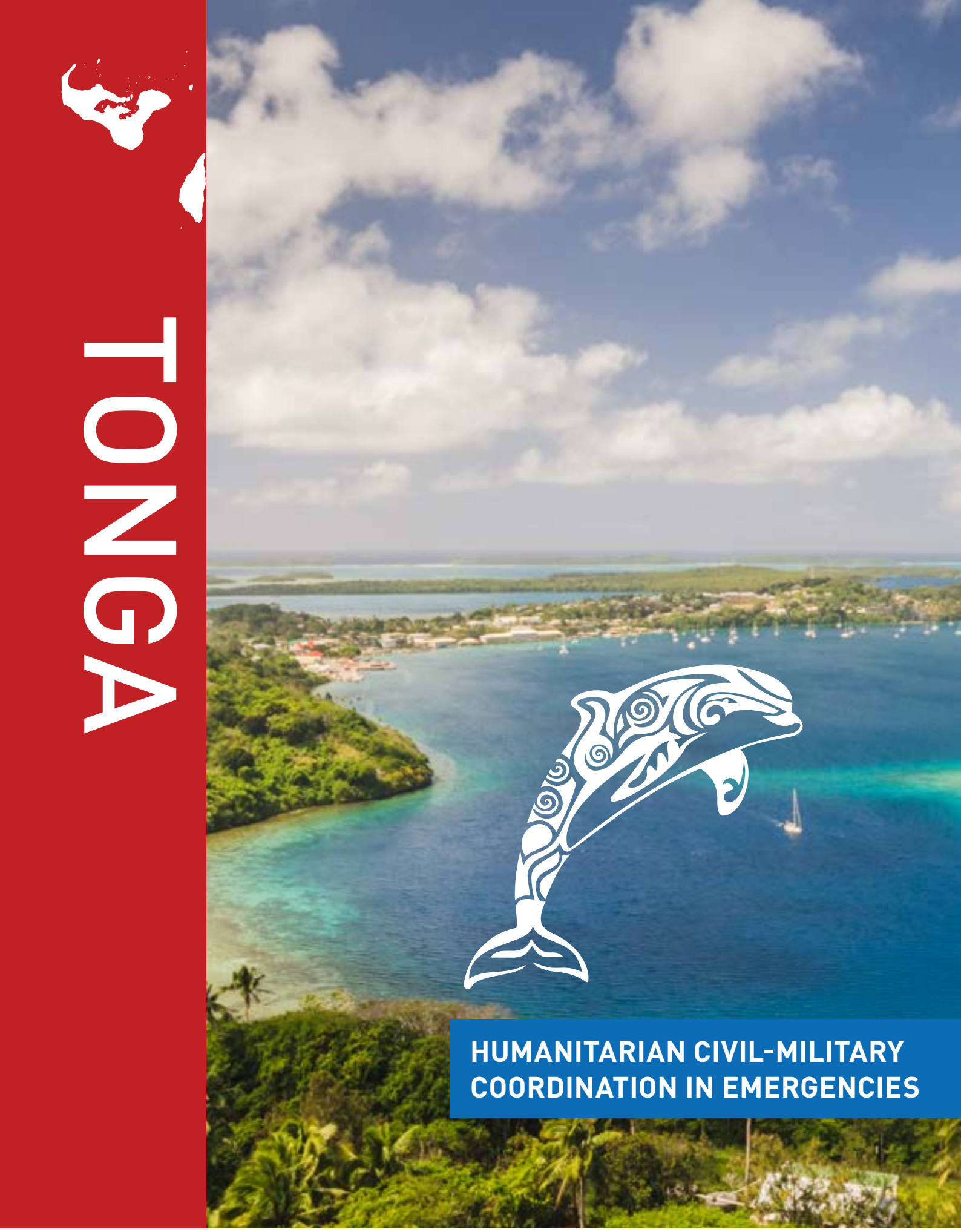


TONGA

HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION IN EMERGENCIES

Kingdom of Tonga, viewed from above. Photo: Michal Durinik / Shutterstock

TONGA

The Kingdom of Tonga (Tonga) was ranked 34th out of 193 countries in the 2025 edition of the World Risk Report due to a combination of climate change risk, geographic location, and socio-economic features. It is an archipelago of 176 volcanic and coral islands (36 inhabited) in the southwest Pacific. Tonga faces frequent natural disasters, including tropical cyclones, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. In 2022 the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and subsequent tsunami caused widespread devastation, damaging infrastructure and contaminating water supplies. Other hazards include droughts, earthquakes, and flash floods.

Disaster management in Tonga is overseen by the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO), formerly known as the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO), operating under the Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change, and Communications (MEIDECC). It is governed by the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021, which replaced the Emergency Management Act 2007, and guided by the National Disaster Risk Management Policy 2023-2030. Strategic coordination is provided by the National Disaster Risk Management Committee (NDRMC), while the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) supports operational response. Tonga adopted a humanitarian cluster system in 2015 to facilitate coordination across sectors, with the first full activation taking place during Tropical Cyclone (TC) Gita in 2018. During disasters, Tonga's military, known as His Majesty's Armed Forces (HMAF), and the Tonga Police provide valuable support to the NDRMO, particularly in key area such as logistics, security, evacuations, and search and rescue. Both the military and police coordinate with NDRMO through the NDRMC and the NEOC.

Tonga's civil-military coordination has evolved through participation in modern disaster response and international peacekeeping operations. The HMAF, formerly the Tonga Defence Service (TDS), has developed a contemporary focus on internal security, disaster relief, and participation in regional peacekeeping and security operations, enhancing its relationship with both its own civilian population and international allies through exercises like Exercise Talisman Sabre and the Pacific Partnership Mission. These engagements have strengthened Tonga's's disaster response capabilities, not only at the national level but also within the broader Pacific context.

KEY EVENTS IN THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF HUMANITARIAN CIVIL–MILITARY COORDINATION IN TONGA

2015

- The Government of Tonga formally introduced the cluster system, laying the foundation for structured humanitarian coordination across sectors which interfaces with civil-military coordination component.

2018

- Tropical Cyclone (TC) Gita (Category 4) triggered the first full-scale activation of the cluster system. Lessons from TC Gita informed the revisions to the National Emergency Plan. The response also involved civil–military coordination, with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) providing airlift, transport, logistical and engineering support.

2020

- TC Harold (Category 5) struck Tonga in April during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tonga Police and HMAF supported evacuations, search and rescue, and relief operations while following national health related restrictions.
- In parallel, COVID-19 preparedness operations saw Tonga declare a State of Emergency before any cases were recorded. Tonga Police and HMAF took central roles in border control, quarantine enforcement, and supply logistics, demonstrating coordination beyond natural disasters.

2021

- The Disaster Risk Management Act replaced the Emergency Management Act 2007. It also established the NDRMO and codified the civil-military coordination structure. The Disaster Risk Financing Strategy 2021–2025 was also launched, providing financial mechanisms to support rapid mobilisation of resources for disaster operations.

2022

- The Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and tsunami represented the largest disaster in Tonga's modern history. The NEOC coordinated all operations and civilian, police and military actors collaborated on security, logistics, evacuations, damage assessment and relief distribution, with strong support from international partners and the Tonga Red Cross Society (TRCS).

2023

- The Pacific Partnership mission was carried out in Tonga, bringing together nearly 1,500 military personnel from Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, the UK, and the US to conduct humanitarian and civic preparedness activities, including engineering, disaster response, public health, and community outreach.
- Tonga's Cabinet approved the Disaster Risk Management Policy Framework 2023–2030, giving overarching policy direction for managing disaster and climate risks. It aligns with the 2021 Disaster Risk Management Act and clarifies the roles of civilian and military actors, including the national cluster system.

2024

- Tonga adopted the Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (MHEWS) Policy 2024–2030, formalising civilian and military roles in early warning dissemination and preparedness, ensuring timely and inclusive alerts across the whole of Tonga.

2025

- Tonga conducted its first Public Health Emergency Operations Centre simulation exercise, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO). The exercise strengthened health security coordination and tested integration between the health sector, NDRMO, Tonga Police and HMAF in epidemic preparedness and response.
- Ex-Longreach was held in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, bringing together military forces, non-government organisations, and civilian agencies to strengthen disaster response capabilities.

DISASTER RISK PROFILE

KEY FACTS

Official name: The Kingdom of Tonga

Land Area: 720 km^2

Population: 103,972 (SPC 2025)

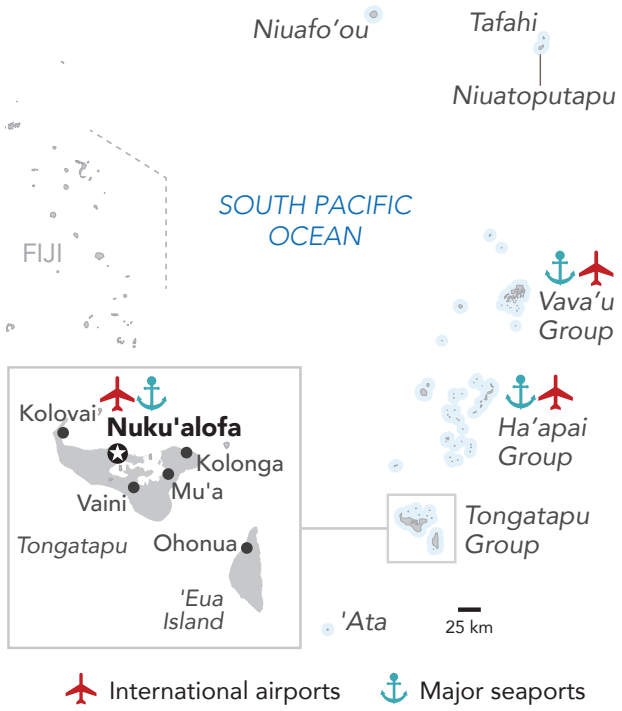
Capital: Nuku'alofa

Official Languages: Tongan, English

Disaster Focal point: National Disaster Risk Management Office

Military: His Majesty's Armed Forces

Police: Tonga Police



Source: Adapted from reliefweb.int Tonga location map, May 2024

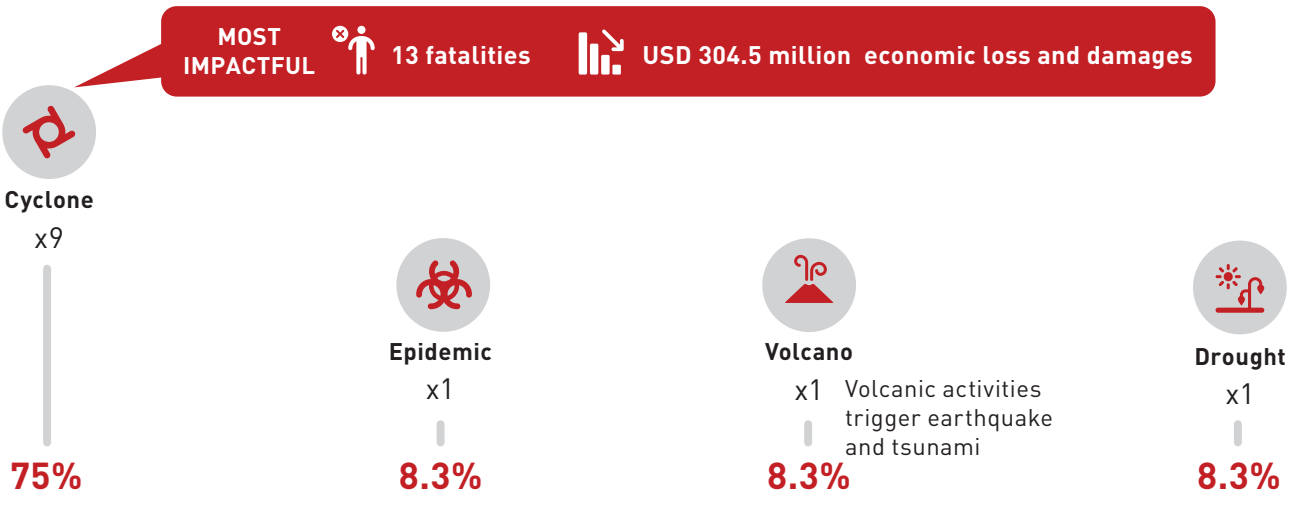
GENERAL INFORMATION

Tonga is highly exposed to a wide range of natural hazards, including tropical cyclones, floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis, and low-lying coastal areas exacerbate these risks, which are further intensified by climate change. All of its islands are situated in a seismically and volcanically active region, meaning volcanic activity, earthquakes and tsunamis are frequent threats.

FREQUENCY AND PROPORTION OF DISASTERS BY TYPE FROM 2000 TO 2025

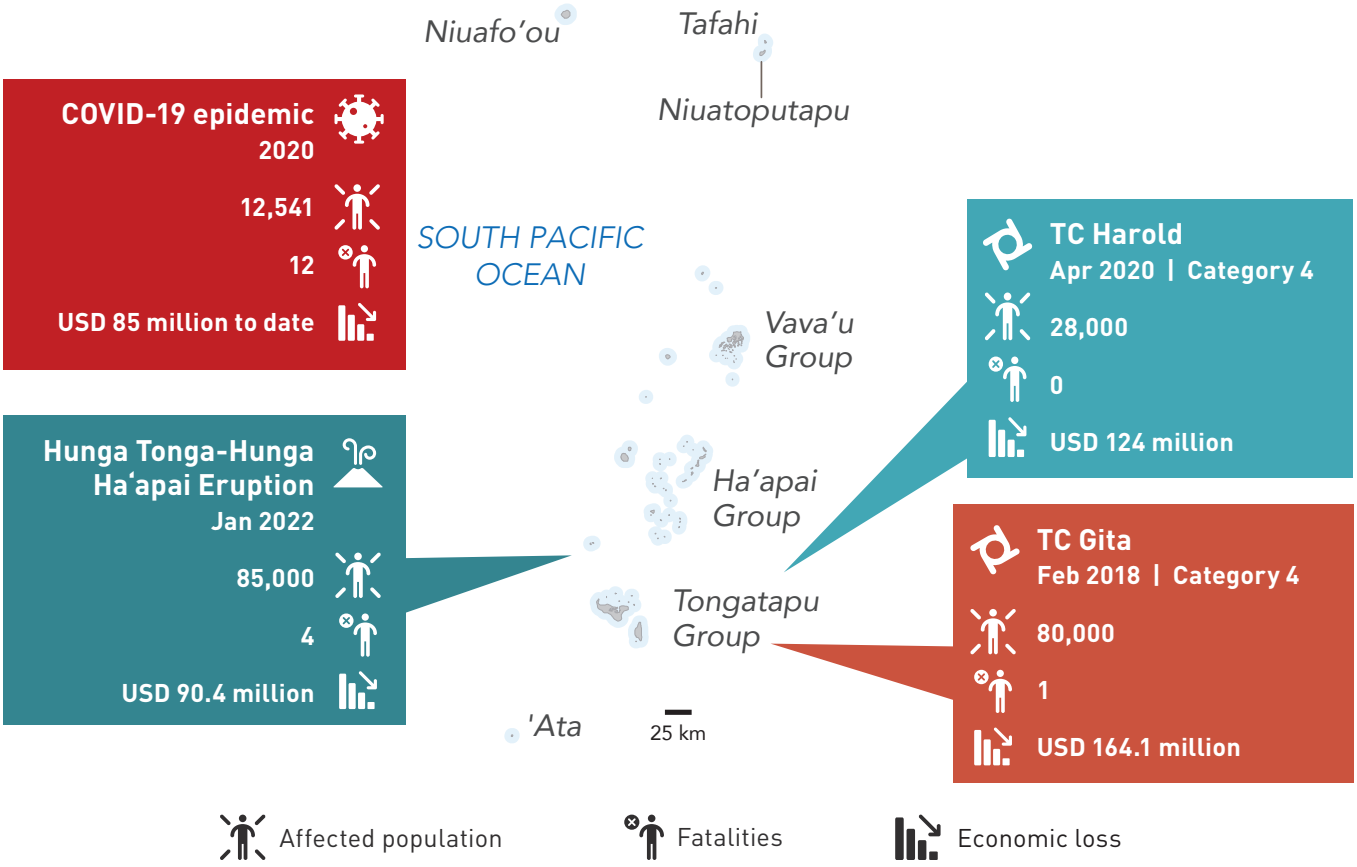
Tonga has been affected by 12 natural disasters over the last 25 years. Its geographical location on the Pacific Ring of Fire and in a cyclone-prone area, combined with the vulnerabilities of a small island developing state (SIDS), makes it the world's 104th most at-risk country for natural disasters.

The graph below orders Tonga's natural disasters by type according to their frequency, with the most to least frequent moving left to right, and the percentage frequency illustrated. The most impactful disaster type is identified but not ranked. Since 2000, tropical cyclones (75%) have been the most frequent disaster to affect Tonga, followed by epidemics, volcanos, and droughts equally (8.3% each). Cyclones were also the most impactful, causing a significant number of fatalities and economic loss.



Source: https://public.emdat.be/data

MAJOR DISASTERS (2015-2025)



INFORM
INDEX FOR RISK MANAGEMENT

INFORM Risk is an open-source risk assessment for humanitarian crises and disasters. INFORM Risk gives each country a risk score of 1-10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest) for each of the dimensions, categories, and components of risk, as well as an overall risk score. The higher the score, the more at risk a country is to disasters.

