Highlights

- Local community transmission of COVID-19 continues in Tonga with 287 confirmed cases and one death.
- The State of Emergency for the volcanic eruption and the State of Public Health Emergency because of COVID-19 have been extended until 14 March 2022.
- Lockdown restrictions have been eased for a few days which provides a brief window for partners to distribute emergency relief supplies to communities and schools in Tongatapu.
- The Government of Tonga is transitioning into recovery phase with plans being developed by national clusters.

Situation Overview & Humanitarian Needs

Localized community transmission of COVID-19 in Tonga continues as the emergency response in the wake of the volcanic eruption and ensuing tsunami transitions into recovery mode. As of 23 February 2022, 287 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed with one death. More than 91% of Tonga’s eligible population of 12 years old and over are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The lockdown that had been imposed at the start of the outbreak has been eased in Tongatapu and Vava’u island districts, where there are active cases, while it has been lifted in Ha’apai and ‘Eua group of islands, where no cases have been recorded. The lockdown slowed down the distribution of some relief supplies as all inter-island shipping was suspended and focus was given to families in isolation. The State of Emergency for the volcanic eruption and the State of Public Health Emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic have been extended until 14 March 2022. International communication with Tonga has been restored with the repair of the submarine fiber optic cable damaged by the tsunami.

The World Bank’s Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) report places the damage of this event at USD 90.4 million or equivalent to 18.5% of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with Tongatapu accounting for 76% of the damage, with tourism and agriculture being the most affected sectors.
Funding Overview and Partnership

Based on information shared by the Government of Tonga and partners on the ground, UNICEF Pacific appealed for USD 2.7 million to provide lifesaving as well as initial recovery support to children and their families in Tonga. This funding requirement is likely to increase once the Government of Tonga has released the results of the needs assessment and their response and recovery plans.

UNICEF Pacific would like to express its sincere gratitude to the Government and the People of Japan for their generous contribution of USD 1.25 million towards the emergency response in Tonga, especially WASH and Health interventions. Moreover, UNICEF appreciates the support provided by UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) through the timely award of CERF funding of USD 501,001 for the WASH sector response, including hygiene promotion. UNICEF also gives thanks to the Australian National Committee for UNICEF for the contribution of USD 235,000 in flexible funding, and the United States Fund for UNICEF for its contribution of USD 200,000 in flexible funding. Moreover, sincere gratitude is extended towards all donors who contributed to the Global Thematic Humanitarian Fund from which UNICEF Pacific received an allocation of USD 350,000 in flexible funding. These contributions will allow to cover a portion of the most pressing lifesaving and recovery needs.

Currently, a funding gap of USD 164,000 remains. UNICEF thanks donors who made firm pledges potentially allowing to cover this gap and further support the Government of Tonga in its recovery efforts.

Humanitarian Leadership & Coordination

The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT), which is co-led by the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office (UNRCO) and the UNOCHA and composed of UN agencies and international NGOs, is leading the coordination with the Government of Tonga and the diplomatic missions. The PHT is based in Suva, Fiji. Under the PHT are ten clusters wherein UNICEF is the lead in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), co-lead with Save the Children in Education, co-lead with World Health Organization (WHO) in Health & Nutrition, and the lead for Child Protection in the Protection cluster.

The Government of Tonga has adopted a localized cluster approach with ten clusters, including Safety and Protection; Health, Nutrition and Water, Sanitation; and Education. All the clusters are led by government ministries and coordinated by the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO). NEMO reports to the National Disaster Council of the Cabinet. The PHT clusters provide a supportive role to NEMO and the Tongan clusters. The Government of Tonga is transitioning into recovery phase and is developing their plans.

UNICEF Programme Response

The total of 44 tons of UNICEF emergency supplies delivered by HMAS Adelaide of the Royal Australian Navy and the Government of Fiji-chartered ship have been cleared by NEMO and have been transferred to their respective consignees, namely the Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and Ministry of Education and Training (MET). The MOH and MET are being provided with container vans to serve as temporary holding areas for incoming supplies. With some of the movement restrictions relaxed for seven days, partners are working double time to have some of them distributed to affected communities and schools in Tongatapu. Programme sections have also started to recalibrate their support to shift to recovery phase with focus on building resilience to natural hazards in line with the Government of Tonga’s transition to early recovery.

UNICEF now has one staff, a Health and Social and Behavior Change Specialist, on the ground in Tonga who will complete his quarantine in early March. He will lead the three local consultants already on board to help in the overall coordination and provide technical support to Health, Nutrition, and WASH. Five more staff from UNICEF Pacific’s WASH, Health, Education, and Emergency Coordination teams are on standby to be deployed to Tonga.

