asked to compare their current income and work experience at VisionSpring to prior jobs, entrepreneurs and managers said the monthly income is similar. Nonetheless, they all explain that the workload in prior jobs was significantly higher and they had to work longer hours. An interviewee explained: “In my old job, I had a start time but no end time. I did not have much time to spend with my family and even less time to study.” The income at VisionSpring is therefore effectively higher compared to their previous jobs.

VisionSpring also provides job growth opportunities for staff. Some of the store staff started their work with the organization as Vision Entrepreneurs and became Supervisors and then Store Managers. Interviewed managers have on average five years working at VisionSpring and in-depth knowledge of the fieldwork and the organization. Store managers also receive commissions on monthly sales and targets met by the store. As a result of the expansion of the hub-and-spoke model, full-time employees increased from one to 20 and Vision Entrepreneurs increased from 10 to 50.

Refined product portfolio. During the expansion phase, VisionSpring learned that having a diversified portfolio of products was crucial for growing the model. The organization initially focused on reading glasses only, but these had low profit margin and could only help a narrow portion of the population—individuals between 35-60 years with near-vision issues. This limited the organization’s capacity to help children, youth, or adults with advanced vision issues. In order to serve these other segments of the population and increase the long-term sustainability of its operations, VisionSpring included prescription glasses in its portfolio. VisionSpring is now able to serve about 80% of the eye care needs of patients as opposed to the 30% it was serving through the provision of reading glasses alone.

Phase 3: Exploring other distribution and manufacturing opportunities

In order to explore other manufacturing and distribution opportunities, VisionSpring identified several partners from nonconventional distribution channels—such as wholesale distributors and private sector companies—and local suppliers to manufacture glasses at competitive prices.

These activities led to the following results:

Identification of nonconventional distribution channels. VisionSpring identified 26 organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean as potential partners to sell VisionSpring’s products. These potential partners include microfinance organizations, healthcare providers, and private companies where vision issues are common (i.e. companies in the mining sector), among others. The partnerships aim at replicating the concept of the Vision Entrepreneur within these organizations. To this intent, VisionSpring provided training and support materials to create Vision Entrepreneurs in these networks. Beyond creating job opportunities, these partnerships allow VisionSpring to meet underserved eye care needs in other markets in the region.

At the time of the field visit, VisionSpring had active partnerships with the following four organizations:

- **Pan American Silver (Bolivia): VisionSpring formalized its partnership with the Canadian mining company in the summer of 2011.**

The purpose of the partnership was to provide affordable glasses to miners and their families, as well as to members of surrounding communities. VisionSpring's staff traveled to Bolivia to train Pan American Silver's staff on how to assess vision issues and recommend appropriate VisionSpring glasses to clients. The training was provided at five health centers to about 10-15 doctors, nurses, and community leaders.

- **Mas Kapital (Mexico): the partnership between VisionSpring and the microfinance organization was sealed in mid-2012.**

VisionSpring provided two in-person training sessions to Mas Kapital's staff and hired a person to provide continued support to the organization in Mexico. As a result of the partnership, Mas Kapital currently has a network of 20 mostly women Vision Entrepreneurs.

- **Clinton Foundation (Peru): this partnership is part of the Clinton Giustra Sustainable Growth Initiative (CGSGI), a project to empower individuals in developing countries by providing them with tools to work themselves out of poverty.** The partnership was also formalized in mid-2012 and in October of the same year the CGSGI staff from Peru visited VisionSpring's operations to better understand the model. The foundation has already trained 20 female Vision Entrepreneurs.

- **Fonkoze (Haiti): VisionSpring established the partnership with this microfinance organization in early 2012.** In the case of Fonkoze, VisionSpring provided supporting materials for the organization and held several calls with their staff. Fonkoze launched a pilot of the Vision Entrepreneur model in July 2012 with 11 trained entrepreneurs.

In addition to these partnerships, VisionSpring has engaged with several wholesale organizations and sector-specific associations to expand its distribution channels. VisionSpring has engaged with wholesale distributors Mi Tienda in Mexico and Tenda Atacado in Brazil—both OMJ clients that were introduced to VisionSpring through the initiative—as well as with the association of coffee cooperatives CAFENICA in Nicaragua. Along with the partnerships mentioned, these distribution channels will allow VisionSpring to service new markets without incurring initial legal and logistical costs related to establishing a presence in new countries.

