

# Shifting the paradigm: emergency management to disaster risk management in Tonga

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Tonga is drafting its Disaster Risk Management Bill to replace the existing *Emergency Management Act (2007)*. The proposed Disaster Risk Management Act will be a new legal framework for both disaster risk reduction and emergency management in the country.

The Kingdom of Tonga is a Polynesian sovereign state and archipelago comprising 169 islands of which 36 are inhabited. Tonga, like other islands in the South Pacific, is highly susceptible to the effects of climate change and resulting disaster risks. Its susceptibility is due to its geographical, geological and socio-economic characteristics. Tonga experiences at least 1-2 cyclones every year (November-April) and is at risk of tsunami and earthquake due to its proximity to the ring-of-fire volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean. As per the World Risk Index 2020, Tonga is ranked as the 2nd highest at-risk country in the world.

Tonga's *Emergency Management Act (2007)* is the legal framework for Tonga to deal with emergencies and disasters. However, the Act focuses on responding to an event rather than recognising and dealing with the risk beforehand. The *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR)* sets clear targets for risk reduction. It advocates for:

*The substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries.*

The concept of 'risk' is not new but, in many parts of the world, disasters are still claimed to be a curse from God or some supernatural soul for human misdeed. A more contemporary awareness and understanding of the natural sciences is growing and the global community stance is that there is nothing natural about 'natural disaster'. All disasters result from human interaction with external events, called hazards, which may be 'natural' or 'anthropogenic'.

Tonga's existing Act has limited scope to set up the legal policy and institutions to work towards disaster risk reduction. Only recently, Tonga approved a Cabinet Submission for policy changes put through by the National Emergency Management Office under their Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications. The new Act, when finalised, will establish governance and the institutional frameworks for Tonga to coordinate disaster risk reduction activities. The National Emergency Management Office will then become the National Disaster Risk Management Office with a mandate, authority and responsibility to:

- develop the National Disaster Risk Management Policy framework
- establish, review and monitor relevant emergency and disaster risk management plans and standard operating procedures under the Act
- coordinate and oversee emergency management activities
- implement policies and decisions established under this Act
- liaise with and provide support and advice to government as well as non-government agencies in Tonga for emergency management, operations and recovery.

The Disaster Risk Management Bill shifts the paradigm in Tonga from traditional emergency response practices to a comprehensive disaster risk management approach. It is expected that this will provide a direction for other Pacific nations that are facing the greater risks from climate change and the resulting natural hazards.