

# PROJECT BHASA

## ENDING THE DROWNING EPIDEMIC

Project Bhasa (which means 'float' in Bengali) is a groundbreaking initiative to reduce drowning in the Barisal Division of Bangladesh. The project is developing a multi-sector and evidence-led strategy to target the most vulnerable people with appropriate and sustainable solutions.



### Why focus on drowning?

Drowning is a leading cause of death worldwide. It's a serious, neglected public health threat, claiming the lives of 372,000 people every year.

More than 90% of drownings occur in low- and middle-income countries, where people have higher exposure to the risks associated with open water as they go about their daily lives: collecting water, bathing, fishing and playing.

Drowning deaths mostly occur in rural areas, away from hospitals and out of the sight of policy makers. To end this silent epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) now recommends all countries develop national drowning reduction plans.

### Why Bangladesh? Why Barisal?

In Bangladesh, drowning is the leading cause of death for children aged 1-17, with 18,000 young lives lost needlessly every year. Disasters and water-related risks affect all areas of Bangladesh, with the Barisal Division bearing the highest burden. Despite the death toll, action to reduce and prevent drowning in Barisal has been absent.

The Barisal Division is situated in the central-southern region of Bangladesh, where several large rivers converge. With a land mass of 13.5 million km<sup>2</sup> and a population of over 8 million, the Barisal Division is one of the most vulnerable areas in Bangladesh - all of its six districts are affected by water-related hazards and disasters.

'There is much to learn about drowning and drowning prevention, but we must take proven, preventive action while research continues. This means urgently targeting vulnerable populations in exposed communities with strategies most likely to save lives'

Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization



In 2007, cyclone Sidr swept through the Barisal Division, bringing heavy rains and a 6m storm surge. Tragically, 3,363 lives were lost and 55,282 people were injured.



## What do we want to achieve?

- Dramatically reduce rates of drowning in the Barisal Division through an integrated and evidence-based approach, using and adapting existing interventions
- Institutionalise interventions through partnerships, securing government ownership and resources to deliver sustainable change
- Capture project learning to develop guidelines which will assist other regions and countries to introduce their own comprehensive drowning reduction strategies.



Photo: Steve Miller/RNLI

## How will we do it?

1. **Better understand the situation** by conducting the world's largest household survey on drowning - determining the size and scale of the problem in terms of deaths, disability, and social impact
2. **Raise awareness of drowning** among stakeholders and establish a multi-sector drowning reduction forum. The forum will coordinate and influence action to address the burden of drowning throughout the Barisal Division, ensuring that communities, water users and service providers have access to appropriate interventions
3. **Create the first comprehensive drowning reduction strategy** in Bangladesh, turning a WHO recommendation into practice
4. **Use evidence to develop, implement and evaluate interventions.** These could include: SwimSafe (survival swimming), SeaSafe (lifeguards), Anchal (crèche), flood rescue, first responders, community awareness and education, school water safety lessons, early warning systems, ferry safety, occupational safety and policy development
5. **Share lessons and findings** to support others in designing and delivering drowning reduction plans.

'Nobody I know can swim. I don't want to stand by any longer and watch so many lives being wasted. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be safe in the water; every boy and every girl.'

New Community Swimming Instructor

## Who are the project team?

Recognising the value of a collaborative approach, this initiative brings together three world-leading organisations:



### Lifeboats

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution,  
United Kingdom  
[RNLI.org/international](http://RNLI.org/international)



The Centre for Injury Prevention  
and Research, Bangladesh  
[ciprb.org](http://ciprb.org)



The George Institute for  
Global Health, Australia  
[georgeinstitute.org](http://georgeinstitute.org)

Project supported by:



Ministry of  
Health and  
Family Welfare



Bangladesh Fire  
Service and Civil  
Defence

## Stay updated

To receive a quarterly project newsletter, or for more information, please contact:

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