

Inclusive education strategy

Championing every
child's right to
inclusive and
quality education



Sightsavers

Zambo, 9, is supported to attend school through our inclusive education programme in Cameroon's Centre Region.



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Cover image

Primary school students supported by our European Union funded education project in Bombali District, Sierra Leone.

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Acronyms

CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DSL	Designated safeguarding leads
GCE	Global Campaign for Education
GEMR	Global Education Monitoring Report
GENIE	Gender and inclusion in education
ICEVI	International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment
IDDC	International Disability and Development Consortium
IRO	Independent research organisation
LMICs	Low and middle income countries
NTDs	Neglected tropical diseases
OPDs	Organisations of people with disabilities
RUL	Research, uptake and learning
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
WBU	World Blind Union



Marie Simone Bono teaches children at a primary school in Mali. The school is supported by Sightsavers' USAID funded education project.

Executive summary

All children have the right to a continuum of good quality inclusive education from early childhood onwards. This right is enshrined in international agreements and increasingly embedded in national legislation. However, the evidence shows children with disabilities in low and lower middle income countries are disproportionately likely to be either out of school or to receive a sub-standard education. This not only leads to poor educational outcomes for these children, but prevents broader social inclusion.

In order to promote educational access and quality for children with disabilities, Sightsavers and its partners will adopt a holistic system-strengthening approach. This will involve working at all three levels of education systems (institutional, organisational, and local) in order to achieve:

1. strengthened policy frameworks, education sector plans, and donor commitments that promote disability-inclusive education.
2. increased capacity of ministries of education and other agencies to support schools and communities to deliver disability-inclusive education.
3. increased capacity of schools and communities to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities.

The promotion of gender equitable education that meets the specific needs of girls and boys with disabilities has been established as a cross-cutting objective of all three goals.

A system-strengthening approach will enable Sightsavers and partners to identify the various elements in education systems that need to be more disability inclusive. In the light of that analysis, system-wide approaches can be identified that strengthen these elements and the links between them. This approach will also enable us to work across sectors – for

instance, to strengthen the links between education services and health and social services.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)¹ recognises that certain groups of children with disabilities are disproportionately educationally disadvantaged. These groups include girls, children with more complex support needs, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and children living in remote rural areas. We will strengthen the capacity of ministries of education at national, district and school levels to meet the specific needs of these children. Adopting social behaviour change approaches, we will also work with communities to facilitate their inclusion in education.

The CRPD further recognises that children with disabilities should not only go to school but receive an education of good quality in enabling environments. We will therefore assist schools and other centres of learning to adopt child-centred, gender-sensitive pedagogical approaches that benefit all learners and simultaneously address the specific needs of children with disabilities. We will also assist them to create stimulating, nurturing and accessible learning environments for these children. As part of this process, we will assist ministries of education to strengthen child safeguarding systems in schools and other centres of learning.

In the countries where we work, our in-country partners will be ministries of education, as they are the primary duty-bearers for education. We will continue to work closely with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) internationally, regionally and nationally in order to ensure our programmes address their concerns. Within our programmes, OPDs will be involved in all phases of the project cycle and play a leading role in all advocacy activities. Over the strategy implementation period, it is anticipated that we will increasingly participate in consortia implementing large education programmes over widespread geographical areas – this will enable us to significantly increase the scale and impact of our work. In order to maximise our global impact and promote joined-up advocacy, we will continue to participate in a variety of international alliances and coalitions.

Recognising the importance of local ownership and the value of situated expertise, we will ensure that teachers, local education officials, parents, and other community stakeholders actively participate in all stages of our programmes. We will also ensure that children with disabilities are provided with meaningful, accessible, and participatory opportunities to express their views and concerns, and shape their education provision.

Our system-strengthening approach will promote sustainability as it will build capacity at the different levels of education systems. Maximising local ownership of Sightsavers-supported programmes and promoting cost-effective, contextually appropriate forms of education provision will also increase the sustainability of our work. Recognising the need for Sightsavers-supported programmes to be environmentally sustainable, we will align with Sightsavers' environmental policy.

In order to be effective, our education programmes need to be evidence-based. When designing programmes, we will draw on various sources of evidence, including specially commissioned situation analyses. During the implementation stage, we will continually adapt these programmes in the light of emerging insights and understandings. In accordance with the principles of the Inclusive Data Charter,² this learning will be shared as widely as possible, especially with ministries of education. At the same time, we will develop the capacity of ministries of education to collect and utilise data and information, including disability-disaggregated school enrolment data.

Sightsavers has an in-house research team which holds independent research organisation (IRO) status. This expertise has been further strengthened with our new research uptake and learning function, which ensures that our research evidence responds to programme needs and is used effectively in decision-making. During the strategy implementation period, this team will create a sound evidence base to support scalable and cost-effective programmes and related advocacy.

We will strengthen the links between our work in education and our work in eye health, unaddressed refractive error, neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), and social inclusion, creating synergies within our programme portfolio and promoting joined-up service provision across ministries and agencies.

Introduction

This document outlines Sightsavers' strategic direction in education. It sets out our goals, objectives, and the system-strengthening approach that will enable us to achieve them.

The key elements of the strategy have been developed collaboratively through a robust consultation process within the organisation, involving country office staff, regional directors, and members of our global teams. We have also consulted a range of partners, including ministries of education, organisations of people with disabilities, and international development agencies. The new strategy will be implemented at all levels of the organisation – globally, regionally, and nationally.

In accordance with Sightsavers' mission and vision statement and international agreements, the strategy identifies ways in which Sightsavers can promote inclusive education for children with disabilities in low and lower middle income countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. While identifying new directions for our work, the strategy builds on the previous strategy which committed the organisation to working at all levels of education systems, in partnership with a variety of government and non-government actors.



Having attended a pre-school in Malawi supported by Sightsavers, Peter (right) is now enrolled in a mainstream primary school.



Mafoune (centre) attends an inclusive school in Mali supported by Sightsavers.

