

# **Levels of Influence: Sightsavers' approach to monitoring progress towards policy influencing objectives**

March 2026



## Introduction

---

Sightsavers is an NGO with projects across Africa and South Asia to provide eye care, eliminate preventable blindness, deliver inclusive education and promote disability rights. Policy influencing is a core element of our programme strategy, with Sightsavers' country offices engaging with both government ministries and civil society organisations on a wide range of processes. This includes advocacy for the development and implementation of policies which make provisions for persons with disabilities, as well as the domestication of international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the African Disability Protocol into policies at national level.

With an extensive focus on policy influencing, it is important to have an effective monitoring system in place, to measure progress towards influencing objectives. It has been argued that policy influencing cannot be measured quantitatively (Whelan, 2008; Reisman et al., 2007), and that quantifying qualitative data relies on subjective assessment which may not be robust (Coe and Majot, 2013). Quantifiable indicators are often either too focused on the short-term activity level, such as the number of meetings held, or too long-term and high level, such as the number of changes in policy, which may not come about for many years (ibid). Rapidly changing and unpredictable contexts don't lend themselves to the rigidity of conventional monitoring through quantitative indicators. There is sometimes a contradiction between donor templates and reporting processes which require rigid quantitative indicators, and the needs of project staff in country offices who need a more flexible monitoring approach to their policy influencing work.

To address this challenge, in 2016 Sightsavers developed a Levels of Influence framework as a monitoring approach to measure progress towards our policy influencing objectives. This framework combines quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in a process that offers the flexibility to accommodate changes in political contexts. Over the past 10 years, Sightsavers has refined the Levels of Influence framework, integrated it into organisational project development and oversight processes, and it is consistently used staff across all 23 country offices for the purposes of reporting progress towards their policy influencing objectives. Beyond this, Sightsavers has presented the Levels of Influence framework to donors, and it has been used for reporting on policy and advocacy donor-funded projects such as Irish Aid Civil Society Partnership for a Better World (12.8 million Euros from 2023 – 2027), Mastercard funding for economic empowerment (38 million USD from 2026 – 2029), as well as project to ratify and domesticate the African Disability Protocol in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe funded by the European Commission.

The purpose of this paper is to outline how the framework works, to share some examples, and to kick-start a conversation on how we can effectively monitor progress towards policy influencing objectives in international development. Sightsavers has also created a short **How-to note on using the Levels of Influence framework**. We hope the Levels of Influence framework may be a useful tool for other NGOs grappling with the same challenges, and we are always interested in feedback or new ideas as to how the approach could be further improved and refined.

## The Levels of Influence Framework

The Levels of Influence framework is based on the idea that progress towards our policy influencing objectives, although context specific, will loosely follow the same six stages. Irrespective of whether we are assessing the progress made towards the policy and advocacy objectives in an eye health, education or social inclusion project, the process of delivering change broadly follows the same steps:

**Level 1. Planning:** Identification and presentation of clear policy influencing objectives through the development of an advocacy plan.

**Level 2. Understanding:** Stakeholders understand our policy influencing objectives, for example through developing and sharing policy and advocacy briefs, recommendations papers, and other information resources.

**Level 3. Engagement and Acceptance:** Stakeholders demonstrate a willingness to engage with us and with the issues in which we are advocating change, take ownership of the issue, accept that the issue needs to be addressed and look into options for taking action, for example a Ministry of Health agreeing to review recommendations on their health policy which Sightsavers has submitted.

**Level 4. Commitment:** Stakeholders commit to implementing the changes which we have been advocating for, for example a government committing to become a champion of the Inclusive Data Charter.

**Level 5. Delivery:** Stakeholders deliver the policies and make the changes that they have committed to, for example a Ministry of Health integrating new indicators on disability in its Health Management Information System.

**Level 6. Reflection:** Assessment of the successes, challenges encountered, and relevant lessons learned for future projects through a review.

