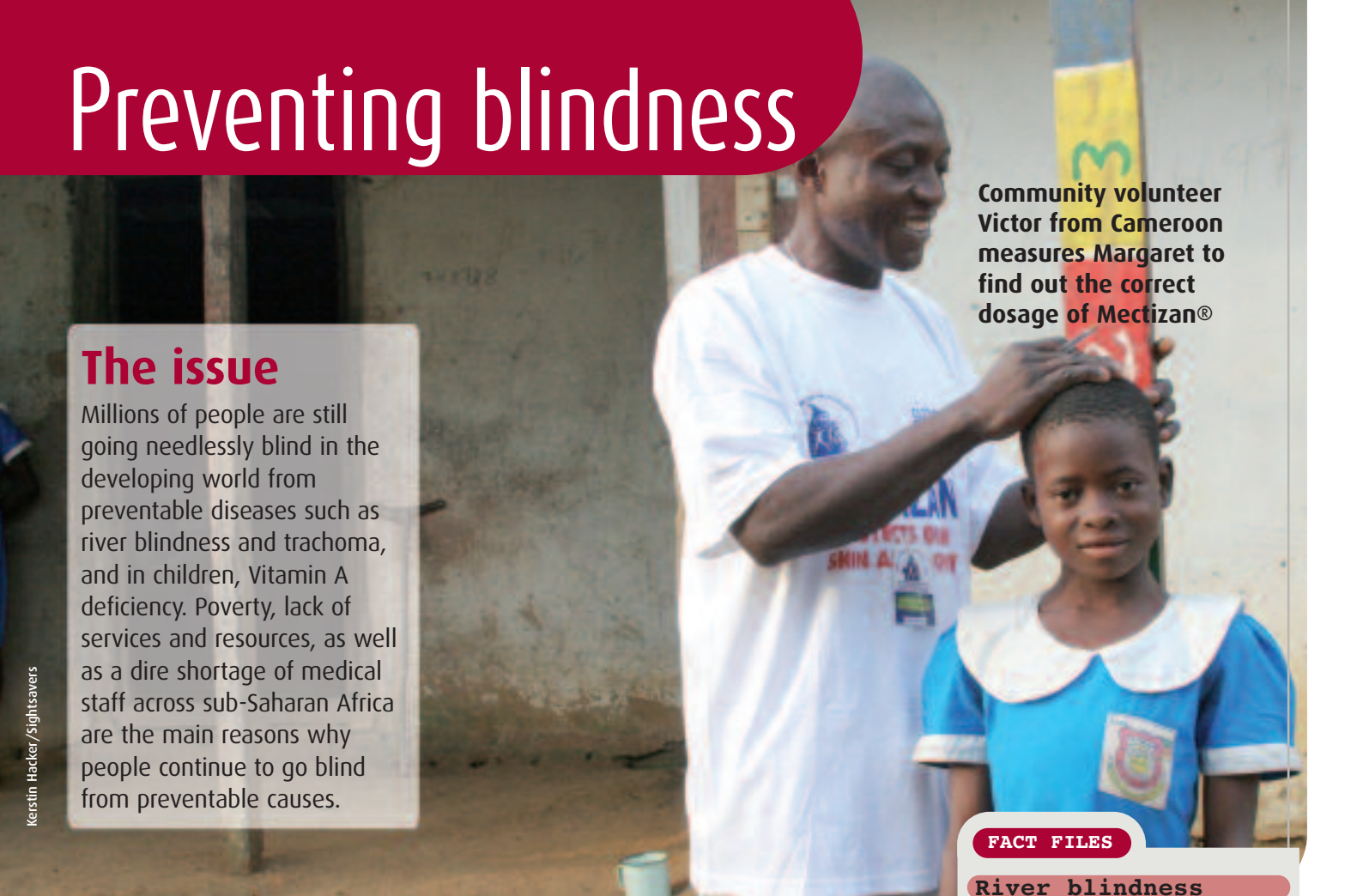


Preventing blindness



Community volunteer Victor from Cameroon measures Margaret to find out the correct dosage of Mectizan®

The issue

Millions of people are still going needlessly blind in the developing world from preventable diseases such as river blindness and trachoma, and in children, Vitamin A deficiency. Poverty, lack of services and resources, as well as a dire shortage of medical staff across sub-Saharan Africa are the main reasons why people continue to go blind from preventable causes.

Kerstin Hacker/Sightsavers

FACT FILES

River blindness

- 300,000 people are blind from river blindness in West and Central Africa, and a further 125 million are at risk from it.
- The disease is spread through the bite of the black simlium fly, which breeds in fast flowing rivers.
- River blindness can be prevented by a yearly dose of the drug Mectizan®, over at least 20 years.

Trachoma

- Trachoma is a disease of poverty, affecting primarily women and children in hot, dry and dusty areas where there is little sanitation, and limited access to medical care.
- Years of repeated infection can result in trichiasis, when the eyelid turns inwards and the eyelashes rub on the eyeball, causing scarring, terrible pain and eventually blindness.
- Sightsavers supports the World Health Organization's **SAFE** strategy: a combination of **S**urgery, **A**ntibiotics, **F**ace washing and **E**nvironmental Hygiene.

Sightsavers solution

Preventing river blindness - Our partners train community volunteers to oversee and distribute the drug Mectizan® which must be taken over 20 years in order to prevent river blindness. Mectizan® is donated by the pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. which has promised to continue to provide the drug free of charge for as long as it is needed.

Tackling trachoma - Communities are taught the importance of hygiene and face washing to prevent the spread of trachoma. Ointment is provided to treat people who already have the infection, and finally if it's progressed to the later state of trichiasis we perform surgery, which can be done at a local health clinic or even in the home, meaning that people do not have to travel huge distances to seek treatment.

Stopping childhood blindness - It's important to ensure that children with eye conditions are identified and treated at the earliest opportunity. As well as distributing Mectizan® to children, we work with governments to facilitate Vitamin A distribution programmes and also promote health education, such as teaching mothers about the importance of keeping children's faces clean to prevent the spread of trachoma.

Health care in the community - One of the key ways of preventing blindness is by integrating eye care into existing primary health care provision, which focuses on bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work. We provide training in eye health to community health workers so they can identify and treat people with common eye conditions during home visits and refer them on for treatment if necessary - these measures can prevent more complex eye problems occurring.

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a closer look

Nasha Kilintai is now free from the pain of trachoma, after being identified and treated through the Shompole Trachoma Project. She'd been coping with severe trachoma for a number of years, and had trichiasis in her right eye, as a result of years of repeated infection.

Like many Maasai living in Kenya's Rift Valley she'd been plucking lashes from her eye with tweezers to relieve the pain.

Thanks to the Shompole project she can now see well enough to do intricate tasks such as needlework.

Free from pain



James Georgalakis/Sightsavers

Proud to prevent river blindness



Caroline Irby/Sightsavers

Gouagna Coulibaly is the only female distributing the drug Mectizan® to prevent river blindness in the Tienfala district in Mali.

"I'm very proud to be the only woman doing this, although I would also like to see more female distributors. But there aren't enough women who know how to write." She says.

"I am motivated in my work because Mectizan® has a positive effect and people are not blind because of this treatment."