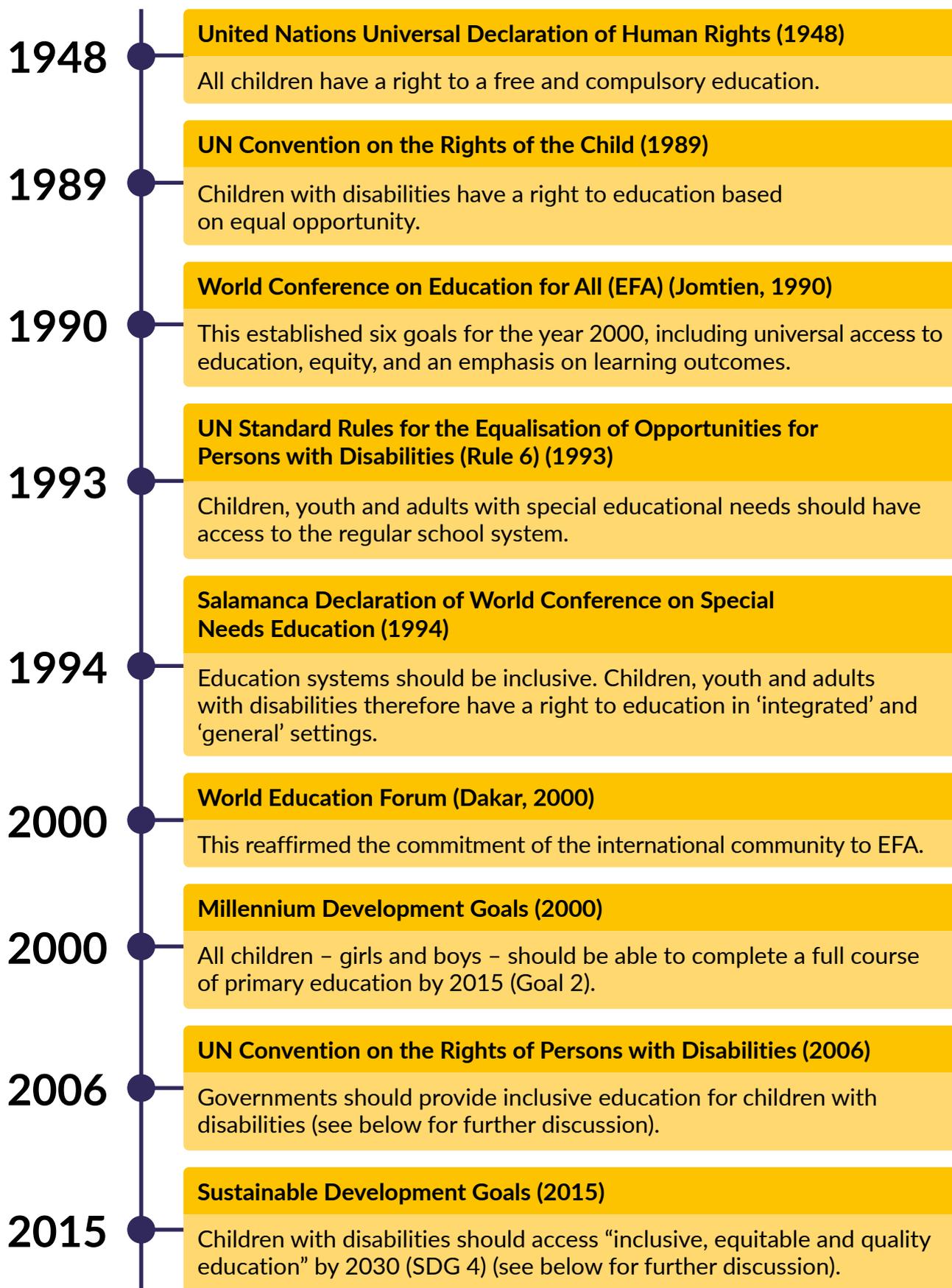
Context

According to the World Health Organization, around 15 per cent of the world's population, or approximately 1 billion people, have disabilities.³ While there is a shortage of reliable data on child disability, it was estimated in 2016 that globally there were 52.9 million children younger than 5 years with developmental disabilities, of whom approximately 95 per cent lived in low and middle income countries.⁴ Self-evidently, the total number of children with developmental disabilities was far higher. Vision loss was the most prevalent disability, followed by hearing loss, intellectual disability, and autism spectrum disorder.

All children have the right to inclusive education of good quality. As the Global Education Monitoring Report⁵ observes, inclusive education results in “improvement in academic achievement, social and emotional development, self-esteem and peer acceptance” and prevents “stigma,

stereotyping, discrimination and alienation” (p13). It is also “a prerequisite for education in and for democracies based on fairness, justice and equity” as it promotes “inclusive societies, where people can live together and diversity is celebrated” (ibid).

International agreements have successively affirmed the educational rights of children with disabilities.



Fatou Sow teaches at an inclusive school in Dakar, Senegal, supported by our Irish Aid funded education project.



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁶ – ratified by 182 nations – provides a road map for all those seeking to improve education provision for children with disabilities. Article 24 of the Convention decrees all children with disabilities have a right to a full course of free primary education and secondary education of good quality “within the general education system”. When required, children with disabilities should be able to access “reasonable accommodation”, “effective individualised support measures”, “alternative modes, means and formats of communication”, and “peer support and mentoring”.

On 25 September 2015, the 193 countries of the UN General Assembly adopted a new development agenda entitled, ‘Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. Goal 4 of Agenda 2030 commits state governments around the world, in association with international development actors, to ensuring children with disabilities, girls and boys, access “inclusive, equitable and quality education” by 2030. This education should be a continuum, starting with “early childhood development, care and pre-primary education” (Target 4.2) and progressing to primary and secondary education (4.1). The right of adults with disabilities to vocational and tertiary education (4.3) is also recognised.

Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) for 2020⁷ describes numerous examples of effective inclusive education initiatives in low and middle income countries. In many cases, ministries of education, along with civil society organisations and the international development community, have significantly contributed to these efforts.

However, the GEMR also found evidence that children with disabilities still experience high levels of educational exclusion and marginalisation.

Drawing on survey data collected from five low and middle income countries, the report found children with disabilities were more likely to be out of school than their peers by 1, 4 and 6 percentage points at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school age. For children with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability, the figures were 4, 7 and 11 percentage points. It also found that children with sensory, physical or intellectual disability were 2.5 times more likely to have never gone to school than their peers.

Drawing on assessment results from 10 low and middle income countries, the report also found children with disabilities aged 7 to 14 were on average 19 per cent less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading than children without disabilities.

The above realities can be placed in the context of what the World Bank terms the “learning crisis” affecting education systems around the world.⁸ According to their World Development Report, this crisis has ‘three dimensions’:

Dimension 1: students are not acquiring basic competences – for instance, more than 60 per cent of primary school children in developing countries are still failing to achieve minimum proficiency in learning after spending at least four years in school.