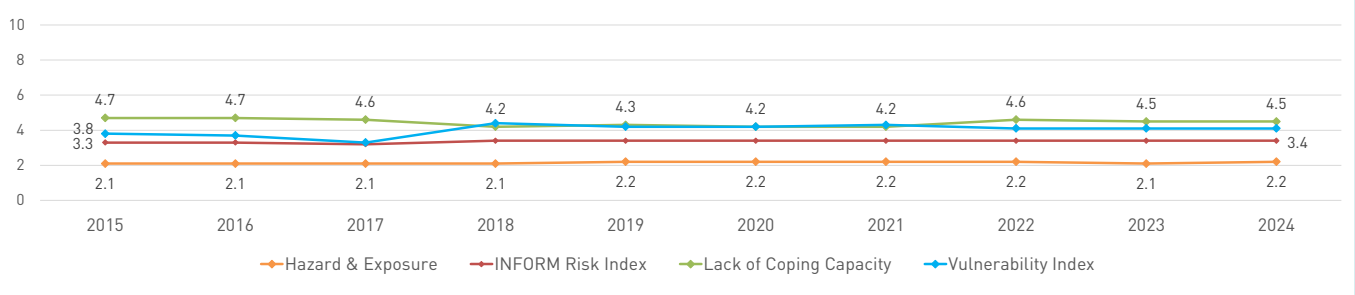
INFORM RISK VALUE AND RANKING 2025

Tonga has low hazards and exposure value, with medium values for vulnerability and lack of coping capacity. The overall risk value is medium.

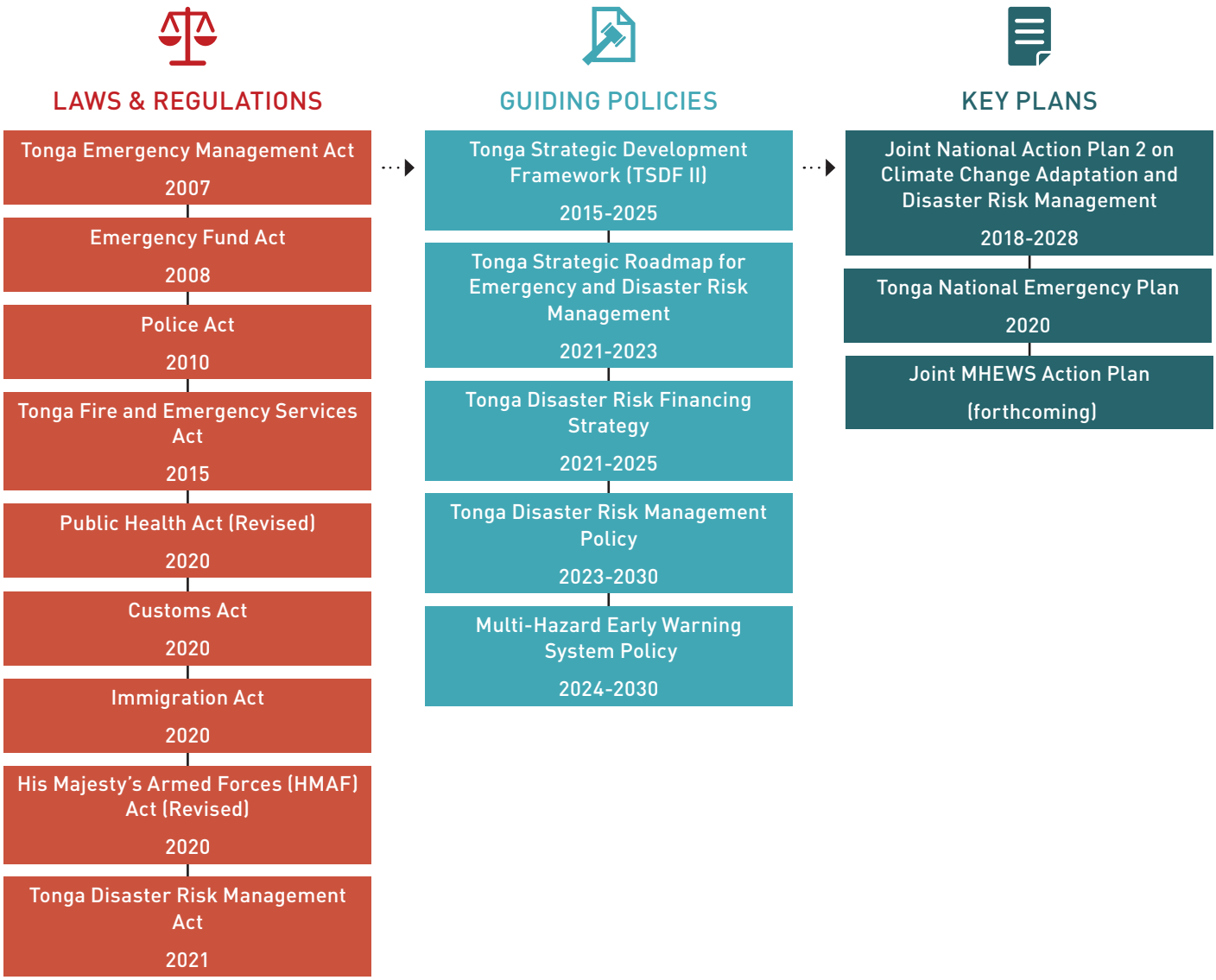
INFORM Risk and dimensions of risk	VALUE (10 as the highest)	WORLD RANK (out of 191 countries)
INFORM Risk	3.4	98
Hazard & Exposure	2.2	129
Vulnerability	4.1	83
Lack of coping capacity	4.5	86

INFORM RISK TEN-YEAR TREND (2015-2024)

Tonga's hazards and exposure and risk values have remained stable, and although there is some variation in the vulnerability and lack of coping capacity values between 2017 and 2022, by 2024 they are very similar to the values in 2015. Consequently, the INFORM risk index remains the same, classifying Tonga within the medium-risk category.



KEY POLICIES, PLANS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION



Tonga Emergency Management Act 2007

The NEMO's revision of the Tonga Emergency Management Act (2007) led to the proposal and eventual adoption of the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021. This earlier act provided the legal foundation for Tonga's disaster management system. It also formally establishes key institutional structures, including the National Emergency Management Committee, the NEMO (later NDRMO), and subnational bodies such as the District Emergency Management Committees and Village Emergency Management Committees to support emergency response.

Emergency Fund Act 2008

The Emergency Fund Act 2008 established a dedicated financial mechanism to support disaster preparedness, response, and recovery activities. It authorises the government to allocate and disburse funds swiftly during declared emergencies, ensuring that civil, police, and military institutions have access to the resources required for effective operations. This act complements the legal powers provided under the Emergency Management Act 2007 and the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021 by providing the financial means to operationalise inter-agency coordination during times of crisis.

Police Act 2010

The Police Act 2010 established the mandate of the Tonga Police to uphold law and order, prevent and detect crime, and ensure public safety. In the context of emergencies, the act empowers police to play a central role in disaster response, including enforcing evacuation orders, securing affected areas, and protecting relief supplies. It also provides the legal framework for joint

operations with civil authorities and the armed services, making Tonga Police a critical actor in maintaining stability and supporting coordinated emergency management.

Tonga Fire and Emergency Services Act 2015

The Tonga Fire and Emergency Services Act 2015 established the legal basis for the Tonga Fire and Emergency Services (TFES), defining its responsibilities in fire prevention, firefighting and emergency response. Beyond its traditional firefighting role, the act empowers TFES to respond to a wide range of hazards, including natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, and rescue operations. In the context of Disaster Risk Management (DRM), TFES works in close coordination with civil authorities, Tonga Police and HMAF to deliver first response services, support search and rescue, and provide critical expertise in community safety and resilience. This act positions TFES as a core actor in Tonga's DRM system, with strong linkages to both national and subnational disaster management structures.

Public Health Act (CAP. 12.15, 2020 Revised Edition)

The Public Health Act establishes Tonga's legal framework for protecting and promoting public health, including powers to manage communicable diseases, sanitation, water quality and quarantine. It provides explicit provisions for declaring a public health emergency and designating emergency officers, including health workers, police and members of the armed forces. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the act enables authorities to enforce quarantine, isolation, movement restrictions and border health controls. Enforcement is supported through coordination with Tonga Police, Customs, Immigration and HMAF, ensuring that public health measures are upheld while maintaining law, order and national security. This act therefore underpins inter-agency cooperation in managing health emergencies and safeguarding population resilience.

Customs Act (CAP. 11.02, 2020 Revised Edition)

The Customs Act established the legal framework for the regulation of imports and exports in Tonga, including the imposition of customs duties, valuation of goods, and enforcement powers. In the context of emergencies, the act is particularly important for managing the entry of humanitarian relief supplies and the movement of goods critical for disaster response and recovery. Coordination between Customs, Tonga Police, and HMAF ensures that emergency goods can be cleared and delivered quickly, while maintaining border security and compliance with national laws. The act therefore plays an enabling role in disaster response and recovery by supporting the smooth entry of international assistance and critical goods through established border procedures.

Immigration Act (CAP. 10.01, 2020 Revised Edition)

The Immigration Act governs the entry, stay and removal of non-citizens in Tonga, providing the legal framework for border management. In emergencies, the act facilitates the rapid entry of humanitarian responders and international assistance, while safeguarding national security. It empowers immigration officers, supported by Tonga Police and HMAF, to enforce border control measures, detain unlawful entrants, and manage the flow of people during crises. Effective coordination under this act ensures that relief personnel can enter swiftly, while maintaining law, order and public safety.

His Majesty's Armed Forces (HMAF) Act (CAP. 9.02, 2020 Revised Edition)

The His Majesty's Armed Forces Act provides the statutory foundation for the organisation, functions, and regulation of HMAF. In addition to their role in defending the Kingdom, the act mandates that HMAF assist and support civil authorities. Under Section 6**,** HMAF may be called out in aid of civil authorities to help maintain public order**.** Section 7 further empowers HMAF to support civil authorities during civil emergencies such as natural disasters, epidemics, or transport accidents. These provisions enable HMAF to provide logistics, engineering, transport, and security support during national crises, ensuring effective integration with Tonga Police and other civilian agencies in coordinated emergency operations.

Tonga Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

The Disaster Risk Management Act 2021, superseded the Emergency Management Act 2007. It provides a coherent legal, institutional and regulatory framework for the planning and management of disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities, the coordination of emergency response during a disaster, and the facilitation of disaster recovery work following a disaster. This act established the NDRMO, formerly known as the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO), under the ministry responsible for DRM (MEIDECC). This is the comprehensive framework that integrates civilian and military structures to effectively manage disaster risk and response.

Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015–2025

The Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015–2025 (TSDF II) serves as Tonga's overarching development blueprint, aiming to achieve a more progressive nation that supports a higher quality of life for all citizens. Structured around a results-based approach, it outlines a national level impact supported by seven national outcomes and 29 organisational outcomes, grouped into five pillars: economic development, social development, infrastructure and

technology, natural resources and environment, and governance. The framework emphasises inclusive and sustainable growth by integrating cultural values and aligning with international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Developed through extensive consultations with communities, civil society and development partners, TSDF II guides sectoral and corporate planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes across government ministries and agencies, ensuring coordinated efforts to achieve national development goals.

Tonga Strategic Roadmap for Emergency and Disaster Risk Management 2021–2023

The Tonga Strategic Roadmap for Emergency and Disaster Risk Management 2021–2023 provides a coordinated national approach to strengthening disaster preparedness, response, and risk reduction across Tonga. It outlines strategic priorities to improve institutional governance, legislative frameworks, coordination mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement. Developed through a collaborative, multi-agency process involving key actors such as NDRMO, Tonga Police, TFES, and HMAF, the roadmap aligns with the Tonga Strategic Development Framework and promotes an all-hazards, whole-of-government approach. It emphasises updating laws, integrating cluster coordination, enhancing capacity-building, and establishing monitoring systems to ensure Tonga is better equipped to manage natural and human-induced emergencies.

Tonga Disaster Risk Financing Strategy 2021–2025

Building upon Tonga's existing legal and policy frameworks for disaster and financial risk management, the Disaster Risk Financing Strategy unifies current and planned initiatives across multiple sectors. It aims to quantify and reduce the financial impacts of disasters. Developed by Tonga's Ministry of Finance, the strategy serves as a coordinated framework guiding collaboration among key stakeholders in implementing targeted actions. Its overarching goal is to enhance the financial resilience of the Tongan government, households, organisations, and businesses to disaster events.

Tonga Disaster Risk Management Policy 2023–2030

The Tonga Disaster Risk Management Policy 2023–2030 provides the overarching framework for implementing the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021, shifting the national approach from reactive response to proactive, and to whole-of-society resilience building. Guided by principles of inclusivity, transparency and equity, it sets out 25 policy objectives spanning risk reduction, preparedness, response, and recovery, and mandates action through national, island, district and village DRM plans under the cluster system. The policy clarifies roles and responsibilities across civil authorities, police and HMAF. It also strengthens monitoring and evaluation systems and aligns with regional and global commitments such as the Sendai Framework, the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, and Tonga's Strategic Development Framework.

Tonga Multi-hazard Early Warning System Policy (MHEWS) 2024–2030

The Tonga Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (MHEWS) Policy 2024–2030 provides a national framework to strengthen the country's capacity to anticipate, communicate, and respond to multiple natural hazards, including cyclones, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and floods. Anchored in a people-centred approach, the policy emphasises timely and accessible warnings, last-mile connectivity, and coordinated action between civil authorities, Tonga Police, and HMAF. Spearheaded by the MEIDECC, the policy was developed through extensive community consultations across Tonga's islands, ensuring inclusivity and local relevance.

Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management 2018–2028

The Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (JNAP2) 2018–2028 is a key strategic framework that integrates climate change adaptation and DRM into one coordinated plan. It aligns national priorities across sectors to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to both climate-related and natural hazards. The JNAP2 builds upon the foundations of Tonga's first JNAP by implementing six policy objectives outlined in the Climate Change Policy 2016, aiming to promote a coherent, collaborative and strategic approach to resilience-building initiatives across the country.

Tonga National Emergency Management Plan 2020

The Tonga National Emergency Management Plan (NEMP) 2020 establishes a comprehensive DRM framework. Developed under the Emergency Management Act 2007, the plan delineates the roles and responsibilities of national, district and village-level committees to ensure coordinated preparedness, response and recovery efforts. It emphasises a multi-hazard approach, integrating both natural and technological risks, and outlines procedures for activation, coordination, and communication during emergencies. The NEMP also incorporates strategies for public education, training programs, and the development of specific contingency plans, aiming to enhance community resilience and ensure effective emergency management. As of the writing of this report, the NDRMO is drafting a revised National DRM Plan which will supersede the NEMP 2020.

KEY CIVILIAN RESPONSIBILITIES IN DISASTERS

NATIONAL DISASTER FOCAL POINT

Tonga's national disaster management system is governed by the National Disaster Risk Management Committee (NDRMC), established under the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021. Chaired by the Minister for MEIDECC, the NDRMC coordinates strategic decision-making, resource mobilisation, and emergency funding. It is supported by three sub-committees: Operations, Recovery, and Inter-Cluster Coordination, which manage response, rehabilitation, and sectoral coordination. Central to this structure is the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO) which leads implementation, policy development, and operational coordination. The NDRMO also provides secretariat support to all governing bodies, ensuring effective disaster preparedness, response, and recovery across Tonga.

NATIONAL DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE (NDRMC)

The NDRMC facilitates coordination at the national level.

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: Minister for MEIDECC

Key functions:

- Advising Cabinet on the status of the work of key DRM entities towards their DRM objectives
- Coordinating government ministries and, during declared states of emergency, calling on Ministry resources including personnel, vehicles, equipment, consumables and office space
- Endorsing funding requests to the Emergency Fund in relation to NDRMC's work
- Convening meetings of its sub-committees when necessary to implement appropriate response and recovery efforts.

Composition: Minister for MEIDECC (Chair), Chief Secretary and Secretary to Cabinet; Chief Executive Officers of the relevant Ministries (MEIDECC, Finance, Agriculture, Food and Forest, Lands, Health, Internal Affairs, Education and Training, Foreign Affairs, Public Enterprises, and Infrastructure), Police Commissioner; TFES Commissioner, Chief of Staff, HMAF, Attorney General, Government Statistician, Director of the NDRMO, and Secretary General of the TRCS.

NATIONAL DISASTER OPERATIONS SUB-COMMITTEE

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: CEO of MEIDECC

Key functions:

- Initiating operational response through government ministries and first responders
- Preparing and submitting initial damage assessment reports to the NDRMC
- Identifying, prioritising, and coordinating immediate disaster relief needs
- Managing the distribution of emergency relief supplies
- Reporting to the NDRMC on the progress and outcomes of its assigned tasks.

Composition: CEO for MEIDECC (Chair), Director of NDRMO, Police Commissioner, TFES Commissioner, CEOs for Ministries of Finance and IA, Secretary General of the TRCS, and any other member determined by the NDRMC. The NDRMO also provides secretariat services to this sub-committee.

NATIONAL DISASTER RISK RECOVERY SUB-COMMITTEE

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: CEO of MEIDECC

Key functions:

- Coordinating immediate recovery and rehabilitation activities after a disaster
- Preparing and submitting detailed damage assessment reports to the NDRMC
- Reporting to the NDRMC on the status and outcomes of assigned work.

Composition: CEO for MEIDECC (Chair), Director of NDRMO, CEOs for Ministries of Finance and IA, CEO for Infrastructure, CEO for Agriculture, Food and Forest and any other member determined by the NDRMC. The NDRMO also provides secretariat services to the sub-committee.

INTER-CLUSTER COORDINATION COMMITTEE

Reporting to the NDRMC and funded by the Emergency Fund, the Inter-Cluster Coordination Committee is responsible for the coordination of cluster activities during an emergency.

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: CEO for MEIDECC

Key functions:

- Overseeing and coordinating the activities of the clusters
- Ensuring clarity and coordination of cluster roles and responsibilities
- Reviewing Cluster Plans and consolidating them into national-level response plans with recommendations to the NDRMC
- Monitoring and reviewing the implementation of Cluster Plans.

Composition: CEO for MEIDECC (Chair), Director of NDRMO (Deputy Chair), a representative from National Planning and a representative of each Ministry that is a cluster lead.

