Research, evidence uptake and learning strategy





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A microscope in Primary Health Post at Irele Local Government area in Ondo State, Nigeria.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

Al Artificial intelligence

EMIS Education management information system

EvRI Evidence, Research and Innovations

GIS Geographic information system

INGO International non-governmental organisation

IRO Independent research organisation

KT Knowledge translation

LMIC Low and middle income country

NTD Neglected tropical disease

PAR Participatory action research

RAAB Rapid assessment of avoidable blindness

SIM Strategy implementation monitoring

UK United Kingdom

WHO World Health Organization



Executive summary

Sightsavers is an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) working with partners in low and middle income countries (LMICs) to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. To deliver on our goals, we develop and demonstrate ideas and approaches that work, so governments and other stakeholders can apply them on a wide scale.

High-quality evidence is critical for our success and represents one of the three pillars of our operations, alongside influencing and implementation. Evidence-based programming is one of the nine principles outlined in our overall programme strategy. Therefore, for Sightsavers, research is a core organisational activity, which contributes to organisational learning, improved quality of programmes and effective influencing. We focus on applied research, which has direct practical implications for the interventions we support and the policies we influence. We also place significant emphasis on the use of effective and innovative tools to ensure that our research findings are easily available, wellunderstood and effectively used by decisionmakers and programme implementers.

This document provides Sightsavers' staff, partner organisations, donors and other stakeholders with a clear understanding of why we are committed to research and evidence uptake, along with our goals and priorities in the next strategic period. These are congruent with our overall programme strategy and five thematic strategies on eye health, unaddressed refractive error, neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), inclusive education and social inclusion.

Our overall aim is to develop a sound evidence base to support scalable and cost-effective programmes and related influencing in health and inclusion. It is also our aim to ensure that this evidence is easily accessible and effectively used by a broad range of stakeholders within, and outside of, Sightsavers.

To achieve this aim, we will work on four interrelated objectives:

- 1. Conduct high-quality primary and secondary research to generate new evidence in response to global knowledge gaps, programmatic needs and organisational learning agenda
- 2. Further strengthen organisational systems for effective management of research evidence and measurement of impact
- **3.** Ensure effective communication of research findings and further build our reputation as an organisation striving for excellence in high-quality implementation research
- **4.** Develop and implement strategies for digital innovations to maximise the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of our work



Blackflies collected in a tube in a field at Akinleye, Iwo, Osun, Nigeria on Monday October 4, 2021.

The key principles guiding our research are outlined in our Research Governance Framework, which is a companion document to this strategy. As before, we will deliver research in partnership with academic institutions and research organisations in the countries where we work. Building on the research delivery model developed in the previous strategic period, we will focus on longer-term and more sustainable research partnerships, which develop and enhance through reciprocal capacity building and mutual learning. Guided by the principles of localisation in international development, we will prioritise strengthening national and local research leadership, giving particular attention to collaborations with researchers, who may be disadvantaged, including female research leaders and researchers with disabilities.

While the primary responsibility for the delivery of this strategy lies with the Evidence, Research and Innovations (EvRI) directorate, the strategy will be implemented in close collaboration with other teams across the organisation. The strategy will be monitored through a number of output, outcome and impact indicators; these are outlined in the last section of this document.

By articulating our research and evidence uptake priorities, we:

- Provide a clear understanding of the role of research evidence within the wider organisational objectives
- Maintain focus on areas and questions that are of most strategic importance to Sightsavers
- Enhance coherence between generating evidence and improving our programmes and influencing
- Articulate to our donors and research collaborators the added value of Sightsavers as a research and evidence uptake partner
- Further strengthen a culture of evidence-based decision-making within the organisation

Introduction

Sightsavers is an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) working with partners in low and middle income countries (LMICs) to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.



Vision

Our vision is of a world where no one is blind from avoidable causes, and where people with disabilities participate equally in society.



Cataract patient Khadijah, 6, recovering after her eye surgery in Sokoto, Nigeria.

To deliver on our goals, we develop and demonstrate ideas and approaches that work, so governments and other stakeholders can apply them on a wide scale. We work in five thematic areas with the aims to improve population health and remove barriers to the participation of people with disabilities in society.