Dimension 2: challenging teaching and learning circumstances lead to poor education outcomes. In particular, children may be unprepared for learning (for instance, due to poor health or malnutrition); teachers may lack the necessary skills and motivation; teaching and learning resources may not be available in schools or, if they are, may be under-utilised; and school management and governance may be unsatisfactory.

Dimension 3: technical and political challenges impact on education systems. In terms of technical challenges, policymakers and implementers may have different priorities or lack the data and evidence necessary for informed decision-making. Alternatively, the different elements of education systems may not be aligned. Politically, education systems may suffer from competing agendas and power inequalities between education stakeholders.

While the learning crisis affects all children enrolled in these education systems, the World Bank notes that “children with disabilities face substantial obstacles to education... and substantially lower participation in school” (p63). This is attributed to stigma and discrimination, the lack of responsiveness of education systems to their needs, the associated costs of education in conjunction with familial poverty, and challenging journeys to and from school. The report also notes

that certain children with disabilities are additionally disadvantaged due to poverty, gender, ethnicity and location.

Environmental factors are increasingly contributing to the learning crisis. Climate change, rising sea levels, rainfall anomalies, and other phenomena have led to the closure of schools and other centres of education, or made it difficult or impossible for children with disabilities to access them.⁹ Environmental factors have also impacted on economies, communication infrastructure, and administrative systems, making it harder for ministries of education and other agencies to provide the necessary levels and types of support for schools and communities.¹⁰ Most recently, the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in large-scale school closures and will continue to impact on education systems in low and lower middle income countries for the foreseeable future due to the challenges of re-enrolling students in school, the impact of the pandemic on national economies, and late-starting vaccination programmes.¹¹ Children with disabilities tend to be particularly severely affected if they are unable to access education systems, as they lose hard-won skills and confidence and experience loneliness, anxiety, and confusion. Unable to provide their children with the necessary recreational and learning opportunities, their parents also suffer high levels of distress.¹² Even if these children can access education systems, they will disproportionately suffer from the reduced quality of education available, especially if they receive a smaller share of an already diminished supply of educational resources.¹³ Finally, it has been predicted that projected population increases over the next decade will place increased demands on already overstretched education systems in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴

These challenges provide the context for Sightsavers’ new education strategy.

Having previously been out of education, Ndeye, 10, now regularly attends a mainstream primary school in Dakar, Senegal.



Goals and objectives

Sightsavers will contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 4: “Inclusive and equitable quality education and... lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

In order to contribute to SDG 4, we will seek to ensure “Children with disabilities, girls and boys, have equal opportunities to participate in good quality mainstream education through strengthened systems, resulting in improved learning outcomes and broader social inclusion”.

In order to achieve the above, the following goals and associated objectives have been identified:

Goal 1: Increased capacity of schools and communities to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities

Objective 1.1: Schools and other education providers have increased inclusive education capacity and continuums of education provision are established.

Objective 1.2: Community stakeholders – including adults, youth, and children with disabilities – actively participate in inclusive education programmes.

Goal 2: Increased capacity of ministries of education and other agencies to support schools and communities to deliver disability-inclusive education

Objective 2.1: Government agencies and institutions in LMIC have increased technical capacity and collaborate more effectively.

Objective 2.2: Government agencies and institutions in LMIC have increased capacity to collect and utilise disability data.

Goal 3: Strengthened policy frameworks, education sector plans, and donor commitments promote disability-inclusive education

Objective 3.1: Policies and legislative frameworks promote inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Objective 3.2: Education sector plans and budgets promote inclusive education for children with disabilities.

There are three cross-cutting objectives that apply to all three goals:

Objective A.1: High-quality data and evidence informs educational analysis and decision-making.

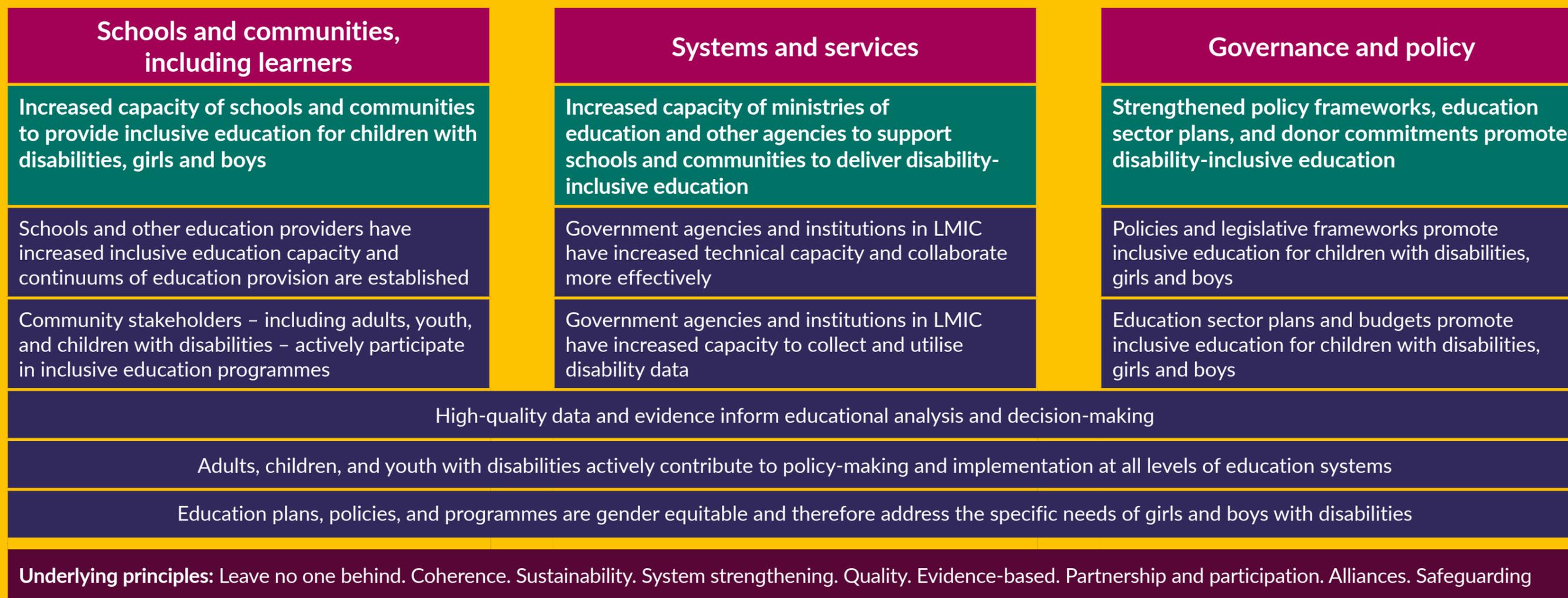
Objective A.2: Adults, children, and youth with disabilities actively contribute to policy making and implementation at all levels of education systems.