NATIONAL DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT OFFICE (NDRMO)

Formerly known as the NEMO, the NDRMO operates under the MEIDECC. It coordinates national efforts for disaster risk reduction and recovery and ensures that its staff, as well as Ministry personnel, are well trained and capable of effective coordination with lead agencies, sector clusters and statutory bodies. The NDRMO also provides secretariat support to the various governing bodies established under the Disaster Risk Management Act, reinforcing its central role in Tonga's disaster governance framework.

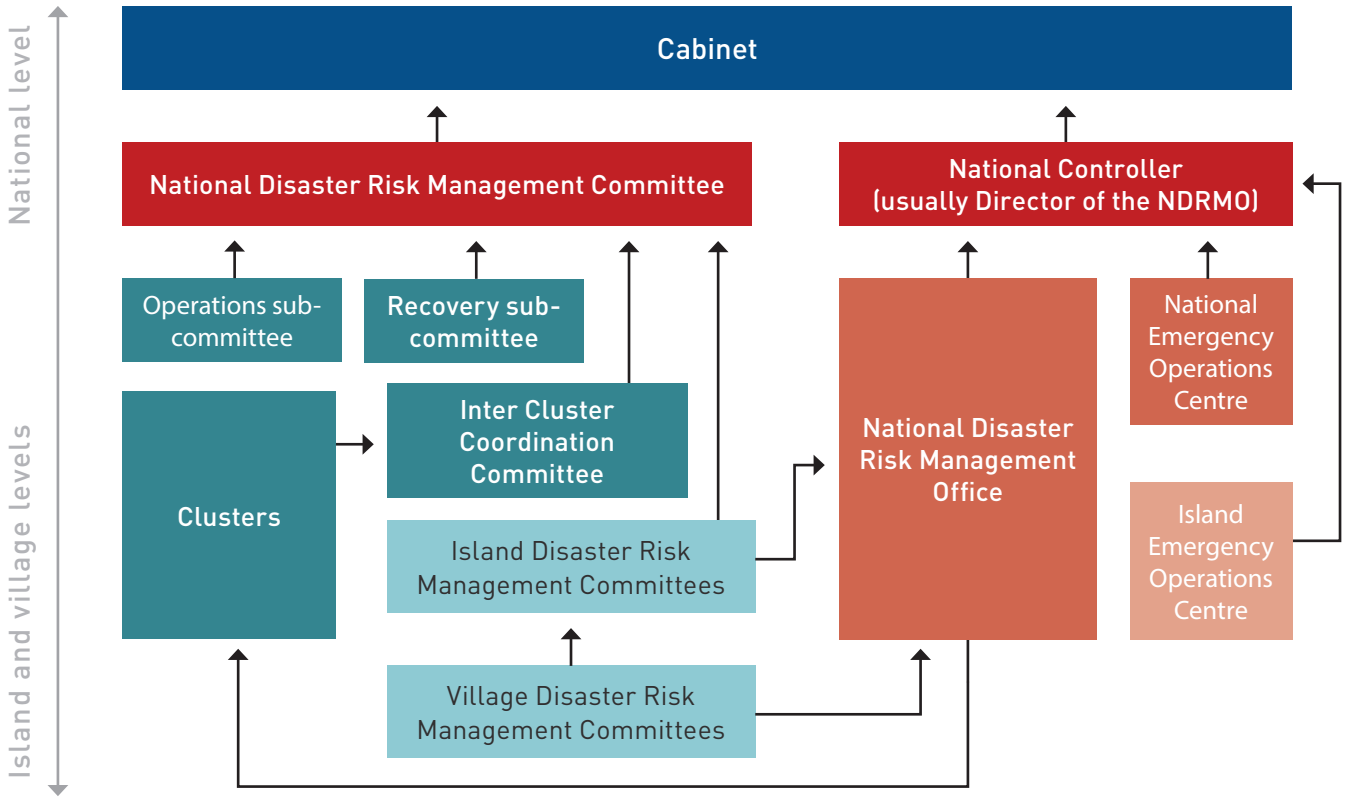
Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: Director of NDRMO

Key functions:

- Lead and coordinate disaster risk management
- Implement the national disaster risk management policy
- Advise the minister and governing bodies on DRM issues
- Develop policies, guidelines, strategies, plans, programmes, and SOPs for all DRM activities
- Report on activities and implement ministerial decisions
- Provide secretariat services to governing bodies
- Lead the cluster system including developing relevant SOPs in consultation with the NDRMC and support from the clusters.
- Prepare a national recovery plan within three months of a declared emergency.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE



Note: Entities in italic are only active during emergencies; they provide emergency first response services. Solid arrows indicate a formal reporting or oversight relationship. Source: Tonga DRM Policy, p. 32 (Adapted from the Government of Tonga DRM Act 2021).

NATIONAL CONTROLLER

The National Controller is the Director of the NDRMO, or an appointee of the NDRMC. The National Controller has the power to:

- Activate the NEOC which has the central role in national disaster operations, reporting daily to the NDRMO and the Cabinet
- Determine the priority of response roles for Government and non-government entities in consultation with the NDRMC
- With the consent of the Minister, allocate available government resources that the Director considers necessary for responding to an event that may happen, is about to happen, or is happening
- Perform any other function of the National Controller specified in the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021 or any of its regulations.

SUBNATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

At the subnational level, DRM Committees are established at both island and village levels to coordinate preparedness, response, and recovery activities. These Subnational DRM Committees are integrated with the NDRMO and national structures to ensure that DRM is implemented effectively on the ground.

The Island DRM Committees operate with operational budgets from the Emergency Fund and are responsible for preparing and implementing Island DRM Plans guided by the National DRM Policy and funded from the MEIDECC's recurrent budget.

ISLAND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

Island DRM Committees are established for each of Tonga's main island groups, including Tongatapu, 'Eua, Ha'apai, Vava'u, Niuatoputapu and Niuafo'ou. These committees, except for the Tongatapu Island DRM Committee, are accountable to the NDRMO.

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: The Governors of Vava'u and Ha'apai and the government representatives of 'Eua, Niuafo'ou and Niuatoputapu.

Key functions:

- Contributing to the development of DRM policies, regulations, and procedures
- Developing and implementing DRM plans and programs in line with Ministry directives
- Conducting operational procedures and training as requested by the Ministry
- Reporting and making recommendations to the NDRMC on local DRM activities
- Supporting communities before, during, and after disasters, and promoting awareness on mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery
- Identifying and coordinating local resources, and managing emergency operations in line with national policies
- Establishing and maintaining communication systems for use in emergencies
- Providing timely information on disasters and their impacts to the NDRMC.

Composition (all Island DRM Committee except Tongatapau): Governors of Vava'u and Ha'apai and Government Representatives in 'Eua and the Niuas (Chair), a representative of the NDRMO (deputy chair); District Officers of the island; Officers in Charge of a Government Ministry that is a member of the National Disaster Operations Sub-Committee; and any other member nominated by the chair and approved by the Minister for MEIDECC.

Composition (Tongatapu only): Tongatapu Island DRM Committee – Representative of the NDRMO (Chair), District Officers of Tongatapu, and any other member nominated by the Chair and approved by the Minister for MEIDECC.

VILLAGE DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

At the community level, Village DRM Committees are linked to the Island DRM Committees, providing information upward and helping to ensure that national DRM priorities are implemented at the grassroots level.

Established by: Disaster Risk Management Act 2021

Leadership: Town Officer of the village

Key functions:

- Providing support to village communities to ensure effective disaster risk management before, during, and after a disaster
- Promoting village and community awareness of DRM, including ways of mitigating, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from a disaster
- Managing emergency operations for each village in accordance with MEIDECC policies and procedures
- Establishing and reviewing communication systems for use prior to a disaster, or when a disaster happens
- Providing information about a disaster or its impact in the village to the Island Committee and NDRMO.

Composition: Town Officer (Chair), up to eight representatives nominated by the village Fono (traditional assembly or council of the village, which consists of village leaders) with the approval of the Minister for MEIDECC. These representatives should include women, youths, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups.

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS IN TONGA



	NAME	LEAD AUTHORITY	NUMBER
FIRST LEVEL	National	NDRMO	1
SECOND LEVEL	Divisional		5
THIRD LEVEL	Districts		23

KEY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

MINISTRY OF METEOROLOGY, ENERGY, INFORMATION, DISASTER MANAGEMENT, ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND COMMUNICATIONS

The MEIDECC plays a central role in enhancing Tonga's resilience to climate change and managing disaster risks across the nation. NDRMO sits under MEIDECC and is tasked with overseeing emergency response operations and coordinating DRR initiatives. Additionally, NDRMO functions as the secretariat for three national-level emergency committees, ensuring streamlined communication, and strategic coordination during times of crisis.

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

The Ministry of Finance holds the primary responsibility for setting strategic direction and providing policy guidance on economic and financial matters within the government. As part of its commitment to strengthening national resilience, the Ministry developed the Disaster Risk Finance Strategy which establishes a coordinated framework for collaboration among key stakeholders, aimed at implementing targeted actions that enhance the financial resilience of the Tongan government, households, and businesses in the face of disasters

MINISTRY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

In Tonga, the Ministry of Infrastructure contributes to disaster management by strengthening essential infrastructure such as ports, roads, and airports to improve response to disasters. The Ministry also ensures that DRR is embedded within national development frameworks. In addition, it works closely with international partners to support initiatives aimed at climate change adaptation and enhancing long-term disaster resilience.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The core function of the Ministry of Health is to deliver prevention and health services for the people of Tonga. For disaster management, it provides a representative to the NDMC, and national working group, monitors potential health problems following a major incident and assists in damage assessments. The Ministry of Health is also designated as the lead entity for the Health and Nutrition and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Clusters, with responsibility for ensuring a needs-based approach and for executing all functions mandated under its Terms of Reference.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides a representative to the NDMC and Cluster Country Group (CCG), participates in and supports disaster mitigation project activities. It serves as the primary liaison with international humanitarian partners during the delivery of international humanitarian assistance.

MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The Ministry of Internal Affairs serves as the lead entity for the Safety and Protection Cluster, responsible for coordinating all functions outlined in the cluster's TOR. In this role, the Ministry ensures that vulnerable groups are reached, and their specific needs are met. It also collaborates with the Ministry of Finance and MEIDECC/NDRMO to develop and implement the Adaptive Social Protection Strategy, strengthening national systems for inclusive and responsive disaster risk management.

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND FORESTS

The Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Forests is the lead entity for the Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster, responsible for coordinating all functions outlined in the cluster's Terms of Reference. It ensures that a needs-based approach guides all food security and livelihood interventions, promoting effective, timely, and equitable support to affected communities.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education and Training is the lead entity for the Education Cluster, with responsibility for coordinating and delivering all functions specified in the cluster's Terms of Reference.

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC ENTERPRISES

The Ministry of Public Enterprises is the lead entity for the Critical Services Cluster, responsible for coordinating and overseeing all functions outlined in the cluster's Terms of Reference to ensure the continuity and restoration of essential public utilities and services during emergencies.

TONGA GEOLOGICAL SERVICES (UNDER THE MINISTRY OF LANDS AND NATURAL RESOURCES)

Tonga Geological Services conducts geological surveys of areas at risk and provides scientific information to guide preparedness and response. It records seismic and other geological activity and is responsible for issuing warnings and disseminating information on earthquakes and related hazards to the public.

TONGA METEOROLOGICAL SERVICES (UNDER THE MEIDECC)

The Tonga Meteorological Service is responsible for collecting meteorological data and providing weather forecasts, including for tropical cyclones, as well as issuing timely meteorological hazard warnings to support public safety and disaster preparedness.

COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT (UNDER THE MEIDECC)

The Communications Department serves as the lead entity for the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, responsible for all functions outlined in the cluster's Terms of Reference. It ensures that emergency communication systems are in place and operational during disasters, including maintaining alternative channels such as satellite and V/HF radio when standard networks fail, and overseeing the installation and upkeep of early warning systems such as tsunami sirens to support timely alerts and coordinated response.

TONGA FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES (TFES)

The TFES operates under the Tonga Fire and Emergency Services Act 2015, which expanded its mandate beyond firefighting to include broader emergency services. Guided by its vision of building a safer and more resilient Tonga and its mission to protect life, property, and the environment from fires and other emergencies, TFES delivers a wide range of critical functions. These include:

- Fire suppression, prevention, and investigation
- Emergency response before, during, and after disasters
- Public fire safety awareness and warnings
- Community engagement to strengthen resilience.

With seven fire stations across Tonga and a workforce of 178 personnel (including 31 women), TFES has divisions for Fire and Emergency Response, Community Safety, and Staff and Organizational Development. In the DRM context, TFES is a core frontline responder working closely with civil authorities, Tonga Police and HMAF to provide firefighting, rescue and emergency services that safeguard communities nationwide.

TONGA POLICE

In 2010, Tonga enacted a new Police Act, replacing the outdated 1968 legislation. While the new act introduced updated police powers and administrative reforms, two key changes stand out: the separation of powers between the Minister and the Commissioner of Police, and the adoption of Community Policing as the guiding philosophy and operational model for the Tonga Police.

Established: Tonga Police Act 2010

Leadership: Commissioner of Tonga Police - appointed from AFP

Headquarters: Longolongo

Key Roles:

- First responder
- Contributes to Logistic and Coordination Cluster activities
- Supports establishing and operating the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC)
- Initial Damage Assessments (IDAs), search and rescue, relief distribution, and overall logistic management.

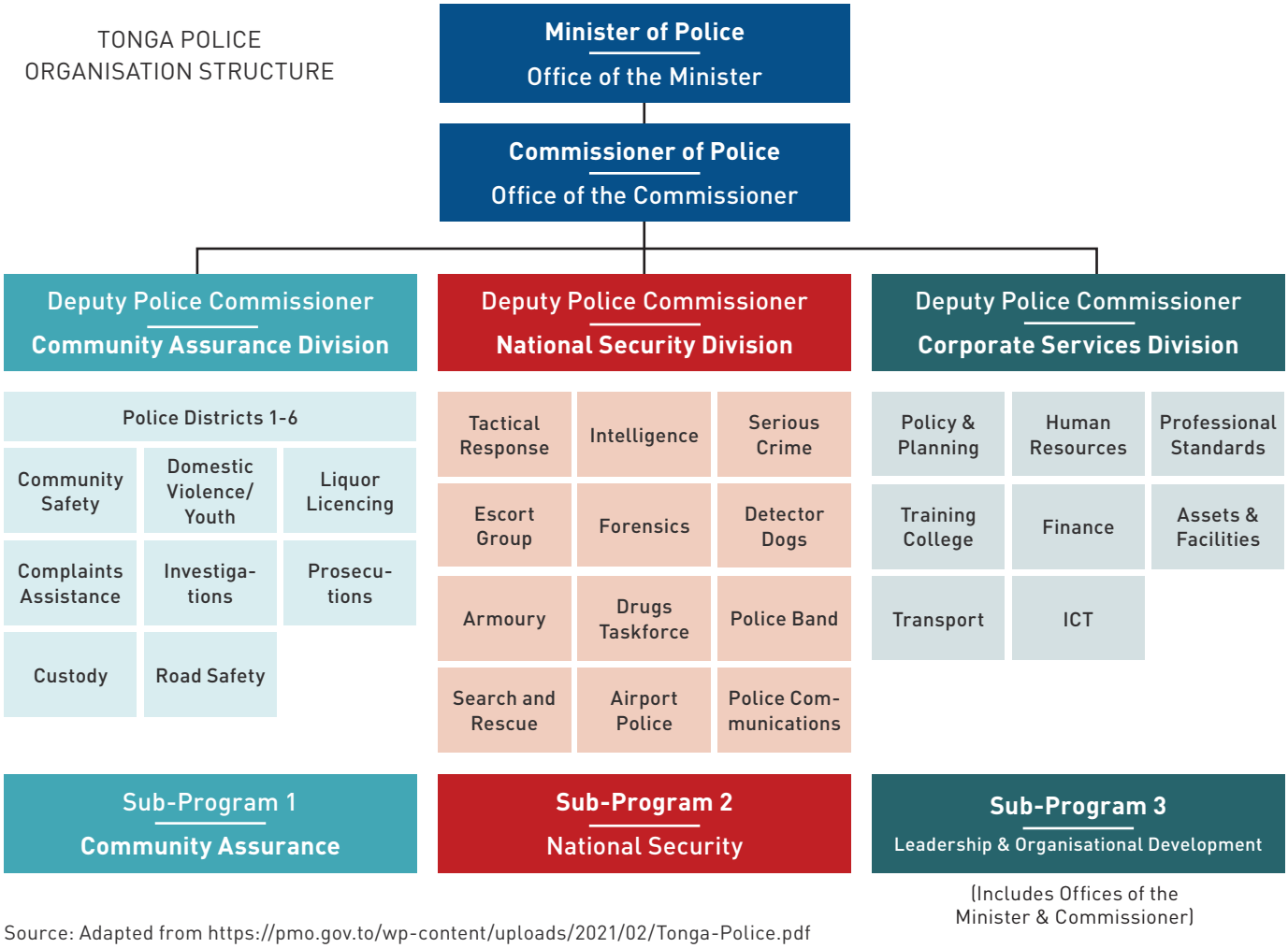
Key functions:

- Maintaining law and order
- Preserving the peace
- Protecting life and property
- Preventing and detecting crime
- Providing community support and reassurance
- Upholding the laws of Tonga
- Serving and executing court processes
- Conducting land and marine search and rescue operations
- Performing any other functions conferred by the Police Act or other legislation.

