



Tonga

Volcano and
Tsunami Emergency
Response

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Background

The Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai underwater volcano erupted violently in Tonga on 15 January 2022, sending a plume of ash more than 50 kilometres into the atmosphere. The eruption triggered a 1.2-meter-high tsunami that hit low-lying coastal communities on Tongatapu, 'Eua and the Ha'apai Group. It was one of the strongest eruptions in the Polynesian nation in the past three decades.

Thick layers of ash covered the worst affected areas, and flood waters damaged infrastructure, homes and schools. Three people were killed, and 84 per cent of Tonga's population were affected by the twin disasters, including more than 36,000 children.

UNICEF immediately shipped ten metric tons of emergency supplies to support the most vulnerable children and families. Supplies included water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) kits, jerry cans and buckets, school supplies and recreational kits for children.

The objective was to ensure that children and their families had sufficient access to safe drinking water, a clean and protective environment, essential health services, emotional support and to ensure children did not miss out on their education.

UNICEF supported the Government of Tonga in its overall response with technical expertise on the ground, data collection, and humanitarian cash transfers for families, including people with disabilities.

UNICEF also provided technical and financial support for the design of a joint WASH, Health and Nutrition damage assessment and supported the data analysis and reporting through the Ministry of Health (MoH). These tools helped reveal who needed the most support and what was required.

Just two weeks after the eruption and tsunami, Tonga was hit with a third disaster when the first community transmitted COVID-19 cases were detected- hampering relief efforts.

Number of people reached through UNICEF programmes



WASH
47,000+



Health and Nutrition
85,000+



Education
28,000+



Protection
10,000+



Communication
60,000+



Social Policy
3,000+
households

WASH



Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services are especially critical after a disaster. These services help prevent public health emergencies, due mainly to water-borne diseases. Children are particularly vulnerable to these diseases.

A Ministry of Health (MoH) survey identified those needing water tanks, and UNICEF responded by helping more than 100 families. In addition, field latrines were set up in some of the worst affected areas in Tongatapu.

Capacity and institutional support to MoH's Environmental Health unit were provided to help plan, monitor, coordinate and assess the damage through data collection, analysis and reporting. Training was also provided.

The Ministry of Health, with support from UNICEF, distributed WASH kits that included soap, toothpaste, sanitary pads and other items to help families who had lost almost all their possessions. WASH kits were also provided to schools to help them re-open.



Relief activities included

- > Repair/rehabilitation of WASH facilities.
- > Cluster coordination, monitoring and reporting.
- > Provide technical support to the Ministry of Health.
- > Delivery of critical WASH supplies.
- > Hygiene promotion campaigns.
- > Vector spraying and environmental cleaning for communities.
- > Provision of storage space for WASH relief items for Ministry of Health.

Direct support included



→ **16,096**
people
benefited from
water tank
treatment



→ WASH supplies
provided to
4,581
households



→ **100**
new water tanks
provided



→ **600**
households
received
COVID-19
hygiene kits



→ **100**
field latrines
installed



→ **850**
WASH in
school kits
distributed

Health and Nutrition



The aftermath of any natural disaster is a critical time for a child's health and nutrition. Regular childhood services like vaccinations and health services to detect issues like malnutrition are interrupted – putting thousands of children at risk.

UNICEF provided in-country technical assistance to support the Ministry of Health with essential health and immunization service delivery, supply and logistics. This included providing essential medicines and equipment to health facilities.

With UNICEF's support, a new multisectoral committee for nutrition was established to assist the Health Ministry in preparing and responding to emergencies. Health workers were trained to identify and manage potential cases of malnutrition and how to deal with nutrition issues in an emergency.

