

Sightsavers' Voluntary Stakeholder Review on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Summary

February 2026

Sightsavers' Voluntary Stakeholder Review (VSR) was launched in 2024 to report our contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This report provides an overview of how and why the VSR was conducted, and what it showed in terms of its findings.

Background

In 2015, when UN member states agreed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, they identified Voluntary National Reporting (VNRs) as the mechanism of follow-up and review for governments to lead national reporting on the progress towards the implementation of the SDGs. VNRs have become an effective and widely used reporting and accountability framework, with 177 countries having presented at least one VNR to date.

A year later, the city of New York pioneered Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), adapting the VNR methodology as a new approach for local authorities to report on their progress towards SDG implementation. VLRs have been embraced by city and local authorities around the world, growing from two submissions in 2016 to 48 in 2021, and now 168 completed VLRs in total.

Paragraph 89 of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development calls on major groups and other stakeholders to report on their contribution to implementation of the SDGs, to recognise and account for the efforts and impact of businesses, civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the private and third sectors. However, no reporting mechanism has been developed and there is no system for other stakeholders to report their work on delivering the SDGs.

Our aim

The purpose of Sightsavers' Voluntary Stakeholder Review (VSR) is to report our contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, adapting the VNR and VLR approaches to pilot a new methodology for NGOs and other organisation to present the impact of their work and how it relates to the SDGs. This is not an external evaluation but a self-assessment, intended to generate organisational learning and to be shared across the sector - as to how the SDGs inform and relate to our programmatic work and how our projects and processes contribute to and comply with the principles of the SDGs. Finally, the aim is to meet the demand for accountability through organisational reporting, as envisioned in 2015 and set out in paragraph 89.

While this VSR model will not be applicable to all stakeholders, and others may need to adapt it according to their specificities, we hope to kick-start a broader conversation as to how we can demonstrate our contribution to the SDGs, and how we can more effectively share resources and learn from each other. As we approach 2030 we hope the VSR experience will be a useful and practical guide, making the case for the link between the work of civil society organisations and the SDGs and how this can be done effectively.

Our approach

The initiative to develop a VSR goes back many years. In 2021, Sightsavers undertook an organisational review and refresh of our thematic strategies on eye health, refractive error, neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), inclusive education and social inclusion. As part of this process, Sightsavers set out organisational level indicators to measure progress towards our overall strategies. This provided an opportunity to map our organisational indicators, not just to the overall SDG goals but to specific targets. For the first time, this enabled us to generate a detailed data picture, showing which SDG targets we contribute towards in each country and how this is done with data reported annually against our organisational indicators.

