

# Executive summary



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**Project name:** Sustainability Synthesis Review Report

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## Background information

Sustainability is a key goal in Sightsavers' programmatic work. Grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Sightsavers' programme strategy<sup>1</sup> published in 2022 says that:

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"We aim to develop sustainable programmes in partnership with organisations that already exist in the countries where we work, so changes will continue effectively once our direct inputs have ended. This involves considering the political, financial, technical, technological, socio-cultural, institutional and environmental and climate change-induced aspects of our programmes. We are developing long-term planning which includes our exit strategy from programmes, and we will revisit these when developing new programmes to judge progress and adjust our long-term approach, as required. In particular, we intend to work harder with governments to ensure that they factor in future financial resourcing of programmes that we work with them to develop."  
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Around 10% of Sightsavers' current set of Thematic Learning Questions<sup>2</sup> specifically mention sustainability and many more address aspects of sustainability, typically around systems strengthening and long-term finance provision, but also extending to environmental impact. The issues are currently present in the thematic questions for eye health and refractive error, inclusive education, social inclusion and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). A range of terms are used, such as 'programme resilience' and 'integration,' and the theme is sometimes conceptualised as part of wider approaches such as advocacy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Sightsavers-Programme-Strategy-2022.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> These cover areas of interest for learning within each thematic strategy, which complement formal programme indicators and are typically addressed through a combination of research, evaluative and learning activity. Thematic strategies are eye health; refractive error; inclusive education; social inclusion; neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). The thematic strategies can be accessed here: <https://www.sightsavers.org/how-were-run/sightsavers-strategies/>

## Purpose of evaluation

The aim of this review is to provide the Sightsavers MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) team with a stronger understanding of how sustainability is being assessed in its evaluations and what can be done to strengthen this. The findings also aim to inform and support future evaluators to assess sustainability capacity and outcomes of Sightsavers' projects/programmes comprehensively and accurately. Finally, the review aims to enable Sightsavers teams to better use existing and future learning and recommendations related to sustainability in the design and delivery of projects/programmes.

## Review approach

This was a synthesised review of 48 Sightsavers evaluation-related documents, including terms of reference and reports from mid-term reviews, end-term evaluations and other learning exercises conducted or supported by Sightsavers evaluation teams from 2019-2023, as well as management responses and action plans from programme teams. It also covered the five thematic strategies. All documents were read, and information related to sustainability was captured in an Excel coding matrix. Codes were assigned to all sustainability-related findings, and then, using an inductive approach, themes emerging from the data were captured. A set of criteria was used to gather information on how evaluations were geared to examine sustainability and how different factors, such as types of sustainability results, had been explored in evaluations. Coded data was then analysed thematically.

This review was desk-based, and took a mixed-methods approach, including a comprehensive review of past evaluations supported by follow-up interviews with Sightsavers staff and other relevant stakeholders.

## Main findings

Evaluations reviewed during this exercise show evidence of a varied effort to explore projects' sustainability (their capacity for sustainability and some sustainability achievements) within the overall scope of enquiry. While many evaluations recognise where projects have achieved sustainability results, there is still room for improvement in interrogating programme ambition and planning to achieve continued impact, as well as making wider recommendations about sustainability capability beyond just identifying cost/financial barriers to sustainability. This will require clear articulation of programme sustainability strategies as a basis for monitoring and evaluation.

## Key lesson

A few evaluations stand out as strong best practice examples of how the concept of sustainability should be approached. These evaluations share two common features: they applied a multi-dimensional lens to sustainability, either in terms of different dimensions (technical, financial, institutional and community commitment); or by examining sustainability at different levels of intervention, e.g. at national policy or community levels. These two approaches allow for an analytical separation that gives a clearer understanding of a programme's sustainability capacity and of where critical traction has been made. This approach equally enables clearer recommendations for how to consolidate progress.

Evaluation evidence from across the thematic areas converges around five main approaches deemed key to achieving sustainability. These include:

1. A systems-strengthening approach
2. Influencing national institutions and policy
3. Embedding ownership through local structures
4. Equity and inclusion practices within government, and
5. Maintaining infrastructure and equipment

## Conclusions

Sightsavers' body of evaluations has identified a range of systems-strengthening approaches, including capacity development and partnership building, as well as policy influencing and impact at the local level, as key to improving project interventions' sustainability capacity.

