

Tongan Government (Official Statement for APMCDRR 2022)

Fellow leaders,
Honourable Ministers,
Members of the Diplomatic corp,
Senior officials,
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Firstly, malo 'aupito (thank you) for the opportunity to share and reflect on Tonga's progress towards implementing national, regional, and global disaster risk reduction initiatives. I would like to start by acknowledging and extending our gratitude to the Turrbal and Jagera peoples for allowing us to gather on your land, and pay our respect to elders past, present and emerging.
2. This meeting is critical for the Tongan Delegation, on several fronts. First, it provides us the opportunity to share stories from the most devastating disaster event that our nation experienced, the Hunga-Tonga Hunga Hapai volcanic eruption and tsunami, which struck Tonga in January. As most of you would be aware, Tonga experienced major impacts as a result of this event, with many communities displaced, and thousands of livelihoods impacted. The government and its stakeholders are still working around the clock to restore infrastructure, particularly homes, and to undertake critical sectoral initiatives such as relocating communities to new settlements. Tonga, like most small island states, is extremely vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change and disasters. In the past decade, they have experienced a myriad of natural hazards, from storms to earthquakes, to acute sea level rise. The World Risk Report ranks Pacific Island countries amongst the most vulnerable year after year, and in its 2021 report, Tonga was ranked the third most "at risk" country to the effects of disasters, with 80 percent of its population living on the coastlines. In a very real sense, we are fighting a war of survival.
3. Second, DRR is a part of sustainable development, so it must involve every part of society, government, non-governmental organizations and the professional and private sector. It therefore requires a people-centred and multi-sector approach, building resilience to multiple, cascading and interacting hazards and creating a culture of prevention and resilience. DRM programmes should not be standalone but instead be integrated within development planning and practice, since disasters are an indicator of failed or skewed development and of unsustainable economic and social processes. Approaches need to address the different layers of risk (from intensive to extensive risk), underlying risk drivers, as well as be tailored to local contexts. There is no 'one-size fits all' approach to DRM, and we must acknowledge this. For example, we have all witnessed how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic can threaten a systemic global collapse. Individual countries now face a myriad of risks that are often interconnected, with one triggering another in a cascade of devastating events. The unrelenting pressure of disasters and climate change, coupled with the pandemic-induced socioeconomic crisis, has further transformed the whole risk profile for the Asia-Pacific region. Let us keep this in mind over the next few

days, as we collectively unpack and draw on experiences of how to effectively integrate risk measures across the development spectrum, which is critical to building resilience.

4. So, what have we been doing in Tonga over the years? We have been working collectively with communities, government sectors, central agencies and NGOs to implement development goals set through the Sendai Framework and other regional frameworks like the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific. We have been reporting on the 7 targets and 38 indicators of the Sendai Framework, along with reforming policies supporting the implementation of disaster risk reduction initiatives. In 2020, Tonga was able to complete Target E with the development of the National Disaster Management Plan, 4 District Disaster Management Plans and 161 Village Disaster Emergency Management Plans. The governance structures through these Disaster Management plans were in place for our relief and recovery efforts during the HTHH disaster and are currently being updated. The Government of Tonga, together with our civil society organisations continues to work with our communities to review these with more updated risk data.
5. I agree with global research that it is not inevitable that risk continues to grow. However, the best defence against systemic risk is to transform systems to make them more resilient. Back home, we have been strengthening legislation that puts into force the necessary governance structures that will support the transformation of existing DRR practice. Further, the NEMO office is also in the same Ministry as the department of climate change, which has a joint national action plan in place to support disaster and climate resilience. We are hoping that the revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) will bring forth the growing commitment to strengthen policy advice and practice on integrating DRR.
6. There is also ongoing work around improving multi-hazard early warning systems, which is one of the top priorities under the Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015-2025 (TSDF II) and National Emergency Management Plan. In stating so, the Department of Communications has been working on the National Emergency Warning System (NEWS) which is due for final commissioning this month. Also in this Ministry is the Department of Tonga Meteorological Services who are currently consulting with the community on the development of the multi-hazard early warning system framework which will be completed in 2023. NEMO continues to work with schools and communities conducting tsunami drills and reviewing the standard operating procedures and updating evacuation plans as required. With the Tropical Cyclone season just ahead of us, preparedness also continues.
7. At a broader whole of Government level, Tonga is adopting a risk-informed approach across its central agencies, to ensure all development planning and budgeting is evidence-based and cognizant of climate and disaster risks. Within the Ministry of Finance, the Aid Management and Resilient Development Division is leading on critical work around risk-informed budgeting and disaster risk financing. Similarly, the Prime Minister's Office is

adopting a risk-informed approach to planning and monitoring and evaluation processes, particularly with regards to infrastructure investments and the work of local government.

8. Learnings from the HTHH disaster and COVID19 in Tonga emphasised the need for accurate data collection and analysis for evidenced-based decision making. With support from regional and international partners, we plan to work towards building capacity in data collection. Change is a result of learning and we need to apply these learnings seriously in order to be better prepared for the disasters to come.
9. The Government of Tonga is also humbled by the support extended to us by our bi-lateral partners, and CSOs, who have been working tirelessly to support mitigation of and response to disaster risks. We in the Pacific are not the only ones affected by these events. More importantly, we are all responsible in some way for the increasing occurrences of natural hazards, and we must work together to deal with the consequences.
10. Like many other Pacific Leaders, I am alarmed by some of the latest international scientific research that predicts the increasing occurrence of climate related hazards causing mass migration. We have already seen displacement of communities after the Hunga-Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and tsunami. Small island developing nations and small vulnerable economies are here to fight for their existence and we should not be left behind in building resilience and minimising risks and vulnerabilities. Tonga and our fellow Pacific Island neighbours will continue, with our community focused culture at the core, to ensure that the vulnerable on our island shores will not be left behind. The road to recovery is a long one and COVID19 has also had a substantial impact on our economies. We call for further financial support for Tonga's recovery efforts and in building back better.
11. We will be counting on your strong support over the coming months, and we need to present a strong and united front at this meeting. We owe it to our people and to every citizen on earth that are bearing the disproportionate risk and burden of dealing with these hazards.
12. I am also very concerned to know that the actions towards adaptation, mitigation and loss and damage, which are widely agreed upon at the Conference of Parties for Climate Change are not taken seriously. Representing countries from vulnerable regions, I hope that spirit of compromise and mutual trust will be reignited again, and we collectively demand for a holistic integration of the decisions made at this meeting. Climate and disaster stressors should stop being viewed in silo's and it is our moral authority to drive further action on this front because our shared futures depend on it. We believe that good development, which is resilient to the impacts of climate change and disasters is everyone's business. Also, to change course, new approaches are needed. Doing more of the same will is no longer enough.
13. To end, I would like to thank the Australian Government and UNDRR for convening this meeting. We anticipate a constructive dialogue to determine the appropriate way forward.

We welcome shared best practices, with the hope of building our resilience to disaster risks, and the development of effective instruments to bring greater accord amongst key players.

Malo 'aupito