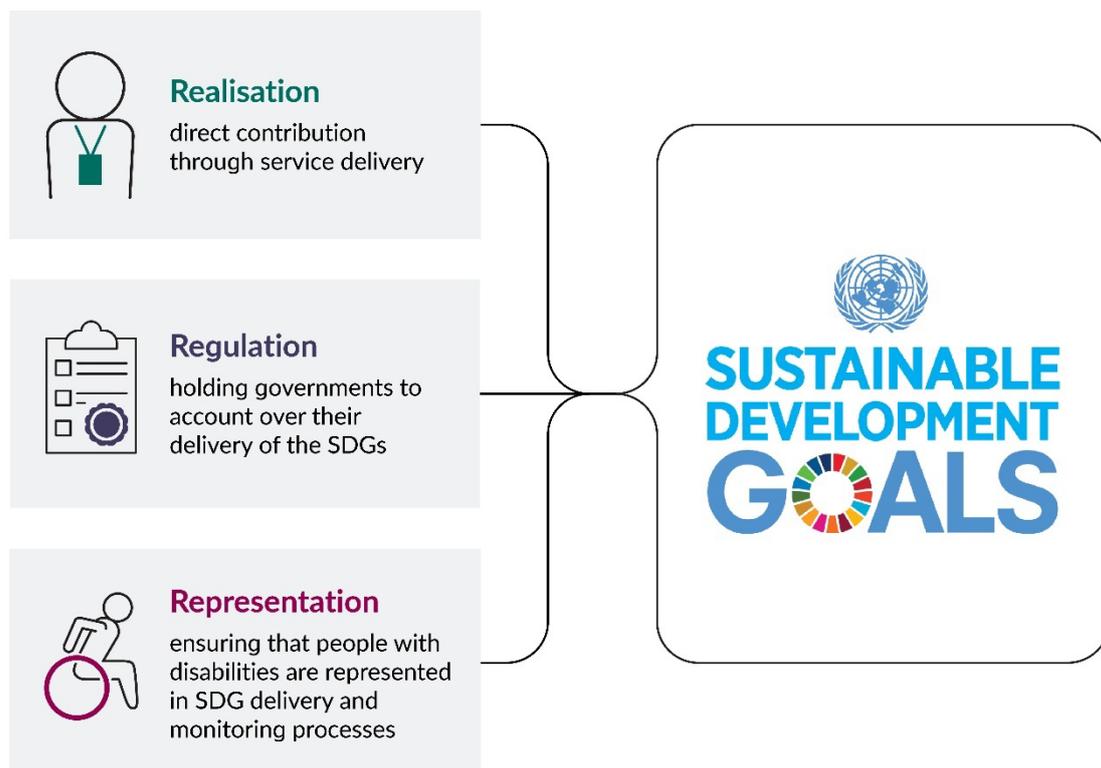


Figure 1: How civil society stakeholders can report their contribution to the implementation of the SDGs

Our next step was to adopt the framework of the 'Three Rs' for presenting our contribution to the SDGs. 'Realisation' refers to instances of Sightsavers' projects directly delivering the SDGs - for example, a Sightsavers project delivering mass drug administration to work towards the elimination of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), relating to SDG target 3.3. 'Regulation' refers to instances of Sightsavers holding governments to account over their delivery of the SDGs - for example, through supporting the passing of the Disability Act in Kenya, which sets out criteria and standards for inclusive development against which future governments can be held. In this instance, we can evidence Sightsavers' technical contribution to the passing of the Disability Act, which relates to multiple SDG targets through upholding the right to inclusive education (SDG target 4.5), sexual and reproductive health services (SDG target 5.6) and the provision of training to access the labour market (SDG target 8.6). However, the passing of the act does not automatically translate into progress towards these SDG targets, as it depends on government implementation.

Lastly, 'Representation' refers to instances of Sightsavers ensuring that people with disabilities are represented in SDG delivery and monitoring processes - for example, through advocating and facilitating the inclusion of provisions for people with disabilities in the electoral code in Senegal. This contributes to the political inclusion of people with disabilities (SDG target 10.2), but it requires the action of government stakeholders to ensure the rights are upheld in practice.

This framework provides a useful structure for us to consider the different aspects of our contribution to the SDGs, prompting wide-ranging discussions across the organisation. Aspects of our 'realisation' of the SDGs include our organisational policies on disability inclusive recruitment, accessibility of office processes, ethical data collection and safeguarding. The SDG principle of 'Leave No One Behind' was instrumental in shaping Sightsavers' strategic shift from eye health and education to 'inclusive eye health' and 'inclusive education' to ensure access for people with disabilities.

Sections were allocated and written by the teams most involved in each area of work, as well as case studies from a number of our 23 country offices across Africa and South Asia, to ensure a wide a range of input across the organisation.

Findings

Conducting the VSR proved to be a useful process for Sightsavers and produced a range of findings which are instructive for future planning, programming and communications:

- **Sightsavers contributes to a wide range of SDGs**
The VSR identified 29 SDG targets across ten SDG goals¹ to which Sightsavers directly contributes, across the areas of health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), employment (SDG 8), inequality (SDG 10) and climate change (SDG 13). In addition, Sightsavers' work indirectly contributes to SDG targets relating to the alleviation of poverty and hunger through enabling improvements in health, education and economic empowerment. Mapping out the full extent of Sightsavers' contribution to the SDGs and determining where the linkages are strongest is a useful process for understanding the long-term impact and situating an NGO's objectives within a global context.
- **Recognising the intersectionality between SDGs is crucial**
The report shows the interlinkages between the different aspects of Sightsavers' work. For example, Sightsavers' projects focused on equipping young people with the necessary IT skills to find employment shows the intersection between education and economic empowerment in SDG target 4.4. Sightsavers' work in supporting the domestication of the National Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights for Persons with Disabilities in Kaduna State in Nigeria highlights the overlap between the areas of inclusive health, social inclusion and gender. Ultimately, this indicates it will not be possible to achieve SDG targets in isolation and progress towards SDG target 3.8 on universal health coverage will also help to meet targets relating to education and other areas.
- **Partnerships with government and civil society stakeholders are key**
Throughout Sightsavers' work and achievements, the model of working in partnership is central. Sightsavers does not directly employ cataract surgeons, teachers and community health workers. Instead, Sightsavers provides technical assistance to a Ministry of Health in developing a masterplan for the elimination of NTDs in Cameroon or facilitates the collaboration between government and civil society stakeholders in reviewing and amending an electoral law to include provisions for people with disabilities in Senegal.
- **Understanding the role of Sightsavers in terms of partnership is useful in addressing the questions of co-accountability and attribution in achieving progress towards the SDGs.** Sightsavers does not single-handedly deliver an increase in the enrolment of children with disabilities in India, but we build partnerships with ministries of education, organisations for people with disabilities and other INGOs. We also provide technical expertise and mobilise international funding, collectively improving access to education. This model ensures that Sightsavers' impact endures beyond the end of a project cycle, that service delivery doesn't come to an abrupt stop if grant