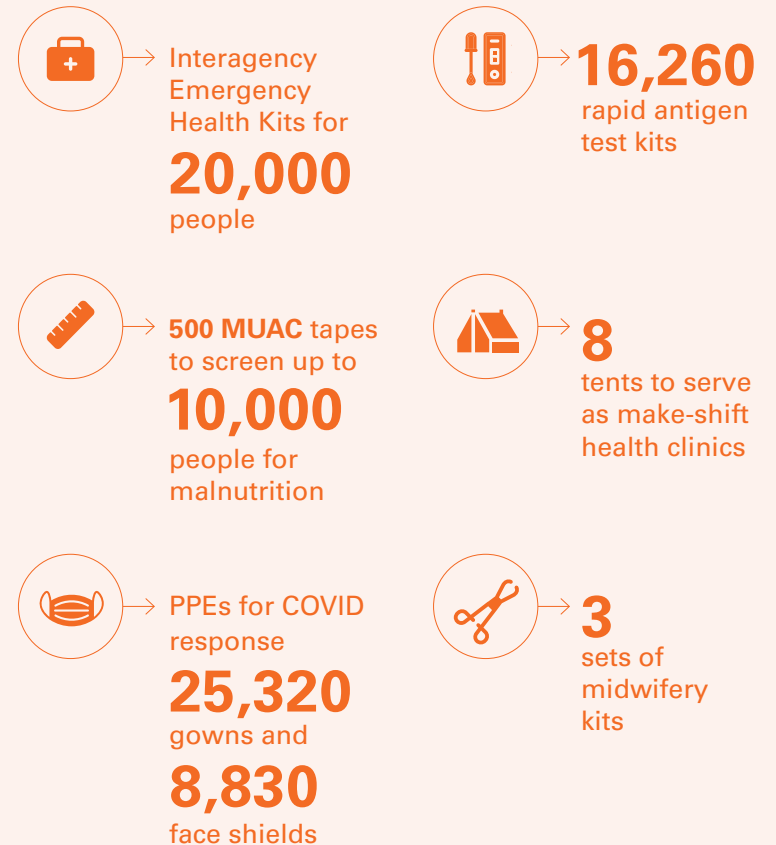
When COVID-19 emerged in February 2022, UNICEF supported procurement of vaccines through COVAX and in collaboration with key development partners. UNICEF also provided technical and financial assistance to MoH in the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations, including the development of training materials and capacity building for healthcare workers.

UNICEF supported the launching and rollout of all three new vaccines – Pneumococcal Conjugated Vaccine (PCV), Rota Virus Vaccine (RVV) and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). UNICEF provided training to 100 frontline healthcare workers on HPV introduction and vaccine administration and worked closely with MoH to rollout the community engagement plan for the HPV introduction. This helped healthcare workers know how to deal with misinformation, rumours and concerns that prevent some people from getting immunized.

Relief activities included

- > Integrated outreach response.
- > COVID-19 response and vaccination rollout.
- > Introduction of new vaccines.
- > Routine immunization support.
- > Nutrition support.

Direct support included



Education



UNICEF strives to provide uninterrupted education for every child. The classroom offers stability and a place to feel safe for children who have survived a natural disaster and may have lost their homes. Schools offer psychosocial support, which provides a structure to help them cope with the trauma they experienced.

The eruption and tsunami are estimated to have affected 66 per cent of students nationally in Tonga and damaged or destroyed 11 schools and two early childhood centres. In response, tents, school-in-a-box and Early Child Development (ECD) kits were provided to keep children learning.

When schools closed in February 2022 due to COVID, UNICEF supported the training of trainers (ToT) on safe school re-opening protocols for head teachers and education officials. At the same time, a ToT on psychosocial support (PSS) helped educators understand how to interact with primary and secondary school students in the wake of the twin disasters.

Specialized training on early childhood was also conducted for officials to support the use of ECD kits and provide psychosocial support for young children.

In support of remote learning continuity during the closures, targeted messages for TV and radio were produced in the Tongan language and uploaded onto the Ministry of Education and Training's online learning platform. The Hama e-learning Platform (HeLP) was a valuable resource for parents and families, benefitting 22,430 learners.

