

Uganda is a nation shaped by water. Our lakes, rivers, wetlands, and seasonal floods support livelihoods, transport, and recreation. Yet this same water is quietly claiming lives at an alarming rate.

Drowning has become one of Uganda's most serious but least discussed public health emergencies. Even more worrying is the growing number of drowning incidents involving school-going children, both within and outside school settings.

Drowning is often dismissed as an accident. From a public health perspective, it is not. It is predictable, preventable, and increasingly linked to systemic failures in safety planning, supervision, and education.

Current estimates suggest that Uganda records between 3,000 and 3,500 drowning deaths each year—an average of eight to nine deaths every day. Children are among the most affected. Studies indicate that nearly one in four drowning victims is under the age of 14. In lakeside and riverine communities, drowning rates are several times higher than global averages.

Despite these alarming figures, drowning remains underreported and poorly documented. It is largely absent from national injury prevention priorities. This lack of visibility has resulted in fragmented responses and repeated loss of young lives—many of them students.

Why are drowning cases rising in schools? First, most schools do not offer swimming or water safety education. Children interact with water through play, floods, school trips, and daily community life, yet many cannot float, tread water, or perform basic self-rescue skills.

Inadequate adult-to-child ratios during swimming lessons, recreational activities, or

# Drowning in Uganda: Silent crisis escalating in schools

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**Allan Kiiza**  
Drowning



school outings significantly increase risk.

Third, poorly regulated school trips involving boats or water crossings expose learners to danger. Many such trips take place without life jackets, trained escorts, or emergency preparedness plans.

Finally, some schools operate in high-risk environments, including open wells, ponds, drainage channels, or flood-prone grounds, often without barriers, signage, or warning systems.

Staffing is equally critical. Lifeguards and pool attendants must be properly trained, certified, and regularly refreshed by recognised institutions in lifesaving, water rescue, and aquatic CPR. Lifesaving skills decline without practice; refresher training should therefore be mandatory.

Across both school and community set-

tings, drowning is commonly linked to lack of swimming ability; panic and low water confidence; floods and heavy rainfall; unsafe or overcrowded boats; absence of life jackets; and delayed rescue and emergency response.

Preventing drowning requires coordinated action at multiple levels. Schools should integrate survival swimming and water safety education into their programmes, using low-cost and non-pool-based methods where necessary.

Parents and communities need targeted awareness on supervision and early risk recognition. At the national level, Uganda urgently requires a drowning surveillance system to generate reliable data and guide effective interventions.

For meaningful change to occur, school proprietors and the Ministry of Education and Sports must act decisively. The Ministry should establish mandatory national standards for school swimming pools, covering licensing, safety manuals, staffing qualifications, and inspection schedules.

Drowning in Uganda, particularly among school children, is a preventable tragedy. Every death points to gaps in policy, preparedness, and protection. Water will always be part of Uganda's identity. The challenge before us is ensuring that safety becomes part of that identity as well.

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