This allows us to set policy influencing objectives at each Level of Influence, with a means of verification to indicate what evidence will be collected, and a timeline to set a target date for completion, as in the example below:

Level	Objectives	Means of verification	Timeline
<b>1. Planning</b>	Development of an advocacy plan, budget and implementation plan	Finalised advocacy plan	Q3 2023
<b>2. Understanding:</b> Project stakeholders understand the rights of persons with disabilities articulated in international frameworks.	Staff at the Ministry of Health and Federation of Organizations for People with Disabilities have access to resources explaining the World Health Organization's recommendations on eye health	Publication of briefings on World Health Organization's recommendations  Activity reports from training sessions	2024

<b>3. Engagement and acceptance:</b> The government engages with Organisations for Persons with Disabilities and accepts recommendations on how to enhance the eye health strategic plan.	The Federation of Organisations for People with Disabilities reviews and submits recommendations on the current eye health strategic plan	Recommendations paper submitted by OPDs	2025
<b>4. Commitment:</b> The government commits to strengthening its eye health system in line with World Health Organisation recommendations.	The Ministry of Health commits to integrating indicators on disability into its Hospital Management Information System	Revised draft of the eye health strategic plan produced by the Ministry of Health	2026
<b>5. Delivery:</b> The government delivers its plans to make eye care services more inclusive for people with disabilities.	The Ministry of Health collects disability data on eye care services through the revised Hospital Management Information System	Ministerial statements about the new HMIS  Media coverage of the HMIS launch  Reports from the Federation of Organisations for People with Disabilities	2027
<b>6. Reflection</b>	Review of advocacy evaluation and lessons learned	Project review documents  Documentation of reflection held with members of country office, evaluations and advocacy team	2028

## Using the Levels of Influence framework in practice

Conventional monitoring revolves around logical frameworks or ‘logframes’, setting out the project objectives, indicators, and targets against which progress will be measured. While logframes are designed to monitor progress towards objectives which are easily quantified such as the number of people trained or treated, they are less well adapted to accommodate policy influencing goals, which are not easily quantifiable.

For example, what indicator can we use if our policy influencing objective is ratification of the Marrakech Treaty by the government of Senegal? We could easily quantify the number of meetings held with the relevant ministry, but this would not be very meaningful, as more meetings doesn’t necessarily translate into more progress made. Conversely, an indicator

such as the number of new policies introduced to implement the Marrakech Treaty may be useful, but it will not be applicable until the treaty has been ratified, which may be many years down the line. Progress may involve a relevant minister showing support or approval from a committee, even if ratification has not yet been reached, and a binary yes/no question as to whether ratification has been reached misses this important step forward.

Beyond this, policy influencing objectives often need to be changed during the project lifecycle and may become obsolete when political contexts change, a government coalition collapses, a new range of ministers come to power, and new advocacy opportunities emerge. In one of our projects in Sierra Leone, one of the most important policy influencing successes, the development of a new eye health policy, was not set out in the original project plans as it was not seen as a plausible objective. As a result, project indicators which are focused on specific policy influencing objectives will create problems and sometimes a lengthy discussion with a donor to change the wording, if that objective has to be altered.

In consequence, policy influencing objectives are often left out of logframes in order to avoid these complications. However, it is important that policy influencing objectives are included in logframes to ensure that these components are fully integrated into the programme with a monitoring mechanism to assess the extent to which progress is on track. Excluding them risks relegating policy influencing objectives to the status of optional extras.

The Levels of Influence framework allows us to resolve this conundrum, using the following as an outcome indicator: 'Level reached in Levels of Influence framework'. This enables us to simply report a baseline and target level to be reached in the project logframe, and the specific objectives under each level can then be defined in the Levels of Influence framework, which can be revised every year, if necessary, without having to make changes to the logframe, as in the example below:

Outcome Indicator	Indicator Reporting				Indicator Definition	Data Source (Means of verification)	Assumptions
	Baseline	2023	2024	2025			
Level reached in Levels of Influence framework	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	The indicator will be reported using the Levels of Influence framework, in which specific objectives and means of verification will be set at each level. A level will be reported as reached if a majority objectives have been reached. The Levels of Influence framework may be revised annually, with objectives added or removed to reflect the changing context.	The means of verification for each objective will be set out in the Levels of Influence framework. Both objectives and means of verification may be revised on an annual basis.	<p>The targets are based on the assumption that the current government will serve its full term until 2026. If there is an early election or the government coalition collapses, this may delay progress.</p> <p>A second assumption is that there is no further wave of COVID-19, which would divert government attention and funding away from eye care and could hold back the achievement of our advocacy objectives.</p>

While the framework and six levels are designed to be simple to use, progress towards policy influencing objectives is unlikely to be linear. Political contexts are fluid and may change quickly. In some instances, rapid progress may be made up to Level 3, but then due to a change in government, we may be unable to reach Level 4 for several years. In other cases, an election may bring a new progressive government to power, and it may be possible to advance from Level 2 straight to Level 5. The framework can accommodate these variances, as the only target entered in the logframe is the level reached. If progress has been delayed, we can report that for example, the target was Level 3, but we were only able to reach Level 2. In this way, the framework enables sufficient quantitative analysis and standardisation to satisfy donor reporting requirements, but it is not overly rigid or prescriptive.