Relief activities included

- > Provision of teaching and learning supplies for early childhood education and primary schools.
- > Support for the "Back to School" campaign and disaster preparedness in schools.
- > Technical support to Ministry of Education on emergency preparedness, coordination, and management.

Direct support included



→ Teaching and learning supplies for

7,665

children as part of the "back to school" campaign



→

399

257 Education Officials trained on ECD and PSS for young children, and 142 Education Officials/primary and secondary headteachers trained on PSS



→

239

Principals and education officials reached with safe school protocols resulting in all schools re-opening safely

Protection



After any disaster, children are more vulnerable to neglect, violence or abuse. A child's mental health and psychosocial needs are often neglected, with consequences that can last a lifetime. Anxiety, depression and other stress-related problems threaten their ability to grow up healthy and happy.

To help counter the emotional impact following the eruption and tsunami in Tonga, UNICEF developed a programme to support children and adolescents. This included supporting the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) to offer services delivered by trained counsellors, para-counsellors and volunteers, including adolescents, through the leadership of the Church Leaders' Desk. Volunteers provided psychological first aid (PFA) to affected children and adolescents as well as caregivers and teachers.

UNICEF also provided 100 recreational kits to support basic psychosocial support services via mobile child-friendly spaces in Tongatapu, 'Eua and Ha'apai group. Thousands of children, including children with disabilities, benefited from community activities, including games, sports, creative arts, and information sharing. Caregivers could also access parenting support, counselling, information sharing and peer support services during the emergency response and recovery phase.

Relief activities included

- > Delivery of recreational kits to provide psychosocial support.
- > Technical and financial support for MIA.

Direct support included

 → **5,012**
 children and
5,117
 caregivers provided with
 direct psychosocial support
 services

 → **80**
 volunteers and
180
 teachers trained in PFA



Social and Behaviour Change Communication



During emergencies, coordinated, clear and credible communication can help families stay healthy and stay informed.

In Tonga, UNICEF supported the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) by developing information, education and communication materials in English and Tongan to ensure people had the correct information to respond to the disaster. The materials focused on good hygiene practices, how to clean homes and water sources after the heavy ash fall, and how caregivers can help their children. These materials were developed in close consultation with the relevant ministries.

Public service announcements aired frequently on radio and television, while SMS blasts were sent out continuously for three months. UNICEF supported the relevant ministries to appear on radio and television programmes.

UNICEF, together with the Ministry of Health, also launched a handwashing campaign after the COVID-19 outbreak.

On the ground, UNICEF trained volunteers on risk communication and mobilized them in the affected communities. While through the National Emergency Management Office, UNICEF supported Tonga in strengthening the Village Emergency Management Committees.

Relief activities included

- > Promoting lifesaving preventive behaviours and practices on TBC's radio and TV networks.
- > Engagement of volunteers for door-to-door visits and facilitation of community dialogues.

Direct support included



60,000

people reached through PSAs on mass media and community engagement activities



Social Policy



UNICEF's Social Policy strategy focuses on its core commitment to support the effective functioning of social protection systems. This includes maintaining regular social protection programmes and adjusting or scaling up social transfers.

In partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, UNICEF leveraged the existing social protection programme and rolled out a new initiative- Humanitarian Cash Transfer Plus. The programme provided TOP 1.5 million (approximately USD 700,000) to help the most vulnerable families and their children obtain critical goods and essential services while strengthening the existing national shock-responsive social protection system.

The cash transfers had two main target groups, households/families impacted by the volcanic eruption and tsunami and existing social welfare beneficiaries who fell under the social protection and disability division which includes children with disabilities.

Relief activities included

- > Technical and financial support with rollout of Humanitarian Cash Transfer programme for families.