Identification of options for local manufacturing. VisionSpring studied manufacturing its products locally as a way to reduce operating costs. China continues to be the best sourcing option for frames. The organization considered sourcing alternatives in Argentina and Brazil, but these manufacturers offer high-end products that are not a good fit for VisionSpring’s target market. Regarding lenses and prescription glasses, VisionSpring currently works with a mix of local providers to obtain these products. However, the organization has faced challenges working with these providers, including high production costs and a lack of inventory reliability. Frames and lenses represent about 35% of the organization’s overall costs, but the products from local providers do not have consistent quality, and, during times of increased demand, providers are often unable to deliver sufficient inventory. Interviewed store managers explained that these issues often result in delivery delays and defective products.

VisionSpring’s senior management is aware of these challenges and has taken steps to establish the organization’s own lenses laboratory. Although the building of a lenses lab was not part of the planned TC activities and no TC resources were used for this, VisionSpring believes that having its own lab is a crucial step to improve operations and a solution to direct financial resources to other activities (i.e. opening new stores, marketing, etc.). The organization expects to have its own lab fully functioning by the first quarter of 2013.

Phase 4: Disseminating lessons learned

With OMJ’s support, VisionSpring continues to promote innovative business models that improve low-income people’s access to better products and services. These efforts include disseminating lessons learned during the implementation of the technical cooperation project through the following activities and events:

Participating in OMJ’s Base of the Pyramid Week. VisionSpring presented its experience with the hub-and-spoke model during the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) Week in May 2012. The BoP Week promoted a discussion around the power of distribution platforms for scaling up business models that serve the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. The event gathered private sector representatives (42%), public sector entities (12%), nonprofit organizations (16%), other multilateral organizations (21%), and representatives from media and academic centers (9%). VisionSpring participated in this series of discussions with other organizations that have implemented similar models in the region and exchanged ideas on how to maximize results and expand their reach.

Creating databases for potential partnerships. VisionSpring has created a database that consolidates information on current and potential partners for the distribution and manufacturing of reading glasses. This database includes 57 organizations worldwide (of which 26 are in Latin America) with potential to either replicate the VisionSpring model or to serve as channels to source from or distribute the products. These partnerships include a diverse group of organizations beyond vision care providers, such as microfinance institutions, mining companies, and wholesale distributors. As previously mentioned, VisionSpring has already engaged with several of these organizations to expand its business model to new markets.

Summary of Results of the Expansion of the Hub-and-Spoke Model

The following table summarizes the most relevant results of the technical cooperation project:

Indicator	2009 (Baseline)	2010	2011	June 2012
Number of stores	0	3	5	5
Beneficiaries (total per period)	3,215	8,094	35,099	15,038
Clients (serviced per year)	3,204	8,054	35,031	14,968
Vision Entrepreneurs (at the end of the reporting period)	10	26	33	50
Full-time staff (at the end of the reporting period)	1	14	35	20
Total Sales (units per year)	2,179	6,074	23,354	14,968
Readers/Sunglasses	2,179	4,330	14,911	8,446
Prescription glasses	0	1,744	8,443	6,522
Vision Entrepreneurs Turnover Ratio	50%	32%	37%	30%
Sales Revenues (US\$)	US\$20,000	US\$75,000	US\$489,000	US\$332,000 (by May 2012)

Other Lessons Learned

This independent evaluation gathered additional perspectives from main beneficiaries about the hub-and-spoke model. Entrepreneurs, staff, and clients offered valuable feedback to improve the work of VisionSpring in El Salvador. Senior management and store managers provided suggestions for overcoming broader challenges, such as limited resources to invest in marketing and higher-tech equipment. On the other hand, Vision Entrepreneurs and store staff offered recommendations related to their daily work, such as improving transportation and tackling staffing issues. Staff and clients suggested enhancing brand visibility and marketing strategies.

The following are the main recommendations gathered from beneficiaries during the field visit:

Transportation. VisionSpring currently has three vehicles to assist its five stores in El Salvador. Vision Entrepreneurs often need to use other forms of transportation—buses or taxis—when these vehicles are not available. This impacts the number of campaigns stores can schedule per day, limiting revenue-generating activities.

Specialized staff. Vision Entrepreneurs and store staff mentioned that there is usually only one optometrist available per store and this limits the number of daily campaigns they can organize. They believe that by having more optometrists per store they could organize more campaigns per day, which means reaching more communities and increasing sales.

