



Case Study

Sustaining Drowning Prevention Programs in Vietnam



Children often play at rivers after school.

In Vietnam, a groundbreaking partnership between the national government and international partners is on track to reduce the national drowning burden by 20%. By securing dedicated funding streams and pursuing innovative partnerships, two high-burden provinces have provided a blueprint for sustaining their drowning prevention programs. This model can help to ensure the health and safety of children in these communities after international funding ends and serve as a guide for other provinces.

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The Challenge

Drowning is the leading cause of death in children under 15 years of age in Vietnam, taking the lives of more than 2,000 children annually. It is the third leading cause of unintentional injury and death around the world, with more than one third of all drownings happening in the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia. Drowning costs countries billions of US dollars in health care expenses and lost productivity every year, placing massive burdens on national economies. The good news is that most drownings can be prevented through evidence-based interventions, such as survival swim training, education and awareness campaigns, community childcare centers that supervise children and the installation of barriers and signs.



Children learn to float at a program class, Dong Thap province.



Field visit to Dong Thap by the MOLISA Vice Minister, WHO Representative and GHAI Vietnam Country Director.

Vietnam's National Child Drowning Prevention Program

In 2018, Bloomberg Philanthropies partnered with the government of Vietnam on a five-year national program to prevent child drowning. The Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI) and the World Health Organization's Vietnam Country Office were selected as implementing partners to support the government's efforts. GHAI partnered with the Department of Child Affairs (DCA) within the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) to test, implement and sustain evidence-based interventions that focus on survival swimming and water safety education for children ages 6 to 15. GHAI is currently advocating to ensure the sustainability of the interventions after external donor financing ends. Twelve provinces with the highest burden of drowning cases were chosen as initial program participants, including Dong Thap and Yen Bai.

Achieving Sustainability: Two Approaches

1. Securing local commitments and dedicated funding:

Dong Thap is a province in the Mekong Delta region that benefits from a large river, channel and water spring system. While the open water system is integral to farming and transportation, it also increases the risk of child drowning. A

2018 Hanoi University of Public Health study found that 89% of child drowning cases in Dong Thap occurred in rivers, and these drownings could be largely prevented through interventions, such as survival swim lessons and water safety education. While political will and interest in reducing child drowning existed, neither had translated into provincial-level action plans or resource allocations. Central and local government agencies also lacked the coordination to design and execute community-based interventions.

Partnerships and commitment

GHAI worked with DCA, key decision makers at MOLISA and the Dong Thap People's Committee to form a partnership for child drowning prevention. The vice president of Dong Thap People's Committee, a medical doctor and former director of the Health Department, approved the expansion of survival swim and water safety education interventions to the entire province, while directing close collaboration among MOLISA, the Ministry of Education and Training and local authorities. The Department of Education and Training committed to adding water safety education to the school curriculum and allocating more funds for child drowning prevention and survival swim programs.

Public awareness and demand

GHAI provided technical support to DCA and the local Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA) of Dong Thap to increase awareness and public demand for these lifesaving interventions and garner political commitment and ownership. According to independent monitoring and analysis by the Hanoi University of Public Health, awareness of the drowning prevention program jumped from 42.7% to 79% after the first year of intervention.

To highlight drowning burdens and promote evidence-based interventions, Dong Thap launched child drowning prevention programs for 1,000 participants, disseminated more than 60,000 leaflets for families and broadcast child drowning prevention messaging nearly 3,000 times over communal loudspeakers and on

local television stations. All communications were tailored to Dong Thap and its people. The majority of parents reported that they were pleased with the survival swimming classes, and nearly 80% were willing to pay for the classes to protect their children.

Training and skill-building

Between 2019 and 2021, GHAI collaborated with the DCA and Dong Thap province to train 105 local instructors on water safety. An additional 71 provincial survival swim trainers were certificated by the Vietnam Sports Administration as official instructors for the province. The program also trained 4,500 children in survival swimming and equipped 7,500 children with water safety skills to protect themselves from drowning.