Five thematic areas of Sightsavers' work:



Eye health



Refractive error



Neglected tropical diseases

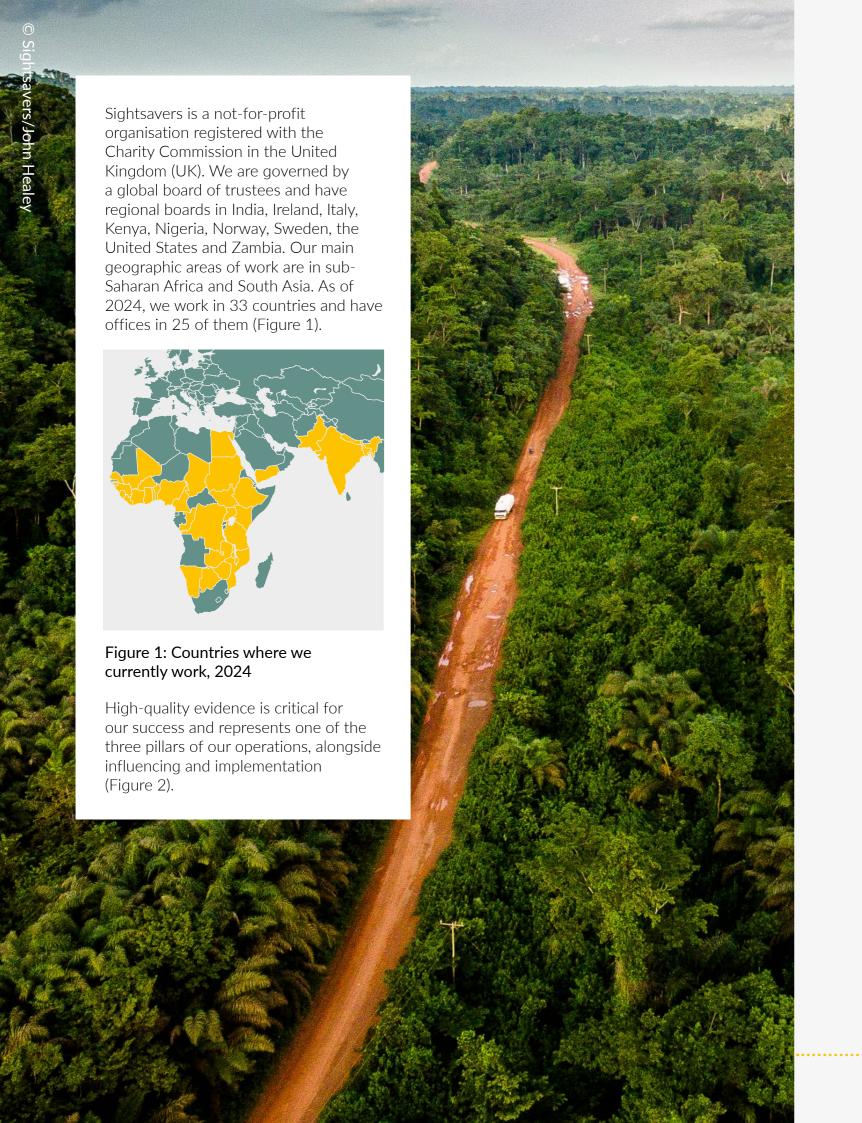


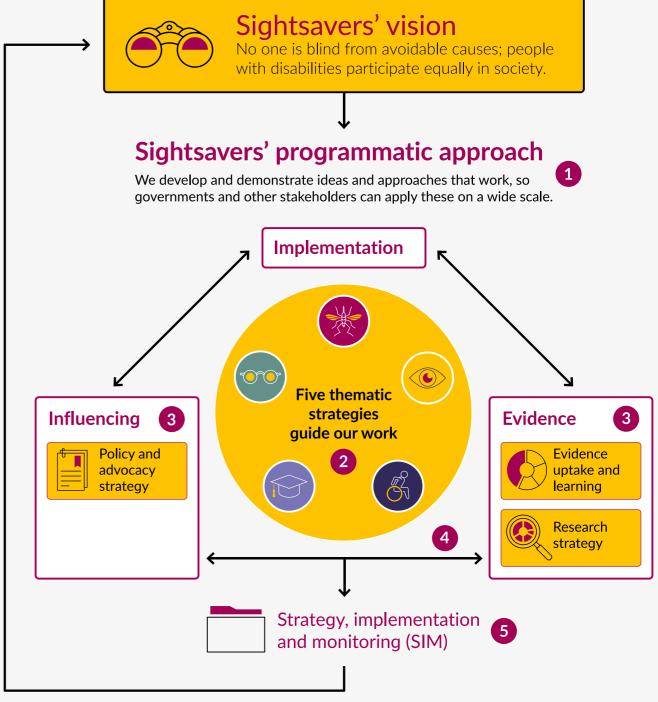
Inclusive education



Social inclusion







- Strategic principles help steer our programmatic approach
 - Five thematic strategies guide our work (Neglected tropical diseases; Refractive error; Eye health; Social inclusion; Inclusive education)
- Research, monitoring, evaluation, learning, and policy approaches feed into our thematic work

- We adapt and adjust our work to ensure we deliver real change
- Our SIM card monitors our effectiveness and progress towards delivering on our vision

Figure 2: Sightsavers' programmatic approach

Evidence-based programming is one of the nine principles outlined in our overall **programme strategy**. This principle commits us to putting the best available evidence at the heart of our programmes, resource allocation and influencing work.

The evidence base that underpins our programmes and influencing is generated in multiple ways, including situational analyses, programme evaluations, output statistics reports, quality assessments and facility audits. Research has a particular niche within this mix, as rigorous scientific scrutiny and transparency of methods make research findings the most credible and comparable sources of evidence, and ones that are accorded a greater weight among decisionmakers and practitioners.

For Sightsavers, research is a core organisational activity. It contributes to organisational learning, improved quality of programmes and effective influencing. As a research delivery organisation, we focus on applied research, which has direct practical implications for the interventions we support and the policies we influence. Knowledge gaps we address can be global or countryspecific, but the relevance of research findings to our work is critical.

Research is a scientific investigation of phenomena undertaken systematically and transparently to increase the stock of knowledge. To achieve research credibility, one must use appropriate data collection and analysis methods, ensure transparency and clarity in the research process, and critically appraise the quality of data.

