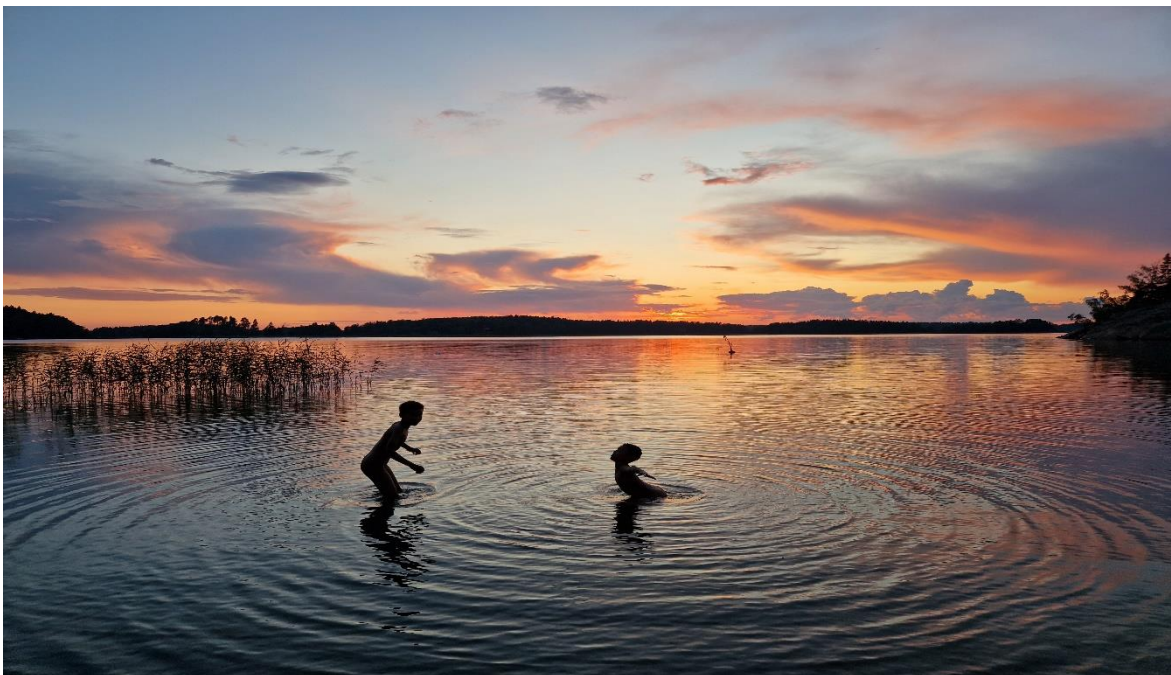


## Drowning in the WHO African Region: A Silent Public Health Crisis

By: Lydia Nobert

[Every hour, more than 30 people lose their lives to drowning around the world.](#) Yet this preventable cause of death remains one of the most underreported and under-prioritized public health issues. In the WHO African Region, the crisis is even more acute, marked by a disproportionate burden of mortality, scarce policy frameworks, and limited access to lifesaving interventions.



*Two young children playing in shallow water. Source: WHO Photo Library*

### Drowning Situation in the African Region:

An estimated 66,000 people died from drowning in the African Region in 2021, representing 22% of global drowning deaths. [With a death rate of 5.6 per 100,000 people](#), Africa has the highest drowning death rate in the world, even though it does not have the highest number of deaths overall. What's more concerning is that while global drowning rates have decreased by 38% since 2000, the African Region has seen only a 3% reduction, highlighting a critical gap in progress.

### Who is Most Affected?

Children bear the heaviest burden. [Globally, 43% of drowning victims are under 14 years old, and in Africa](#), drowning ranks as the sixth leading cause of death for children aged 5–14 years. In many African countries, children are frequently exposed to open water bodies, such as rivers, lakes, and ditches, often without proper supervision or swimming skills.

## Other vulnerable groups include:

- Fisherfolk and water transport workers are exposed daily to risky aquatic environments.
- People living in flood-prone areas, where climate change is intensifying extreme weather events.
- Migrant and displaced populations, who often travel on unsafe boats across inland or coastal waters.

## But why Is Drowning So Prevalent in the African Region?

Several systemic and structural issues contribute to Africa's high drowning rates:

- **Lack of safe infrastructure:** Many communities lack bridges, safe wells, or designated washing and bathing areas.
- **Low awareness and education:** Drowning prevention is not widely included in public health messaging or school curricula.
- **Insufficient policies:** Only [15% of African countries have national drowning prevention strategies](#) or water safety regulations.
- **Limited emergency services:** There are minimal lifeguard, search-and-rescue, or first responder services in rural and underserved areas.
- **Climate vulnerability:** Flooding and heavy rains, increasingly common due to climate change, raise the risk of drowning.

## Missed Opportunities in Prevention

The report highlights that while [81% of countries globally offer free weather alerts and 73% implement community flood-risk reduction programs](#), few African countries provide swimming lessons in schools or have daycare services to keep children safe during the day. Basic lifesaving skills are not routinely taught, and laws mandating the use of lifejackets, or the fencing of water bodies are largely absent. For example, only 14% of participating countries globally have laws requiring fencing around swimming pools. Less than 22% of national school curricula include swimming and water safety training, despite its proven effectiveness in saving lives.

## So, what can be done?

The African Region can significantly reduce drowning deaths by implementing low-cost, evidence-based interventions and integrating drowning prevention into broader development and public health efforts. These include:

- Community childcare programs to protect toddlers.
- Incorporating swim and water safety education into schools.
- Training first responders and lifeguards.

- Improving disaster risk reduction in flood-prone areas.
- Strengthening legislation on boat safety and alcohol use around water bodies.

Importantly, improving data collection systems, such as through civil registration and cross-sectoral data sharing, will provide the evidence needed to guide interventions and secure funding.

## Response to Drowning

The UN General Assembly and World Health Assembly resolutions on drowning prevention provide a roadmap that African governments can use to take immediate action. Stronger governance, adequate funding, multisectoral collaboration, and community engagement are crucial to reversing the trend.

As WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, *“Anyone can drown. No one should.”*

Let us ensure that African children grow up in safe environments where water is a source of life and joy, not death.

## For more information

[Global Status Report on Drowning Prevention 2024. World Health Organization.](#)

[Regional Analytical Factsheet 2023](#)

[Global Report on Drowning 2014](#)

[WHO Multimedia Library](#)