

# The Kingdom of Tonga

## National Voluntary GCM Review

Implementing the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and  
Regular Migration

### Methodology

The Kingdom of Tonga (Tonga) has welcomed the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and  
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## National Context

A Polynesian archipelago comprising 172 islands, of which 36 are inhabited, the Kingdom of Tonga (Tonga) has a population of 107,542 people of whom 70% presently reside on the main island of Tongatapu.<sup>1</sup> Despite its relatively small population, Tonga was among the top four countries of emigration in relation to its population.<sup>2</sup> Tongans began moving after the Second World War as the mushrooming population of the country began facing a shortage of agricultural land. The first moves were internal, from outer to main islands, and from smaller to larger towns. Beginning as a trickle in the 1950s, international migration from Tonga stepped up in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the primary destinations of New Zealand, Australia, and the United States owing to an increasing pull of education and work opportunities. Throughout the last half of the 20th century, internal and overseas migration have been part of a steady transformation of the country.

J ku'O clguv{a'I qxgtpo gpv"\*I qxgtpo gpv+ does not currently have reliable demographic data regarding the diaspora, its size, or its profile however, it is estimated that the Tongan diaspora is as large in number, if not bigger, than the population of Tongans residing in country<sup>3</sup>. The size of the Tongan diaspora is estimated to be 126,540, based on recent census data in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, where most overseas Tongans reside.<sup>4</sup> Within the country, most Tongans reside on the main island of Tongatapu particularly in the capital, Nuku'alofa. Increasing outer island exodus results in depopulated islands and has pushed government to adopt new government policies aimed at stemming the tide of internal population movement.

Tonga has a small but open economy reliant on remittances (equivalent to 39% of GDP in 2020)<sup>5</sup>, tourism, agriculture, and foreign aid. Migration and migrants have become central to the economic and social fabric of the contemporary Tongan society. Remittances makes a significant contribution to the economy with Tonga receiving the highest remittances (35.2%)<sup>6</sup> in the world when viewed as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product.

However, the relationship is much broader than a financial one and has important social and cultural dimensions. Members of the diaspora can also contribute to Tongan development through the transfer of skills, through return migration and through investment and trade activity. Labour mobility schemes (predominantly to New Zealand and Australia) are also a feature of the migration and employment landscape. The government continues to engage in dialogue with destination countries and with the Tongan community to ensure the effective continuation of the various labor mobility schemes and to protect the interests of Tongans.

Net remittances have largely remained stable over 2020 and 2021, despite the global impacts of COVID-19. Tonga like other countries around the world has faced society.

have disproportionately affected migrant workers, who have found themselves stranded unable to return to their place of work or their communities of origin. The volcano eruption and the ensuing tsunami waves on January 15, 2022, came as Tonga struggled to overcome the devastation caused by a series of severe cyclones in recent years<sup>7</sup> and the economic impact of COVID-19. The international community mobilized immediate emergency relief and longer term support towards the recovery plan. The recovery efforts from the HTHH eruption was further complicated with the COVID-19 outbreak. The outbreak prompted a series of lockdowns, and the country remains in a state of emergency.

Like other Pacific Small Island Developing States, several structural factors constrain development and growth prospects of Tonga. These include the challenges posed by smallness,



TSDf II 2015-2025 outcomes and outputs, related KPIs and the 2030 Agenda goals, targets, and indicators.

J ku"O clguv{ø}I qxgtpo gpv has developed the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) 2019-2023 also known as the Tonga Strategy for the Development of Statistics (TSDS) 2019-2023. "cu'yj g'eqwv{ø}pcvqpcnlhco gy qtn'q'o ckwutgco "ucvku'k'p'q" national policy and planning process, to produce information responding to the needs of the various users, to mainstream sectors and other players into the National Statistics System (NSS) and to coordinate the entire NSS. The TSDS responds to the identified data challenges of Tonga and aims to deliver a country-led data revolution that builds statistical capacity for all members qh'yj g'P UUVj g'utcvgi { 'r megu'Vqpi cø'r tqf wv'q'p.'eqmge'q'p.'c'p'f "wug'qh'ucvku'k'p'k'p'g'y kj " international best practice principles in that it requires statistical data production, collection and storage, methods, and procedures to be grounded in scientific principles and profi 4x3(e)(nd )-29d es to

The Government currently uses several frameworks, which integrate climate change measures into national policies and planning. Tonga established the Emergency Management Office under the Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change, and Communication (MEIDEC) which focuses on coastline protection and raising the level of knowledge within different local communities on what climate change is and its effects on Tonga. The National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) has the primary initial response role and coordinates the national response to disasters. IOM in partnership with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Platform for Disaster Displacement (PDD) is implementing a project to strengthen the disaster displacement response of J ku'O clguw{øu'I qxgtpo gpv to reduce the risk of disaster displacement risk for vulnerable communities in Tonga. The project will enhance the technical capability and operational response capability of the Government.

