

A conversation with Sightsavers, May 20, 2019

Participants

- Khondoker Ariful Islam – Bangladesh Country Director, Sightsavers
- Md. Rafiqul Islam – Senior Programme Officer, Sightsavers
- Md. Kamrul Hasan Bhuiyan – Finance & Support Services Manager, Sightsavers
- Sandeep Buttan – Global Technical Lead Eye Health, Asia, Sightsavers
- Rob Boyce - Project Finance & Risk Officer, Sightsavers
- Amanda Jordan – Trusts Manager, Sightsavers
- Andrew Martin – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Ariful Islam, Mr. Rafiqul Islam, Mr. Bhuiyan, Mr. Buttan, Mr. Boyce, and Ms. Jordan.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Ariful Islam, Mr. Rafiqul Islam, Mr. Bhuiyan, Mr. Buttan, Mr. Boyce, and Ms. Jordan of Sightsavers as part of the second round of investigating applicants to the 2019 GiveWell Grants for Global Health and Development in Southeast Asia and Bangladesh (<https://www.givewell.org/research/grants-southeast-asia-bangladesh-2019/application-details>). Conversation topics included Sightsavers' District Eye Care Program model and its use of additional funding.

Sightsavers' District Eye Care Program model

Sightsavers' District Eye Care Program supports cataract surgeries through hospital partners across eight districts in Bangladesh. Sightsavers' core responsibilities for the program include:

- **District selection** – Districts are targeted based on parameters including prevalence of blindness, cataract surgery coverage, and poverty rate. Only three hospital partners operate across the eight targeted districts, which have a total backlog of 58,000 cataract surgeries. Data on cataract surgeries is typically collected from hospital partners or through past government surveys, although Sightsavers also sometimes conducts surveys.
- **Program planning and needs assessments** – Sightsavers plans programs at the district level based on its assessment of a district's needs relating to infrastructure (e.g. operating microscopes), human resources (e.g. surgical training), outreach, and policy.
- **Support to partner hospitals** – Sightsavers provides NGO hospitals and government hospitals (where ophthalmologists are available) with supplies, capacity-building support, and training.
 - **Capacity-building support** – Sightsavers financially supports the recruitment of new clinical and non-clinical employees to hospitals experiencing staff shortages. It typically pays partial salaries, with the remaining staff costs treated as in-kind contributions from partner hospitals (one partner hospital incurs the full cost of additional staff). Sightsavers also assists hospitals with improving their quality control and monitoring systems to ensure that correct protocols for examining and

treating patients are followed and that surgical outcomes are properly measured and evaluated.

- **Training** – Need-based training on cataract surgery is provided both to doctors and nurses and requires travel to an institute in Kolkata, India (some short courses are available within Bangladesh). Sightsavers also supports trainings on hospital administration, financial management, and other topics.
- **Outreach camps** – Sightsavers supports community-based outreach camps to clinically confirm vision impairment issues and identify patients for cataract surgery. Partner hospitals typically operate eight to ten outreach camps monthly. Outreach camps are located in areas where there is limited access to eye health facilities. Sightsavers also provides transportation to patients who would otherwise not be able to travel to a hospital for their cataract surgery.
- **Policy formulation and implementation** – Sightsavers is involved in national-level policy formulation and district-level policy implementation. It sometimes invites government experts to visit program areas and observe the quality of its work. It also sometimes requests technical assistance from government.
- **Monitoring** – Sightsavers monitors program outputs, verifies the quality of data collection, and compiles district-level reports. Specifically, it collects data on all targeted patients' visual acuity before and after receiving cataract surgery. Sightsavers also attempts to collect follow-up data on visual acuity (patients are advised to return to the hospital 7-10 days after surgery and again within 4-6 weeks), although many patients do not return for follow-up visits if they are not experiencing any problems. If any refractive error correction is determined to be necessary upon follow-up examination, a prescription is provided to the patient.

BRAC partnership

With financial and technical assistance from Sightsavers, BRAC conducts community-level outreach for the District Eye Care Program. BRAC's community health workers (CHWs), who conduct basic vision screenings during door-to-door visits, are also trained to refer and transport patients with vision impairment to Sightsavers' outreach camps for clinical confirmation. Each BRAC CHW is responsible for screening approximately 300 families.

Financial support from Sightsavers

Sightsavers supports BRAC's work on the District Eye Care Program by funding eye care trainings for CHWs, the salaries of field organizers (one per district), and CHW commissions (CHWs only receive a commission for a patient referral resulting in a clinically confirmed cataract case).

Lack of existing capacity

The Bangladeshi government operates a national eye health care program but is unable to staff ophthalmologists in 24 of the nation's 64 districts. NGO hospitals, which provide cataract surgeries to patients not served by the national program, are also at maximum capacity.

Lack of training

Of the approximately 1,000 ophthalmologists in Bangladesh, roughly 50% are unable to conduct cataract surgery. Of those able to conduct cataract surgery, 80% reside and operate in urban centers (mainly Dhaka).

Sightsavers' work with the government

Sightsavers works with the Bangladeshi government to employ ophthalmologists in districts where none currently operate.

Use of additional funding

If it received an additional \$250,000 through the 2019 GiveWell Grants for Global Health and Development in Southeast Asia and Bangladesh, Sightsavers would allocate approximately 95% of the funding to supporting additional cataract surgeries and 5% of the funding to supporting a school-based vision impairment screening.

Additional cataract surgeries

Funding for Sightsavers' District Eye Care Program ceases at the end of 2019, and it does not expect to receive additional funding for this work from any other donors. Additional funding from GiveWell would enable Sightsavers to continue its current operations, improving coverage of cataract surgery within the eight districts where it already works.

School screenings

Two of the leading causes of vision impairment are refractive error and cataracts. Sightsavers formerly operated a child blindness program that included school-based screenings to identify children with refractive errors, cataracts, or other eye health issues—followed by the provision of corrective glasses if necessary. The child blindness program ended in 2018, but Sightsavers still supports school-aged children through the district eye care program.

Sightsavers would use additional funding from GiveWell to conduct vision screenings for children in one school as well as for adults in the same district. Upon identification of refractive error, Sightsavers would provide patients with the appropriate glasses. Children with other eye health problems such as cataracts would also be identified and treated.

*All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>*