

Sightsavers Locally Led Development Statement

November 2023



Sightsavers Locally Led Development Statement (2023)

Definition of locally led development

Sightsavers' work has always been locally driven; supporting organisations of people with disabilities, governments, and a wide range of other local partners to deliver their priorities. We see locally led development as the process of ensuring decision-making agency, funding, leadership, and power sits with local and national-level actors (including citizens, authorities, civil society, and private sector) to enable them to play a greater, more central role in determining, pursuing, and reviewing humanitarian and international development activities and outcomes. This means working to decentralise power, money, and resources, and ensuring that international actors such as INGOs work to strengthen and support existing local service providers, structures, and civil society, stepping in only if and where needed and in clear response to the needs and priorities expressed at local level.

We focus on working with and through local networks, strengthening local systems, mutual capacity development with local organisations, and responding to locally defined agendas, policies and strategies.

The principle of locally led development runs throughout Sightsavers' ways of working and informs our programme strategy, organisational structure and human resourcing, and governance. As well as a programme delivery approach that puts local partners and communities at the heart of everything we do, we strive to ensure that our support operations, human resourcing, decision making, and programme management structures are embedded within (or as close as possible given wider organisational management and governance requirements) the countries where our programmes are implemented.

1. Locally led development in Sightsavers' organisational and programme strategies

Our **organisational strategy** sets out our goals and ambitions that will ultimately ensure we realise our vision of “a world where no one is blind from avoidable causes and where people with visual impairments and other disabilities participate equally in society”. Our purpose statement – “Governments in the countries where we operate ensure everyone has access to quality eye health services, and people with disabilities are fully included in all aspects of life” – is underpinned by our belief that strengthening capacity and leadership of national level systems, structures, and stakeholders will lead to longer term sustainable change and this is mirrored throughout our organisational strategic objectives.

Our **programme strategy** further articulates our approach to locally led development, and outlines how we develop sustainable programmes in partnership with existing service providers, policy makers and civil society organisations so that lasting change can be leveraged once our direct inputs have ended. Our programme strategy sets out nine key principles that crosscut all our work, several of which (including “Leave No One Behind”, “sustainability”, “system strengthening”, and “partnership and participation”) speak directly to the locally led development agenda.

Our **thematic strategies** in health and inclusion further emphasise our commitment to work within, and strengthen the capacity of, existing systems to ensure that governments and duty

bearers are able to uphold their obligations, and that people with disabilities and their communities have increased agency and empowerment to realise their rights. Within each thematic area, we do this through:

- **Capacity development:** building the capacity of local partners in essential skills such as research, communication, advocacy, safeguarding, and programme management – and allowing opportunity for partners to build our capacity in areas where they have greater understanding and knowledge (e.g., of local context) than we do. These needs are mutually identified and agreed at the outset of our partnership relationship.
- **Movement building:** supporting local organisations to network and connect with others working towards the same goal (for example, women’s rights) and to engage on campaigns that build energy and momentum to influence policy and to drive forward lasting change.
- **Participation:** working with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and other civil society groups to identify and address the priorities, needs and challenges facing their members and communities, and to increase the voice, participation and agency of people with disabilities and other marginalised groups within our programmes and wider society.

2. Locally led development in Sightsavers’ governance, structure, and human resourcing

Sightsavers is a global organisation that works – and has registered offices – in many countries, both in the North, where we undertake most of our fundraising activities and international advocacy and policy influencing activity, and across numerous countries in Africa and South Asia where the programmes we support are located. The need to support successful and effective project implementation within our network of in-country and international partners lies at the heart of our structure, with all activity ultimately focused on supporting that outcome.

The key characteristics of our operating model are:

- **A network of country office teams** with programme and financial management accountabilities in all our significant programme implementation countries. Currently we have 24 countries where we operate from a registered office, and eleven further countries with staff and/or partners on the ground but no formal office.
- **Two regional office teams**, one based in West Africa, and one based in East, Central and Southern Africa, responsible for overseeing and supporting the work, programmes, and staff of their respective country offices.
- **Global technical and operational support functions**, working across the organisation to support effective programme and operational implementation.
- A **global trustee board** comprised of international members with specific skills, many of whom are based in our programme countries.
- **Country-level trustee boards** where required, governing our many of our international fundraising offices (Ireland, Italy, USA, Norway, Sweden), programme offices (Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia), and Sightsavers India (which operates independently of Sightsavers International).