Additionally, NEMO and other national emergency stakeholders have also launched the Tonga Strategic Roadmap for Emergency and Disaster Risk Management to enhance emergency and disaster risk management and build safer communities. The Roadmap builds on existing strengths and addresses challenges of emergency management coordination in Tonga.

Small-scale agricultural production in Tonga has been negatively impacted because of the migration of agricultural workers, as migrants abandon their lands and farms to work overseas and often do not work the lands upon their return in the off-season. In turn, the decline of small-scale agricultural production has created further impetus for cyclical migration through the labour mobility scheme. Moreover, changes in relative wages due to the influx of remittances affect agricultural ptqf wēvkp"cpf "vj g'tgrvkxg'eqo r gkxkpguu'qh'Vqpi cøu'ci tēwmtcrlo ctngv' These fluctuations in the income and productivity of farmers and small-scale food producers are potential drivers of migration<sup>8</sup>. Other areas of the Tongan labour force have also been impacted by the labour mobility schemes ó for example, interlocutors noted that the supply of semi-skilled workers for the whale watching industry has been depleted because of the attraction of higher wages offshore.

In response, to minimize the effects of these factors, the Government has adopted a policy utcvgi { "kp"vj g"O UFR"vq"ōRtqo qvg"lpkkcvkxgu"vq"dqquv'r tqf wēvkxkx{ "cpf "rkxgkxj qqf u"cetquu" various sectors including agriculture, fisheries, tourism and micro business activity. Education campaigns were designed to increase awareness about practices and resilience strategies that reduce negative environmental impacts, which contribute to forced displacement and o ki tcvkqpö. Together with the affected communities, the Government has developed Community based strategies to mitigate negative impacts of labour mobility schemes in terms qh'vj tgcw"vq'hcø kn{ "eqj gukqp"cpf "hqcrl'hcδqwt"uwr r n{ 'r tguuwt guö'\

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<sup>8</sup> Taufatofua, Pita. April 2011. "TCP/TON/3302: Migration, Remittances, and Development in Tonga". Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: Sub-Regional Office for the Pacific Islands: <http://www.fao.org/3/a->

### **Objective 3: Provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration**

Vj g'Cwqtpg{ 'I gpgtcmz'u'Qhleg'ku'vj g'hg{ 'gpvk{ 'eqm'kpi 'tgi kur'kqp'cpf 'tgi w'kqpu'qp'cmhcy u' in Tonga, including immigration laws and regulation. Information regarding all stages of migration to and from Tonga is available on the official website of the Attorney General.

### **Objective 4: Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation**

The Immigration Service of the Government facilitates overseas travel with issuance of passports. The process of issuing passports for labour migrants begins with the Internal Affairs issuing a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who then issue passports to citizens free of cost. Foreign Affairs also keeps a record of all the issued passports. The Ministry of Justice provides birth certificates to all children born in the country regardless of the status of their parents and maintains a sperate register for non-Tongan citizens. Other government departments provide other necessary documents such as Health Clearance and Police Records needed for permanent migration and seasonal workers.

### **Objective 5: Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration**

Tonga has bilateral agreements with the Government of Australia and the Government of New Zealand to facilitate labour migration: The labour mobility agreement between Tonga and New Zealand is known as the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. Tonga is one of the first two countries in the region that signed an agreement with New Zealand for seasonal work program. The RSE scheme is the first formal labour market arrangement the Tongan Government has managed. It is implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Commerce, and Industries (MLCI). The agreement between Tonga and Australia is known as the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), and in September 2018 was amended and renamed the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). Thousands of Tongans are employed in labour mobility schemes with Australia and New Zealand in horticulture, meat processing, construction, tourism, and hospitality. The Government will further negotiate and enter into bilateral agreements with destination and transit countries with a vief "vq"o czko k g"o ki tvkqp"dgpghku"hqt"Vqpi cœu" sustainable development planning. The Ministry of Trade and Economic Development together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, hosted the National Labour Mobility High Level Meeting vq"f gxrqr "Vqpi cœu" P cvkqpcn Labour Mobility Policy which was launched in February 2021. The policy aims to maximize the development impact of circular labour mobility in Tonga.

