VOSH represented in the Forum on the Visual Health Crisis in Latin America - FRANJA 2025

Dr. Mónica Márquez Galvis

Optometry Program Fundación Universitaria del Área Andina, Pereira, Colombia

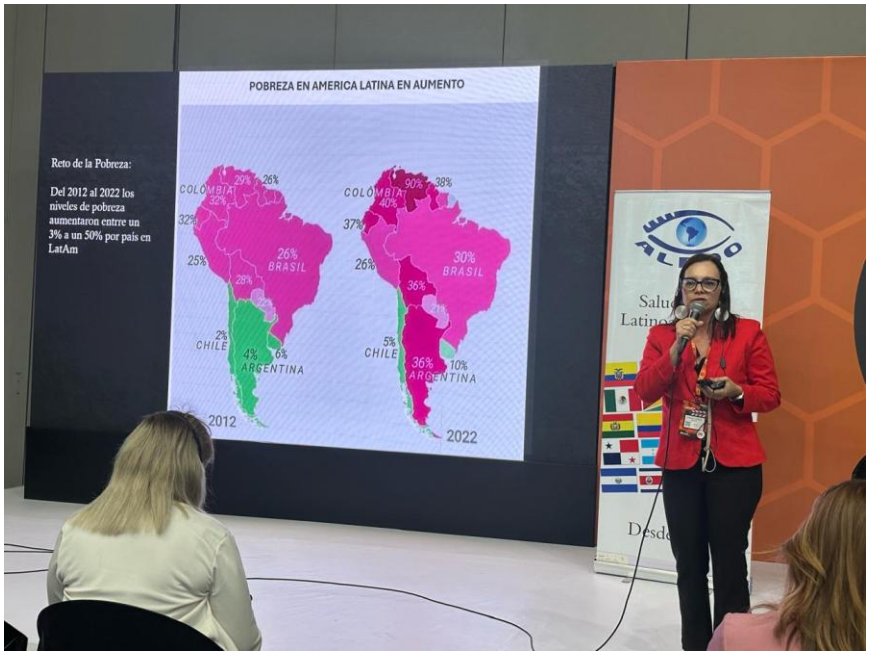
At the Forum on the Visual Health Crisis in Latin America, held during the FRANJA 2025 event on May 16 in Bogotá, Colombia, Dr. Mónica Márquez Galvis—faculty adviser of the SVOSH-Areandina-Pereira chapter—delivered a presentation on behalf of VOSH/International. She highlighted five key challenges and the state of affairs currently affecting the region, with the first two focusing on poverty and insufficient national investment in public health.

1. Poverty:

In South American countries, poverty levels between 2012 and 2022 show a worrying increase. In countries such as Venezuela (from 29% to 90%) and Argentina (from 4% to 36%), the deterioration is significant. This increase in poverty has a direct impact on life expectancy, which is inversely proportional to the level of poverty. Only a few countries with high poverty levels achieve a life expectancy of more than 80 years, thanks to maintaining sustained investments in public health.

2. National investments in public health:

There is a direct correlation between public health investments and life expectancy. According to 2010 data, only a few Latin American countries allocated 5% or more of their GDP to this sector. This threshold of investment is associated with a minimum life expectancy of 70 years.



The remaining three challenges identified in the region relate to the availability of human resources, optometric education, and the integration of optometry into national health systems. These challenges are particularly important given that uncorrected refractive errors represent the leading cause of visual impairment globally (defined as visual acuity between 20/70 and 20/400) and the second cause of blindness. In countries such as El Salvador, Panama, Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, and Honduras, the prevalence of visual impairment ranges between 11% and 14%.

3. Number and distribution of professional staff:

In the LAC region, only a few countries meet the recommended ratio of one optometrist per 10,000 inhabitants. Jamaica, for example, faces a critical shortage, with only 33 optometrists, equivalent to one for every 85,000 inhabitants. While countries like Colombia, Puerto Rico, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago show ratios close to 1 for every 7,000 to 9,000 inhabitants, this does not guarantee sufficient coverage, as most professionals are concentrated in urban areas. This situation raises a key concern: if at least one annual eye examination is recommended, a ratio of 1:10,000 would imply access to an eye examination every three or four years.

4. Professional optometric education:

The quality and scope of optometry education are closely linked to the legal recognition of the profession in each country. Colombia has a robust regulatory framework that supports the development of undergraduate and graduate academic programs. This has also enabled the strengthening of professional and specialized associations. However, most Latin American countries are still fighting for the formal recognition of optometry as a health profession.

5. Inclusion of optometry in national public health plans:

As the key discipline of primary eye health care, optometry should be explicitly integrated into the national public health systems across the region. So far, only Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, and Ecuador have achieved this level of integration, enabling their population to access optometric services directly, without requiring prior referrals from general practitioners.

Final Thoughts

These five realities align with the guidelines outlined in the World Health Organization's World Vision Report, which urges countries to recognize optometry as a primary eye health care profession, advance toward universal visual health coverage, strengthen the training and distribution of eye care professionals; promote research; and ensure equitable planning of interventions, thereby reducing disparities in access.

The visual health crisis in Latin America is an urgent problem, but also an opportunity to act in a coordinated manner. Recognizing optometry as a fundamental pillar of health systems, investing in the education of optometrists, and ensuring their equitable geographic distribution are necessary steps toward transforming the lives of millions of people across the region.

For more information, contact Dr. Marquez at mmmarquez@areandina.edu.co

VOSH/International thanks Dr Marquez for representing us at this event.