Objective A.3: Education plans, policies, and programmes are gender equitable and therefore address the specific needs of girls and boys with disabilities.

Theory of change

Realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: “Inclusive and equitable quality education and...lifelong learning opportunities for all”

Children with disabilities, girls and boys, have equal opportunities to participate in good quality, mainstream education through strengthened systems, resulting in improved learning outcomes and broader social inclusion





Stella, 17, attends school in Centre Region, Cameroon, with support from Sightsavers' Irish Aid funded inclusive education project.

Our system-strengthening approach

The World Bank defines an education system as a complex, dynamic, and multi-level entity that includes:

- “The full range of learning opportunities available in a country, whether they are provided or financed by the public or private sector (including religious, non-profit, and for-profit organisations).
- Formal and non-formal programmes, plus the full range of beneficiaries and stakeholders in these programmes: teachers, trainers, administrators, employees, students and their families, and employers.
- The rules, policies, and accountability mechanisms that bind an education system together, as well as the resources and financing mechanisms that sustain it.”¹⁵

A system-strengthening approach enables policymakers and implementers to identify the various inter-related factors in an education system that are preventing children with disabilities accessing inclusive education of good quality. In the light of this analysis, these actors can adopt joined-up approaches that not only strengthen the individual elements of education systems but strengthen the links between these elements, promoting disability-inclusive education.

For example, if disability-inclusive perspectives are included in pre-service teacher training programmes, then newly qualified teachers will be better able to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classes. However, this intervention alone will not necessarily lead to significantly improved learning outcomes among students, as other conditions need to be in place. For instance, practising teachers need to access continuous professional development of good quality; school curricula need to take into account the needs of all learners; learner-centred assessment systems need to be in place; school environments need to be disability accessible; and children with disabilities need to access assistive technology and associated tuition and training. Unless these conditions, and others, are in place, strengthening initial teacher training alone will not lead to significantly improved learning outcomes at either global or national levels. As well as improving educational supply, governments need to strengthen educational demand. For instance, parents may be unable or unwilling to send children with disabilities to school due to the associated costs of education. They may also be concerned that their children will experience various types of abuse if they go to school or struggle to keep up with the other children. If transport systems are inadequate, their children may be physically unable to attend school. Again, governments need to address these challenges through joined-up approaches.

Sightsavers will apply this system-strengthening approach to all three levels of education systems:

1 Institutional level
The regulatory frameworks (laws, policies, plans, guidelines, budgets and so on) that govern education systems.



2 Organisational level
The various agencies and institutions, spanning the government and non-government sectors, that are responsible for providing schools and other centres of learning with the necessary support.



3 School and community level
The direct providers and facilitators of educational services for children with disabilities.

Through working at institutional level, we can help ensure government policies and plans address the needs of children with disabilities and ensure our work achieves sustainability, scale, and impact. For instance, we can:

- advocate for the signing and ratification of international agreements by all governments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Marrakesh Treaty.
 - advocate with donors for targeted disability-inclusive investments in education systems.
 - advocate at national and district levels for disability-inclusive policies, regulations, and guidelines.
 - contribute to the development of disability-inclusive national education sector plans and associated budgets.
 - support ministries of education to monitor the implementation of plans, policies and programmes.
 - contribute to the development of school curricula that promote learner-centred education and address the specific needs of children with disabilities.
 - support the inclusion of organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs), including organisations of women with disabilities, in policy development and implementation processes.
 - participate in education coalitions that draw on the vitality and creativity of civil society, especially the vitality of the disabled people's movement.
- lobby local councils to invest in disability-inclusive education while ensuring they have the capacity to utilise these funds effectively.
 - produce situation analyses, policy briefs, academic papers, and other informational materials to promote evidence-based educational decision-making.
 - organise learning events in which inclusive education knowledge can be shared and disseminated.



A group of girls playing at an inclusive school in Cameroon.

© Sightsavers/Rodrig Mbock

Through working at organisational level, we can ensure key departments and agencies have the capacity to provide schools and other education service providers with the necessary support to ensure satisfactory learning outcomes for all students. Through strengthening systems, we will also ensure sustainability, scale and impact. Our activities can take various forms. For instance, we can:

- assist ministries of education to develop the capacity of Education Management Information Systems to collect and utilise data disaggregated by sex and disability.
- assist ministries of education to carry out costing studies that will enable them to establish the costs of scaling up inclusive education district-wide and nationally.
- assist ministries of education to strengthen their child safeguarding systems so they meet the specific needs of children with disabilities.
- assist ministries of education to produce school textbooks and other teaching and learning materials that are disability-inclusive and gender-sensitive.
- assist ministries of education to incorporate disability inclusion perspectives in initial teacher training and continuous professional development.
- strengthen the capacity of teacher trainers, inspectors, itinerant teachers and other education personnel to promote disability-inclusive education.
- strengthen the capacity of tertiary and higher education providers to address the needs of youth and adults with disabilities.
- strengthen the links between ministries, directorates and agencies at national and sub-national levels to promote joined-up services for children with disabilities and their families.
- strengthen the links between special schools and mainstream schools to promote sharing of skills and knowledge and assist special schools to become resource centres.
- ensure hospitals, clinics, and centres have the capacity to provide children with disabilities with clinical and functional assessments and follow-up services.
- assist local education authorities and other actors to support the transition of children and young people with disabilities from one phase of education to another and from education to employment.