Components:

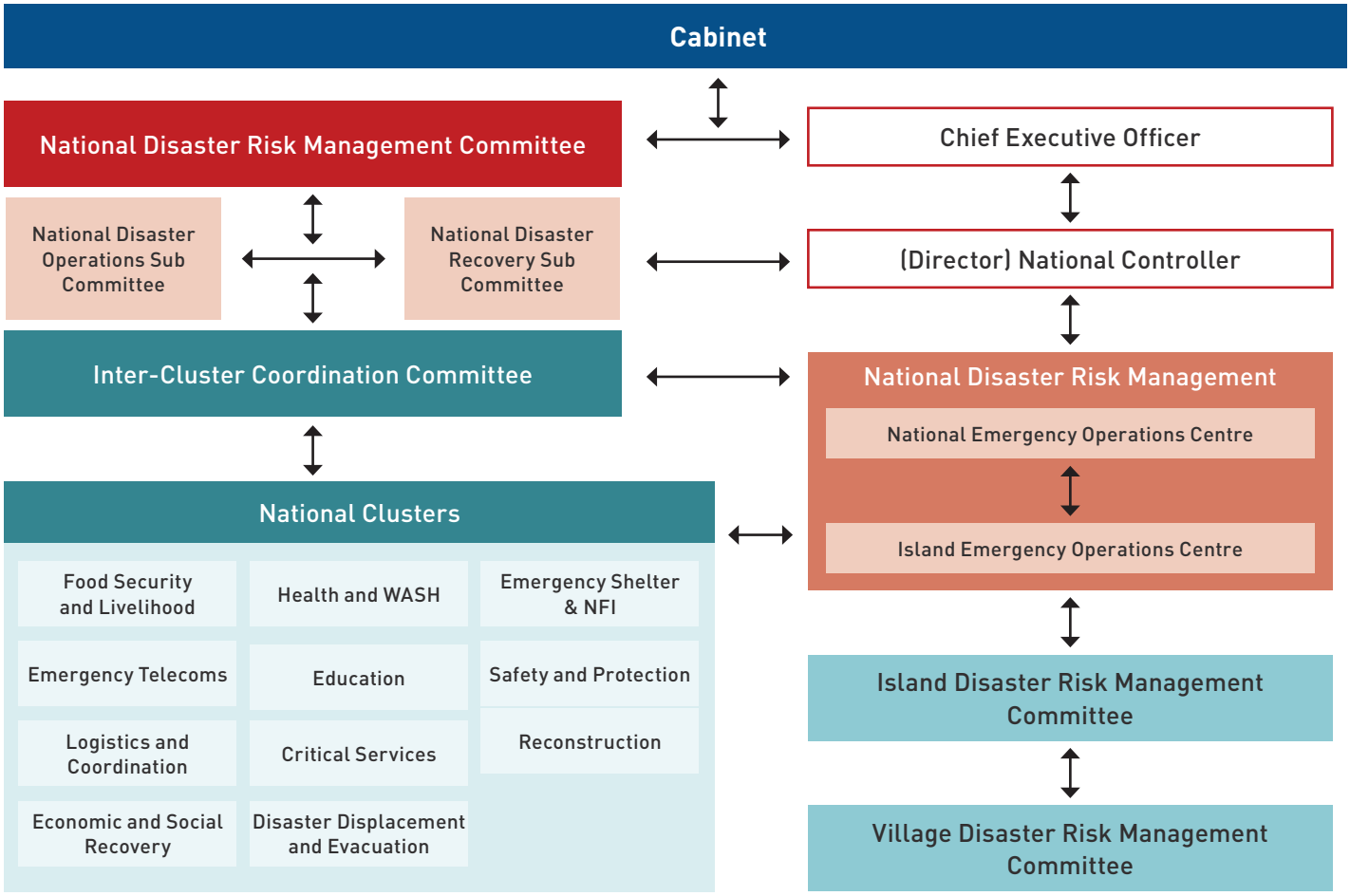
- Community Assurance Division
- National Security Division
- Corporate Services Division

TONGA POLICE
ORGANISATION STRUCTURE



Source: Adapted from https://pmo.gov.to/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Tonga-Police.pdf

COORDINATION MECHANISMS



In the event of an onset disaster or during a disaster, the National Controller is tasked with activating the NEOC, determining the priority of roles, and allocating resources in collaboration with the NDRMC. The NDRMO then collaborates with clusters, represented by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Committee, which oversees and coordinates cluster partners activities.

NATIONAL CLUSTER SYSTEM

A cluster is a group of governmental and non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders established under section 43 of the Disaster Risk Management Act. They coordinate their response efforts during a disaster to reduce duplication of effort, improve information sharing, and facilitate decision-making, thereby increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

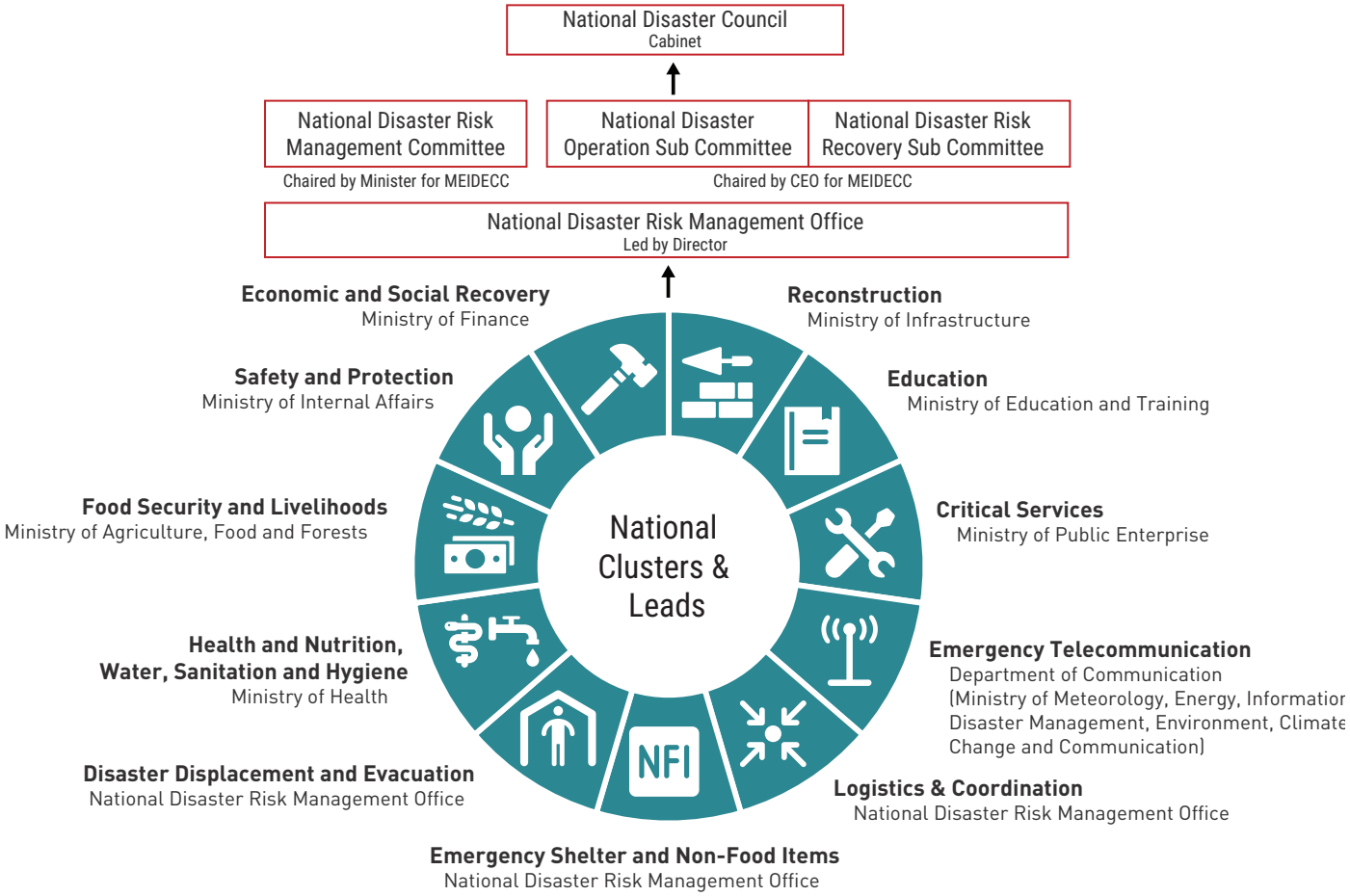
Tonga's cluster system was formally endorsed by Cabinet in 2015 and first activated during Tropical Cyclone Gita in February 2018. Coordinated by the NDRMO, each cluster is led by a designated government ministry and supported by international and regional partners. The cluster lead is stipulated by the Disaster Risk Management Act.

There are currently 11 clusters: Coordination; Essential Services; Emergency Shelter and Non-Food Items; Safety and Protection; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene; Economic and Social Recovery; Education; Reconstruction; Food Security and Livelihoods; Communications; and Displacement and Evacuation Centre Management.

The Inter-Cluster Coordination Committee, chaired by the CEO of MEIDECC and comprising all cluster leads, was established to oversee coordinated disaster management efforts. The NDRMO supports this committee by facilitating coordination and serving as the secretariat for the cluster system. Inter-Cluster Coordination Committee decisions are submitted to the NDRMC for review and then forwarded to Cabinet for final approval.

The overarching vision of the cluster system is to ensure that the specific needs of individuals and communities affected by, or at risk of, humanitarian crises, whether sudden or prolonged, are met. Through coordinated preparedness, response and recovery efforts at the community, national and international levels, the system aims to save lives, enhance livelihoods, and build the resilience of households and communities.

NATIONAL COORDINATION STRUCTURE



Source: Adapted from https://reliefweb.int/report/tonga/tonga-humanitarian-coordination-structure-10-july-2024

NATIONAL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTRE (NEOC)

The NEOC is activated when a disaster approaches or occurs. It serves as the central hub for coordination and command, at the national level, during an emergency operation. The Director of NDRMO, acting as the National Controller, has overall responsibility for supervision of the NEOC and all authorised officers working in the centre. The NEOC is staffed by NDRMO officers and liaison officers from surge capacity teams drawn from key government ministries and agencies. To run the NEOC, the National Controller is supported by the NEOC Task Force, which consists of the Deputy Chief of Staff for HMAF, the Deputy Police Commissioner, and the Deputy Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner.

SUBNATIONAL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTRES

When a disaster occurs on any of the islands of Vava'u, Ha'apai, Niuafo'ou, Niuatoputapu or 'Eua, the powers and functions of the National Controller (outlined above) will be extended to an Island Disaster Controller. The Island Disaster Controller is responsible for activating and overseeing the operations of an Island Emergency Operation Centre (IEOC) in accordance with the relevant provisions. This Centre serves as the central hub for coordination and command at the island group level during emergency operations. The IEOC taskforce is composed of officers from the MEIDCC and nominated representatives from the relevant ministries. The functions of the Island Emergency Operations Centre mirror those set out for the NEOC, with the distinction that the Island Emergency Operations Centre exercises its functions specifically in relation to the island group.

MOBILISATION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Under the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021, the Ministry of MEIDECC is required to develop regulations to facilitate international assistance for disaster response and recovery. In developing these regulations, the Ministry must consult relevant stakeholders, including other key government ministries and governing bodies established under the act, development partners, the TRCS, faith-based and non-governmental organisations, and, where feasible, the Tongan diaspora. The act also provides for establishing arrangements with other countries, development partners and international bodies, and enables coordination and receipt of external relief supplies through national authorities.

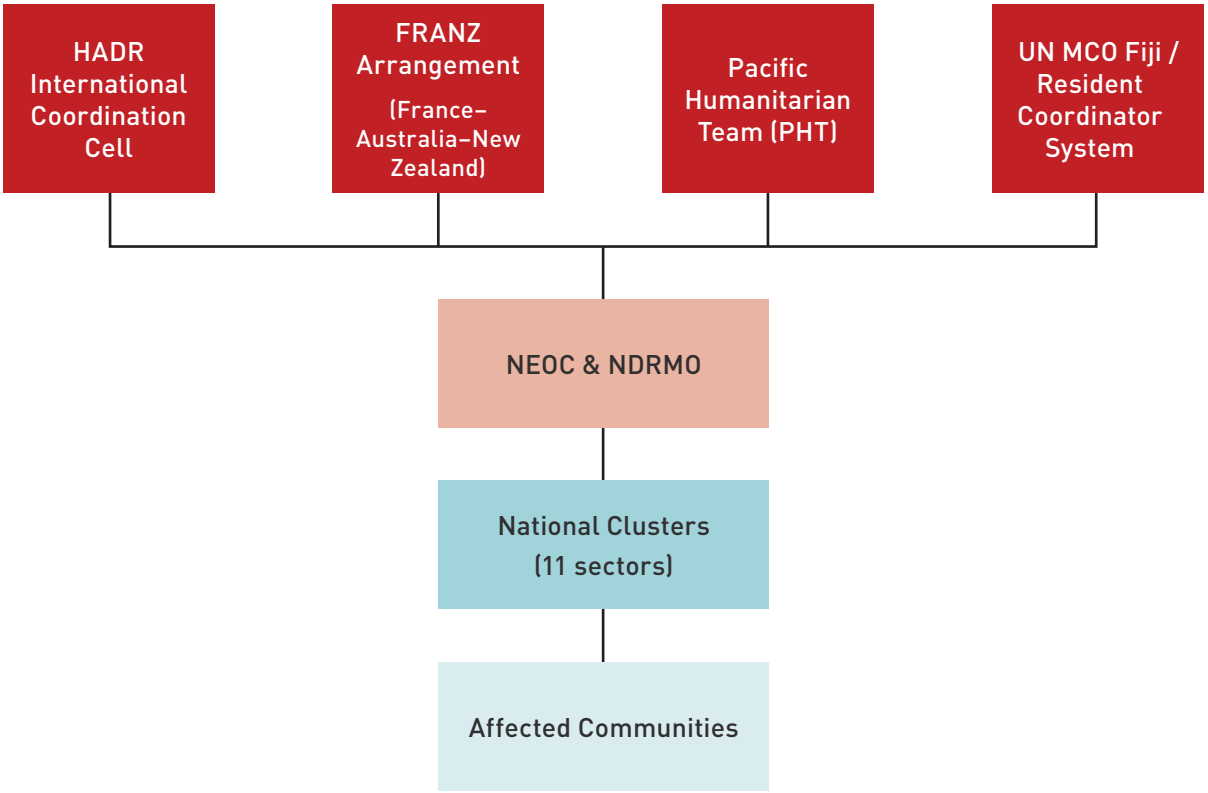
COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

International assistance to Tonga is coordinated through government-led mechanisms (NDRMO/NEOC) and complementary bilateral and multilateral arrangements. The FRANZ (France–Australia–New Zealand) Arrangement, a standing arrangement since 1992, is activated to coordinate reconnaissance and relief to PICTs upon request, including Tonga in 2022. These mechanisms operate in support of, and in alignment with, government-led priorities and cluster coordination.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION SYSTEM

Tonga engages the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT), a United Nations (UN)–supported regional inter-cluster network that mobilises international technical and operational capacity in support of nationally led clusters. Regional coordination is provided through UN-OCHA and the UN Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Fiji, under the UN Resident Coordinator covering Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. At country level, Tonga applies the cluster approach led by government ministries and coordinated by NDRMO through the NEOC. As per the UN Country Implementation Plan 2023–2025, Tonga hosts eight resident UN agencies, whose staff provide programmatic support and reinforce preparedness and response capacity.

The NEOC serves as the operational hub that integrates these international arrangements (FRANZ, PHT and the UN system) with Tonga's nationally led cluster coordination. When activated, the NEOC acts as the entry point for incoming assistance, aligns it with sectoral clusters, and ensures that international resources are directed according to government priorities and community needs.



KEY MILITARY RESPONSIBILITIES IN DISASTERS

HIS MAJESTY'S ARMED FORCES

The primary responsibility of HMAF is the defence of Tonga's sovereignty, people and national interests. The Royal Guard, established in the 1860s, took various forms before being renamed HMAF in 2013. Established originally under King George Tupou I as part of a broader strategy to secure Tonga's independence from colonial influence, it was initially a means of gaining diplomatic legitimacy rather than a fighting force.

Defence cooperation agreements with Australia, the United States, and New Zealand provide partial support to HMAF. Presently, it consists of 600–700 active personnel, one of the world's smallest sovereign armed forces. HMAF's role includes acting as one of Tonga's first responder agencies to disasters, supporting the NEOC when activated, participating in IDAs, undertaking search and rescue, distributing relief supplies, and providing logistical support.

Established: Tonga Defence Services Act 1992

Leadership: Chief of the Defence Staff

Headquarters: Vilai Barracks in Nukuʻalofa

Key roles: Serve as one of the four key first responders, participate in NEOC activations including carry out IDAs, search and rescue, relief distribution, and overall logistics management. Responsible for internal security and maritime patrol

Key Functions:

- Defence of the Kingdom
- Aiding civil authorities in maintaining order
- The support of civil authorities more broadly, including during emergencies
- Other functions as His Majesty may determine.