Applied research is a type of research that uses theoretical knowledge to solve real, everyday problems with a more immediate impact on improving practices. However, we recognise that generating evidence is not sufficient for improving the delivery and quality of programmes and influencing. It is also important to ensure that research findings are available, wellunderstood and used by decision-makers and programme implementers. Therefore. we place significant emphasis not only on the production of new knowledge, but also on the use of effective and innovative tools to ensure knowledge translation. organisational learning and evidence uptake.

Knowledge translation (KT) is a dynamic and iterative process that involves synthesising, evaluating, summarising and sharing knowledge to motivate action. KT involves systems and tools, which can help prioritise issues, map knowledge gaps and move evidence into policy and practice.

Evidence uptake is the process of using evidence by different stakeholder groups to inform their decisions, policies and practice.

Organisational learning is a collective process of acquiring, interpreting, sharing, institutionalising and acting on new knowledge.

In this document, we set out our strategy for research, evidence uptake and learning. It aims to provide Sightsavers' staff, partner organisations, donors and other stakeholders with a clear understanding of why we are committed to research and evidence uptake, along with our goals and priorities in the next strategic period.



A research team member and peer researchers are engaging in participatory research to understand how the learners experience climate change or disaster related risk.

When developing this strategy, we undertook a historical review of research and learning at Sightsavers and conducted consultations on evidence gaps within our five thematic areas. We considered our priorities in the wider context of health and disability research to ensure that the new evidence we generate is pertinent to the needs of the global development community.

This strategy is congruent with our overall **programme strategy** and five thematic strategies on eye health, unaddressed refractive error, neglected tropical diseases, inclusive education and social **inclusion**. Each thematic strategy sets out the ways in which we deliver programmes in that area and identifies key objectives for what we implement. This strategy outlines priorities for generating and using evidence to support these thematic objectives.