Victory

On February 8, 2021, Dong Thap People's Committee formally approved US\$500,000 over five years to support child drowning prevention—five times more funding than the national program had provided to the province. These funds will be used to meet specific targets, including reducing the child drowning rate by 10% compared to 2020, providing survival swim training for at least 100,000 children, training 80% of children between the ages of 6 and 15, making portable swimming pools available for training in all districts and making water safety education an option in school curriculums.

Dedicated funding and local buy-in assures the sustainability of the child drowning prevention program in Dong Thap. The unique collaboration of these global and local partners will create a safer and healthier future for the province's children.

2. Leveraging partnerships

Yen Bai is a remote province known for its rugged mountains and valleys of green rice paddy fields. It's home to streams, large lakes, swamps and more than 200 canals—all of which pose drowning threats to children. Not



Launching ceremony of child drowning prevention program in school, Dong Thap province.

only has Yen Bai lacked the necessary public infrastructure and facilities to provide swimming lessons to children, but many locals were also unaware that survival swim training can save lives. According to Ministry of Health data, Yen Bai has consistently ranked among the top 10 provinces for drowning incidents.

Technical assistance for partnerships

GHAI provided technical support to MOLISA to facilitate local partnerships for Yen Bai's DOLISA. This included identifying private swimming pools that could be used for survival swimming classes. Under an agreement between local businesses and the Yen Bai DOLISA, children received free survival swim training at a reduced cost to the province (US\$.90 per day, per child). Local hotels have since been enlisted to support the program by offering their swimming pools at a discounted price, lowering the cost per lesson to US\$0.87 per child.

Since 2021, Yen Bai has self-funded its drowning prevention program in line with Vietnam's 10-Year Action Plan on Child Injury Prevention 2021-2030. The partnership between businesses and the local government has been key to reducing the government's investment in infrastructure; this allows the program to rapidly train a larger number of children in survival swimming, while also improving its classes through better-equipped



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Children enjoy swim class in a locally provided pool in Yen Bai.

facilities. Private entities have supported the program's growth because it aligns with their corporate social responsibility goals, making it a win-win scenario.

Training and skill-building

With strong support from local authorities and the community, the program has trained 89 people to teach water safety skills and certified more than 53 core provincial trainers as survival swim instructors through the Vietnam Sports Administration. The program has taught 1,600 children survival swimming, increasing the percentage of children able to swim from 11.2% to 30.9% in program areas. Additionally, 3,875 children were equipped with water safety skills to protect them from drowning. Progress has been extraordinary, decreasing the drowning rate in Yen Bai from 16.2 to 10.8 per 100,000 children.

Victory

Following concerted advocacy efforts, both public and private entities united in support of the national program in Yen Bai by providing pool infrastructure at no or reduced costs. This helped scale up the program effectively and sustainably.

Seeing the success of innovative partnerships in Yen Bai, the national child drowning prevention program is now applying these strategies in all the provinces it serves. Since the initiative in Yen Bai began, 13 new portable pools and 63 existing pools belonging to local, state and private entities have been used by other program provinces. Locally-based partnerships present

an opportunity for members of the community to come together to address the issue of child drowning efficiently and effectively. Pursuing opportunities for these partnerships will help to keep children in Vietnam safe and healthy for years to come.

Lessons Learned

- For successful budget advocacy and long-term sustainability of drowning prevention programs, political commitment and local demand and ownership are equally crucial.
- Partnerships with diverse stakeholders can reduce investment costs and ensure program efficiency. Stories of successful local partnerships and their impact at the community level can lead to wider interest and reception of programs by private entities in other provinces.
- Communications play an important role in raising public awareness and demand for programs. A majority of parents [91.7%] reported that they were satisfied with the swim classes, and 82.1% reported a willingness to co-pay for their children's classes. These findings are useful indicators of the public support that is necessary to scale and sustain such programs.
- A combination of data and human stories can help convince local leaders to commit to long-term investments in drowning prevention.
- Strategic technical assistance can help local authorities tailor and implement evidence-based interventions creatively, using their own resources. Sharing successful, localized examples of drowning prevention programs can encourage stakeholders to scale up such interventions nationally.

The Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAi) supports civil society organizations who advocate for public health policies that reduce death and disease.