Components:

- HMAF HQ
- Land Force
- Tongan Royal Guards Air Wing
- Information, Communication, and ICT
- Northern Command
- Training

HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION MECHANISMS

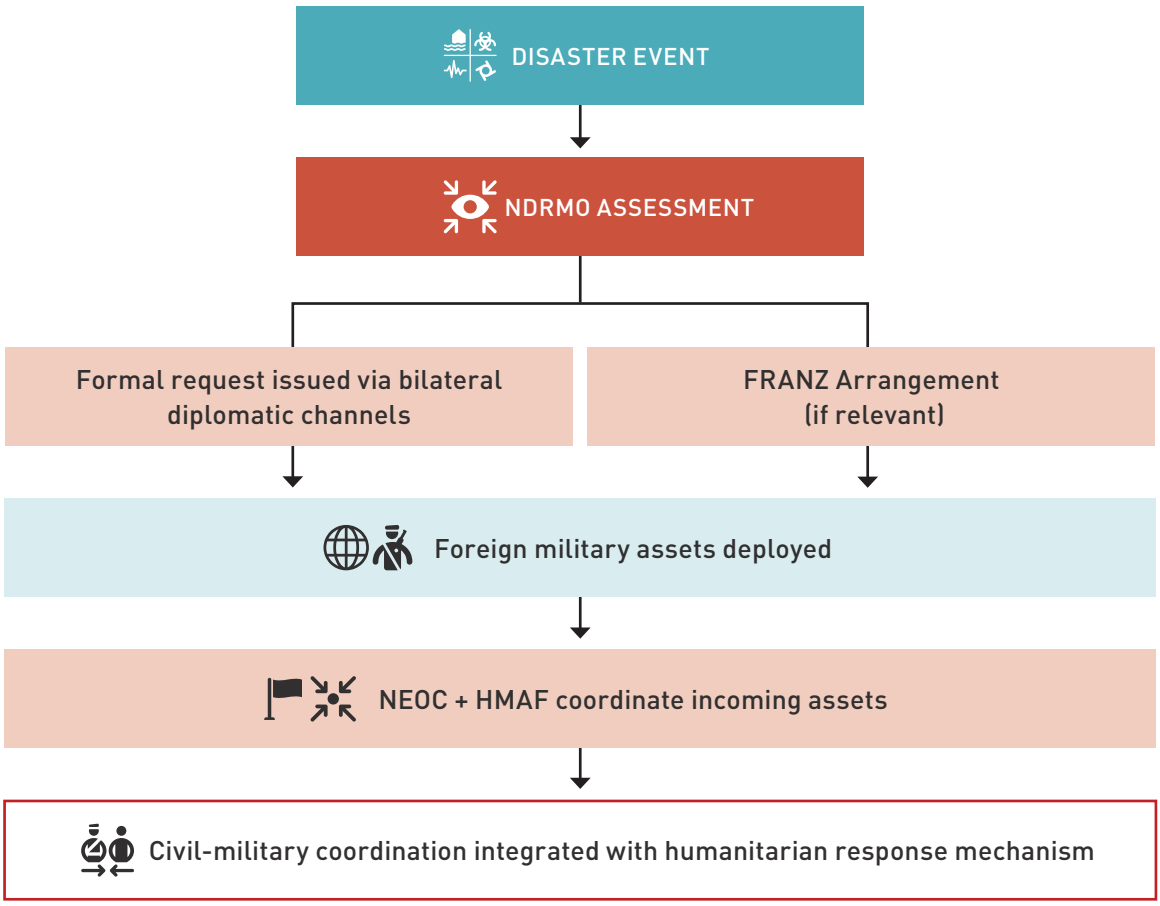
COORDINATION OF FOREIGN MILITARY ASSETS

In Tonga, HMAF leads defence coordination with foreign military partners, particularly during emergencies that exceed national capacity and necessitate international assistance. The Government of Tonga issues formal requests for support through diplomatic channels, either bilaterally, engaging partners such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, France and Japan, or via regional mechanisms like the FRANZ Arrangement, which facilitates coordinated reconnaissance and relief efforts across the Pacific.

Once foreign military assets are accepted, they are integrated into Tonga's national response system through the NEOC, with HMAF acting as the primary liaison for defence-related support. To ensure alignment with government-led priorities and the broader humanitarian response framework, a Civil–Military Coordination Cell may be established under the NEOC. If an international humanitarian response is activated, the UN-OCHA can provide UN civil military coordination support to help manage civilian–military engagement while upholding humanitarian principles.

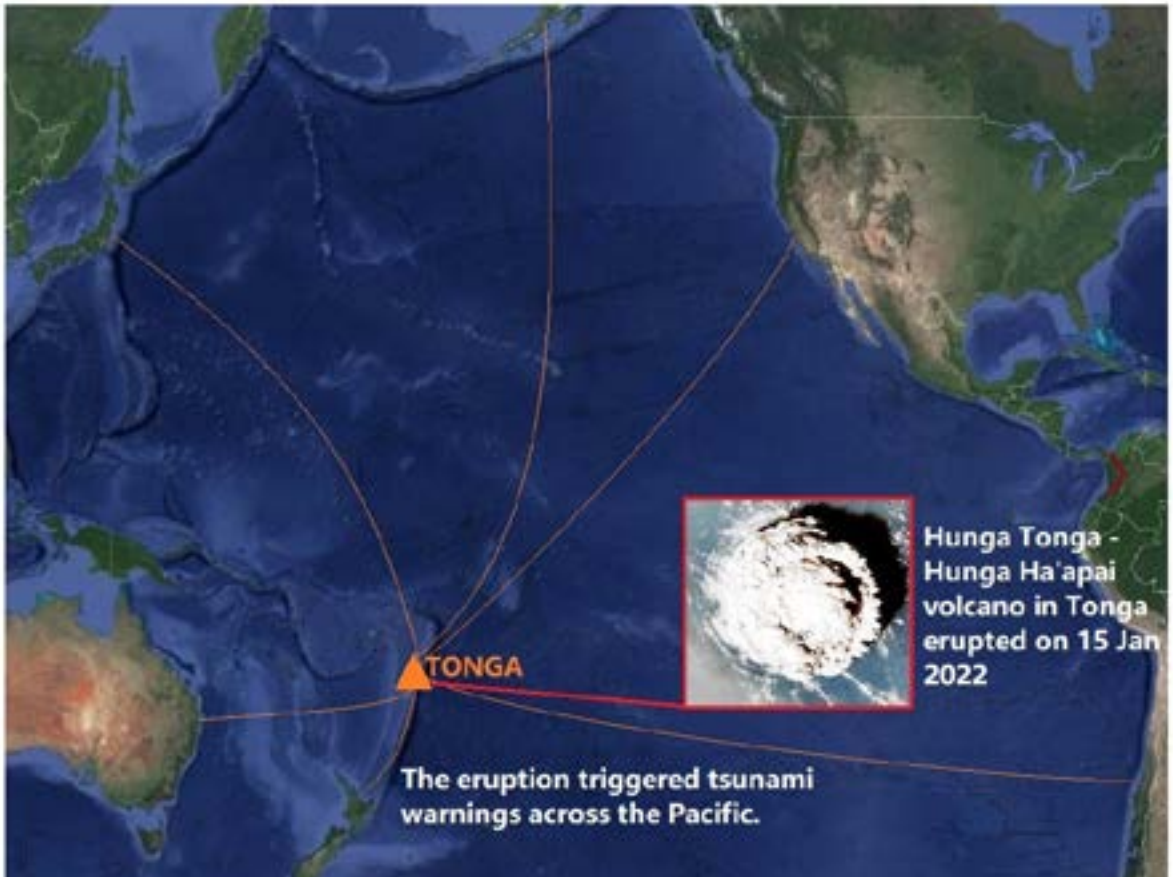
HMAF typically collaborates with foreign forces on logistics, relief distribution, engineering support and communications, often through embedded liaison officers. These coordination mechanisms are regularly strengthened through joint exercises that test policies, procedures, and interoperability. Notable examples include Exercise Longreach, Exercise Povai Sapper and the Civil–Military Coordination Workshop & Tabletop Exercise conducted under the Pacific Partnership initiative.

Efforts to develop a formal coordination in the context of mobilising foreign military assets remain a work in progress; no official mechanism has yet been established. At present, coordination occurs primarily through HMAF liaison officers assigned to the NEOC when it is activated.



CASE STUDY: HUNGA TONGA–HUNGA HA'APAI ERUPTION & TSUNAMI 2022

15 January 2022 | 85,000 affected | 4 fatalities | USD 90.4 million



Source: https://www.geonet.org.nz/tsunami/story/hthh

OVERVIEW

The Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai submarine volcano, located 65 km north of Tongatapu, erupted with impacts felt across Tongatapu, Ha'apai, 'Eua, and outer islands. Ashfall disrupted air travel and contaminated water supplies, while the tsunami reached as far as Peru, Japan, and the United States of America west coast.

The Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai (HTHH) eruption and resulting tsunami devastated Tonga's coastal communities, destroyed homes and businesses, blanketed islands with ash, and severed the nation's only undersea communications cable, isolating Tonga from the outside world for weeks. The Government of Tonga, through the National Emergency Management Committee and the NEMO, coordinated the response under the Disaster Risk Management Act 2021. The National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) was activated on 14 January 2022 following a tsunami marine warning issued by the Tonga Meteorological Services. Immediate priorities included clearing ash from runways to restore international flights, repairing disrupted communications, conducting rapid needs assessments, and supporting displaced families.

Preliminary government estimates show 84,176 people (84% of the population) on Tongatapu, Ha'apai, and 'Eua were affected, mainly due to ashfall. ReliefWeb reported a total of about 2,390 displaced people from 465 households, with ongoing humanitarian needs in the aftermath of the

eruption and tsunami. The disaster also caused severe damage to critical infrastructure and services. Fua'amotu International Airport was closed for a week due to ash cover; Queen Salote and Vuna Wharves were clogged with debris, and Vaiola Hospital's backup generators failed due to ashfall. On 'Eua Island, Nafanua Wharf, coastal roads, bridges and multiple government offices were destroyed. The World Bank estimated direct damages at 87.3 million USD (18.5% of GDP), while the Government's Recovery Plan projected 240 million USD with the damage to the communication cable adding significant additional costs in time and money.

The HTHH eruption coincided with Tonga's first community transmission of COVID-19, which further complicated the response. National lockdowns were imposed from 2 February 2022, restricting movement and requiring the adoption of strict contactless delivery protocols for humanitarian assistance. Despite these challenges, the NEOC maintained coordination with government ministries, clusters, and partners through virtual platforms and controlled field operations. The Government of Tonga adopted strict 'contactless delivery' protocols for international humanitarian assistance due to COVID-19 border measures, requiring offshore delivery and disinfection of relief supplies. Regional and international partners including Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Japan, France, the United States, and the PHT supported the government-led response, providing naval vessels, aircraft, engineering support, water purification units and relief goods.

By 18 February 2022, NEMO and partners had distributed food and hygiene kits to 269 households under home isolation, provided over 1.1 million litres of water through assistance from HMNZS Aotearoa, HMNZS Canterbury, Ohsumi, and HMAS Supply, and issued 594 exemption permits to sustain essential logistics operations. Relief distribution continued across Tonga's island groups under COVID-safe conditions, with officers using full PPE and adhering to disinfection protocols.

International humanitarian support was substantial, it was coordinated through the NEOC under contactless conditions. Assistance came from Australia (17 flights, HMAS Adelaide, HMAS Supply), New Zealand (5 flights, 3 vessels), Fiji (Lomaiviti Princess 1), Japan, France, China, the UK, and the USA providing naval assets, aircraft, desalination units, and relief goods. This multinational support was conducted under Tonga's leadership, ensuring alignment with government priorities and COVID-19 safety requirements.

The disaster impacts on many sectors of the economy and infrastructure were severe. The agricultural sector lost over 80% of crops in affected areas, while livestock deaths and widespread ash contamination threatened food security. Recovery for agriculture alone was estimated at USD 12.45 million, including soil fertility restoration, crop replanting and livestock support. The fisheries sector suffered damages estimated at USD 10.4 million, with nearly 200 small fishing vessels lost, aquaculture farms damaged, and Special Management Area infrastructure destroyed. Widespread water contamination from volcanic ash left rainwater tanks unusable in Tongatapu, Ha'apai and 'Eua. Water quality testing on islands such as Nomuka, Fonoifua and Tungua revealed 'very poor' drinking water, requiring urgent relief. The tourism industry was devastated, with nine large and seven small resorts destroyed on Tongatapu's west coast and nearby islands, causing 20.6 million USD in damages and major employment losses.

CIVIL–MILITARY COORDINATION

The Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai crisis demanded close cooperation between civil authorities, HMAF, Tonga Police and international military partners. NDRMO coordinated the overall national response through the NEOC, providing direction to clusters, consolidating information, and liaising with Cabinet and humanitarian partners to ensure that relief and recovery operations were aligned with national priorities.

HMAF deployed naval vessels and personnel to Ha'apai and 'Eua for rapid assessments, evacuations and relief distribution, and supported ash clearance at Fua'amotu International Airport. They provided logistics for transporting supplies and restoring essential services. HMAF also served as the primary liaison for incoming foreign military assets operating under Tonga's NEOC coordination. Tonga Police coordinated immediate coastal evacuations, maintained law and order, managed security at ports and airports, and supported distribution of relief supplies in affected communities. TFES led search and rescue operations, cleared debris to restore access routes, and provided emergency fire and safety support at critical facilities, including ports and evacuation centres.

International Military Assistance was significant. Australia's HMAS Adelaide and Supply, New Zealand's HMNZS Aotearoa, Wellington, and Canterbury, Japan's Ohsumi, and vessels from Fiji, France, the USA, and the UK delivered humanitarian cargo, engineering support, and desalinated water. Personnel from the Republic of Fiji Military Force assisted with clearing debris from restricted zones in Nuku'alofa, working alongside Australian Defence Force personnel and HMAF teams.

Through this multi-layered cooperation, Tonga was able to restore essential infrastructure, deliver emergency relief and maintain national health security during a compounded crisis.

Key Learnings

The Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai (HTHH) disaster provided critical insights for strengthening Tonga's national preparedness, coordination systems, and institutional governance. The eruption, tsunami, and simultaneous COVID-19 outbreak exposed both strengths and systemic weaknesses in disaster response, coordination, and communication.

- **Coordination and governance through the cluster system reduces silos and improves information sharing:** The response demonstrated that while Tonga's cluster system is a valuable coordination framework, there is still overlap and duplication between the NEMC and NEOC that blurred strategic and operational roles. This reinforces the need for clearer separation of functions and stronger adherence to the Emergency Management Act. An after-action review on this response also found data and information management to be a key challenge. Despite these challenges, the establishment of Cluster Coordinators was seen as a positive development offering real potential to reduce silos and improve information sharing and integrated planning across ministries.

- **Legislation and financing needs to be clear to clarify roles and strengthen coordination**: The response occurred as the Government was transitioning from the Emergency Management Act (2007) to the forthcoming Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Bill and National DRM Policy. It reaffirmed the importance of these instruments for providing a clear governance framework that integrates DRR and DRM, clarifies roles and responsibilities, and strengthens coordination across all sectors.

- **Inclusion, local leadership, and community engagement need to be institutionalised**: The vulnerabilities of women-headed households, people with disabilities, and displaced island communities were a key concern. The integration of district and village disaster plans, community leadership, and inclusive participation in cluster operations proved critical for effective outreach and should be institutionalised as part of preparedness and recovery planning.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Australian Federal Police
CCG	Cluster Country Group
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
EOC	Emergency Operations Centre
FRANZ	France–Australia–New Zealand (Arrangement)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HADR	Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief
HMAF	His Majesty's Armed Forces
IDA	Initial Damage Assessment
IEOC	Island Emergency Operations Centre
JNAP	Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management
MCO	Multi-Country Office
MEIDECC	Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications
MHEWS	Multi-Hazard Early Warning System
NDRMC	National Disaster Risk Management Committee
NDRMO	National Disaster Risk Management Office
NEMO	National Emergency Management Office
NEMP	National Emergency Management Plan
NEOC	National Emergency Operations Centre
NFI	Non-Food Item
PHT	Pacific Humanitarian Team
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TC	Tropical Cyclone
TFES	Tonga Fire and Emergency Services
TRCS	Tonga Red Cross Society
TSDF II	Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015–2025
UN	United Nations

RESOURCES

Australian Government Department of Defence. (2025). *Strengthening disaster relief cooperation in Tonga.* https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-09-01/strengthening-disaster-relief-cooperation-tonga

Government of Tonga. (2021). *Disaster Risk Management Act 2021.* https://pacificresiliencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Tonga-Disaster-Risk-Management-Act-2021.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2020). *His Majesty's Armed Forces Act CAP.902.* https://ago.gov.to/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1992/1992-0017/HisMajestysArmedForces_3.pdf

Government of Tonga (2020). *His Majesty's Armed Forces Corporate Plan & Budget 2020-2023.* https://pmo.gov.to/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMAF-CP-2020-2023.ENG_.FINAL_.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2020). *Immigration Act (CAP. 10.01).* https://ago.gov.to/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1969/1969-0016/ImmigrationAct_3.pdf

Government of Tonga (2018). *Joint National Action Plan 2 on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management 2018–2028.* https://library.sprep.org/sites/default/files/jnapdrm-2018-2028.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2020). *Public Health Act (CAP. 12.15).* https://ampeid.org/documents/tonga/public-health-act-(chapter-1215)/

Government of Tonga (2009). *The Emergency Fund Act 2008.* https://ago.gov.to/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/2008/2008-0018/EmergencyFundAct2008_1.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2016). *Tonga Police Act 2010 (CAP.20.18).* https://ago.gov.to/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/2010/2010-0035/TongaPoliceAct_2.pdf

Government of Tonga (2021). *Tonga Disaster Risk Financing Strategy 2021–2025.* https://finance.gov.to/publications

Government of Tonga. (2023). *Tonga Disaster Risk Management Policy 2023–2030.*

Government of Tonga. (2007). *Tonga Emergency Management Act 2007.* https://tonganemo.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/emergencymanagementact20071.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2016). *Tonga Fire and Emergency Services Act 2015.* https://ago.gov.to/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/2014/2014-0021/TongaFireandEmergencyServicesAct_2.pdf

Government of Tonga. (2024). *Tonga Multi-hazard Early Warning System Policy (MHEWS) 2024–2030.*

Government of Tonga. (2020). *Tonga National Emergency Plan 2020.* https://pacificresiliencepartnership.org/documents/tonga-national-emergency-management-plan-2020/

Government of Tonga. (2021). *Tonga Strategic Roadmap for Emergency and Disaster Risk Management 2021–2023.* https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1481/files/appeal/documents/Tonga%202021%20Roadmap%20SRE-DRM.pdf

ReliefWeb. (2022). *Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami.* https://reliefweb.int/disaster/vo-2022-000005-ton

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2024). *Tonga humanitarian coordination structure*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/tonga/tonga-humanitarian-coordination-structure-10-july-2024

US Embassy Fiji. (2024). Pacific partnership returns to Tonga for the first time in ten years. https://fj.usembassy.gov/pacific-partnership-returns-to-tonga-for-the-first-time-in-ten-years/

VANUATU



HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION IN EMERGENCIES

Drone in Vanuatu. Photo: Seiji Seiji / Unsplash

VANUATU

Vanuatu was ranked 44th out of 193 countries in the 2025 edition of the World Risk Report. It is highly susceptible to floods, droughts, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions. These risks are further compounded by Vanuatu's geography. Like many island nations, Vanuatu's remote location poses considerable challenges for the timely delivery of aid, further complicating disaster response efforts. This combination of risk and geography underscores the importance of effective coordination across all key stakeholders in disaster response.