The evaluations contained limited information on programme design and planning in regard to sustainability; this in itself suggests there is some way to go in terms of operationalising sustainability. A further review of programme documents would help to ascertain to what extent programmes are engaging in recurrent analysis. This would involve scanning the political/economic landscape for significant change and opportunities to leverage project evidence and partnerships, as well as identifying/advocating for more financial, human and environmentally sustainable resource solutions.

Sustainability is part of a longer-term change process. This review has found that evaluations' understanding of sustainability often fluctuates between that of **process** and **outcome**, and often confuses the two, in their examination of a project's sustainability. The review highlighted the importance of fully understanding what contributes to and limits the prospect of achieving sustainability. For evaluators, sustainability should encompass more than, for example, whether financial allocations remain, but **on how systems are strengthened over time**, using concepts such as **pathways** and **structures** to guide the assessment. This perspective will give a more comprehensive assessment of how multiple interventions work together and create momentum — such as through key partnerships and building capacity and tools to improve policy — to understand the level of sustainability achieved and how to ensure its lasting impact.

## Recommendations

### For programmes, projects and project design teams

1. **Encourage all programmes to articulate their sustainability objectives, strategy and success indicators** to better deliver sustainable outcomes and facilitate meaningful monitoring and evaluation.
2. **Use plans to clearly distinguish between the process of building sustainability capacity of a programme and the sustainable outcome** – which means being clear about what is a means to achieve sustainability and what the desired sustainability outcome might be.
3. **Encourage programmes and projects to conduct a sustainability analysis to inform the sustainability strategy.** This includes scanning the operational context and

assessing the internal drivers of sustainability as well as factors in the enabling environment. The analysis should be revisited on a recurrent basis<sup>3</sup>.

4. **Build in room for flexibility in sustainability plans.** Considering the context-driven nature of sustainability, establish a flexible plan and be ready to act/ change track with agility in response to unforeseen challenges and opportunities.
5. **Appreciate that not all programmes/projects can have high sustainability-related ambitions and potential,** but it is important to be specific about the level at which the project seeks to embed change
6. **Encourage greater awareness across Sightsavers' programmes and projects of the role of environmental sustainability,** for example, appreciating the role of management of supply chains, consumables and waste; the effects of general project logistics and travel; and the wider permanent environmental choices made in projects, like use of durable construction materials, energy sources and land. Continue to look for opportunities to increase resilience against environmental change within programming.

### For the MEL team and other evaluators

7. **Use a sustainability framework to guide TORs and evaluators in assessing sustainability in Sightsavers' programmes and projects.** This will ensure that both sustainability capacity and outcome are examined through the multi-varied lens of pathways to sustainability.
8. **Expect evaluators to assess sustainability on the basis of a good understanding of where the project is seeking to embed change,** including an assessment of the factors influencing a project's sustainability capacity.
9. **Consider using a set template to conduct systematic analysis and reporting of the critical factors influencing sustainability,** especially for mid-term reviews.
10. **Consider engaging MEL team/evaluators while the sustainability strategy is being developed** to understand what sustainability success looks like and to understand optimal points of the intervention in which to get involved and take stock.
11. **Consider assigning weightings to the different components/pathways set out in the sustainability plan** for priority interventions and clearly identify assumptions around the factors that may affect the delivery of the strategy/plan.
12. **Make use of Sightsavers' other MEL processes throughout the project cycle to consider and track sustainability** in the same way as other oversight elements, for example, performance and risk, and involve Global Technical Leads in this process.
13. **Seize opportunities to do more long-term analysis/impact evaluation,** including ex-post evaluations where appropriate and feasible.
14. **Use targeted case studies to learn from successful programme influencing** to understand how influencing strategies were used to affect policy across multiple countries and different thematic areas.

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<sup>3</sup> The Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT) is a good example of an easily approachable assessment tool: <https://sustaintool.org/psat/understand/>

- 15. Really consider what evaluations of environmental sustainability involve**, including environmental impacts of project interventions (management of supply chains and materials, waste, energy, and construction) and any opportunities (or lack of) to build in efficiencies and resilience for environmental change across the staff/project participant spectrum.
- 16. Consider using an off-the-shelf tool such as the Sustainable Life Cycle Assessment (SLCA)<sup>4</sup>** or equivalent tools to assess the environmental impacts of individual Sightsavers' "sustainable" interventions, such as the "green vision centres."

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<sup>4</sup> Further information on the Sustainable Life Cycle Assessment tool available here:  
<https://www.lifecycleinitiative.org/starting-life-cycle-thinking/life-cycle-approaches/social-lca/>