Sightsavers strives to employ staff with appropriate, in-depth knowledge and understanding of the contexts and countries in which we operate. This requires a decentralised approach

to recruitment, where posts are established as geographically close to the activities they are supporting as possible. This philosophy is applied across roles and activities, including financial management, fundraising, technical programme expertise, research, policy and advocacy oversight, and programme implementation.

All our regional and country office staff are **local national staff**, and the majority of our global headcount (currently 59%) is comprised of local staff employed within our programme countries. Sightsavers does not employ any Northern ex-patriate staff in our country offices as we believe that programme design, implementation and partner management activities are best managed by people who are familiar with and fully understand the local environment, systems, and challenges.

A high (and rising) number of our global technical and support team staff are based in our programme countries, including colleagues working in global and pan-African financial support, MEL, programme supply chain, data analytics, policy and advocacy, and programme technical advisors. Again, where employed in programme countries, these support team staff are nationals of that country. We have set clear expectations with all managers that recruitment for support functions must be opened to candidates in our programme countries wherever possible, and we have been able to successfully on-board staff of all levels of seniority and expertise.

3. Locally led development in Sightsavers' decision-making

Sightsavers ensures that decision making is devolved, and in line with management accountability structures. Decisions are made as close to programme implementation as possible and decision-making structures ensure that programme and partner viewpoints are taken into account:

- **Project design** – projects are designed in participatory fashion, with local partners working together with the Sightsavers country office and technical teams to determine the location, scope, approach, goal/purpose and reach of the planned intervention.
- **Project implementation** – project plans are agreed in collaboration with partners, who are given authority to manage decisions over implementation. Sightsavers country office teams work with partners to monitor project progress through regular visits/calls, and to provide on-going support on project implementation and to ensure that partners input into significant decisions and longer-term planning at all stages of the project cycle.
- **Country Office portfolio management** – our Country Directors are given responsibility and authority to manage their project portfolios and play a key role in agreeing plans and overall strategies with partners. Within each country office, specific project support, implementation and oversight decisions are delegated to project managers and their teams who are closest to our partners and activities.
- **Regional management** – Sightsavers has senior, locally recruited regional directors in place who have overall responsibility for the country offices programme activity in their regions and who take overall responsibility for organisational and programmatic decisions at this level. Currently this includes directors managing our operations in West Africa,

East, Central and Southern Africa, India, and Bangladesh.

- **Senior leadership team** – Sightsavers has a global senior management team that takes overall responsibility for the sound management of all aspects of the organisation. Our regional directors are part of this team and ensure programme and partner requirements are part of all discussions and decisions. Country Directors are also brought into these discussions as required when specific issues are being discussed.

4. Locally led development in Sightsavers' programmes and partnerships

Locally led development has been at the heart of Sightsavers' organisational strategy since 2009 and has been the driving force behind our programme implementation methodology for significantly longer.

As outlined in our **programme strategy**, in all our programmes we strive to make our own role either redundant (by strengthening partners, services and systems to be able to continue without us) or adaptable (by ensuring that any role we play in supporting or monitoring change is enabling rather than competing with existing structures). Simply put, we implement programmes with partners who are rooted in the systems and communities where we work. While in some circumstances we undertake research, implementation and influencing activities directly ourselves, our principal route to encouraging communities' participation in the development process is via partnerships, which help to enable and strengthen local organisations and to build sustainable accountability mechanisms.

Our **programme partnership policy** includes a dedicated section on locally led development, where we explain that, in accordance with one of our seven core values ("with the right resources, people can find their own solutions"), Sightsavers recognises and respects the leadership of local Governments, service providers, and civil society actors in the countries where we work. The meaningful engagement of local organisation of people with disabilities (OPDs) is particularly important to our work and is outlined further in our **principles for the engagement of people with disabilities**. We are committed to strengthening the leadership, capacity, and voice of local organisations, thus ensuring that our projects and programmes address the needs of local populations (as defined by them) and increasing the reach, sustainability and effectiveness of our work.

