



PERMANENT MISSION
OF THE KINGDOM OF TONGA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE HIGH LEVEL EVENT ON THE MELLENIUM
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

**AT THE 63RD SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
ROUND TABLE II: EDUCATION AND HEALTH
TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL CHAMBER**

**STATEMENT BY
THE HON. DR. FELETI VAKA'UTA SEVELE
PRIME MINISTER OF TONGA**

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UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTER, NEW YORK**

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Distinguished Co-Chairs,

It is my pleasure and great privilege to be here to deliver this brief statement on the Kingdom of Tonga's progress towards achieving the education and health Millennium Development Goals.

The primary education system is a fundamental basis of Tonga's education system. The Kingdom can report that it has achieved "universal primary education". The net enrolment rate in primary education was 97 percent in 2006, the proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5 was 92 percent in the same year, and our literacy rate of 15-24 year olds is over 95 percent. With such high rates it is clear that there is no gender disparity in the Kingdom's schooling system.

While these figures are commendable the issue for the Tongan Government is one of sustainability. A major constraint facing most primary schools has been insufficient funding for non-salary related expenditure, for buildings and related facilities.

Further improvement in the primary education system remains a high priority to the Government. With the assistance of the New Zealand Government and the World Bank the Government introduced a school grants program in 2006. The focus of this program is on increasing operating expenditure to schools, with a particular emphasis on maintenance of infrastructure. This grants program is based around 3 year school development plans, the priorities of which are developed through school community participation.

Limited financial resources however, will continue to see Tonga looking to donor partners for the construction and rehabilitation of major school infrastructure.

The health assessment of children in the Kingdom of Tonga is very good. The under 5 mortality rate was 3 per thousand in 2006, while the infant mortality rate was 14 in the same year, one of the best performers of pacific island countries. The low level of infant mortality and child mortality testifies to the concerted effort by the Government to ensure the primary health care is effectively delivered. This is further reflected in the proportion of children immunized in the Kingdom which has been 99 percent for the past 4 years.

The advances made in maternal and child health have made an impressive impact on the national maternal mortality rate. However, the maternal mortality rate is subject to substantial fluctuations due to our small absolute numbers, with less than 4,000 births per annum, and therefore the statistics fluctuate wildly. The proportion of births attended by skilled health professionals is high at over 90 percent. An issue remains for Tonga to address the urban/rural differentials in this area with maternal mortality a particular concern in remote areas of the islands.

Access to health care services in the Kingdom is quite impressive at 100 percent and the life expectancy is a little over 70 years. Infectious diseases are very much under control, which is attributed to the good standard of water and sanitation facilities as well as the primary health care delivery system which focuses on both communicable diseases and maternal and child health.

However, Tonga has an increasing issue with non-communicable diseases and this has become a focus of the health care system in recent years.

Tonga is witnessing a changing disease pattern with rising levels of non-communicable diseases, or those associated with modernization and development. The improved economic standards, better communication, and access to processed and imported foods has resulted in obesity becoming an increasing problem in the Kingdom in recent years.

The prevalence of diabetes remains high at over 250 per 100,000 and that for tuberculosis is just under 30 per 100,000. The proportion of TB cases detected and cured remains at over 95 percent.

The level of contraceptive usage among women age 15-49 years remains low at around 30 percent.

Although HIV/Aids figures are very low, with only 17 cases in the last 20 years, the Government remains acutely aware of this threat.

The current focus in the health care system is seeing a shift towards preventative health care with a focus on non-communicable diseases. In recognition of the diverse health problems faced by its people, the Government has committed itself to key national priorities including developing an equitable health care financing system, an improvement in health information and surveillance, prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, all through the design and implementation of a national health strategy.

Finally, having delivered such good news on the Kingdom's progress towards the education and health MDGs, I must be honest in that although our achievements make us one of the best performing small island states, we have serious concerns with regards to sustainability.

The current turmoil in the world financial markets, the rapidly rising world food prices, and the heavy burden fossil fuel prices play on our economy, makes our country very vulnerable. Being a small island state, these factors significantly affect our countries ability to sustain our significant gains in the MDG measures.