

**“We must develop a lot of awareness to get people in government to know more about the product”:  
Gerardo Medina of RestoringVision on the  
importance of partnerships and integrating  
distribution channels into existing government  
programs.**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard**

**November 27, 2024**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you please start by introducing yourself and telling me more about the Peru Pension program. How long has it been around and how does it work?**

**Gerardo Medina:** Sure. I'm in charge of RestoringVision's Latin American and Caribbean programs. We started a relationship with MSH [Management Sciences for Health] Peru in 2017 with our community outreach program, where they buy a small quantity at a [subsidized price] to serve 8,400 Peruvians with reading glasses and 5,946 for UV protection. MSH-Peru is on the equator, closer to the sun, so UV radiation is higher there. Peru has one of the biggest UV indexes in the world. They have a lot of cataracts, [pterygiums] and other problems related to UV radiation.



We started with those glasses, and the pilot program was very successful. We served five states in 2017, the first relationship in which MSH-Peru and RestoringVision started working together. In 2018, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, MIDIS, approved a program to serve around 540,000 Peruvians in the pension program. Thanks to Vision Catalyst Fund and other donors, MSH-Peru and RestoringVision started to work together on a program to reach

500,000 users from the pension program over a two-year period. 2017 was our first contact, and then, in 2018, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion wanted something bigger. MSH-Peru started making connections, and RestoringVision started to look for funding. When the Vision Catalyst Fund came through, we began that program in 2022.



It was a community outreach program where they bought reading glasses and sunglasses in a very low quantity at the [subsidized price] just to learn more about the product. This was the first connection.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Before you did the pension program, what did you use for delivery? Community health workers?**



**Gerardo Medina:** We worked with MSH-Peru and health workers. It was a very small quantity, with the first contact. The main program is funded by the Vision Catalyst Fund and started in 2022. It aims to help 500,000 people in Peru over two years. MSH-Peru, Vision Catalyst Fund, and RestoringVision signed an agreement for the fund. In Peru, MSH-Peru signed an agreement with the government with this pension program. At that point it was a very good achievement to have a partner signing with a local government, because that is not always easy. So far, this program has dispensed 245,000 reading glasses to end users.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did they do that?**



**Gerardo Medina:** The pension program serves everyone over 65 years old in Peru. There is an entity called SISFOH ["Sistema de Focalización de Hogares," or "Household Targeting System"], which filters users who live in extreme poverty. There are also filters to confirm they are over 65 by checking their identifications, birth dates, et cetera. The government approves an annual budget for this pension program, and the users' amount increases year-by-year, depending on the budget. Once these users are in the program, they are already in a database. The government knows where they live, that they are over 65, and maybe 99% of them have presbyopia. Presbyopia starts at the age of 40, so if we consider that it's an aging condition, most of them over 65 have presbyopia. You can see it with the campaigns—we already have a database with our targets, and where they are located.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How are you working with MSH-Peru, or are you part of MSH-Peru? How do you work with the government on this?**



**Gerardo Medina:** I'm in charge of RestoringVision's Latin American and Caribbean programs. Our partner is MSH-Peru, which is a local NGO in Peru. It's a branch of MSH, affiliated with MSH internationally. They have a contractual relationship and an agreement with the government, so we work directly with MSH-Peru. We have been introduced to the director of

Pension 65, and we are having very good discussions, but we are not involved contractually, which is something very important to [note] when we work with governments.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's your role in the partnership?**



**Gerardo Medina:** My role is to coordinate all the logistics. In RestoringVision we have an operations department, but I need to make sure shipments coming from China get there safely and on time. I also exchange information with their freight forwarder and their international commerce broker in Peru. Also, I coordinate the reports that MSH-Peru sends, as agreed with the Vision Catalyst Fund. We monitor the quantity delivered per period and the cumulative quantity that we have [distributed].