Government policy relating to the entry of Tongan dual nationals who are travelling on non-Tongan passports is currently under review (in the context of the review of the visa system)

**Objective 6: Facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work**

The establishment of Labour Mobility Agreements (LMA), like the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) between the Government of Tonga and the Governments of New Zealand and Australia has been crucial for increasing access to decent and productive work for Tongan men and women. These labour mobility schemes are important programs for addressing the pressing problems of unemployment due to a lack of formal job opportunities in Tonga and a youth demographic bulge.

Currently there is an Employment Relations Bill 2020 which has yet to be passed by the



documents (birth certificate/passport), family make-up, medical check, police record, reference letters, covid-19 vaccination certificate and RAT tests as required documents per person.

**Objective 7: Address and Reduce Vulnerabilities in Migration**

The GoT has also launched the Strategic Roadmap for Emergency and Disaster Risk Management (2021 ó

UN, who then contact Foreign Affairs in Tonga with information on missing migrants. Subsequently, Foreign Affairs liaises with the Ministry of Justice and the Immigration Division to locate missing migrants. The GoT also liaises with foreign governments in strengthening coordination efforts and documentation of migrants, for example, Indian nationals living in Tonga register themselves with their consular service in Fiji.

**Objective 9: Strengthen the transnational response to smuggling of migrants**

The Transnational Crime Unit (TCU) under the Ministry of Police has been designated to focus mainly on transnational issues, including aiding border agencies with specific focus on drug trafficking and smuggling, trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants, mutual assistance requests, money laundering and proceeds of crime, terrorism financing, cybercrime of any kind, illegal smuggling of flora/fauna and any other transnational issues of intelligence. The TCU works in partnership with other national agencies such as Customs, Immigration Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Biosecurity, Tonga Airport Limited, Telecommunication and Radio Regulator, Financial Intelligence Unit, and the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime Act 2013 also includes provisions which prohibit the trafficking of persons, and children (Part 8) and people smuggling (Part 9).

Tonga continues to develop its internal legislation, policies and procedures to combat human trafficking and smuggling. The IOM has been providing technical support and financial

currently under consideration would enhance the capacity of Tonga to deal with trafficking situations. The 2019 TIP Report acknowledged significant strides the Government of Tonga is making to combat human trafficking, including that the government has increased funding to an NGO that assists victims and has made efforts to train new police on victim identification.



**Objective 18: Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competences**

Improving local and national employment opportunities for the youth is a critical concern for the Government of Tonga, as un- and under-employment is a major driver of migration for adolescents and youth benefit from ongoing programs arranged through bi-lateral agreements with other countries. These initiatives facilitate access to further study and employment, such as academic scholarships and sports exchanges programs, for youth. These youth programs demonstrate a continued commitment to student mobility and are important targets towards



Currently, the GoT, particularly the Ministry of Internal Affairs has a partnership with churches that act as a service provider to facilitate the process of return and reintegration. Once in Tonga,

migration and contribute to efforts to combat transnational crime and irregular migration. The dialogue on migration issues also involves various regional and international organizations which aim to support migration governance, improve migration data, suppress crime, and protect victims and vulnerable groups.

### **Potential for further development**

Nko kɔf "ecr cek{ "cpf "hwf lpi "tgo ckp"e"egpvtcrl'ej cmgpi g'kp"Vqpi cəu'ghqtu"vq" effectively manage migration, especially impacting the collection, use and management of data.

Continued work towards policy goals would benefit from greater consistency in the enforcement of plans across ministries and committees and from improved monitoring and evaluation. In addition, more resources are needed to improve climate resilience particularly in the outer islands. Additional funding is also required to expand and



To improve border security, improved coordination is needed between the Ministry of Customs and Revenue and the Ministry of Police, especially in terms of information



