



Vancouver Declaration on Drowning Risk Reduction of Migrants and Refugees

“The world we choose has to reflect the actions we take.” - Tima Kurdi

Introduction

This declaration is inspired by the personal account of refugee drowning given in Vancouver at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention 2017 by Ms. Tima Kurdi, the aunt of the “boy on the beach” Alan Kurdi – a three-year-old Syrian of Kurdish ethnic background who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on 2 September 2015. Alan and his family were Syrian refugees. Photographs (by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir) of Alan’s lifeless body face down at the water’s edge generated global headlines and prompted international responses.¹

Ms. Kurdi spoke passionately of the need for voice and action to prevent drownings of migrants and refugees. She challenged the 805 conference participants from 60 nations to raise their voices collectively and individually. This declaration – to raise awareness, raise voices and inspire actions to reduce drowning among migrants and refugees – is the conference participants’ response to her challenge.

Drowning is a preventable tragedy that needs more effective risk reduction action.

¹ <http://www.kurdifoundation.com/>

Vancouver Declaration on Drowning Risk Reduction of Migrants and Refugees

Drownings of migrants and refugees, which continues in all regions of the world, is a complex issue in need of global preventive action. Global public health agencies do not know how many migrant and refugee men, women and children die each year from drowning. While there is recent high-quality data from regions of the world where bodies have been recovered, there remains an unknown toll of missing persons.²

Increased awareness, knowledge and evidenced-based action is needed to put an end to these human tragedies. We appeal to the global leaders in drowning prevention, to the multi-sectoral community, national and world stakeholders, to act to reduce preventable drowning.

This declaration offers a framework that individuals, organizations and communities can use to:

- raise the collective voice of the drowning prevention movement
- guide meaningful action that can drive communities to achieve impact

Recommendations for Global Action

Statement #1

All nations and communities honor and implement the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

There are 30 Articles in the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), including:

Article 13: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”*

Article 14: *“Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”*

Statement #2

All communities, governments and global agencies work to achieve peace, equality, acceptance, education, safety and health for all.

Migrant and refugee drowning is a complex multi-factor challenge in risk reduction. By focusing narrowly on the drowning deaths of migrants and refugees as they cross water, we limit our perspective of the problem, and therefore we inadvertently limit our potential to help. We ask that our communities and nations use their influence to reduce the need for the movement of migrants and refugees. Refugees and migrants are extremely vulnerable people and communities. They deserve compassion, safety and access to supports.

² <https://missingmigrants.iom.int>

Vancouver Declaration on Drowning Risk Reduction of Migrants and Refugees

Statement #3

Legal and safe transit routes should be established to facilitate passage of migrants and refugees seeking safety.

All legal routes allowing refugees to reach safety must be put in place urgently.³ Effective access to coherent asylum procedures and assistance should be provided. Swift registration and access to temporary protection should be provided upon arrival. Dignified reception conditions must be offered to all. Legal migration pathways will replace the dangerous and illegal human smuggling routes and reduce the extreme risks that migrants and refugees are currently forced to take.

Statement #4

All vessels used for water transportation must be legal, safe, have adequate safety equipment, suitable lighting, skilled crew, and are appropriately loaded.

Drowning prevention and humanitarian experts condemn the dangerous vessels, fake safety equipment, and overcrowding as migrants and refugees cross water in high risk conditions, led by human smugglers. We ask that the appropriate legal authorities enforce the national and international standards on lifesaving equipment, especially lifejackets, before they are sold to migrants and refugees. We ask that organizations working in origin countries for refugees and migrants include water safety education.

Statement #5

All nations and vessels fulfil their duties under the [International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue](#). Humanitarian focused water rescue and medical services must be available at all common water crossings.

There is no evidence that providing rescue services increases the number of migrants or refugees attempting to cross water (described as the “pull effect”). There is evidence that rescue services reduce the “pull effect” and significantly reduce mortality.⁴

Strategies that are engaged in “pushing back” refugees and migrants out of their national waters by the illegal use of force, are unhelpful.⁵ These actions contravene international laws.

³ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/04/20/legal-entry-routes-are-the-only-real-solution-to-migrant-deaths-in-the-mediterranean/>

⁴ <http://gh.bmj.com/content/2/3/e000450>

⁵ As described at WCDP2017 by Dr. Maurice Stierl in his presentation “Activist and humanitarian interventions to prevent migrant death in the Mediterranean Sea.”

Vancouver Declaration on Drowning Risk Reduction of Migrants and Refugees

Statement #6

Refugees and migrants may have a disproportionate drowning mortality risk after settlement in countries of relative safety.⁶ Drowning risk reduction needs community partnership effort, to integrate, empower and provide knowledge, skills and attitudes to ensure ongoing water safety. Inclusion of all communities in drowning risk reduction education, activities and programs is proposed.

Drowning mortality in migrant and refugee communities in high income settings, has been attributed to lower rates of swimming and water safety skills. This may be related to other economic, social and geographic factors.

There are many potential benefits arising from community partnerships that seek to build drowning risk awareness, swimming skills, lifesaving skills, and create more accepting environments for diverse cultural groups. Programs and partnerships have been a feature of discussion and action at World Conferences on Drowning Prevention. Further research is needed to confirm the increased drowning risk in citizens new to a community, and the impact of interventions.

Statement #7

A Global Partnership for Drowning Prevention should be established, as recommended in the [WHO Global Report on Drowning](#), as the preferred method to coordinate a strategic approach to migrant and refugee drowning risk reduction.

Global collaboration and cooperation led by a unifying vision to reduce drowning risk in the world's most vulnerable communities would be helpful. No single organization has all the necessary skills and resources to solve the issue of drowning globally. The partnership would serve as a policy and implementation leadership community for drowning prevention. The partnership would set priorities for further development in the drowning prevention field, provide technical exchange, improve drowning mortality and morbidity data, develop guidance for governments and advocate for drowning risk reduction in political and public health discussions.⁷

Recommendations for Community Action

1. **Review** the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).
2. **Start** a conversation about how the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be honored and implemented within your organization.
3. **Advocate** to persons of influence and policy makers to increase awareness and actions in support of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
4. **Research** the humanitarian organizations working directly with communities in countries of origin of migrants and refugees, and find out what support they require.

⁶ <http://www.lifesavingsociety.com/drowning-research/high-risk-groups/new-canadians.aspx>

⁷ http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/global_report_drowning/en/

Vancouver Declaration on Drowning Risk Reduction of Migrants and Refugees

5. **Research** the NGOs and advocacy groups who campaign for safe passage for migrants and refugees and find out what support they require.
6. **Advocate** to persons of influence and policy makers to request action on the creation and management of safe migration routes.
7. **Research** the NGOs that are providing a Search and Rescue capability in the waters that refugees and migrants are crossing and find out what support they require.
8. **Research** advocacy groups focused on search, rescue and medical aid for migrants and refugees and find out what support they require.
9. **Discuss** how your organization or community can be more inclusive to refugees and migrants and pro-active in welcoming all.
10. **Identify** humanitarian organizations within your community with whom you can partner.
11. **Identify** the members of your community who are at higher risk and deliver drowning prevention interventions that target those people.
12. **Provide** education to people in your community including how to recognize a safely loaded boat and a good quality lifejacket. Provide this education in people's first language where possible. Encourage people to share this knowledge through their networks.
13. **Engage** with humanitarian organizations to establish a Global Partnership for Drowning Prevention.

Conclusion

Drowning is preventable. Migrant and Refugee drowning is a global issue that has many points of primary and secondary prevention. Collective action is required to protect the most vulnerable people in our world. Prevention actions must be made compelling to policy makers, governments, NGOs and result in interventions with impact.

Acknowledgements:

Inspiration: Tima Kurdi and World Conference on Drowning Prevention 2017 participants

Conceptual formation, drafting, coordination of input: Stephen B. Beerman

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