By articulating our research and evidence uptake priorities and principles, we:

- Provide a clear understanding of the role of research evidence within the wider organisational objectives
- Maintain focus on areas and questions that are of most strategic importance to the organisation
- Enhance coherence between generating evidence and improving our programmes and influencing
- Articulate to our donors and research collaborators the added value of Sightsavers as a research and evidence uptake partner
- Further strengthen a culture of evidence-based decision-making within the organisation

Research and learning at Sightsavers: a historical overview

We started setting up our in-house research operations in 2012 and our first research strategy was published in 2014. In the previous strategic period, we focused on:

- A better understanding of the existing body of evidence relevant to Sightsavers' work
- Identifying areas of research where we can bring significant added value
- Developing our internal research capacity and partnerships
- Building our reputation as a credible and trusted research partner

Our research team has grown organically in response to the needs of the organisation and knowledge gaps identified by our programmes. In 2017, based on an independent assessment of our research capabilities and publication outputs, Sightsavers was awarded Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status by UK Research and Innovations.

In 2019, we made additional investments and developed a complementary organisational function of evidence uptake and learning to ensure that evidence generated through our research and other internal and external sources is widely available, easily accessible and effectively used.

In the current organisational structure, the primary responsibility for generating new research evidence and facilitating evidence uptake lies within the directorate called EvRI. As of 2024, the directorate has 25 staff with expertise in epidemiology, statistics, economics, geospatial analysis, participatory action research, evidence synthesis and evidence uptake. Our staff are based in different country offices across Sightsavers' regions, and they work closely with programme staff and partners. Every year, on average, we conduct 20 to 25 studies, publish 20 to 30 peer-reviewed papers and present at 10 to 12 scientific for ain relevant thematic fields.

Pre-2011 2011 2014 2017 2019 2024 Commissioned Strategic First research Awarded Additional Research research decision to strategy Independent investment and evidence to external invest in published Research in evidence uptake academic in-house Organisation uptake and strategy status by UK reviewed and research learning partners Research and updated capacity

Innovation

Below, we describe research areas and methods where we have developed particular strengths, highlighting some of our research achievements in the past decade:

- We have been a major contributor to the global evidence on the prevalence and causes of visual impairment using rapid assessment of avoidable blindness (RAAB) methodology. Data generated by these studies is critical for national eye care planning, global estimates of the burden of visual impairment and monitoring countries' progress towards universal eye health coverage.
- We supported the development of a standardised tool and conducted a series of national eye health system assessments (EHSAs) used by governments to prioritise their health system-strengthening interventions.
- We developed a series of evidence gap maps on priority eye diseases. These maps have been made freely available to decision-makers, practitioners and researchers worldwide.
- Driven by our commitment to **inclusive** data we are one of the first INGOs to pioneer the integration of Washington Group Questions on Disability in both population-based surveys and routine data collection systems. We have also tested various tools to measure socioeconomic inequalities, and, in 2022, we won the Davidson Gwatkin Equity Measurement Prize for the use of the Equity Tool.
- Our implementation research on NTDs pioneered innovative approaches to identify hard to reach populations, using community knowledge that was supplemented by geographic information system (GIS) technology, and resulted in the development of **alternative** treatment and surveillance strategies.

- Recognising the limited fiscal space in many countries, we made significant investments in promoting and undertaking economic research, including costing studies, willingness to pay studies and budget impact analyses.
- We developed strong expertise in participatory action research (PAR) and peer-led qualitative studies, making people with disabilities central to disability research and building their capacity to conduct high-quality studies.

Since the establishment of our evidence uptake and learning function in 2019, we have focused on implementing a knowledge management approach through the development of systems and platforms to collate, store and disseminate research evidence, easily and effectively. We can now track our research activities from ideation to implementation, translation and use. We share our findings through a range of internal fora, and all Sightsavers staff can easily access research evidence in various formats. In the past two years, we have worked closely with our programme teams to identify specific learning gaps and develop an organisational learning agenda.



Objectives and priorities in the next strategic period

Our overall aim is to develop a sound evidence base to support scalable and cost-effective programmes and related influencing in health and inclusion. It is also our aim to ensure that this evidence is easily accessible and effectively used by a broad range of stakeholders within, and outside of, Sightsavers.

To achieve this aim, we will work on **four interrelated objectives**; these are described below.

