

# Sightsavers and education

## Guy Le Fanu

Sightsavers is an international organisation working with partners in 34 low-income countries across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. We were established in 1950 and our head office is in the United Kingdom.

In line with our 2009–2013 organisational strategy, Sightsavers is committed to strengthening systems of education. Our aim is to promote increased access to inclusive education systems that fully meet the needs of children with visual impairments and thus enable them to become productive and fulfilled members of society. In 2010, we directly supported the education of 5,244 such children while indirectly supporting the education of a much larger number of disabled students. We also supported the training of 2,623 classroom teachers.

Sightsavers supports pilot projects that demonstrate scaleable, adaptable and cost-effective approaches for disabled children. For example, Sightsavers and the Malian Union for the Blind (UMAV) initiated a project in 2005 for inclusive education of children with low vision – the first project of its kind in Mali. A management team of UMAV staff with experience in special education for blind pupils was set up to initiate the project. The team received training in low vision so they could provide quality support for affected children, and 27 students with low vision were then identified through assessments and equipped with optical and non-optical assistive devices. Since the pilot stage, various actions have been taken to ensure the project's sustainability, including setting up a resource centre provided by UMAV but renovated and equipped by Sightsavers and training of trainers in the field of information and communication technology (ICT).

## Advocacy

Through advocacy, Sightsavers can influence the policies and practices of national governments and bilateral and multilateral donors. In particular, we can help ensure that all children, including disabled children, have access to quality basic education in line with Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3, the Education for All (EFA) goals and international human rights law (including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). When carrying out this work, we not only engage directly with policy-makers and implementers but also build the capacity of civil society organisations, including disabled people's organisations, to engage with the education sector. In addition, Sightsavers develops guidelines/tools that promote equity and inclusion in education.

Sightsavers Kenya, for example, convened an education stakeholders' forum in 2007 with a view to identifying the factors that were hindering effective educational provision for learners with visual impairments in mainstream schools. A key issue identified was insufficient funding for children with visual impairment: under the free primary education policy, all children received the same amount (US\$15) despite the greater costs of learning materials for those with visual impairments. Another issue was the lack of a policy to increase access to mainstream schools for disabled learners. An advocacy task force was created to take up these two issues and later widened its remit to include other disabilities and wider education actors. Key achievements included increased funding by the Ministry of Education for each child with a disability – from \$15 to \$40 – and a new policy to increase educational access to mainstream schools for disabled persons, which has been implemented since early 2010.

## Supporting high quality teacher training

Through supporting the provision of high quality pre-service and in-service training, Sightsavers can ensure that teachers will be better able to meet the sometimes complex educational requirements of disabled students. Research carried out by the University of Birmingham on the role of itinerant teachers in Kenya and Uganda, for example, revealed that most of these teachers lacked knowledge and skills in Braille and low vision, making it difficult for them to provide the necessary support for children with visual impairments. In response, a three-week training course was organised by Sightsavers Kenya for 30 teachers. Its success led to the decision to offer training to over 300 teachers (one from each integrating school in Kenya). While the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) was identified as the most appropriate organisation to deliver this training, its capacity to do so proved limited. Sightsavers therefore organised training for the lecturers at KISE while helping the institution to redesign its curriculum. There is now a three months' in-service training course at KISE, and KISE staff provide specialised training for special needs education teachers in mainstream schools.

## Curricula, materials and equipment

Sightsavers and its partners seek to ensure that curricula are sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities – as well as that disabled students have access to the necessary education materials and equipment and possess the skills and knowledge to make best use of them. In another example from Kenya, the country's

Examination Board decided that visually impaired learners should get an additional 30 minutes when sitting their exams. Although this was a positive step, it was insufficient as the measure was applied uniformly, irrespective of the technicality of the subject or the total time allocated for the paper. After lengthy discussions between Sightsavers, the Examination Board and other concerned parties, it was decided that visually impaired students should be allocated 30 per cent more time than other students to complete their papers. It was also agreed that visually impaired students should be given extra time when taking examinations in the more demanding subjects.

### Development of educational management information systems

Through promoting the development of appropriate educational management information systems, Sightsavers can ensure that education providers have a better understanding of the educational needs of students with disabilities and respond more sensitively to those needs. For example, a clinical assessment exercise, in conjunction with research on Sightsavers-supported programmes in

four East African countries, revealed weak or non-existent data/records for disabled students at various levels. This made it difficult for schools to provide any guided support for the child or carry out good quality caseload management. In addition, due to lack of a reliable database and inventories, some schools had more equipment than they needed while others had little or none. The process of streamlining and developing a reliable database in the last three years has yielded positive results not only in terms of rationalising provision of materials but also in tracking coverage and performance at all levels.

Drawing on its network of partners across the world and its own internal expertise at national, regional and international levels, Sightsavers is committed to promoting inclusive education of good quality for disabled children within the Commonwealth and beyond.

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