



PRESS RELEASE

Tonga enacts new disaster risk management legislation to tackle increasing risks posed by disasters and climate change.



19 July 2023 (Nuku'alofa, Tonga) – The Government of Tonga has enacted a new Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Act and enforced a new DRM Policy (2023-2030) to ensure the country is better prepared and able to respond to the increasing impacts and risks posed by disasters and climate change.

The DRM Act and DRM Policy serves as the blueprint to ensure the country has fit-for-purpose disaster mechanisms to enhance the resilience and safety of people in Tonga.

In the past decade alone, Tonga has experienced 16 climate-induced disasters, which have wiped away years of development gains. Research articles on the recent Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha'apai (HTHH) eruption and subsequent tsunami event reveal how Tongan communities were yet to fully recover from Cyclone Gita and Cyclone Harold when they were exposed to the impacts of the HTHH event. This reality is one that recognizes the need to be better prepared in the face of changing

disaster risk landscapes and the need for increased levels of targeted risk-informed investments.

Undoubtedly, Tonga communities will continue to be exposed to new risks due to the complex interrelated factors that result in climate-related emergencies and disasters. As such, wider changes such as adjustments of building types, environmental management, land use and risk culture is essential.

Spotlighting the DRM legislation and policy, Tonga Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Disaster Risk Management, Hon Hu'akavameiliku stressed the importance of being proactive and enhancing crisis preparedness through improved institutional and governance arrangements. The Hon. Prime Minister echoed, "the DRM legislation mandates the establishment of a system that is inclusive, and will deliver better outcomes for all people before, during, and after emergency". He further called on stakeholders to scale up their support towards implementing the DRM legislation and policy, which will contribute towards building a more resilient Tonga.

The DRM Act 2021 replaces the almost two-decade old Emergency Management Act 2007 and reinforces a whole-of-society approach while also clarifying the role of central government stakeholders. The Act also introduces systematic improvements to ensure that the DRM governance and institutional system is best placed for the future. Some key changes include:

- Revised DRM structures of existing committees and clarifying roles and responsibilities at the national, island and village level.
- Formalisation of the cluster coordination mechanism and the functions of lead/co-lead agencies
- Restructure of the National Disaster Risk Management Organisation (NDRMO) to accommodate increased responsibilities in the functional areas of disaster risk and resilience, policy advice, emergency operations, administration and finance, and donor and development partner engagement.
- Greater clarity of emergency powers during a state of emergency as well as the responsibilities of authorized offices during state of emergency
- Recognises the important role of enhancing participation at all levels, including at the strategic, planning and operational level.
- Establishment of the multi-hazard early warning system and its critical role for information dissemination
- Introduces the regulations, standard operating procedures, and guidelines needed to give effect to, or support the Act to achieve the desired outcomes.

Hon Hu'akavameiliku explained how discussions on transformation are often centered around climate change mitigation and adaptation, without recognition of the combined impact that climate change has with disaster risk management, including how and to what extent transformation is necessary for societies deal with both natural and environmental hazard.

Reflecting on Tonga's journey towards developing the DRM Policy and Act, Hon Hu'akavameiliku emphasized that this legislation reflects transformational change as captures all elements of the DRM cycle and articulates arrangements for mainstreaming disaster risks into development planning and



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budgeting process. He also stressed how the outcomes of genuine mainstreaming can inform policy and decision-making processes such that the root causes of vulnerabilities are considered from the onset.

He applauded his NDRMO team, which was previously known as the National Emergency Management Office, and the technical agencies such as NEMA (MFAT), RedR Australia (DFAT), UNDP Pacific Office, IDMC, and World Bank for leading the consultation and development of both the legislation and policy.

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