Direct support included



Over
3,000

households, including
people with disabilities



Moving Forward

As a result of the positive collaboration between UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, tools were developed for the WASH cluster. A Detailed Damage Assessment (WASH, Health and Nutrition) and a General Beneficiary Data Disaggregation Tool are now being used by MoH for their overall monitoring and reporting in the Ministry. Similarly, operational and administrative support to the Ministry of Health and Environmental Health Unit has helped strengthen planning, coordination, monitoring and reporting. The partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs on Humanitarian Cash Transfers also provides an entry point for further collaboration on improving a more shock-responsive and child-sensitive social protection system in the country, including the institutionalization of policies and programmes targeting children and other vulnerable groups.

With the Ministry of Education, UNICEF will continue to support and promote access and quality education based on the findings made in the After Action Review in December 2022 and with the Ministry of Internal Affairs to support long-term strategies to continue promoting the rights of children in Tonga in the frame of building resilience.

However, challenges remain, and much more needs to be done to improve not only Tonga's response in emergencies but also in supporting communities to thrive in their everyday lives.

Challenges and Opportunities

- As highlighted by the MoH, the aftermath of the twin disasters put considerable pressure on Ministry staff. The Ministry had to respond to the needs of communities while adhering to the restrictions that were in place to mitigate the risks associated with COVID-19, which posed a challenging operational situation.
- The current WASH institutional set-up in Tonga may benefit from a stronger and coordinated system, as currently, there are separate sub-sectors such as water, sanitation, health, and waste management. The water sub-cluster is managed by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Land Survey and Natural Resources. The Ministry of Health solely manages the sanitation sub-cluster, and Waste Management is managed by the Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communication (MEIDECC). Efforts to review, streamline and strengthen the WASH Sector and reinforce cluster coordination arrangements and staff capacity will contribute to a more agile model.
- The social protection system in Tonga is in a nascent phase and has a strong vision and mandate which can be leveraged for improved results. At present, there are no social cash transfer programmes targeting children living in poor and vulnerable households. The absence of a reliable and effective information system is an ongoing challenge. To respond more effectively to future emergencies, there is an opportunity to put in place Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) for all humanitarian cash transfers.
- There is a need for strong in-country Information Management (IM), including systems and dedicated capacity linking sectoral IM from the Ministry with NEMO.
- There is an opportunity with the Ministry of Education and Training to link refresher training on psychosocial support with ongoing professional development activities for teachers and to create linkages to long-term school-based, disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives.
- Referral pathways for child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) cases need to be strengthened, and essential capacity building for personnel initiated, particularly related to focused and specialized mental health services for young people and their caregivers.

Living through the night

Vake, age 14, with her mother, Maaimoa Toetu'u.



One year on, as families recover and rebuild, the scars of the night are still in the minds of those affected, especially those who lost everything they had, like Vake and her family.

"As we ran, we kept looking back. The waves went over the rooftop of the houses, washing away everything," says Vake.

Her mother Maaimoa Toetu'u recalls the painful memories of that first night and day before help arrived.

"The ash started falling by the time we reached higher ground," she adds.

Throughout the night, the elderly and children took shelter under a tarpaulin.

"We thought we would return later to get our clothes and things. But when we went back, there was nothing left."

Psychosocial interventions help families recover.

With support from UNICEF, the Ministry of Internal Affairs initiated a psychosocial support programme in Tongatapu and the outer islands to help people recover from the twin disasters.

"At first, it was so devastating to see where the families sought refuge, but it made me realize how important the work that we do is," says Mafi Hoa, Child Protection and Suicide Prevention Coordinator at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

"But gradually, I started to see recovery, but with the first response, it was obvious that families were very much affected," she added.

Maaimoa, a mother of five, who has seen first-hand the impact of these interventions, adds that the games brought relief to the children and allowed Vake and her friends to start regaining a sense of normalcy.

"Seeing children smile again has helped me heal, too," she says.



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UNICEF Pacific Multi Country Office

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