The theory of change underpinning our strategy is shown in Figure 3.



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

Theory of change

Financial resources to support research and evidence uptake are available

High quality evidence and learning is a priority for the organisation



Effective crossorganisational working to identify learning gaps and support research and evidence uptake is in place Appropriate technical expertise for research and evidence uptake is available within the organisation

Effective research partnerships are in place and can be easily mobilised







New, high-quality evidence is generated from integrated and standalone research

Existing evidence is synthesised and made available to the organisation





Information and knowledge management systems adequately support evidence storage, dissemination and use

Research and learning products are available in accessible and user-friendly formats

Motivations and capacities of staff to understand and use research evidence are evident across the organisation

Effective evidence uptake strategies and partnerships are in place

Time and space is created for reflection and learning





Staff systematically and effectively use research evidence in ongoing and new programmes

Staff systematically and effectively use research evidence in national and global influencing



Sightsavers implements high-quality, evidence-based programmes and advocacy, and proactively contributes to global learning and influencing

Figure 3: Theory of change underpinning our research strategy

Sightsavers/Michael Duff

Specific activities to achieve each strategic objective are agreed annually and described in our annual workplans. Below, we describe our broad vision of the key areas of our focus in the next strategic period.

Objective 1: Conduct high-quality primary and secondary research to generate new evidence in response to global knowledge gaps, programmatic needs and organisational learning agenda.

Under this strategic objective, as before, we will conduct research in five thematic areas: eye health, refractive error, NTDs, inclusive education and social inclusion. Our research portfolio will include both **primary** studies, which collect new data first-hand, and **secondary** research, which involves systematic and rapid literature reviews or the collation and analysis of already available data.



In eye health, we will continue investing in visual impairment surveys, eye health system assessments and measuring equity of access by different population groups with a focus on gender, poverty and disability. We will expand research into the drivers of socio-economic inequities and intersectionality between poor eye health and other characteristics of disadvantage. We will work with our programme teams to identify and test innovative approaches and technologies that can reach more people - particularly women, people with disabilities and those in remote rural locations. We will continue testing the effectiveness of task shifting and integrating eye care into primary and community health care as a way of reaching disadvantaged groups. We will also prioritise research into the economics of eye health to generate more evidence on the costs and costeffectiveness of eye care interventions, and to identify and test sustainable and equitable eye health financing models.



Our **refractive error** research agenda will prioritise studies into the epidemiology of refractive error, patient health-seeking behaviour, the effectiveness of different service delivery models, the use and applicability of technology and the impact of refractive error interventions. While our research into refractive error in children will focus primarily on schoolbased delivery platforms, we will work to explore the most effective ways to reach out-of-school children.



Our research on NTDs will be aligned with the content of the WHO NTD road map and research priorities of the WHO NTD collaborating centres. Our disease focus will continue to be on trachoma, onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis, schistosomiasis and intestinal worms. Our research questions will focus on reaching the last mile in the elimination agenda, new NTD diagnostics, sustainable systems for post-elimination surveillance and morbidity management, and adaptability to global disruptors,

such as climate change, pandemics and conflicts. We will strengthen our entomological research portfolio and research into the interconnection between people, animals and their shared environment, using the One Health approach. We will also continue investing in research into opportunities for the use of NTD platforms for other public health interventions.



Our inclusive education research will focus on how to integrate disabilityinclusive practices within key building blocks of educational systems, in a practical and cost-effective way. One of our key priorities will be to inform development of disability-inclusive education management information systems (EMISs), generating evidence on what disability data is critical for these systems to hold, and how this data can be collected and stored reliably and accurately. We will continue investing in studies that explore how children with disabilities participate in education, and expand the use of rigorous approaches to assess the impact of inclusive education interventions on children's developmental and learning outcomes. We will also expand our portfolio of research into collaboration between health, education and rehabilitation services, particularly with regards to early identification of impairments, functional and educational assessments and provision of assistive technologies. Another priority will be building collaboration with other organisations in developing standardised methodologies for assessing costs and cost-effectiveness of inclusive education practices across different settings.



