HIGH COMMISSION OF THE KINGDOM OF TONGA
LONDON

17th April 2020

To: Secretariat of United Nations
Secretary-General's
High Level Panel on Internal Displacement
Room S-142, Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10
idpspanel@un.org

Re: - Call for Submissions and Input -

Dear HLP – ID Secretariat,

The Secretary-General's decision to establish a High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement is a positive outcome for Tonga and small-island states that are affected by both sudden and slow-onset natural disasters that are increasingly linked to climate change. The Kingdom of Tonga is comprised of 172 islands that are all uniquely vulnerable to tropical cyclones, earthquakes, ENSO, and sea level rise.

Last week, our capital Nuku'alofa was devastated as Cyclone Harold, a category-4 storm, made landfall during an unseasonably high King Tide. The resulting storm surge sent a wall of water up to 2.7m high, barreling across low-lying, coastal communities on Tongatapu and Eua. On Tongatapu, damage was concentrated in the capital's low-lying districts and on the western coast where the island's major resorts were decimated.

It is in this context of displacement that I submit the following input. Internal displacement in coastal communities will only increase as sea levels rise and tropical storms strengthen. The following recommendations have been compiled in partnership with John Marazita, an expert on disaster displacement in small island states. Please use the lessons learned by small island states as you compile recommendations that will undoubtably shape international response to disaster displacement.

Sincerely,

TONGA HIGH COMMISSION LONDON

H.E. The Hon. Titilupe Fanetupouvava'u Tu'ivakano

High Commissioner

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Input for the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement from the Kingdom of Tonga

Background. The Kingdom of Tonga, as an island nation in the South Pacific, is acutely vulnerable to tropical cyclones, earthquakes, and impacts of climate change. In the 50-year period beginning in 1960, Tonga was impacted by 76 tropical cyclones. Widespread destruction caused by category-5 Cyclone Ian on Ha'apai island group led to mass displacement locally. The following input presented to the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement represents lessons learned from past disasters in the context of ongoing international dialogue.

Key Points

✓ Policy needs to reflect that King Tides are natural disasters that cause disaster displacement

Sea level rise is often associated with slow-onset natural disaster. Coastal communities around the world, however, are increasingly impacted by abnormally high tides that the Pacific region has long referred to as King Tides. Depending on lunar and solar orbits, coastal communities can experience up to 4 King Tides per year. Increasingly, even minor weather disturbances coinciding with King Tides lead to flooding and displacement.

The phenomenon is not limited to the Pacific Islands. In the last year, displacement has been exasperated by the combination of tropical storms and King Tides, including in the Bahamas and South Florida (Dorian), Tuvalu (Tino), and Tonga (Harold).[1] Venice also saw record floods due to a King Tide.[2] Disaster and preparedness literature ignores the link between King Tides and displacement and are thus not monitored nor included in DRR measures. Sea level rise is no longer a future problem but is now causing measurable and predictable displacement that needs to be monitored.

✓ Safeguards for IDPs lacking documentation

In small island states, displacement often necessitates movement between islands for indefinite lengths of time. IDPs needing to register for benefits or apply for temporary work/housing require documentation to verify identification or credentials. IDPs lacking documentation may be denied benefits or unable to secure employment. For foreign nationals displaced by disaster, the lack of documentation can have far reaching consequences including exclusion from benefits and in some cases deportation.[3] Measures to protect IDPs without access to proper documentation are inadequate.

✓ Inclusion of indigenous knowledge in DRR frameworks

[1] Marazita, J. "Silent Disasters: Preparing for the King Tide". March 2020.
[2] Alves, L. "Italy Declares State of Emergency in Venice Due to King Tide Flooding". 15 November 2019.
[3] IOM. "IOM Tracks Repatriations of Haitian Migrants from The Bahamas". 15 November 2019.

Disaster displacement has been a part of the Pacific islands' narrative since our seafarer ancestors made landfall untold millennia ago. Our local communities have fostered innovative methods to prepare, sustain, and recover from natural disasters. The indigenous knowledge around disaster displacement has the potential to improve the flow of IDPs into durable solutions. The governments, however, do not have the resources or methodology to cultivate and disperse indigenous knowledge. In order not to repeat past mistakes and gain a broader consensus, the consideration of indigenous knowledge by policymakers and researchers should be encouraged and facilitated.

✓ Streamlined funding for large-scale local and regional environmental adaptation initiatives

Regional cooperation between states on DRR and climate adaptation has greatly improved through programs such as the Commonwealth Blue Charter, SPREP, various leader forums, etc. As dialogue between parties increases, regional and local solutions to DRR are emerging. Funding mechanisms for local/state-initiated large-scale projects face rigid funding barriers. Recent projects, such as the procurement of ferronickel slag aiming to reduce a dependency on beach mining lack straight-forward funding avenues. As such, Tonga is left dependent on an industry that is degrading our fragile marine environment and that will adversely impact our long-term economic sustainability. Streamlined funding mechanisms for such projects would allow greater agency for small island states and bring innovation to the often-repetitive nature of development aid projects.

Discussion

Small island states are acutely vulnerable to natural disaster that often causes local and inter-island displacement. Rising sea levels associated with climate change have led to a vulnerability to King Tides. As tropical cyclones increasingly strike in combination with higher than normal King Tides, storm surges send tsunami-like walls of seawater several meters high across low-lying islands. The resulting storm surge leads to flooding, inundation, and salinization. Although King Tides impact all low-lying coastal communities and are often reported in local media worldwide, their predictable occurrences are not monitored. Most importantly, King Tides are not included in disaster literature and disaster risk reduction protocols. Coastal communities are left without guidance and displacement is often exasperated.

Island states experience unique displacement pathways that are often overlooked. As entire islands are increasingly impacted by disaster, survivors disperse to other islands. Unlike localized displacement, displaced person in unfamiliar communities have limited personal networks. IDPs lacking sufficient documentation in the new setting and without a supportive personal network may be unable to register for benefits, enroll children in school, or apply for jobs. Migrants unable to prove legal status are acutely vulnerable.

The Kingdom of Tonga governs 172 geographically diverse islands that were settled by Polynesian seafarers at a time when Europe entered the Iron Age. Over 3 millennia, our ancestors adapted to the risk of natural disaster. They managed displacement and negotiated durable solutions. Although indigenous knowledge may not be enough to overcome the projected impacts of climate change in our rapidly modernizing urban centers, local knowledge should be cultivated and shared so that we as states do not repeat our mistakes. As sea level rises and tropical storms strengthen, small island states are the warriors at the frontline of climate change.

Lead Authors

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