Through working at school and community level, we can pilot innovative¹⁶ approaches that can subsequently be scaled up by governments and other providers of educational services. For instance, we can:

- assist community structures, particularly local organisations of persons with disabilities, to promote disability-inclusive education through lobbying schools and local education authorities.
- use social behaviour change approaches to increase demand for and use of inclusive education services.
- assist parents to provide home- and community-based educational support for children with disabilities.
- increase the participation of parents of children with disabilities in school management committees, parent teacher associations, and other decision-making bodies.
- support children with disabilities to play a leading role in their own education – for instance, through participation in school parliaments.
- assist schools to develop and implement school action plans that are learner-centred and address the diverse needs of children with disabilities.
- assist head teachers and their staff to design and deliver disability-inclusive, continuous professional development programmes.
- in association with school stakeholders, pilot disability-inclusive, gender-sensitive teaching and learning approaches.
- in association with school stakeholders, develop IEC materials that describe how children with disabilities – girls and boys – can be included in a full range of curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- pilot the innovative use of technology¹⁷ in schools and other centres of learning, including ICT where contextually appropriate.
- assist schools to make school clubs and societies, including girls' clubs, more accessible.
- assist schools to make their environments more physically accessible for children with disabilities through no cost/low-cost adaptations.
- assist schools to meet the specific needs of children with complex needs, girls with disabilities, and other groups of children with disabilities.
- support the transition of children and youth with disabilities through the phases of education, including from secondary education to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and tertiary/higher education.
- support the transition of youth with disabilities from education to employment.

The diagram on page 25 summarises our approach to education system strengthening. It is based on the Framework for Disability-Inclusive Education, a tool developed for ministries of education by UNESCO-IIEP and UNICEF to support their inclusion efforts.¹⁸ This tool can be used to examine an entire education system through an inclusive lens in order to identify what actions and interventions need to be considered to provide an effective learning environment for children with disabilities. The framework promotes a holistic approach to system strengthening by providing an overview of all the different aspects of an education system that need to be addressed, including the social context, to enable the inclusion of children with disabilities. This framework has guided the development of our own specific approach to education system strengthening to ensure no learner is left behind.

Service Delivery

Educational supply

- Capacity and commitment of teachers and other educators
- Pedagogical practices
- Classroom support
- Teaching and learning resources, including assistive technology
- School infrastructure
- School ethos
- School systems and processes
- Testing and assessment practices

Educational demand

- Social attitudes and practices among stakeholders at all levels of education systems
- Perceived benefits of education
- Accessibility, availability and affordability of education
- Inputs of civil society organisations, including OPDs and local authorities

Levels of education

- Tertiary education
- TVET
- Secondary education
- Primary education
- Pre-primary education
- Early childhood education
- Non-formal education

Education support services

Advisory services; itinerant teacher services; inspectorates; health and social services; providers of initial and in-service teacher training and continuous professional development; community inputs into schools and other learning centres.

Enabling environment

Enabling frameworks

- Curricula
- Education sector plans
- Policies, guidelines and legislation
- Examination regulations
- International agreements

Data and evidence

- Definitions of disability
- Education management information systems and other databases
- Monitoring and evaluations and inspections
- Household surveys
- Research/grey literature
- Inputs of children with disabilities

Leadership and management

- Management capacity at central, sub-national and local levels
- Procedures and compliance
- Participation of OPDs
- Cross-sectoral coordination

Finance

- Allocations to mainstream education budgets
- Targeted support for children with disabilities
- Resources from other sectors
- Donor commitments

Diagram 1: Multi-level factors impacting on educational access and quality for children with disabilities

Principles

Leave no one behind

Sightsavers will adopt a rights-based approach to education programming. This recognises that all children with disabilities have the right to a full course of inclusive education of good quality, starting with early childhood education and extending to secondary education and beyond.

Children with certain impairments and conditions can experience particularly high levels of educational exclusion. In Sierra Leone, a UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey found that

children who experienced difficulties with hearing, self-care, seeing, communication, and learning were particularly likely to be out of school (see table below).¹⁹ Even if enrolled in education, these children may receive a particularly poor standard of education due to various environmental and attitudinal barriers. Children with multiple disabilities, such as children with deafblindness,²⁰ experience particularly high levels of educational disadvantage and discrimination, as do children with albinism in some southern African countries.²¹

Type of functional difficulty reported	Percentage enrolled in education
Hearing	50
Self-care	60
Seeing	60
Communication	61
Learning	64
Children without disabilities	78

Table 1: Percentage of children aged 5 to 17 with particular types of functional difficulty enrolled in education in Sierra Leone (compared to children without disabilities).

Source: Sierra Leone MICS 2017

The same survey showed that the academic performance of children (whether disabled or not disabled) reflected the strong regional and socio-economic inequalities in the country. In the western part of Sierra Leone, where the capital is located, three times more children achieved the expected reading skills for their grade than in the rest of the country. Among the richest children, around 39% demonstrated basic literacy and numeracy skills as opposed to 3% of the poorest children.

Girls with disabilities are also disproportionately disadvantaged due to the 'double discrimination' they experience as a result of their gender and disability. Analysing the latest publicly available census data from 11 sub-Saharan countries, Wodon et al (2018) found only 65.4% of girls with disabilities had ever enrolled in education, compared to 66.3% of boys with disabilities. The figure for girls and boys without disabilities were 75.3% and 76.7%, respectively. Over time, the gap between girls and boys with disabilities widened. Only 21.6% of girls with disabilities completed a full course of secondary education, compared to 25.0% of boys with disabilities. The figures for girls and boys without disabilities were 28.6% and 36.1%, respectively.²² Analysing enrolment data from 45 government primary schools in three Upazila in Bangladesh, Zulfiqar et al (2018) found girls with disabilities were significantly less likely than boys to be enrolled in education, although the performance rate of the girls in the final exams was better than the boys'.²³ In some contexts, boys with disabilities too may experience double discrimination – for instance, due to assumptions that they should leave school early to enter the world of employment.²⁴

Sightsavers and its partners will work at all three levels of education systems to increase their capacity to ensure no child is left behind.

At institutional level, we will advocate for:

- inclusive policy development processes that provide opportunities for children with disabilities – girls and boys – to express their views and concerns.
- financial allocations in budgets that are fair and equitable.
- testing and assessment systems responsive to the needs of diverse learners.

At organisational level, we will develop the capacity of ministries of education and other agencies to:

- collect and utilise student data disaggregated by sex and disability.
- provide gender-responsive teacher training that addresses the specific needs of children with diverse impairments and conditions.
- produce accessible school textbooks free from negative gender stereotypes, which provide positive representations of people with disabilities.

At school and community level, we will assist local stakeholders to:

- ensure schools are physically accessible for children with disabilities and possess secure, private, sex-segregated toilets.
- promote gender-responsive teaching and learning approaches that accommodate the needs of children with different types of functional difficulties.
- employ social behaviour change approaches to address stigma and behavioural barriers within schools and communities.



Lesline (centre), 8, with friends at her school in Centre Region, Cameroon.