Work equipment and devices. Vision Entrepreneurs often mentioned that optometrists do not always have all the tools they need to conduct a comprehensive vision evaluation. “Sometimes the equipment we take to the field does not have enough battery and we are not able to serve all patients that attended the campaign. We give out references for them to go to the stores, but some clients will not go to the stores. These are people that really need our services. Also, they represent lost sales,” explained one Vision Entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs also mentioned that most devices need an upgrade.

Marketing strategy. All interviewees agreed that VisionSpring must be more aggressive in marketing its products and services. Vision Entrepreneurs said it is challenging to find contacts and organize campaigns in new communities because VisionSpring is still not widely known. One entrepreneur explains: “the first reaction of potential clients when I introduce VisionSpring is that products and services are expensive and they cannot afford them, mainly because the name VisionSpring sounds like a standard optical store.” Another entrepreneur said: “when we explain that VisionSpring is a nonprofit organization, communities think that the products might be used or are of low quality. In other cases, the organization is mistaken for FUEDEM, which is VisionSpring’s main competitor.” Although VisionSpring has made significant efforts to better market the company through radio, *perifoneo*,⁴ and print media, a common suggestion from beneficiaries is to increase awareness of VisionSpring’s mission, products, and services.

4. *Perifoneo* is a marketing strategy widely used in Latin America by which publicity is delivered through a car with loudspeakers that goes around target communities.

Conclusions

This independent assessment has served to verify that VisionSpring has implemented the activities outlined in the technical cooperation project with Opportunities for the Majority. The evaluation provides evidence of how such activities fulfilled expected outcomes of the project, including justifications for changes in plans and the results of such changes. More importantly, the assessment was able to gather sufficient information to assert that the hub-and-spoke model is a feasible business model to serve low-income populations.

Redirecting resources to consolidate the model in El Salvador rather than expanding VisionSpring operations into new markets seemed well justified and coherent with available resources. After a careful review of the final TC budget and other financial documents consulted during the field visit, the evaluation determined that resources were allocated in accordance with the project phases of implementation. This assessment also asserts that invested resources and implemented activities led to the expected outcomes and results.

The hub-and-spoke model is therefore a viable solution to serve unmet eye care needs and a source of employment for those at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. The perspectives gathered during key stakeholder meetings support this conclusion. Partnerships with organizations in other countries also provide evidence that this model can be replicated in other communities where the need for basic health services exists.

From a financial investment perspective, the evaluation concludes that VisionSpring is an example of a pre-commercial model worth investing in. The model has capacity to be profitable and to be scaled. However, it is important to consider that expansion efforts may temporarily drive down profitability. As VisionSpring solidifies its presence in El Salvador and takes the needed steps to mitigate some of its operating costs, the organization will reach profitability, proving that the model is sustainable, independent of grant resources.

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Appendix

Table 1. List of Interviewees

No.	Interviewee	Job Title	Store / Location
1	Elizabeth Boggs Davidsen	Team Leader	Opportunities for the Majority
2	Lina Salazar Ortigón	Research Fellow	Opportunities for the Majority
3	Peter Eliassen	Chief Operating Officer	VisionSpring Corporate
4	Heidy Serpas	National Director	San Salvador
5	Stefanie Carado	Vision Entrepreneur	San Salvador
6	Marilín Fuentes	Vision Entrepreneur	San Salvador
7	Noel Hernandez	Store Manager	Sonsonate
8	Catherine Mendoza	Client Representative	Sonsonate
9	Ligia Alfaro	Vision Entrepreneur	Sonsonate
10	Hazel Marinero	Cashier	San Salvador
11	Marvin Montesino	Vision Entrepreneur	San Salvador
12	Elmer Martinez	Vision Entrepreneur	Santa Ana
13	Mario	Client (in store)	Santa Ana
14	Sara	Client (in store)	Santa Ana
15	Jenny	Client (in store)	Santa Ana
16	David	Client (in store)	Santa Ana
17	Liset	Client (in store)	Santa Ana
18	Lidia Salinas	Store Manager	Santa Ana
19	José Guillermo	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
20	Jorge	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
21	Oscar	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
22	Napoleón	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
23	José	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
24	Ana Cecilia	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
25	Luis Alonso	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
26	Jose	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
27	Jessica	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador
28	Pedro	Client (during a campaign)	San Salvador







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