Our **social inclusion** research will be aligned with the thematic priorities identified in our social inclusion strategy. It will explore how people with disabilities, in all their diversity, participate in society, with a focus on access to health care services, political processes, labour markets and financial services. We will also invest in developing and testing tools for measuring disability inclusion in a more standardised way to allow for comparisons of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of inclusive interventions across different contexts.

While we continue undertaking a thematic approach to researching, so that our research agenda will be guided by the knowledge gaps and learning questions identified within each thematic area, one of our priorities in the next strategic period will be expanding opportunities for transdisciplinary research and crossstudy learning. For example, we will be looking to build stronger links between NTD, eye health and disability research portfolios, expanding the use of both participatory and systems research methodologies. We will explore how education data platforms could be effectively used to collate data on visual impairment and other disabling health conditions diagnosed through the health sector. We will also work closely within the team to develop common tools and generate more holistic learning on cross-cutting research topics, such as gender inequalities, stigma and climate resilience. Building on our recent successful experience, we will continue developing our expertise in the use of multidisciplinary methodological approaches; for example, geospatial analysis, storytelling and photovoice.

Zeinabu spends a lot of time playing at home with her best friend Zeinabu Diagne (8, yellow shirt), who also helps her sometimes with her homework.

Objective 2: Further strengthen organisational systems for effective management of research evidence and measurement of impact.

In the new strategic period, we will build on our previous work and achievements and further strengthen the systems and processes for evidence storage, sharing and use. We will work to make sure that all staff across the organisation are well-aware of where to find information about Sightsavers' research and how to use it. Our intention is to keep our systems and processes flexible and agile, so they can be adjusted in response to feedback and specific needs.

We will also expand our work with other teams to ensure that our research management platforms are wellaligned with other sources of evidence, particularly programme monitoring data. We will work to develop mechanisms for triangulation of research findings with programme data to ensure more holistic and coherent learning. Particular attention will be given to strengthening systems and processes for more pro-active integration of learning in programme design and implementation.

We acknowledge that the journey from research to impact is an iterative and often complex process. We will develop additional measures to monitor the uptake and impact of the research evidence we produce.

Objective 3: Ensure effective communication of research findings and further build our reputation as an organisation striving for excellence in highquality implementation research

While using research evidence to improve the quality of our programmes and advocacy has always been the primary drive of our investments in research, we are strongly committed to sharing our findings with other national and international organisations and the global academic community.

Dissemination of research findings through peer-reviewed publications and conferences has been a key priority for our research team, and we remain committed to using these important communication channels. As before, to maximise access to our findings by decision-makers and practitioners in the countries where we work, we will publish our research through open access platforms and in line with the guidelines on good publication practices.



his work on Female Genital

Schistosomiasis at a conference.

We will continue to be strong advocates of the role of INGOs in implementation research and will encourage other INGOs to share their research and programmatic learning – openly and transparently.

One of our priorities in the next strategic period will be to diversify our research communication channels. We will expand the use of alternative means of research dissemination, including blogs, podcasts, videos and social media platforms. This will include channels for effective communication of findings to programme beneficiaries.

In addition to international scientific conferences, we will increase our presence at relevant regional and national fora. We will also expand opportunities for joint presentations with other research groups from academic institutions, development agencies and INGOs. Where applicable, we will build links with other organisations and networks focusing on knowledge translation and evidence uptake.

Sightsavers/Anouk Gouvras

Objective 4: Develop and implement strategies for digital innovations to maximise the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of our work.

We define digital innovation as the application and adoption of digital technologies in a strategic manner to improve our operations or create novel products and services.

Since the establishment of our in-house research team, we have progressively introduced a variety of digital technologies, including mobile data collection applications, cloud-based data storage platforms and interactive data visualisation software. The purpose of our digital enhancement in the next strategic period will be three-fold. First, we will work to leverage technology to further automate the processes of

data collection, analysis and synthesis and thus reduce time and resources required, while also maximising our productivity and efficiency. Second, we will advance the use of digital tools in the presentation and dissemination of our research findings to facilitate more innovative ways of engagement with our different target audiences. Third, we will collaborate with relevant partners to deploy and test novel technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, to develop new distinctive products and services, which can improve the delivery and quality of our programmes.