Coherence

As part of our system-strengthening approach, Sightsavers will work across education systems – for instance, through strengthening the vertical links between education authorities and schools and the horizontal links between schools and communities. We will also work across sectors – for instance, through strengthening the links between ministries of education and ministries of health and social welfare – in order to promote the sharing of knowledge and resources and joined-up service provision.

Recognising the importance of civil society, we will work closely with a variety of civil society organisations, especially organisations of people with disabilities. At community level, we will increase the participation of community stakeholders in education programmes through adopting social behaviour change approaches. Internationally, we will participate in coalitions and alliances in order to ensure consistency, create synergies between programmes, and promote knowledge sharing.

Sustainability

Working at different levels of education systems, Sightsavers and partners will ensure our education projects not only promote educational access and quality but also achieve high levels of sustainability.

At school and community level, Sightsavers and its partners will promote cost-effective and contextually appropriate forms of education provision. We will simultaneously mobilise community support for inclusive education and develop the capacity of schools to manage their own inclusive education programmes.

At organisational level, we will strengthen the capacity of existing agencies and institutions to support schools and other centres of education – for instance, the capacity of teacher training institutes to deliver disability-inclusive pre-service training, of Education Management and Information Systems to collect and utilise sex and disability disaggregated data, and inspectorates to monitor schools.

At institutional level, we will assist ministries of education to incorporate disability-inclusive components in their education sector plans (five to ten years in duration) and then support the implementation of these plans. In association with our advocacy partners, we will also promote the development of national and sub-national policy frameworks that are disability inclusive, possess appropriate accountability mechanisms, and are effectively disseminated and implemented. Through our pilot programmes in schools and communities, we will demonstrate cost-effective and contextually appropriate inclusive education approaches that can be scaled up district-wide and even nationally. Through carrying out costing studies, we will be able to identify the costs for ministries of education of scaling up this provision.

Through our global advocacy work, Sightsavers and its partners will shape the plans and priorities of multilaterals, bilaterals, global funds, and other international non-governmental organisations working in the field of education.

At present, Sightsavers is carrying out a review that will examine ways in which we can reduce our environmental footprint and promote sustainable development. The findings of the review will feed into our work across the thematic areas. In the field of education, this could take various forms, including:

- minimising international travel.
- assisting local producers to manufacture their own assistive technologies, reducing the need for equipment and materials to be imported from abroad.
- encouraging the use of assistive technology in schools that is sturdy, easy to maintain, and energy efficient.
- encouraging schools to use alternative/renewable sources of energy (such as solar) where appropriate.
- liaising with other organisations working in the field of education to achieve economies of scale – for instance, rather than organising our own training, helping these organisations to incorporate disability-inclusive perspectives in their training.
- producing soft rather than hard copies of training materials.



A group of children play football at school in Cameroon's Centre Region.

System strengthening

In order to promote educational access and quality, Sightsavers will adopt a system-strengthening approach. This will enable us to identify the various elements in education systems that need to be strengthened in order to have a significant impact on education provision for children with disabilities. In the light of that analysis, interventions can be identified that not only strengthen these elements but the links between them, creating synergies

within education systems. Through working at all three levels of education systems (institutional, organisational, and school/community), we will not only be able to pilot inclusive education programmes in schools and communities, but also create enabling policy frameworks and assist ministries of education to sustain and scale up these programmes. Our system-strengthening approach is discussed in more detail on pages 20-25 of this document.

Quality

All children, including children with disabilities, not only have the right to access a full course of education (from early childhood onwards to secondary education and beyond), but an education of good quality. According to General Comment 4 (GC4) on Article 24 of the UNCRPD, this should be characterised by a “whole person approach (in which) recognition is given to the capacity of every person to learn, and high expectations are established for all learners, including learners with disabilities”.²⁵

In order to adopt a ‘whole person’ approach, teachers need to adopt “flexible... teaching methods adapted to different strengths, requirements and learning styles”. Children with disabilities, like all children, will benefit from child-centred teaching and learning approaches, broad and balanced curricula, and from studying in safe, supportive, and accessible learning environments. GC4 also recognises that schools need to respond to the specific needs of children with disabilities through:

- employing “reasonable accommodations” – in other words, adapting teaching and learning in simple, contextually appropriate ways.
- providing necessary “continuous personalised support”, such as orientation and mobility training for children with visual impairments and sign language tuition for deaf children.
- ensuring students can access necessary assistive technology, such as mobility aids for children with physical disabilities, hearing aids (where appropriate) for deaf children, and adapted toys and games (for children with diverse impairments and conditions).
- ensuring students can access “alternative modes... and formats of communication”, such as sign language for deaf children and braille for children who are blind, are severely visually impaired, or have progressive eye conditions.
- offering flexible curricula that ensure children with disabilities can access necessary specialist support.

Sightsavers and its partners will promote child-centred models of education that are responsive to the diverse needs of children with disabilities. This provision will be sensitive to contextual realities and will draw on the situated expertise of local practitioners. To ensure this provision is as disability inclusive as possible, we will provide children with disabilities with meaningful and accessible opportunities to express their views and concerns, and thus shape their own education provision. As already stated, we will work at all three levels of education systems in order to have the greatest impact.

Recognising that girls and boys with disabilities have specific gendered needs, we will promote education provision that is gender-sensitive, as well as disability inclusive – in terms of curriculum content, teaching and learning approaches and materials, school systems and processes, and physical and social environments.²⁶ Again, we will work at all three levels of education systems to have the greatest impact.

Riya attends a school in Bihar, India, and wants to become a doctor.



Evidence-based

When designing and implementing programmes, we will continue to draw on our expanding evidence base of programme learning. We will also draw on the existing literature on disability, education, and international development, including relevant grey literature. Through participating in conferences, workshops, and other learning fora, we will further expand our knowledge of 'what works' in inclusive education.

As well as drawing on diverse sources of evidence, we will ensure programme learning is made available nationally and internationally, in line with the principles of the Inclusive Data Charter,²⁷ especially to ministries of education. This learning will be made available in forms including blogs, IEC materials, conference presentations and videos. By doing this, Sightsavers will strengthen the global evidence base in the field of inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Partnership and participation

In the field of education, Sightsavers has significant experience of working in consortia through our participation in the UK-funded Disability Inclusive Development (DID) programme. Sightsavers will continue to pursue such opportunities, as consortium-working provides us with valuable opportunities to develop our networks of partnerships and ensure large numbers of learners with disabilities dispersed over widespread geographical areas are able to access educational services.