We do this by:

4.1. **Ensuring that appropriate local organisations are involved in our projects, and that suitable risk-management processes are in place to support them.**

We identify and work with appropriate Government bodies, local service providers and local civil society organisations in our projects, including those that represent the people and communities we serve (for example OPDs and women's organisations), at national, regional and/or district level.

Our partnership management tools are designed with supportive risk management at their centre, and include:

- **A two-stage partner due diligence process:**

For all partners, the initial Minimum Partnership Criteria (MPC) assessment, a pass/fail test for whether partnership can go ahead. The MPC must be completed and signed off before any partner contract is signed. It checks whether the partner meets our 13 minimum standards for partnership, for example, that the organisation is properly registered, has no links to terrorism, is not bankrupt, and has not engaged in fraudulent or illegal activities.

All partners on all projects must undergo an MPC, regardless of their funding status or previous history of work with Sightsavers. Any shortcomings must be swiftly mitigated through an action plan signed by both parties. If this is not possible, either because the risk is too severe, or the partner is unwilling to sign up to the plan, the partnership does not go ahead.

For higher risk partners¹, a subsequent in-depth Due Diligence assessment, which is a detailed supportive review to identify additional improvement and capacity-development needs that will need addressing to facilitate successful programme delivery and stronger long-term health of the partner. Depending on the partner's role in the project, this may be run as a full assessment, or a safeguarding-only assessment. The process is a collaborative, solutions driven process with an emphasis on joint identification of possible issues and required support. A long-term action plan for improvement is drawn up to address areas of weakness, and progress is monitored throughout the lifespan of the partnership.
- **Compulsory safeguarding training for all partners**

This is run by our network of in-country Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) during project inception. All partners are required to attend, to ensure that everyone is clear on safeguarding standards, expectations and reporting channels (and the support and resources available from Sightsavers), to minimise risks to beneficiaries and to the reputations of all organisations involved in the project.
- **Project risk-assessment matrix**

A project-specific risk matrix is drawn up collaboratively between Sightsavers and partners during project design, to identify and mitigate any risks or issues that might impact upon the successful delivery of the project. The risk assessment template categorises risks into security, safeguarding, political, operational, financial, environmental, reputational and miscellaneous other, and is expanded upon and regularly monitored and updated throughout the project lifecycle.

4.2. **Coordinating a participatory project design process and ensuring equitable power dynamics and shared decision-making throughout the project cycle.**

We ensure that our partners have a voice in shaping the priorities, reach and scope of the project through a participatory project design process.

Local partners have a seat at the table at all points of the programme cycle, from conceptualisation through to delivery, exit and closure. We ensure that partners have

¹ **Higher risk partners** are those who receive Sightsavers' funds, or implement project activities directly, or have direct contact with beneficiaries, or manage settings that beneficiaries attend, e.g., schools or hospitals.

clear representation and an equal voice in decision-making through transparent governance structures, well defined implementation responsibilities, and clear programme management review checkpoints. Partners are represented on project governance bodies, for example Steering Committees, where relevant, to promote local ownership and accountability.

Our country offices are focussed on developing strong relationships with all partners, from government ministries to community level organisations, and are committed to working jointly with them on all aspects of implementation and decision making.

4.3. Providing tailored capacity development that meets our partner’s needs and priorities, and which supports them to become strong, effective, autonomous, and independent organisations.

Our due diligence approach, which involves a joint review of our partners’ strengths and weaknesses during project design and inception, enables us to identify any capacity gaps or challenges, and allows jointly agreed, realistic and affordable plans for support and improvement to be put in place where appropriate. We acknowledge that capacity development can take many forms – training, investment in core systems or staff, provision of technical expertise/advice, mentoring, or ensuring a partner is fully linked up with key support networks or other similar organisations within their own environment.

Sightsavers ensures that learning is at the heart of our work with partners. We ensure that all stakeholders involved in the implementation of programmes take the time and opportunity to reflect and learn from their experiences. This is a joint process between Sightsavers and our partners, with all parties building shared knowledge and greater expertise as projects are implemented.