¹ Sightsavers directly contributes to SDGs 2.3, 3.2, 3.3, 3.7, 3.8, 3.c, 3.d, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 5.2, 5.6, 5.c, 8.3, 8.5, 8.6, 8.8, 10.1, 10.2, 12.6, 13.1, 13.2, 13.3, 13.4, 13.5, 16.7, 17.17, 17.18

funding is terminated, and that the contribution towards the SDGs is sustainable.

- **Conventional reporting focuses on realisation over regulation and representation**
The process of developing a VSR showed that our conventional reporting is primarily focused on realisation. This is unsurprising as, for any NGO, the key demands of donor reporting and fundraising revolve around explaining budget expenditure, the achievement of project outputs and direct project delivery. However, through employing the approach of the 'Three Rs', the VSR gave more prominence to Sightsavers' work holding governments accountable for delivering on the SDGs (regulation) - for example, through advocating for national governments to adopt international frameworks such as the African Disability Protocol and facilitating the input of people with disabilities in government consultations (representation).
- **Realisation, regulation and representation are not mutually exclusive categories**
Presenting Sightsavers' work on delivering the SDGs in terms of realisation, regulation and representation was a useful way to explore the breadth of contributions. However, it is also important to recognise the overlap between these categories. For example, Sightsavers' involvement in providing technical assistance to a Ministry of Health in setting accessibility standards for facilities would simultaneously be an example of realisation in contributing towards universal health coverage (SDG 3.8), as well as an example of representation in making sure that the needs of people with disabilities are reflected in the standards.

Sightsavers' capacity building of organisations for people with disabilities (OPDs) to produce shadow reports on national SDG implementation could be seen as an example of realisation, regulation and representation all at once. As a result of this, it was not possible to conduct a statistical analysis of the findings of the VSR - for example, in terms of the extent to which the economic empowerment and eye health portfolios differ in the distribution between realisation, regulation and representation (and this is not the purpose of the 'Three Rs' approach).

- **SDG implementation has to be context specific to be effective**
The SDGs are global goals, intended to guide governments and stakeholders around the world with ensuring that people have the rights, living conditions and access to services they need. However, the examples and case studies in the VSR outline how meaningful change requires working within existing systems rather than trying to impose universal solutions. For example, in Uganda, rather than implementing a standardised gender-based violence support programme, Sightsavers carefully mapped local power structures and brought together 13 different groups - from law enforcement to community leaders. Similarly, in our NTD work, the contribution outlines how success in eliminating diseases like trachoma across seven countries was not achieved through a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, programmes adapted to local disease patterns, health system capacities and even environmental factors like climate change impacts.

- **The focus on, and need for, better data is a running theme across all areas of SDG delivery**

From eye health to education and economic empowerment, the VSR highlighted the need for disability disaggregated data to facilitate the planning and allocation of government resources, and also to enable accurate reporting on the SDGs. Sightsavers provided technical assistance in supporting integration of the Washington Group Questions on disability into the census in Nigeria, Zambia and Tanzania, so that governments have accurate data on the number of people with disabilities in the country. Similarly, Sightsavers worked with the International Labour Organisation to embed questions on disability into Labour Force Surveys in Pakistan and Bangladesh, to generate data on the extent to which people with disabilities are included in the workforce. As a result, SDG target 17.18 - to increase the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data - is a focus for Sightsavers across multiple areas of work.

- **Research and innovation are inseparable from SDG delivery**

Research is an integral part of Sightsavers' work, providing the necessary evidence to inform project design and strategy. Epidemiological and entomological studies supported by Sightsavers have direct impacts on disease elimination, as they pinpoint locations for treatment and life-changing support, and facilitate global and national investments to support the delivery of these interventions at scale. In the past decade, we have supported 25 national and sub-national visual impairment surveys, which provide vital information for developing national eye health programmes and improving quality of eye care. However, distinguishing the contribution of Sightsavers' research work towards the SDGs in terms of realisation, regulation and representation is complex: a study on the extent to which children with disabilities are able to access education may be used to guide the delivery of a Sightsavers project or development of an Education Sector Plan (realisation); it may be used by civil society organisations to hold a government to account in meeting its commitments on education for all (regulation); and it could be used to strengthen the role of organisations for people with disabilities in monitoring the delivery of education services for children with disabilities (representation).

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

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