



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Department regarding Australia's new International Development Policy.

Royal Life Saving Society - Australia

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia is a public benevolent institution that has a proud history of working within our region and beyond on drowning prevention. Royal Life Saving works within the global framework of the International Life Saving Federation and Royal Life Saving Society Commonwealth. We actively partner with organisations globally to empower communities to reduce the burden of drowning.

For more than 125 years, Royal Life Saving has served the Australian community providing water safety and swimming skills. The expertise and research capacity of Australian water safety organisations is widely respected internationally and uniquely positions Australia to reduce the global burden of drowning.

Drowning in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Drowning disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in low-income and middle-income countries, where 90 per cent of the drowning burden occurs.[1]

Drowning is a leading cause of death globally yet has been largely neglected in health and sustainable development policy. The World Health Organization estimates that 2.5 million people have lost their lives to drowning in the past decade.[2]

Half of all drowning occurred in people younger than 25, and drowning is a top ten cause of death for people aged between one and 24 years in every region globally.[1] Children one to four years have the highest rates of drowning. Studies in Bangladesh consistently show that drowning is the leading cause of death in children one to four years, with most incidents occurring within 20 metres of the family home.[3]

Drowning has a disproportionate impact on poor and marginalised people, who are less adaptable to changing environmental and social risks. Together, WHO Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions represent 60 per cent of global drowning mortality. [4, 5] Four countries in the Indo-Pacific region - China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh account for more than 50 per cent of all drowning deaths.[6]

Drowning rates in low-income and middle-income countries, including those across our region, are up to three to five times higher than those experienced in Australia.[1] African and Pacific Island nations have some of the highest rates of drowning,[6] often impacted by exposure in small scale fisheries, inter-island transportation, flooding and coastal surge, and children and youth playing and bathing in everyday life.[7]

2021 United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention

Given the high burden of drowning in low- and middle-income countries, the global community is increasingly looking at drowning as a neglected area of public health. This is evidenced by the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of its first-ever Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention in 2021.[8]



Three factors helped convince Member States of the need to act on drowning prevention. First, methodological advancements in population-representative data have identified previously hidden community level drowning burden. Second, growing evidence for effective interventions convince actors that prevention is not only possible, but contextually relevant to low-income and middle-income countries where the burden is greatest. And finally, the reframing of drowning prevention in health and sustainable development terms positions drowning relevant to other investments and objectives in global agendas.[9]

Blueprint For Action on Drowning Prevention in Our Region

In 2021, the World Health Organization published Drowning Prevention Status reports for nations in the Western Pacific [5] and South-East Asia [4] regions. Each nation was asked to appoint a drowning focal point to convene a national workshop to assess drowning prevention issues. These reports provide a blueprint for action in most countries in the Indo-Pacific Region.

The reports make several key recommendations. Firstly, that national governments designate a national lead agency, or support establishment of a multisector coordination body, to drive coordinated drowning prevention efforts. Secondly, that national governments develop and implement a national water safety plan that contains measurable indicators for drowning prevention.

Australia's Leading Role

Australia is uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in global drowning prevention, given its extensive experience and evidence-based approaches to water safety. Many of the actions called for in the United Nations Resolution are established practice in Australia.

The Australian Water Safety Strategy is presented by the World Health Organization and others as an example of global best practice. The strategy brings together the best expertise from organisations including Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, Surf Life Saving Australia, and AUSTSWIM in a multistakeholder effort to reduce drowning in Australia. Australia exceeds all of the World Health Organization recommended drowning prevention interventions.[5]

In fact, Australian organisations have played a key role in designing, contextualising, and investing in the most significant and accepted low- and middle-income country interventions recommended by the World Health Organization. [10]

Our work with partners across the region has demonstrated Australian instructional techniques, policy settings and safety-focused education can be successfully adapted to low- and middle-income country contexts.

Drowning prevention is an area of great strength for Australia and presents great opportunity for world-leading international development policy and implementation. Action on drowning prevention by the Australian Government and Australian organisations has high potential for attribution.

World-Leading Established Success

The Australian Government was an early adopter, recognising drowning as a problem before any other development partner, and investing in drowning prevention research and solutions.

Between 2008 and 2012 the Australian Government supported partner initiatives through Australian non-government organisations Royal Life Saving Society - Australia and Surf Life Saving Australia. At the time, drowning was described as a hidden epidemic, data confidence was low, and few (if any) international development agencies were willing to invest in drowning prevention.



Although Australian Development Aid policy changes in 2013/14 prompted a discontinuation of Australian Government support for a planned regional drowning prevention strategy, investments made between 2008-2012 were strategic and continue to have impact on the field and issue today.

The investments have included:

- Investing in the design and evaluation of low- and middle-income country drowning prevention interventions
 - Seeding studies testing the provision of day care as a drowning prevention tool, subsequently shown to be effective,[11] tested in second study,[12] together prompting the World Health Organization to develop guidelines for its use in low- and middle-income countries[13]
 - Seeding studies testing the feasibility and effectiveness of teaching survival swimming as a drowning prevention tool in low- and middle-income countries, subsequently shown to be effective,[11] prompting the World Health Organization to develop guidelines for its use in low- and middle-income countries. [13]
- Creation of an International Drowning Research Centre in Bangladesh, now the leading low- and middle-income country based drowning prevention research centre, subsequently recipient of donor funds from the United Kingdom, United States, Sweden, Canada
- Funding investments in Vietnam's national drowning prevention strategy 2009-2012 and providing a benchmark for other government-led policies
- Investing in regional capacity building to:
 - develop swimming policy and program capacity in Vietnam, Thailand, and Bangladesh
 - drowning prevention policy and planning across Asia-Pacific
 - support lifesaving and lifeguarding systems and training in India
- Co-sponsoring the World Conference on Drowning Prevention in Vietnam in 2011

The foundations for the inclusion of drowning prevention in Australia's new International Development Policy are present, and there is current institutional knowledge available to draw on to regain leadership in this area of development.

Genuine Partnership

Our intrinsic cultural links to swimming and water safety are well-known in the region. Australia comes to this development area with a reputation for excellence. While broader geo-political factors are at play in many of the areas of international development, drowning prevention is above politics. All key stakeholders are aligned by a vision of reducing the years of life lost due to premature mortality.

Approaches to drowning prevention provide a common goal and platform for multilateral institutions, civil society organisations, the private sector, and other donors to work together at regional, national and community levels. The most successful models are community-driven.

Drowning prevention presents opportunities to build trust with our neighbours, demonstrating a genuine desire to work in partnership. The new International Development Policy is an opportunity for Australia to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities.

The policy should not be centred solely on directing funds to drowning prevention efforts, although this is undoubtedly an important element to facilitate drowning prevention planning that has context and culture



embedded in its design. There is a significant opportunity for person-to-person diplomacy through genuine partnerships.

Uniting Australians

Research from the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University has shown a poor understanding in the broader community about how much aid is given and how international development funds are expended.

Australians know the importance of drowning prevention. Most people living in Australia have in their lifetimes directly engaged with water safety and learn-to-swim programs; it is part of our way of life.

Drowning prevention is a tangible policy area where everyday people can see the benefits of the funds expended in the short, medium, and long-term.

Conclusion

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia would welcome the opportunity to help shape Australia’s new International Development Policy in respect of drowning prevention.

Should you require further background information or research, please contact Justin Scarr, Chief Executive Officer, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia at jscarr@rlssa.org.au or on 0408 434 011.

Yours sincerely,

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