Policy influencing is an iterative process, and plans will need to evolve as a project progresses. The Levels of Influence framework for Year 1 of a project will represent our best understanding of the change process at the time and the documentation which will be available as evidence of this change, but this may need to be adapted in Year 2 and Year 3 as we learn more.

With this approach, we can report that, for example, Level 4 has been achieved, with the means of verification as any examples and evidence of government commitment,

irrespective of whether these were originally set out in the project proposal, as in the example below from a donor report:

Target	Actual	Performance	Notes
Level 4	Level 4	Met	Several important milestones were reached in 2021. Sightsavers supported the Ministry of education in the development of the Education Management Information System, to develop the data collection tools for the reporting of disability disaggregated data. The MoE developed a new and comprehensive inclusive education policy, committing budgetary resources for teacher training and assistive devices. Sightsavers is a member of the technical advisory committee for the education policy, providing examples of inclusive education policies in other countries and recommendations on how to strengthen disability inclusion. The progress made on the EMIS and the inclusive education policy indicate that commitment from government stakeholders (Level 4) has been reached.

The baseline level reached may be 1 (particularly if this is a new project), where the first stage is to develop a new advocacy plan. However, in some cases, for example in a project extension, stakeholders may have already demonstrated engagement and acceptance, and the project extension aims to reach commitment and delivery. In this case, when a new advocacy plan is developed for the project extension phase, the baseline would already be Level 3.

The target level reached is determined taking into account the baseline, project budget and duration. A project typically seeks to progress by one level per year, but this will vary according to country and context. If the baseline is Level 1 in a two-year project, it may not be realistic to achieve more than Level 4 in the final year of the project. If this is the case, objectives and means of verification may be entered at Level 5, with a timeline beyond the end of the project, with a note explaining that these objectives are unlikely to be achieved during the project lifetime due to the limited duration and budget.

It will often be the case that achievements are made at higher levels before all objectives have been reached at a lower level - a project may have achieved the majority of objectives set at Level 3, without having achieved all objectives at Level 2, and also achieved some objectives set at Level 4. When this is the case, the overall level reached is reported as the highest level where the majority of objectives have been reached, with an accompanying narrative report to present achievements made at both higher and lower levels, as in the example below:

Target	Actual	Performance	Notes
Level 2	Level 2	Met	In 2023, Sightsavers reached two of the three objectives set out under Level 2. Sightsavers engaged with the Ministry of Health as well as district level authorities, to discuss the budgetary eye care services, and held meetings with the National Pharmacy to discuss the inclusion of cataract kits on the essential drug list. However, we were unable to engage with the Ministry of Education on the provision of eye screening in schools. We also saw some progress at Level 3, as we established regular coordination between actors in the Water Sanitation and Hygiene and NTD sectors. Sightsavers also succeeded in securing the inclusion of cataract kits which was an objective set at Level 4, a major breakthrough in securing the sustainable provision of eye health medication at local level, and a positive indication of the increasing prioritisation placed on eye health in Senegal. On the basis that the majority of objectives have been reached at Level 2, as well as some milestones at Level 3 and Level 4, our assessment is that the target of Level 2 has been met.

## Conclusion

Introducing the Levels of Influence framework has been an important step forward in embedding the rigour of monitoring into our policy influencing work and ensuring that policy influencing is fully integrated as a key component of our projects in our logframes as well as our internal and donor-focused reporting processes. It is not perfect, and some inconsistencies between what is reported at each level in different projects are inevitable. However, as pragmatists we accept that some form of quantitative assessment of qualitative data is both required by donors and despite its flaws, useful for our own learning.

Sightsavers has been using this approach since 2016, and it is now firmly established within the organisation and our 23 country offices. However, Sightsavers is always looking at how our monitoring approaches can be improved, we welcome any feedback, and we are interested to learn how other organisations may approach the challenges of monitoring policy influencing in other innovative ways.

**For more information, please contact Nick Thorne, Global Advocacy Monitoring Advisor at [nthorne@sightsavers.org](mailto:nthorne@sightsavers.org)**