Vanuatu places a strong emphasis on integrating disaster risk elements into its broader disaster management framework. This strategic direction is demonstrated through the updated disaster management legislation, which shifted from the National Disaster Act 2000 to the Disaster Risk Management Act in 2019. Meanwhile, disaster response mechanisms combine both a national structure and cluster system. The Disaster Risk Management Act 2019 guides disaster management coordination and designates the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) as the lead agency. Following Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam in 2015, Vanuatu first activated the national cluster system to enhance coordination between government agencies and humanitarian partners that work under the NDMO.

The Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) serves a comparable role to that of a military. This mobile unit, comprising around 300 personnel, operates under the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF). The VMF primarily supports law enforcement and acts as a frontline responder in national security and disaster situations. Its role in disaster response is coordinated through the Joint Planning and Operations Centre (JPOC), which coordinates emergency services in disaster response to uphold Vanuatu law. The JPOC operates under the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) led by the NDMO and works in collaboration with the cluster system.

Disasters have been key to developing civil–military coordination in Vanuatu, particularly TCs Pam (13 March 2015) and Harold (6 April 2020) and the recent earthquake last year (2024). This coordination has been complemented by participation in key regional exercises such as Croix du Sud 2025 (Southern Cross), one of the Pacific region's largest multinational disaster response exercises, and the Pacific Resilience Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange. These engagements have strengthened Vanuatu's disaster response capabilities, not only at the national level but also within the broader Pacific context.

KEY EVENTS IN THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF HUMANITARIAN CIVIL–MILITARY COORDINATION IN VANUATU

2011

- The cluster coordination mechanism was adopted by the NDMO with the support of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) and the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (VHT).

2014

- The Ministry of Climate Change (MoCC) was established which works to integrate disaster response with environmental and climate-related planning.

2015

- March: TC Pam struck Vanuatu, triggering large-scale international military deployments from Australia, New Zealand, and France to support relief operations. The Vanuatu humanitarian cluster system was activated for the first time.
- June: The Australian Civil–Military Centre (ACMC) convened a roundtable discussion involving government agencies, NGOs and civil society groups engaged in the TC Pam response. The objective was to share experiences and identify best practices for disaster and humanitarian response in the Pacific. A key lesson was the need to strengthen civil–military coordination in Vanuatu to improve future responses.

2016

- The Pacific Resilience Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange was held in Port Vila, marking the first civil–military disaster preparedness initiative between the VMF and the U.S. Military Indo-Pacific Command.

2018

- PAC ANGEL 18-3, a U.S. military humanitarian exercise was held in Vanuatu in July, delivering medical and civil engineering support to local communities.

2019

- The Vanuatu Disaster Risk Management Act 2019 (Act No. 23 of 2019) was enacted, replacing previous legislation. The new act places greater emphasis on disaster preparedness and risk reduction, whereas the former focused primarily on response.

2020

- TC Harold hit Vanuatu and other Pacific Island countries, including Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. With border closures and testing protocols in place, the event tested contactless and remote military support operations. It highlighted the need for clearer Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the integration of health measures into civil–military coordination frameworks.

2023

- Days apart, two category 4 cyclones, TCs Judy and Kevin, struck the Pacific region, prompting Vanuatu to declare a state of emergency. Regional military assets, particularly from Australia under the France–Australia–New Zealand (FRANZ) Arrangement, were mobilised to provide critical airlift, logistics and engineering support. This coordinated response reinforced the importance of Pacific humanitarian partnership frameworks, notably the Boe Declaration (between the member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum) and regional military assets, particularly from Australia under the FRANZ Arrangement, both of which play a vital role in enabling swift and effective military–humanitarian responses across the region.
- The first VPF annual report was published. The report highlighted the importance of engagement with foreign military to support the VPF's role in disasters. This included capacity development support from the Australian Defence Force (ADF), Vanuatu–Australia Police and Justice Program (VAPJP), as well as from United Kingdom, New Zealand and the People's Republic of China.
- TC Lola struck Vanuatu in October as a powerful category 5 storm, causing widespread damage. The NDMO led the response which included activating support from regional military forces such as Australia and New Zealand, and also France to assist with aerial early damage assessment and aid delivery.

2024

- Exercise Pacific Exchange in September brought seven Vanuatu Mobile Force personnel to train with the Australian Army's 51st Battalion, focusing on skill-sharing, cooperation, and strengthening VMF capability.
- In December a 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck Vanuatu, triggering activation of key coordination mechanisms such as the NEOC, the national cluster system and the JPOC. Additionally, upon formal request from the Government of Vanuatu, international assistance was deployed, including Emergency Medical Teams (EMTs) from Fiji and Australia, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams from Australia and New Zealand, and the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT).

DISASTER RISK PROFILE

KEY FACTS

Official name: Republic of Vanuatu

Land Area: 12,190 km²

Population: 331,70 (SPC, 2025)

Capital: Port Vila

Official Languages: Bislama, English, French

Disaster Focal point: National Disaster Management Office

Police: Vanuatu Police Force and its specialised branches, the Vanuatu Mobile Force and the Vanuatu Police Maritime Wing



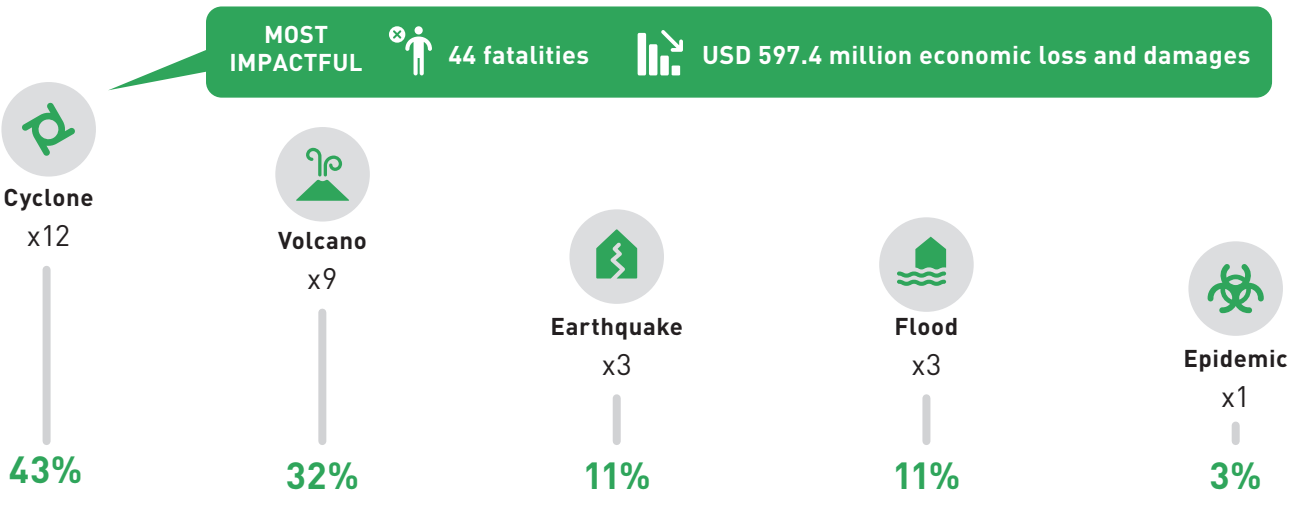
GENERAL INFORMATION

Vanuatu faces significant exposure to a wide range of natural hazards, including tropical cyclones, storm surges, landslides, flooding, droughts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis. All islands are situated in a seismically and volcanically active region, contributing to the frequent occurrence of volcanic activity, seismic events, and tsunami threats.

FREQUENCY AND PROPORTION OF DISASTERS BY TYPE FROM 2000 TO 2025

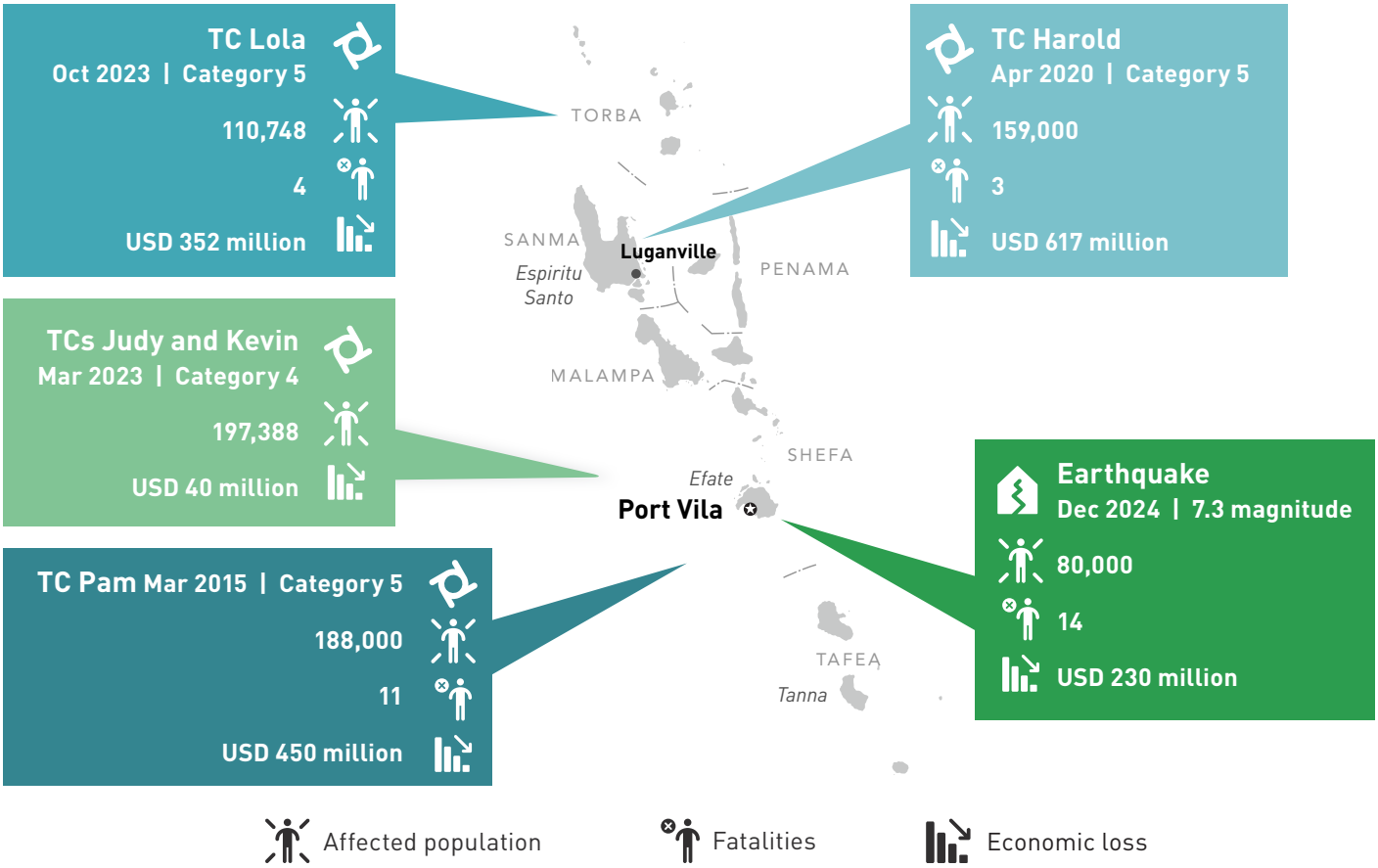
Vanuatu has been affected by 28 natural disasters over the last 25 years. Its geographical location on the Pacific Ring of Fire and in a cyclone-prone area, combined with the vulnerabilities of a small island developing state (SIDS).

The graph below orders Vanuatu's natural disasters between 2000 and 2025 by type according to their frequency, with the most to least frequent moving left to right and the percentage frequency illustrated. The most impactful disaster type is identified but not ranked. Since 2000, cyclones (43%) have been the most frequent disaster to affect Vanuatu, followed by volcanoes (32%). Cyclones were also the most impactful, causing a significant number of fatalities and economic loss.



Source: https://public.emdat.be/data

MAJOR DISASTERS (2015-2025)



INFORM
INDEX FOR RISK MANAGEMENT

INFORM Risk is an open-source risk assessment for humanitarian crises and disasters. INFORM Risk gives each country a risk score of 1-10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest) for each of the dimensions, categories, and components of risk, as well as an overall risk score. The higher the score, the more at risk a country is to disasters.

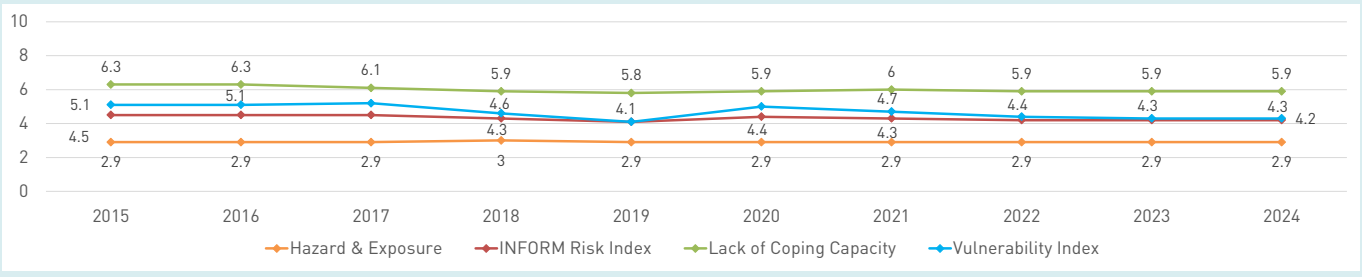
INFORM RISK VALUE AND RANKING 2025

Vanuatu has a low hazards and exposure value and a moderate level of vulnerability but has a considerably higher value in lack of coping capacity. As a result, it is classified as medium risk.

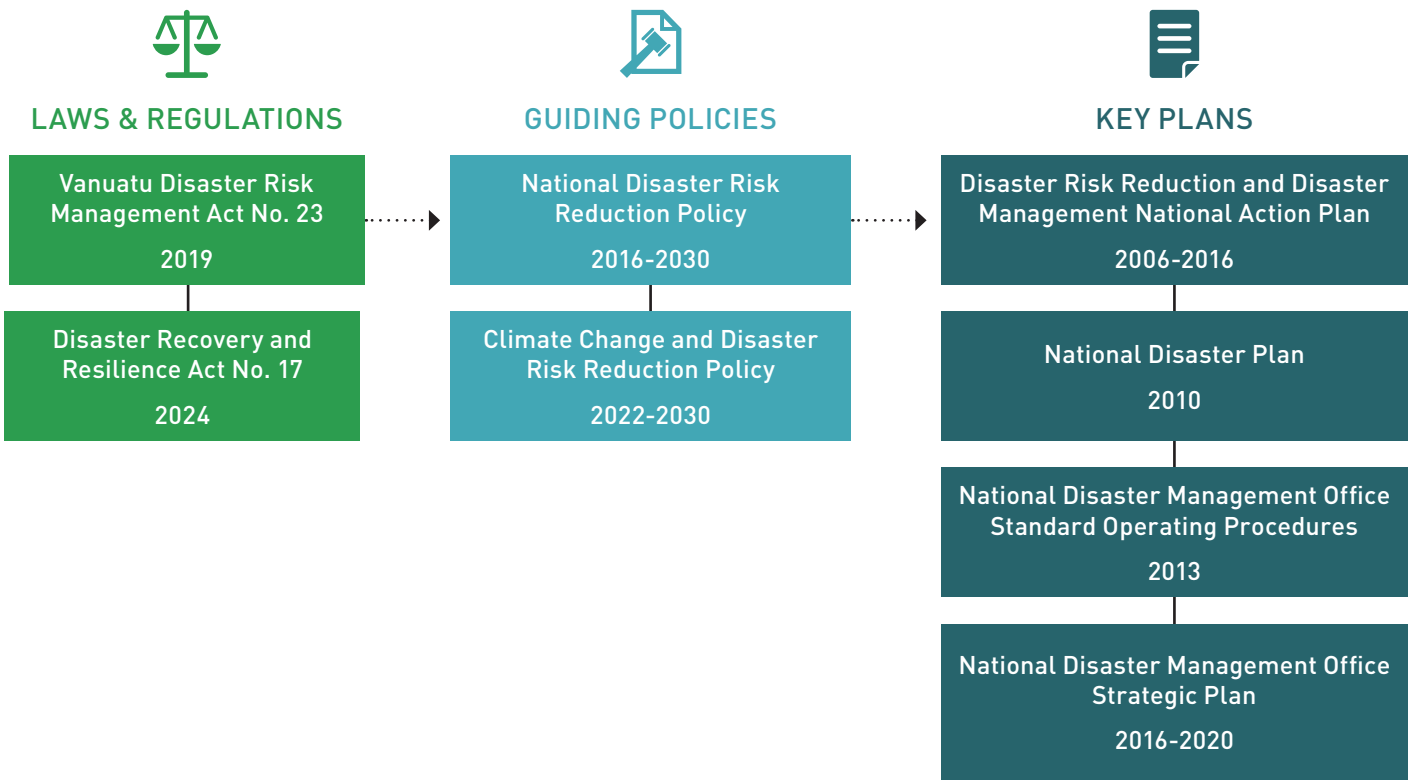
INFORM Risk and dimensions of risk	VALUE (10 as the highest)	WORLD RANK (out of 191 countries)
INFORM Risk	4.2	74
Hazard & Exposure	2.9	99
Vulnerability	4.3	77
Lack of coping capacity	5.9	48

INFORM RISK TEN-YEAR TREND (2015-2024)

Vanuatu's hazards and exposure, coping capacity and risk indicators have remained stable since 2015; however, it's vulnerability demonstrates sharper rise and falls in 2019 and 2020 and then steadily decreased over the last five years due to increasing disasters. Consequently, the INFORM Risk Index has slightly decreased, classifying Vanuatu within the medium-risk category.