Globally, we will continue to work closely with the International Disability Alliance, a coalition of 14 international organisations of people with disabilities, as well as regional organisations, such as the African Disability Forum, and organisations representing specific groups of people with disabilities, such as the World Blind Union (WBU). We will work closely with both WBU and the International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairments (ICEVI) to ensure we continue to meet the needs of children with visual impairments enrolled in Sightsavers-supported schools.

We will continue to develop our partnerships with universities and research institutes, particularly those based in low and lower middle income countries in order to develop local research capacity.

Within our countries, our primary partnerships will be with ministries of education as they are the primary duty-bearers for education. We will also work closely with national umbrella organisations of people with disabilities and local OPDs, ensuring they play a leading role in advocating for disability-inclusive education with policymakers and implementers.

Recognising that local stakeholders have significant expertise and that pilot programmes in schools and communities will only be sustainable if they are 'owned' by local communities, we will ensure these stakeholders are fully involved in all the phases of the project cycle, from project design and development through to final project evaluation. As part of this process, we will provide children with disabilities with meaningful, accessible, and empowering opportunities to express their views, incorporating a variety of communication strategies and addressing child safeguarding concerns.²⁸



Memory Chafulumira works for Sightsavers' partner, the Centre for Children's Affairs, our implementing partner in Malawi.

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Tapiwa, 6, attends a community-based childcare centre in Malawi, funded by People's Postcode Lottery. She has made great progress at the centre and can now sit upright, and learn and play with her friends.

Alliances

In the field of education, we will continue to participate in a variety of international alliances in order to share learning and advocate with donors, multilaterals, inter-governmental bodies, and ministries of education. In education, we will participate in a range of networks, including the Education Task Group of International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), a grouping of civil society organisations; Global Campaign for Education (GCE), a platform for unifying civil society voices in relation to the global education agenda; Gender and Inclusion in

Education (GENIE), a members' organisation promoting inclusive education in West and Central Africa; and United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), a global partnership dedicated to advocating for gender equality in and through education. As already discussed, Sightsavers will continue to collaborate closely with the International Disability Alliance, a coalition of 14 international OPDs, as well as regional organisations, such as the Africa Disability Forum, and organisations representing specific groups of people with disabilities.

Safeguarding

Students with disabilities are particularly likely to experience various types of abuse, and less likely to have access to justice or redress. There are multiple reasons for this, mainly stemming from deep-rooted inequalities and power imbalances. It may be because children with disabilities are perceived as 'different' or less strong than other children. It may also be because they find it harder to identify their abuser (for instance, because they are visually impaired) or report their abuse (for instance, because of inaccessible communication). Girls with disabilities are particularly likely to experience abuse, as are children enrolled in residential institutions.²⁹

Sightsavers has established a due diligence process for assessing the child safeguarding policies and procedures of potential partners, principally ministries of education, and drawing up and implementing action plans with these partners. In addition, Sightsavers has country-based designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) responsible for responding to safeguarding incidents, advising in-country colleagues, and monitoring partners.

In accordance with our system-strengthening approach and in association with development partners, Sightsavers will continue to develop the capacity of ministries of education and other education providers to establish child safeguarding systems that:

- recognise the increased risk that children with disabilities experience, particularly girls and those with more complex support needs.
- ensure students with disabilities are aware of their rights, of the different types of abuse, and the processes they should follow if they believe they have been abused or are at risk of abuse.
- protect children enrolled in residential institutions.
- appoint designated child safeguarding leads in schools who are both male and female.
- ensure teachers and other staff are regularly trained in child safeguarding, are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and have signed codes of conduct.
- ensure school management teams, school boards of management, and other relevant school structures oversee and coordinate child safeguarding arrangements.
- ensure all school stakeholders are aware of child safeguarding systems and processes.

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Children during class at Tithandizane CBCC School in Chimpambana, Chikwawa, Malawi.



Teachers in Segou take part in a training activity as part of our inclusive education project in Mali.

Policy and advocacy

Policy change at international, national and sub-national levels is a central focus of Sightsavers' work in education. Through policy change, we can ensure ministries of education provide children with disabilities with increased access to continuums of education of good quality – both now and in the future.

Within countries, we will advocate for and support governments at national and sub-national levels to develop inclusive education policies aligned with the CRPD and the SDGs. We will also advocate with national governments for the signing and ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty that seeks to end the 'book famine' experienced across the world by people who are blind, have low vision, or are otherwise print-disabled.³⁰ Our influencing work in the next strategic period will also focus on ensuring that these policies are effectively implemented, that accountability mechanisms are in place, and that the rights of children with disabilities are embedded in mainstream education planning and delivery.

Similarly, we will influence international development actors to ensure that inclusive education for children with disabilities is prioritised and mainstreamed. These actors will include multilateral organisations, such as UN agencies and the World Bank, and bilateral organisations, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in the UK.

Our national and international influencing is closely linked – for example, through our support for the implementation of international policy frameworks at the national level.

Advocacy objectives will be integrated into the design of Sightsavers' education programmes. This will ensure we have a systematic approach to advocacy and that advocacy issues are addressed throughout the programme cycle.

Measurement, learning and accountability

The overarching goal of this strategy is: “Girls and boys with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in good quality mainstream education through strengthened systems, resulting in improved learning outcomes and broader social inclusion.”

We will measure progress towards meeting strategic goals and objectives as outlined in the theory of change (p18-19).

Sightsavers has developed indicators for success within the wider monitoring, accountability and learning framework. These indicators help provide the necessary evidence that will show our education projects are contributing to the overall aims of the Sightsavers' inclusive education strategy, programmatic goals and objectives, and the SDGs.

Regular monitoring and assessment of progress will involve qualitative and quantitative analysis of project data, operational research, assessments, and interactions with the communities we serve. Through asking and answering learning questions we will deepen our understanding of inclusive education issues.

Grounded in best practices, we will continue to strengthen the collection and use of data with a focus in this strategic period on disability, sex, age and geography.

Sightsavers will continue to develop our ability to learn from and be accountable to the people and communities we serve by ensuring that local stakeholders, including people with disabilities, actively contribute to the design, implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of education projects. We will create routine opportunities for stakeholders to feed back in ways that are meaningful for them. Learning from experiences in our education programmes will feed into our other programmes.

To promote the uptake of evidence and learning, we will ensure project feedback informs project decision-making and the design and implementation of new projects.



