



AAI Eyeglasses Project.

Globally, about one person in ten needs eyeglasses to see properly. In Albania few people wear glasses, and in Shkrel only a handful of students out of a population of over 700 wear them. Either Albanians are genetically superior, or there are a lot of students who need glasses. There is a cultural stigma attached to wearing glasses, but also there is extreme poverty in the villages in Shkrel, and very few homes have parents who read anything, including newspapers. To determine which of these three constraints were most important, Steve applied in the fall of 2008 to the Dutch Embassy in Albania under its "Small Grant Program" for funding to test student eyes in Shkrel, and to provide eyeglasses to those students and teachers who needed them. The grant was approved for \$17,000.



During Steve's 2009 trip to Albania, at the top of the agenda was the eyeglasses project. He, along with several aids, spent a hectic six days (out of seven) visiting Boge, Xhaj, Vrithe, Dedaj, Zagore, and Reç testing eyes and fitting needy students and teachers with glasses. In the six days they screened nearly 600 students and provided glasses to about 70. In the lower valley schools, attendance wasn't as good and more screenings will be offered in the fall those who weren't able to come the first time.



From the feedback that Steve got from students, teachers, and parents, it appears that the cultural stigma is the third most important of the three constraints. Poverty is most critical, parents simply couldn't afford glasses for their sons and daughters, but this issue was exacerbated by the lack of reading among parents, thus reducing the significance to them of eyeglasses. The cultural stigma did raise its head on some occasions, but the number of students that began wearing their new glasses immediately, as well as the effusive thanks from students, parents, and teachers, led Steve to believe that they will continue wear their new glasses in the future.