KEY POLICIES, PLANS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION



Vanuatu Disaster Risk Management Act No. 23 of 2019

The Disaster Risk Management Act 2019 of Vanuatu replaced the National Disaster Act No 31 of 2000, establishing a regulatory framework for managing disaster risks across preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. It established key governance structures, including the National Disaster Risk Management Council, and sets out the role of the NDMO. At the subnational level, the act outlines decentralised responsibilities to provincial and municipal authorities, enhancing local capacity and coordination. It also assigns specific roles to government agencies, local authorities, NGOs and communities.

Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act No. 17 2024

The Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act No.17 2024 complements the Disaster Risk Management Act 2019 by providing a specific framework for the recovery and resilience efforts while the previous Act provides guidance focusing in response contexts. This act outlines key areas around disaster recovery including the establishment of the National Recovery Committee, provision for the declaration of disaster recovery, provision for international disaster recovery assistance and the establishment of an emergency recovery fund.

National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2016–2030

The Vanuatu Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2016–2030 was issued in 2015 by the Government of Vanuatu in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). This policy outlines the nation's long-term vision for addressing climate change and enhancing community resilience. The groundwork for this initiative began in 2012 with the creation of the National Advisory Board (NAB) on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction (CCDRR). The policy encompasses a comprehensive framework guided by principles of accountability, sustainability, equity, community engagement, collaboration and innovation.

Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2022–2030

The Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2022–2030 articulates Vanuatu's vision, guiding principles and strategic priorities in addressing Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction (CCDRR). It provides a platform for integrating these efforts into the national development planning framework, providing a clear mandate for ministries and line agencies to incorporate relevant actions into their business plans. At the subnational level, the Department

of Local Authorities supports provincial and area councils in embedding climate change and disaster risk considerations into their development planning and budgeting processes. Additionally, the policy recognises the critical role of humanitarian actors including the VHT, the NDMO and cluster agencies to support CCDRR efforts through collaboration and coordination.

Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management National Action Plan 2006 – 2016

The Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management National Action Plan 2006 – 2016 outlines strategies to promote resilience in Vanuatu through the reduction of social, economic and environmental impacts of disasters. This framework mainstreams all-hazards risk management into all sectors and decision making process at all levels of government including national planning and budgetary process.

National Disaster Plan 2010

The Vanuatu National Disaster Plan 2010 which replaced the 1987 National Disaster and Emergency Plan, is an arrangement under the provision of Section 9 Part 3 of the National Disaster Act No.31 of 2000. It presents a framework for disaster preparedness, response and recovery in the country. The plan designates the NDMO as the lead coordinating agency, supported by the National Disaster Committee (NDC) and sector-specific cluster groups.

National Disaster Management Office Standard Operating Procedures 2013

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) outline processes and arrangements for operation and coordination in emergency response. These procedures serve as a practical guide to implement operational strategies in response to both natural and human-induced hazards. The SOPs also define operational relationships between NDMO and designated Lead Agencies for various hazard types. It is intended to be used alongside the National Disaster Plan and the National Disaster Act. As the central hub for emergency response coordination, NDMO is maintained in a constant state of readiness to ensure rapid activation and effective management during emergencies and disasters.

National Disaster Management Office Strategic Plan 2016-2020

The National Disaster Management Office Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020 defined the central role of the NDMO in coordinating disaster response efforts across Vanuatu. It highlighted the role of collaboration with key operational partners, including line ministries, UN agencies, faith-based organisations, the private sector, international and local NGOs, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RCRC), in assessing and addressing the needs of disaster-affected populations. The plan also emphasises the role of the NDMO to facilitate effective coordination among these humanitarian actors to ensure timely delivery of essential relief services such as food, water, sanitation and emergency shelter. The plan included 4 key objectives :

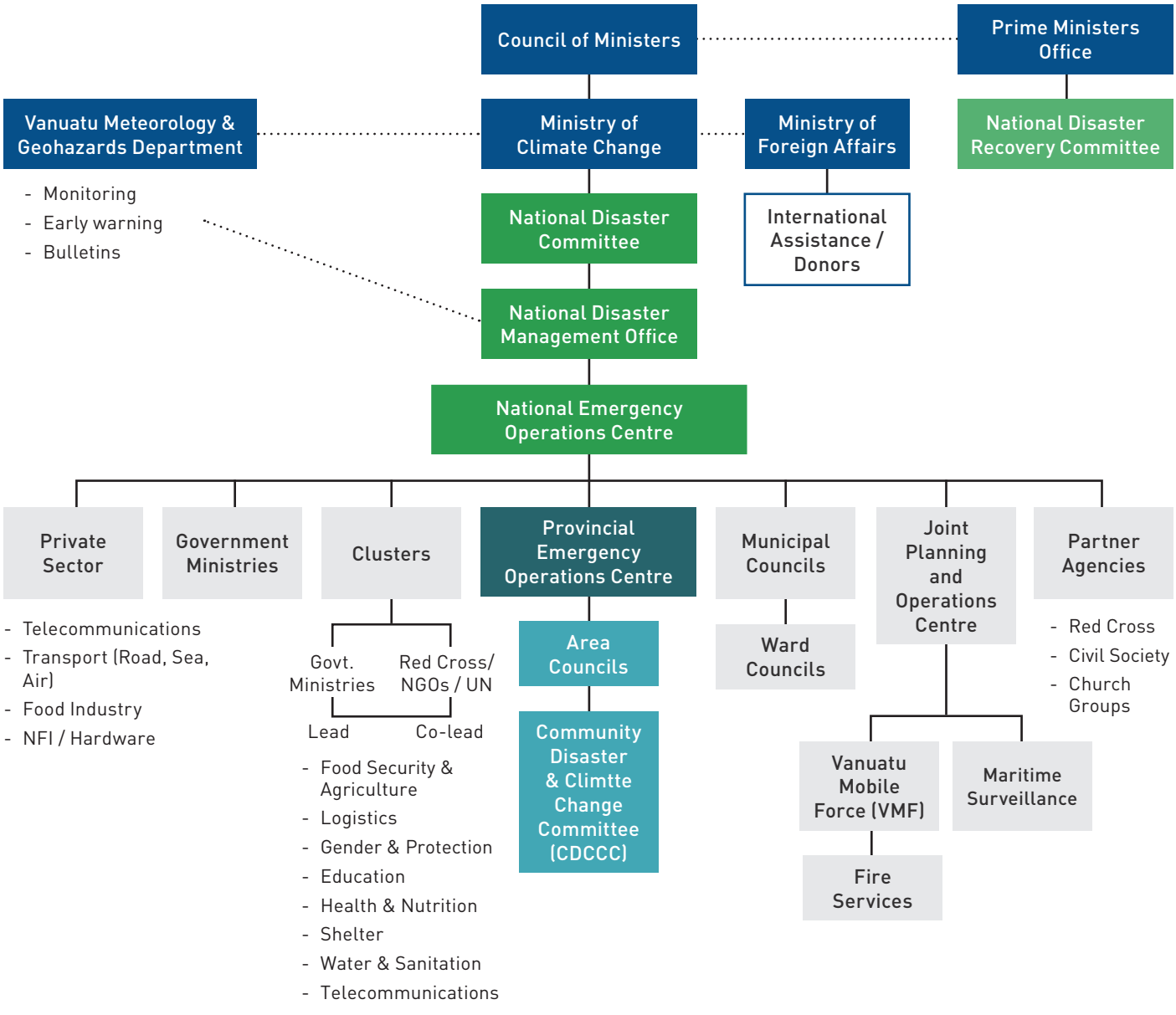
- Strengthen the NDMO governance framework through reporting/monitoring and evaluation (M&E), planning, budgeting, resourcing, legislation, policy and procedures and by advocacy for DRM and climate change (CC) mainstreaming.
- Improve DRM coordination arrangements with all stakeholders at regional, national, provincial and community levels.
- Enhance DRM operations preparedness, response and recovery for a safer, secure and resilient Vanuatu.
- Facilitate harmonisation and mainstreaming to promote coherence between DRM including CC approaches, systems, programmes and stakeholders involved in development (preparedness, response and recovery).

KEY CIVILIAN RESPONSIBILITIES IN DISASTERS

NATIONAL DISASTER FOCAL POINT

The 2025 Disaster Management Structure published by NDMO for Vanuatu introduces a multi-tiered disaster response framework, with the NDMO at the centre (see diagram below). Strategic oversight is provided by the National Disaster Committee composed of director generals and chaired by the Ministry of Climate Change. The Council of Ministers oversees this committee, particularly for high-level decision-making. Operational coordination occurs through NEOC, supported by sectoral clusters and provincial coordination units.

NATIONAL COORDINATION STRUCTURE



NFI - Non Food Item NGOs- Non-Government Organisations UN - United Nations

Source: Adapted from National Coordination Structure, National Disaster Management Office

NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

The National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) is the government body that is concerned with the formulation of policies and strategies in relation to the aims of this plan. In times of emergencies, the Emergency Committee of the NDMC undertakes the coordination of emergency activities.

Established by: National Disaster Act No.23 of 2019

Leadership: Director-General of the Ministry of Climate Change

Key functions:

- Develops strategies and policies for the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from disasters
- Ensures the implementation of the strategies by the NDMO, as well as other government and non-government agencies
- Advises ministers on declaring an SOE
- With the approval of the Commissioner of Police, determines the number of members of the VPF to be deployed in all disaster management phases
- Ensures that government agencies comply with direction given by the Minister of Climate Change and Adaptation
- Advises Minister of Climate Change and Adaptation on all matters relating to disasters.

Composition: The Commissioner of Police; Director of the NDMO; Director Generals from line ministries including Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, Ministry of Public Utilities and Infrastructure, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Ministry of Lands, Director from Air Coordination and Planning, Department of Provincial Affairs, Vanuatu Metrological and Geohazards Department and CEO of Vanuatu Red Cross Society, and representatives (one of whom must be a woman) of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs).

NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT OFFICE (NDMO)

The NDMO is the principal government agency responsible for coordinating responses to emergencies and disasters across Vanuatu. It supports disaster preparedness and response, working closely with NGOs and international agencies to improve resilience.

Established by: National Disaster Act No.31 of 2000

Leadership: NDMO Director

Key functions:

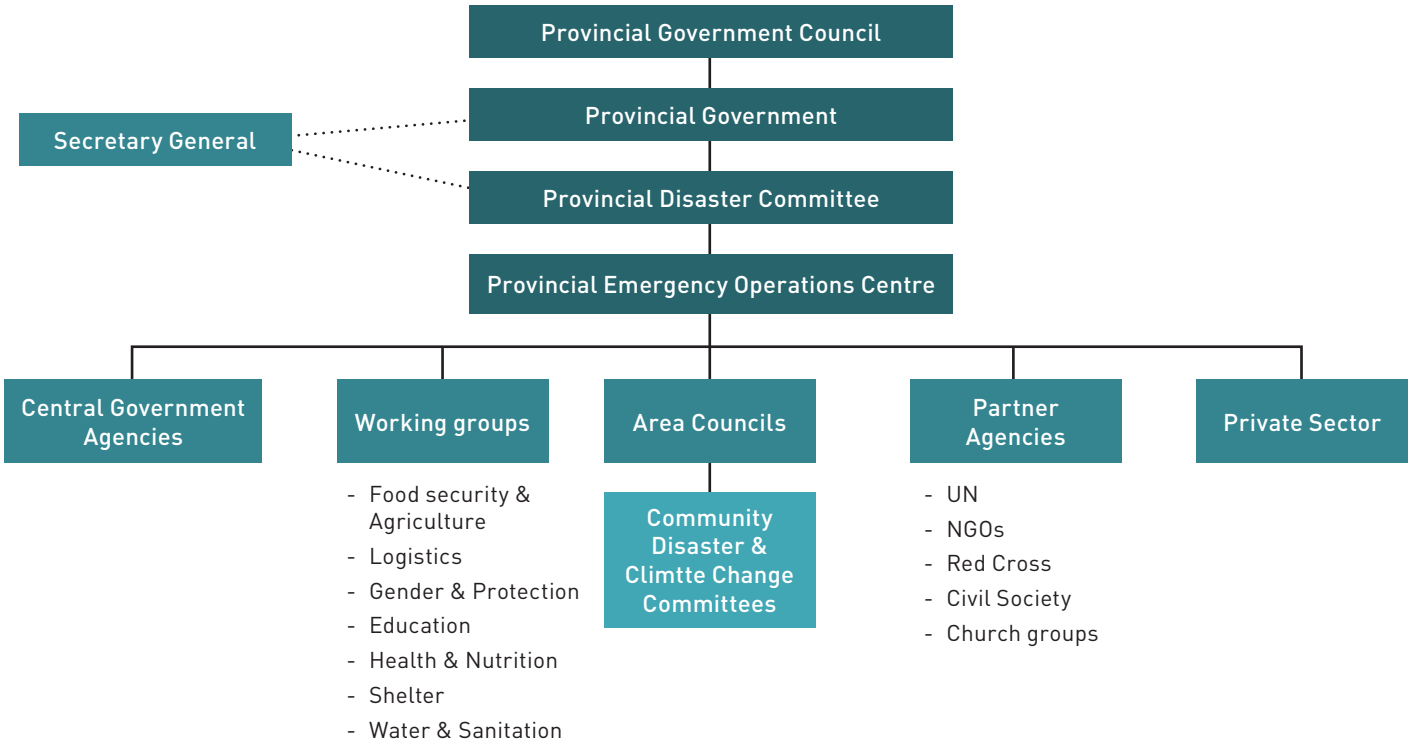
- Coordinates emergency response
- Supports DRR and climate change adaptation programmes
- Informs partners of risks
- Builds communication networks
- Facilitates capacity-building at all levels

SUBNATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

At the provincial and municipal level, structures for disaster management exist in each of the 6 provinces. Subnational disaster management agencies in Vanuatu operate under the authority of the NDMO, as per the Disaster Risk Management Act No. 23 of 2019. Members include provincial government officials, local leaders, community representatives and relevant stakeholders, including non-government agencies nominated by the Vanuatu Association of NGOs (VANGO). The VPF, including the VMF, supports subnational committees by providing security, logistics, and assistance during disaster response operations. Their involvement is coordinated through the NDMO and relevant provincial authorities.

The Vanuatu government's system operates at the national and local scale. Local governance is handled by Provincial and Municipal Councils. Vanuatu is administratively divided into provinces and municipalities, the structure of its Disaster and Climate Change Committees aligns with these governance levels. At the subnational level, there are Provincial Disaster and Climate Change Committees and Municipal Disaster and Climate Change Committees. Communities participate in disaster preparedness and response through Community Disaster Committees (CDCs), which operate with support from the NDMO. The following diagram outlines the subnational disaster management structure.

SUBNATIONAL COORDINATION STRUCTURE



Source: National Coordination Structure, National Disaster Management Office

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS IN VANUATU

National: The overarching level of government for the entire country.

Provinces: Vanuatu is divided into 6 provinces, each with its own Provincial Council responsible for local governance.

Municipalities: 3 municipalities (Port Vila, Luganville, and Lenakel) have their own Municipal Councils.



	NAME	LEAD AUTHORITY	NUMBER
FIRST LEVEL	National	NDMO	1
SECOND LEVEL	Provincial	Provincial Office	6
THIRD LEVEL	Municipal	Municipal Council	3

KEY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE (PMO)

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) provides strategic leadership through the development of government policy and oversees national priorities, working collaboratively with domestic and international partners to develop and implement comprehensive DRR strategies. This includes leading the Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management National Action Plan 2006 – 2016, and securing the necessary resources to support its implementation. Furthermore, the PMO also leads the recovery efforts through the Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act 2024 and the National Disaster Recovery Framework 2021 to guide and strengthen recovery and resilience initiatives.

MINISTRY OF CLIMATE CHANGE (MoCC)

Established by the Government of Vanuatu in 2014, the Ministry of Climate Change (MoCC) was created to strategically align departments responsible for responding to natural disasters and promoting sustainable environmental development. It plays a central role in disaster management, leading efforts in climate resilience, DRR, energy and environmental protection. The NDMO operates under this Ministry.

MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS (MoIA)

The primary function of the MoIA is to manage policing, corrections, labour and internal security. During disasters, the ministry provides security and logistical support and ensures the continuity of essential government services during emergencies. Furthermore, the MoIA, through its Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, is involved in capacity-building, field surveys and database development to enhance disaster resilience and support national early warning systems.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH (MoH)

The MoH oversees public health systems and services, coordinating with other agencies, like the NDMO, to ensure a comprehensive approach to health-related issues during and after disasters. The MoH launched the National Health Plan for Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation (2021–2025), which serves as a guide to develop and implement plans to address the health impacts of various hazards, including cyclones, earthquakes and pandemics. The MoH aims to support the health and wellbeing of the people of Vanuatu through minimal disruption of the delivery of quality essential health services during and in the aftermath of natural disasters.