Since 2011, [Peru] has had something like seven presidents, so the political conditions are always [uncertain]. At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, the president was removed and a new president came into power. The first issue is to ensure the security and the safety of personnel. I coordinate and monitor those kinds of things and collect testimonials.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How have you been able to keep this program consistent when there's been so many different people in power?**



**Gerardo Medina:** It's something we need to monitor. When something changes, we know the delivery rate will slow down. At that point, I am in constant contact with the director of MSH-Peru, who is also monitoring with the government on how the territories and provinces are doing. They are monitoring where it's safe to keep delivering, and where it isn't. Finally, things settle down and we continue. The cost of delivery slowing down during one period will not stop the program.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think it is about Peru that has made this pension program possible for eyeglasses?**



**Gerardo Medina:** Making and developing a relationship takes time, it's little-by-little. The reading glasses we give to the most vulnerable population makes an immediate impact. We must develop a lot of awareness to get people in government to know more about the product.



A very good thing with MSH-Peru is their implementation quality. They track from the first step to the next, so you know exactly in what quantities the donation is spreading across the country. The front-line people are key to this program. We have a lot of personnel who make the first touch, i.e. face-to-face contact with the elderly population, that's key for this program. Also, the commitment between the government and MSH-Peru's personnel is strong. The program won an award this year from the government for best practices in public management in the public-private category.



The program is well-recognized for changing the paradigm in Peru. We have great leadership with our partner, MSH-Peru. They have a lot of experience in assessing how governments implement a health system. There's a lack of optometrists for the work we are doing globally as well as in Peru, which has a population of 33 million people, with around 3.5 million over 40 years old and living in poverty. A lot of people need reading glasses who don't have access to them. The Peruvian government understands very clearly that there is a need to cover.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you thinking of scaling this beyond Peru?**



**Gerardo Medina:** We have always wondered, "How can we scale and expand this program in other countries?" RestoringVision ran three studies in Peru, with the help of the Vision Catalyst Fund and other funds. We made a study on the impact we have on people's lives. For example, I have presbyopia and need eyeglasses with the power of 2.5 just to see my cell phone or my keyboard. I cannot work without my glasses. For me, the impact is very clear. But when you see people's faces, it's incredible—how do we measure that? How to convert that into numbers in black and white?

We ran a very comprehensive impact study, and one finding is that receiving reading glasses increases the likelihood of users achieving high self-sufficiency by 39%. It also showed that receiving reading glasses increased productivity by 36%, which is very consistent with other studies around the world. Making that study with the government was very important, because they have first-hand numbers on the impact. We also ran another study on how to replicate this program, and we found other countries with good potential. If you think about it, the overall idea is not complex. What changes is the value proposition. That requires monitoring and training, et cetera, but we know it's possible to help more people and we are willing to expand this program in other countries.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's the next country? What's the timeline for expansion?**

**Gerardo Medina:** We don't have a timeline exactly right now. We are just starting to make our expansion plans. We want to start in 2025 with our first pilots in other countries.

We have a very good potential group of countries, possibly Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia, Colombia, or Mexico, which has a very good social program. We will start making connections and developing this plan.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you going to start with one country at a time, or many countries?**

**Gerardo Medina:** Possibly between one and three at a time. We believe it's better growing little-by-little, and having control of our programs, but the need is very, very big. The potential to help people is huge, but it requires knowledge of what you are doing, how you are implementing the program, and how you evolve and develop the program in a country.

## Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the first steps you are planning?



**Gerardo Medina:** The first step is to find trusted partners to make a relationship in a new country, and then start making contact with the people in charge of the pension programs. We need to show the value of having a pair of reading glasses, mostly for people who are not even aware they already have presbyopia, those who little-by-little lose the capacity of seeing up close. Then we can make pilots and share our operational background, boundaries, and evaluate the pilots, while continuously improving vision.



Scaling up depends on the capacity, on the delivery experience. We are delivering physical products, so we need to have this capacity in a country. We also need to evaluate what, or who, will be on the front line face-to-face with the user. That will be very important. There are a lot of variables to consider, but starting a first connection with MSH-Peru and starting to know their processes, that's very important.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much.**

## ICON LEGEND



Advocacy



Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's*

*not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*