A partial view of the TT Tracker mobile application





Group photo of youth researchers and members of Sightsavers' research team involved in a school related gender-based study in Sierra Leone.

How we will deliver our strategy

As before, we will deliver research in partnership with academic institutions and research organisations in the countries where we work. In the previous strategic period, we developed a research delivery model, where all studies are co-designed, co-implemented and co-disseminated by Sightsavers staff and in-country research partners. In the next strategic period, we will build on this established model, but focus on longer-term and more sustainable research partnerships, which develop and enhance through reciprocal capacity building and mutual learning.

Guided by the principles of localisation in international development, we will prioritise strengthening national and local research leadership, giving particular attention to collaborations with researchers who may be disadvantaged, including female research leaders and researchers with disabilities. Working closely with our colleagues in the NTD team, we will continue investing in research capacities of facilities involved

in the NTD diagnostics and surveillance. Peer-led participatory research, particularly in disability studies, will continue being our priority; and we will work closely with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs), helping them to develop capacities and networks for peer-led participatory action research.

Building on our previous experiences with academic institutions, we will continue supporting PhD studies and student placements. Priority will be given to the initiatives which:

- Demonstrate direct relevance and benefits to our programmes
- Develop sustainable technical expertise in the countries where we work
- Contribute to building long-term research partnerships with Sightsavers
- Use cost-effective approaches and provide value for money

The key principles guiding our research are outlined in our Research Governance Framework, which is a companion document to this strategy. These state that:

- All research supported by Sightsavers should focus on a clearly defined question or problem and be grounded into the existing body of knowledge. It means we will invest in research areas where there are true knowledge gaps and where research findings can advance our, and global, learning
- All research should use pre-defined study protocols, transparent methods and validated tools and follow internationally recognised principles and standards
- All staff leading on research design and implementation should be trained in research methods and ethics and have a good understanding of the subject area

- All participants should be informed about the purpose, methods and intended use of research findings; and all research involving human subjects, their tissues or data should obtain ethics clearance from relevant national ethics bodies
- The independence of research should be clearly described, and any conflicts of interest or partiality should be declared
- Where appropriate, the research should be designed with a disability and equity focus, to ensure the views of people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups are central to the research design and implementation

While the EvRI directorate will be central to the delivery of this strategy, we anticipate that a range of other teams across the organisation will play a significant part in its implementation. For example, our technical expert teams and country offices will play a critical role in identifying programmespecific knowledge gaps, providing oversight to the research implementation and putting research findings into practice. Our policy and advocacy teams will lead on developing influencing messages and policy recommendations arising from new studies, while our fundraising teams will lead on identifying research funding opportunities and supporting research funding applications and grant management.

Monitoring progress

The delivery of this strategy will be monitored at several levels. First, Sightsavers' **strategy, implementation and monitoring (SIM) score card**, a cross-organisational performance monitoring tool, sets out key organisational objectives and indicators to track performance against them. At this level, we are accountable for the delivery on the organisational objective, "Generate and disseminate sound research and evidence". The objective has four indicators; three of them are monitored annually and one indicator is monitored bi-annually.

There is also a set of output research indicators, such as the number of studies implemented, or papers published. These are monitored and reported annually. With the increased focus on evidence uptake and use, we will introduce a number of new indicators, which will help us monitor impact

of our research, internally and externally. We will update this section of the strategy once these indicators have been developed.

The list of all indicators used to monitor this strategy is shown in Table 1.

Indicator	Frequency of reporting	Monitoring mechanism
% of projects that generate new evidence through high-quality research	Annually	SIM card
% of projects that disseminate new evidence to internal and/or external audiences	Annually	SIM card
% of organisational income invested in research or other evidence generating activity	Bi-annually	SIM card
% of newly designed projects that demonstrated the use of high-quality evidence and learning from Sightsavers' and external research in the project design	Annually	SIM card
n of research projects implemented	Annually	Research tracker
n of peer-reviewed papers published	Annually	Publication tracker
n of conference presentations delivered	Annually	Conference tracker
n of other research products (blogs, media articles, podcasts, and so on) disseminated	Annually	Research Hub
n of internal research webinars conducted	Annually	Research Hub

Table 1: Strategy indicators, frequency of reporting and monitoring mechanisms



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













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