Sightsavers also recognises that many partners have greater understanding and knowledge than we do, both in some technical areas and of the context we are working in. As such, we are open to opportunities for our partners to build our organisational capacity, and this also reinforces the importance of ensuring that our local partner’s voices are central to project design, delivery and learning.

4.4. Ensuring that local partners are fairly compensated for their efforts and expenses in supporting the delivery of the project, and that any support is suitably flexible, sustainable, and helps to build financial independence.

We ensure that our financial plans and budgets are transparent and fully agreed with partners prior to signing project agreements, and we ensure that all activities and outputs that are agreed as part of programme design have a realistic and fair budget.

Our programmes are implemented by local partners and, as such, we on-grant a high proportion of the agreed project financing directly to partners for them to manage and spend appropriately and in line with project plans. We plan multi-year projects with partners and agree budgets across the life cycle of these projects, in line with any relevant donor agreements. This can vary from three to six years. Budgets are

monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis by both Sightsavers and our partners and can be adapted and changed in line with need, subject to affordability.

Where there are sound economic and value-for-money reasons, or where our due diligence findings necessitate it, Sightsavers may incur some project expenditure directly on behalf of a partner. This often relates to international procurement of equipment or medicine and is done with full agreement and transparency and where it makes logistical and economic sense.

Sightsavers ensures that budgets agreed with partners are comprehensive and cover a wide range of costs. Each budget agreement is made with the specific need of the project and partner in mind and agreed support for indirect and overhead costs will be specific to the partner and project requirement. This could take the form of coverage of costs for financial capacity development, coverage of operational overhead costs as part of the programme, or provision of indirect cost support, especially for weaker community-based organisations. In all cases this will be appropriate, agreed with the partner as part of project design, and reviewed regularly.

Wherever possible, we support partners to work towards financial sustainability and independence, seeking to identify strategies to secure long-term sustained inputs and/or funding, to ensure the continued delivery of key services and benefits after the Sightsavers-funded project ends.

4.5. Ensuring that monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) activities are participatory and co-owned by local partners.

We strive to develop organisational and individual capacity in monitoring, evaluation and learning, and to shift power to support local partners and practitioners in our programme countries. We promote local decision-making based on locally identified needs and evidence, which involves:

- Implementing inclusive participatory approaches to MEL that engage local partners from design through to the analysis of data. The co-creation and joint delivery of MEL plans with local programme staff and partners ensures shared accountability and ownership of the change that the project expects, and consensus on how the change will be measured over the life cycle of the project. Partners apply the knowledge and learning that emerges, promoting ownership and skills transfer whilst bringing partner and community voices to the fore.
- Strengthening partners' existing tools and processes to monitor, evaluate and learn from programmes wherever possible, rather than introducing parallel MEL systems and approaches.
- Recruiting in-country evaluators to make use of local skills and experience (and to support their professional development) and to ensure that appropriate contextual knowledge is applied to the evaluation.
- Promoting participation and locally led development through the articulation and demonstration of approaches that enable local communities to hold service

providers to account. Examples include the collection of inclusive data, patient feedback mechanisms for local health providers, and principle and values statements for the people and communities we serve.

4.6. Working with local partners to develop strategies for lasting change

We design projects in such a way that local partners, including Government and existing service providers are enabled to continue key activities when Sightsavers' funding comes to an end. Sustainability has multiple dimensions, and we seek to address these, wherever feasible, in our projects and partnerships, building advocacy plans and sustainability plans into project design from the outset:

- Technical sustainability – building technical and institutional capacity of local partners through skills and knowledge transfer and targeted capacity development.
- Social/community sustainability – working to ensure that services are accessible, acceptable, and equitable across different population groups and developing behavioural change and community understanding.
- Institutional sustainability – strengthening local governance structures, policies, and the administrative capacity and will of institutions to ensure the long-term effectiveness and stability of the education, health, and social services systems.
- Financial/fiscal sustainability and resourcing: working to improve the long-term availability of sustained funding and/or inputs to enable continued delivery of key services and benefits after the Sightsavers-funded project ends.