WASH

During this period, priority needs remain the provision of clean water to populations dependent on rainwater harvesting or where supply lines have been damaged. There remain some outstanding sanitation needs for populations that have been displaced. Assessments and response have been restricted due to COVID-19 lockdown regulations. WASH partners are looking towards recovery and build back better activities with a focus of the response to shift to recovery soon. Anticipated recovery needs are likely to be improvements to rainwater harvesting systems, protection of water sources, and installation of more efficient pump and filter systems for communities and schools.

WASH supplies have been released by NEMO to the MoH. Despite limited scope for assessments, distribution plans have been prepared during lockdown period and will commence this weekend. CSO partners with movement authorization are supporting communities with hygiene supplies and provision of water supply. WASH Cluster partners CARE/Mainstreaming
of Rural Development Innovation (MORDI) Tonga, OXFAM/ Tonga National Youth Council (TNYC), Caritas/Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Live & Learn, IFRC/Tonga Red Cross have all been actively delivering critical emergency WASH support to affected populations.

The impact of COVID-19 has been a critical constraint on WASH partners delivering response due to restricted movements. This has also led to insufficient meetings with partners to facilitate coordination. The MoH as Cluster lead has used the time to develop refined distribution plans and to engage with partners remotely to track ongoing response activities. Under the management of the MoH, with support from UNICEF, the WASH Cluster has reached more than 30,000 people to date with ongoing support. Multiple CSO partners are actively involved in the WASH response and the Cluster has supported in developing and refining distribution planning to mitigate gaps/overlaps in assistance. The Cluster is now working to support a rapid transition from response to recovery phase with a focus on WASH systems that are resilient to future shocks.

Health & Nutrition

Some 7,000 AstraZeneca vaccines donated by the Government of Japan through COVAX, and 15,000 sets of Antigen Rapid Diagnostic Test procured by UNICEF were delivered to the MoH to help in their campaign to stem the outbreak. UNICEF is also facilitating the country’s readiness to manage and administer Pfizer vaccine. Some 54,990 doses of Pfizer vaccines procured with support from the Australian Government are in the pipeline. The Tonga Emergency Medical Assistance Team (TEMAT) remains in Nomuka Island, one of the worst affected, providing basic health services. A nutrition screening programme in areas affected by the volcanic eruption and tsunami is being planned as soon as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. UNICEF has also procured more than $400,000 worth of personal protective equipment (PPEs) and $160.00 worth of other supplies including solar direct drive refrigerators, collapsible water tanks, high performance tents, etc., that are due to arrive in Tonga by the first week of March.

Child Protection

During the lockdown period, TV and radio programmes advertising support via helplines have run while MIA counsellors were attending incoming calls to provide psychosocial support (PSS). PSS and counselling teams in the non-locked down areas (Ha’apai and ‘Eua) are continuing to offer face-to-face support to affected children and families. Data on numbers reached is not yet available. When inter-island travel resumes, a mission is planned to outer islands to provide supervisory support to the teams there. MIA Church Leaders’ Desk (CLD) has a network of 80 trained volunteers across the 5 divisions under a local team leader and an assistant team leader in each location, with technical supervision from two MIA/CLD staff and administrative support from a Town/District Officer in each town/district. The volunteers have been providing psychological first aid (PFA) in their local communities and other support to parents. UNICEF is working with the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster (PHPC) (led by UNWomen) to coordinate and support the national Safety and Protection Cluster (chaired by MIA Tonga) in child protection/PSS.

Education

UNICEF is working with the MET to fast track the distribution of Education in Emergencies (EiE) and WASH in School supplies. These will be distributed to 180 of the most-affected schools with a combined population of 22,430 learners and 1,432 teachers and staff. Two tents have been delivered to a school with damaged classrooms while 22 Early Childhood Development (ECD) kits, 32 recreational kits and 100 bottles of liquid detergents are set to be shipped to Ha’apai schools as soon as inter-island boat operations resume. Technical support is being provided to the MET in preparation for the conduct of PSS activities for teachers and learners and for safe re-opening of schools. UNICEF is coordinating with Save the Children and other partners for support to MET.

Social & Behavior Change

Demand generation for COVID-19 vaccination and awareness raising on COVID-19 preventive behaviors on national radio and television networks and digital relays through SMS and social media/Facebook messaging are ongoing. MOH counsellors have reached out to positive cases and their families in communities as well as quarantine facilities through phone and contact tracers. Aside from providing moral support, they were advised on COVID-19 safe behaviors during home isolation. Four national hotline numbers are responding to public complaints and concerns for COVID-19 and one for tsunami/volcano related emergency response. The feedback is relayed to relevant stakeholder groups for corrective action. MoH will intensify mass media messaging, community dialogues, and capacity building of community volunteers and village development committees with support from UNICEF from early March onwards.

Human Interest Stories & External Media

New UNICEF – Government of Japan partnership to support thousands of Tongan families affected by the volcanic eruption and tsunami
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