Students at Gbendembu Primary School, Sierra Leone.

Research and evidence

For Sightsavers, research is a core activity that contributes to organisational learning, improved quality of programmes, and effective advocacy. We support research that generates new evidence and addresses key knowledge gaps. These gaps can be generic or context-specific, but practical implications of research evidence for our programmes and advocacy is critical.

Under the previous organisational strategy, Sightsavers made a significant investment in research and its internal research capacity. We have an in-house research team with expertise in population-based surveys, economic studies, participatory research methods and evidence synthesis and we hold independent research organisation (IRO) status. This expertise has been further strengthened with our new research uptake and learning function, which ensures that our research evidence responds to programme needs and is used effectively in decision-making.

Our aim in research is to provide a sound evidence base to support scalable and cost-effective programmes and related advocacy. Driven by the objectives outlined in this strategy, our inclusive education research in the next strategic period will focus on:

- Understanding how children with disabilities, in all their diversity, participate in education.
- Understanding the impact of disability and education experiences on the mental health and quality of life of children with disabilities and their carers.
- Developing, testing and using appropriate measures of education participation and inclusion in order to test the impact of different interventions.
- Identifying and testing approaches to tackle disability-related stigma and behavioural barriers.
- Identifying opportunities for integrating the education and health sectors.
- Identifying the incremental costs of inclusive education in order to promote scale up across the sector.

We will use a range of methods to explore how, if at all, children with disabilities participate in education, and to understand their experiences when doing so. We will seek to understand how different groups of children with disabilities may have different experiences and face different challenges by examining a range of individual characteristics, such as gender, age, family socio-economic status, location and type and severity of impairment. This focus on diversity will enable us to identify those who are particularly at risk of being excluded from education.

We will use rigorous approaches to test the effectiveness of education programmes, and specific interventions aimed at improving participation and learning outcomes of children with disabilities. We will focus specifically on context-appropriate interventions that improve classroom and home support of children with disabilities, including children with multiple and complex impairments.

We will also work with country offices and other teams to introduce more systematic approaches to collecting and analysing routine programme data with a specific focus on monitoring cohorts of children in the schools we support. Where possible, we will align our approaches with national Education Management Information Systems. Where valid and reliable measures related to disability are lacking, we will contribute to the development, validation and promotion of new tools, appropriate for the local context.

Disability-related stigma is a pervasive challenge to the inclusion of children with disabilities in education. We will identify and test approaches to remove or reduce stigma in a variety of settings.

We will also work to better understand different building blocks of education systems and how to integrate inclusive education within them in a practical and cost-effective way. One of our key priorities will also be coordination between health and education sectors, particularly with regards to clinical and educational assessments and identification and support of children with disabilities in the early years of life.

Studies of economics of inclusive education will establish robust methodological approaches and produce evidence on costs and cost-effectiveness of inclusive education, budget impact analyses and inclusive education financing models.

Where possible and practical, we will integrate participatory and peer research approaches in all aspects of our studies to ensure the meaningful engagement of children with disabilities, including young children with disabilities and their carers, in research design, implementation and evidence uptake.

In the next strategic period, Sightsavers' research uptake and learning (RUL) team and education global technical leads will further strengthen the relationship between research and programmes. Research uptake refers to the use of research evidence by different people, including programme designers, policymakers, and implementers. Working with other teams across the organisation, the team will lead on the implementation of our RUL strategy and ensure that it contributes to and is informed by the objectives of each thematic strategy. The team will work closely with other parts of the organisation to ensure a coordinated approach to the effective capture, communication and use of evidence. Effectively engaging stakeholders across the education sector with compelling evidence will encourage uptake and help us to achieve the ambitious goals articulated in this strategy.

Thematic links

Through strengthening the links between our work in education and our work in eye health, unaddressed refractive error, NTDs, and social inclusion, Sightsavers will enable the sharing of resources and the development of joined-up services across ministries and agencies.

Eye health

All children with visual impairments are entitled to early vision screening, visual function assessment, correction of refractive error, and frequent follow-up. Children should also receive continued high-quality eye care, spectacles, and assistive technology. In order to achieve this goal, we will coordinate our work in education and eye health. As a result of establishing school-based eye health programmes, children will not only access necessary eye health services, but also perform more effectively in the classroom. In order to ensure sustainability and impact, we will strengthen links between ministries of health and education through establishing mechanisms for common policy development and ownership, planning, resourcing, implementation, and evaluation at national and local levels.

Unaddressed refractive error

To support the learning of students with disabilities, including those with refractive error, it is important to take advantage of existing support systems close to schools and communities. Close collaboration between health professionals, educators, the broader social sector and OPDs is needed for the identification of students with disabilities and the establishment of effective support mechanisms in order to build an inclusive education system for all children. This is also expected to increase demand for accessible quality eye health services for all, aligned with the demand components in the inclusive education framework.



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Faith, 16, has her eyes checked during a vision screening in Greenville, Liberia.



Teacher, Keita Kadiatou, supports children with visual impairments in her fifth grade class in Mali.

Neglected tropical diseases

In education, we will draw upon the expertise of our neglected tropical diseases (NTD) teams in social behaviour change when developing and implementing strategies for engaging with communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for children with disabilities to access necessary water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Again, we will draw on the expertise of our NTD teams to ensure these facilities are available in schools and other education centres, and to ensure desired uptake of services. With the NTD teams, we will explore ways in which NTD platforms can be used to deliver inclusive education messages, and, conversely, education platforms can be used to deliver NTD messages. In addition, NTD programmes could potentially be used to identify out-of-school children and support their enrolment in school. Recognising that schistosomiasis and intestinal worm infections lead to poor health and consequently poor learning, there are potential links between our NTD, education, and school-based eye health programmes.

Social inclusion

Through establishing links with Sightsavers' social inclusion programmes, we can ensure children with disabilities are included in schools and communities, and can successfully transition to technical and vocational education and employment. Through strengthening links with our citizenship and political participation programmes, we can ensure governments at national, district and local levels promote educational quality and access for children with disabilities, thanks to the presence and participation of OPDs and parents of children with disabilities in relevant decision-making bodies, such as local council education commissions, school management committees, and parent teacher associations. Children with disabilities will also be considered as active players in their education and encouraged to meaningfully participate in school governance and choices that affect their education. When provided with opportunities to revise curricula, we will ensure that the civic education components of these curricula address disability issues and promote broader social inclusion.

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We work with partners in low and middle income countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

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