5. The role and value-add of Sightsavers

The locally led development agenda focusses on ensuring that appropriate decision-making agency, funding, leadership, and power sits with local and national-level actors, including within Sightsavers' own structure (where national and regional leadership roles in offices across Africa and Asia are staffed by people from the country or region in which they are based). Within this context, Sightsavers and the wider INGO community continue to play a critical role and to bring significant value-add to the design, delivery, and evaluation of development programmes. This includes:

- **Capacity sharing**, where we recognise the experience, expertise, legitimacy and representative roles of government and civil society partners but also bring our own capacities and strengths to the relationship and the programme, so that all parties can develop their respective skills and knowledge and learn from each other's expertise.
- **Thematic and cross-cutting technical expertise** to drive forward quality programming. We bring together our partners' direct experience of programme delivery, with vast sectoral knowledge developed across multiple contexts and from the international bodies we partner with including the UN system, professional bodies, global civil society partners, institutional donors, multinational companies and research institutions.

- **Systems capability** which ensures assurance and compliance against international best practice. This includes organisational and human resource expertise, policies and resources in critical areas such as safeguarding, inclusion, procurement and security, compliance and controls, contract management, financial planning and strategy setting.
- **High quality data, research and evidence**, from across multiple contexts, including the ability to bring learned experience and evidence of what works across a range of contexts and what is more relevant in specific countries or regions. This also enables us to contribute to the global evidence base in our areas of thematic focus, increasingly working with research partners based in the countries where we support programmes.
- **Programme cycle management** with an emphasis on developing consistent approaches to programme quality, sustainability, MEL and systems strengthening.
- Finally, we bring a vital role as a “**critical friend**” to partners, with a shared mission and values and a common purpose both within and beyond specific programme activities, but also the ability to step back and raise and work through issues which may not be so apparent when focusing on the day-to-day work of project delivery. This is an important part of our open, transparent, and constructive partnership approach.

6. Further information

Please find a small selection of case studies overleaf, to showcase a few examples of locally led development in practice within our programmes.

Locally led development case studies

Inclusive political systems, Senegal and Cameroon

Sightsavers' Irish Aid funded projects in West Africa have made great progress enabling greater participation of women and men with disabilities in political processes.

The Zero Project Awards recognised the success of initiatives in Senegal and Cameroon empowering people with disabilities in local governance and leadership. People with disabilities have been elected as local councillors, and most local councils we worked with are now systematically recognising Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) as equal stakeholders in key decisions. We worked hand in hand with the umbrella OPD federations (*FSAPH* in Senegal and *The Platform* in Cameroon), building their knowledge in electoral administration, advocacy skills, ability to participate in decision making and hold governments to account – for example in responding to the needs of people with disabilities during the COVID pandemic.

Global Labor Program, Kenya

Our USAID-funded program in Kenya is building the skills of jobseekers, unions, employers and government to enable people with disabilities to access work opportunities. Our approach is centred on building effective collaboration and active networks between OPDs, private sector employers, trade unions and County governments – and we have been making strides in demonstrating effective, locally led approaches to inclusive employment. We are working with Diageo East African Breweries Limited and Coca Cola Beverages Africa to embed inclusion and labour rights in the companies' supply and distribution chains. By May 2023, we had established 90 farmer hubs, recruited over 1,000 smallholder sorghum farmers, 400 of whom have disabilities, and supported a total of 7,000 non-sorghum farmers.

Inclusive Futures, Nigeria

In Nigeria, Sightsavers' FCDO-funded **Inclusive Futures** eye health project in Kogi State has put local Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) in the driving seat to advocate for improved access to eye health services for people with disabilities. The OPD-led advocacy campaign has made substantial gains, influencing the Kogi state government to recognise the Disability Rights Law and inaugurate the Kogi State office for Disability Affairs (Disability Commission), a huge step forward for disability rights in Kogi state.

Inclusive Futures, global programme

Effective partnerships between INGOs and OPDs need to incorporate shared decision-making and governance, recognising OPDs as owners and co-creators of the project. Sightsavers is committed to ensuring that people with disabilities are meaningfully engaged in our programmes. But what does this really mean, and what does it look like in practice? Through the FCDO-funded **Inclusive Futures** programme, we have developed **a guide to building successful partnerships between INGOs and disability organisations**.