COORDINATION MECHANISMS

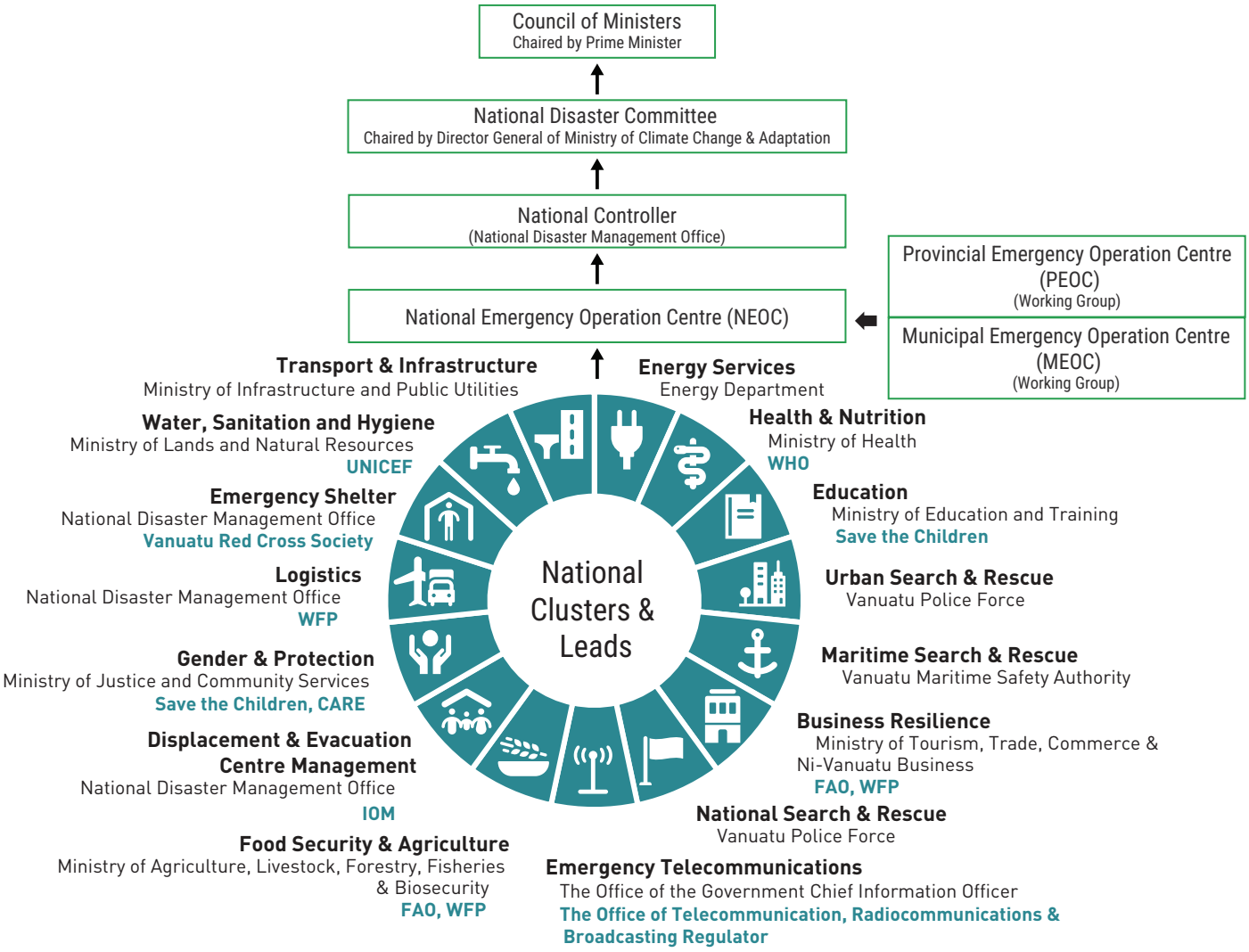
NATIONAL CLUSTER SYSTEM

Vanuatu's disaster response coordination operates through a national cluster system. Each cluster is led by a national government ministry, typically at the director general level, while the co-lead comes from humanitarian agency partners such as the UN, RCRC and NGOs. The clusters cover 12 sectors, including energy services, education, emergency shelter, food security and agriculture, health and medical services, emergency telecommunications, displacement and evacuation centre management, business resilience, gender and protection, logistics, water, sanitation and hygiene, and transport and infrastructure. Following lessons learned from the TC Pam response, the Government of Vanuatu formed the national cluster system as a standing mechanism that serves during disaster response and, importantly, during disaster preparedness activities. At the provincial level, a cluster is referred to as a working group.

NATIONAL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTRE (NEOC)

The NEOC acts as the central hub during emergencies, facilitating coordination between key agencies, clusters, subnational agencies and international partners. It is activated by NDMO during disaster and major emergency operations to gather information, conduct assessments, coordinate support, make logistical arrangements and prepare reports, such as briefing papers or situational reports. The NEOC is the operational arm of NDMO. However, during emergency response when a state of emergency is declared, the National Controller assumes a higher position than NEOC. To support operational tasks, the centre includes officers of the VPF, as agreed by the Director and the Commissioner of Police and other officers of government agencies determined by the Director of the NDMO.

NATIONAL COORDINATION STRUCTURE



Source: UN OCHA: Vanuatu: Humanitarian Coordination Structure (As of 30 June 2025)

SUBNATIONAL EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTRE

At the subnational level, each province and municipality in Vanuatu operates a Provincial Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC), which serves as the coordination hub during disasters and facilitates communication between national and provincial authorities. Activation of PEOCs is under the instruction of the Director of the NDMO and is led by the Provincial Disaster Coordinator.Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and is led by the Provincial Disaster Coordinator.

MOBILISATION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

In the event of a disaster, the Government of Vanuatu requests and accepts international assistance through established protocols. This support is mobilised through the VHT and the NEOC under the leadership of the NDMO in coordination with Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

COORDINATION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

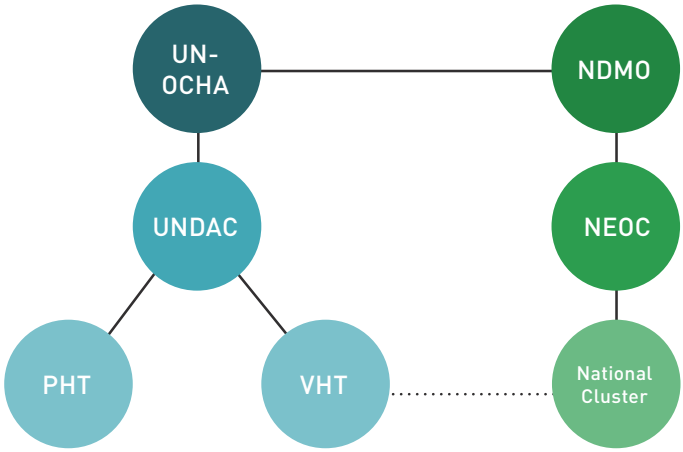
The UN-OCHA Office of the Pacific supports in-country coordination through deployment in response to disasters. The United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team may be deployed to support UN-OCHA as required. International aid is mobilised through partnerships, including donors such as the World Bank, which provide emergency funding for response and recovery efforts. Coordination with international partners is managed by the NDMO and NEOC, ensuring that assistance aligns with national priorities and effectively addresses the needs of affected communities.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION SYSTEM

Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (VHT)

The Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (VHT) is a network of organisations that supports the Government of Vanuatu in humanitarian coordination, disaster preparedness, and emergency response. Coordinated by Oxfam, the VHT brings together a diverse group of members, including the UN, Red Cross, and INGOs. The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) and VHT interact under coordination from UN-OCHA. The PHT provides support to the VHT as the regional coordination mechanism supported by UN-OCHA OoP. Furthermore, this international humanitarian coordination mechanism interfaces with the national system through the cluster approach, facilitated by UN-OCHA in coordination with the NDMO. The diagram below illustrates the connection between international and national coordination structures and composition of VHT.

ALIGNMENT OF INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISMS WITH NATIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISM



KEY VANUATU MOBILE FORCE (VMF) RESPONSIBILITIES IN DISASTERS

VANUATU MOBILE FORCE (VMF)

The VMF is a small, mobile corps of approximately 300 personnel and serves as the paramilitary component of the VPF. Its primary roles include supporting law enforcement and acting as a first line of defence in national security and disaster response.

VMF has participated in multiple international humanitarian and training activities, including PAC Angel 18-3, a 2018 joint exercise with the U.S. military focused on humanitarian medical and engineering support, and Exercise Pacific Exchange 2024, a joint training with the Australian Army's 51st Battalion in Cairns, Queensland. These efforts help build VMF capabilities in disaster response, logistics, and medical outreach.

Established: 1980, following Vanuatu's independence

Leadership: Led by a Commander under the VPF

Headquarters: Port Vila, Vanuatu

Area of Commands: Nationwide jurisdiction through the VPF

Key roles: Assists in law enforcement, provides initial defence, supports humanitarian efforts, and manages national fire and emergency operations

Key functions:

- Supports community preparedness through trainings
- Coordinates joint operations across the VPF
- Liaises directly with the NDMO during hazard response
- Oversees VPF communication networks
- Provides operational advice to senior police leadership
- Engages in emergency response, such as search and rescue operations, clearing and repairing infrastructure, evacuation and relief distribution, providing security for disaster relief efforts, assigning a liaison officer to NEOC when activated

Composition: Operates as a single mobile unit with specialised functions, including fire and emergency response

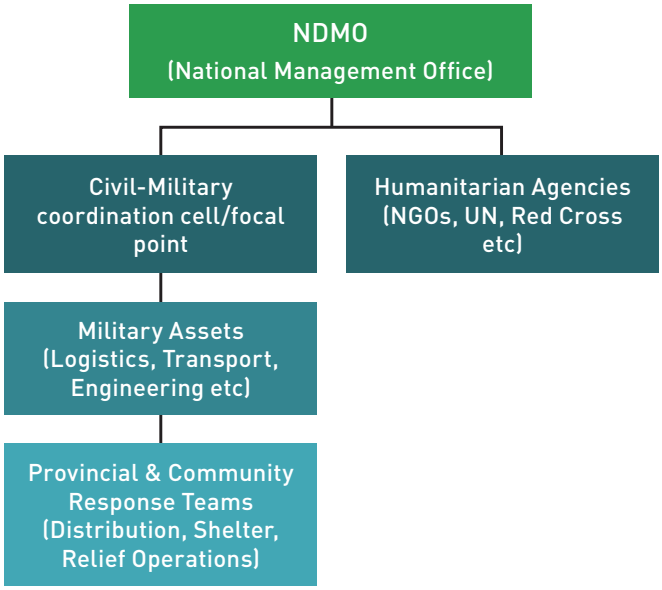
Coordination mechanisms: As part of emergency service providers, VMF coordinates with the NDMO and participates in the national cluster system to support the disaster response.

HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION MECHANISMS

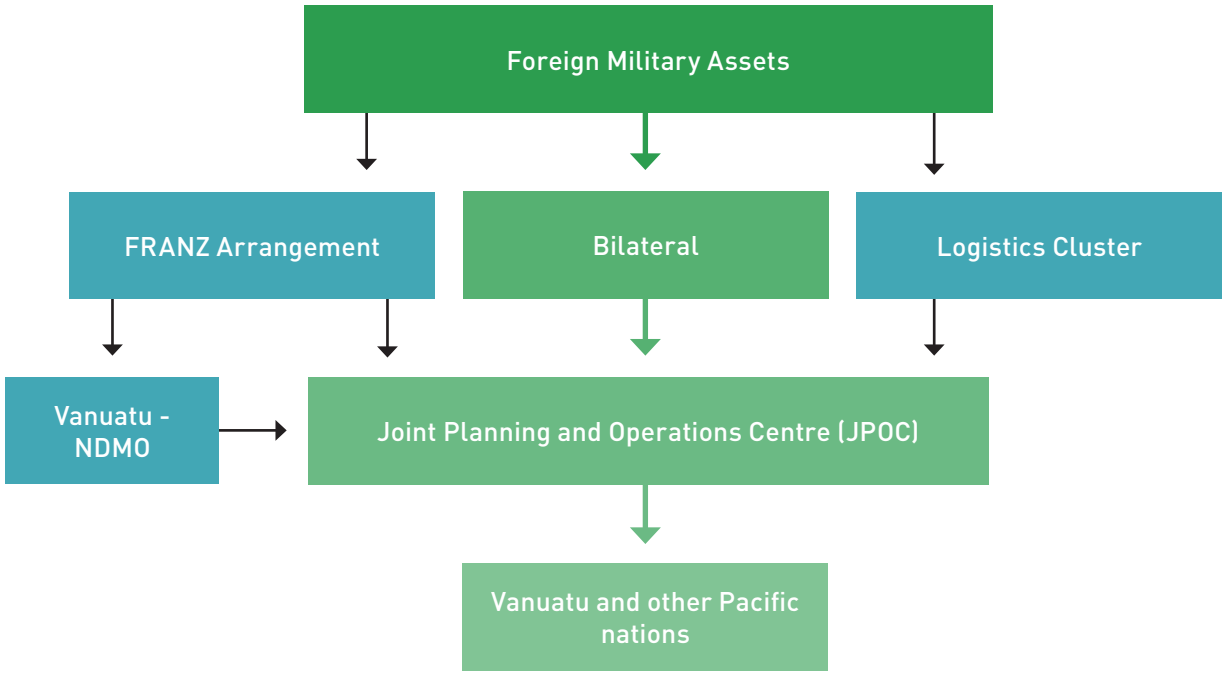
COORDINATION OF FOREIGN MILITARY ASSETS

Under the Disaster Risk Management Act No. 23 of 2019, the NDMO is primarily responsible for coordinating international humanitarian assistance, including foreign military assets. The NDMO ensures that all foreign military support aligns with national priorities and is integrated into existing response structures. The JPOC, housed within the VPF, serves as the operational hub for coordinating with both local and foreign military entities. The JPOC facilitates logistics, communications and deployments in close alignment with the NDMO. Another mechanism is through the FRANZ Arrangement, a trilateral disaster relief framework which plays a critical role in supporting Vanuatu during emergencies. These partners often contribute military assets for rapid response, logistics and humanitarian aid.

HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION STRUCTURE]



COORDINATION OF FOREIGN MILITARY ASSETS IN VANUATU

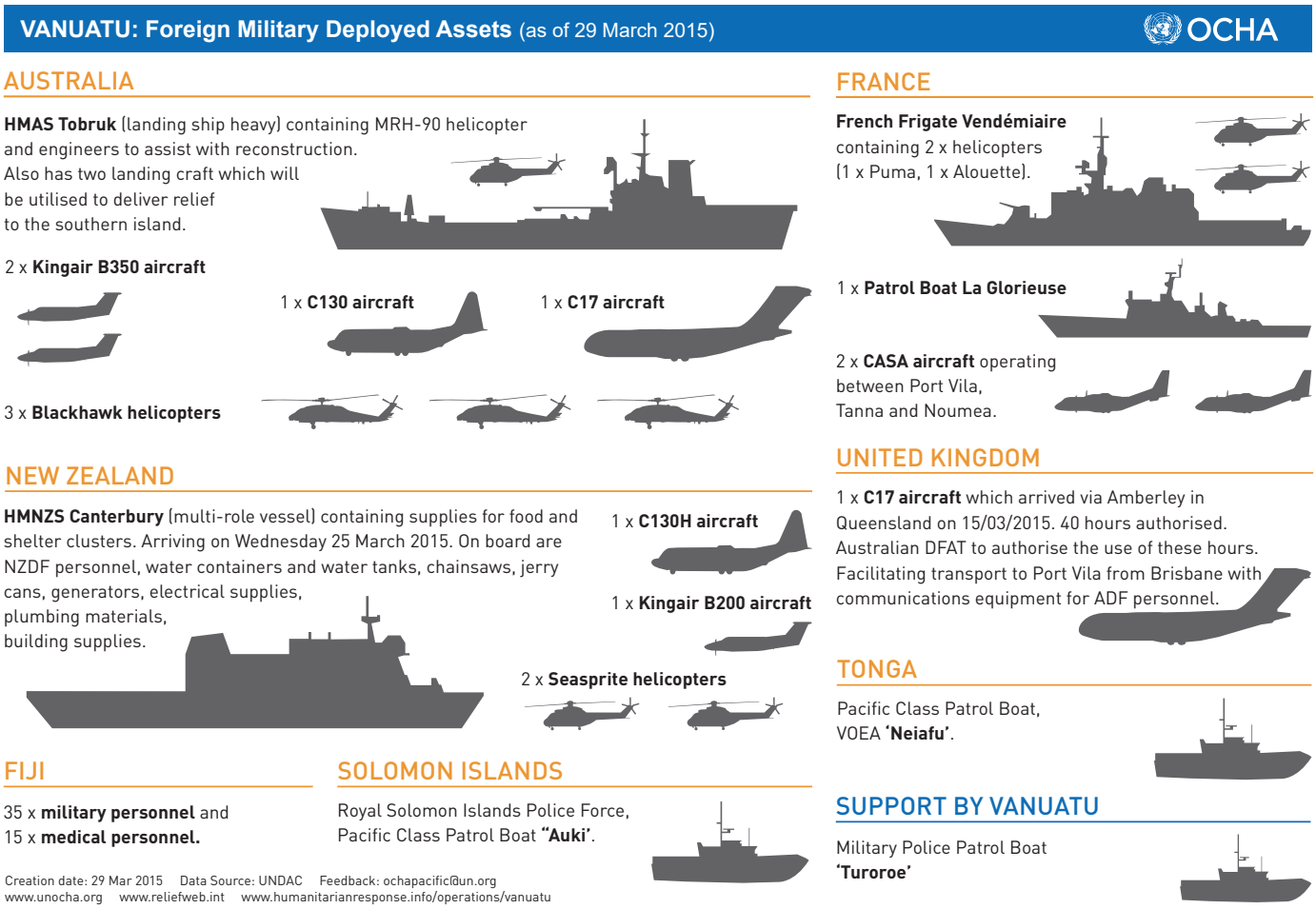


CASE STUDY: TROPICAL CYCLONE PAM 2015

12-14 March 2015 | **188,000 affected** | **11 fatalities** | **USD 450 million**

OVERVIEW

TC Pam, a Category 5 cyclone, struck Vanuatu in March 2015, devastating infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods across multiple islands. The VPF played a critical role in disaster response, ensuring law and order, coordinating evacuations and assisting humanitarian partners in relief operations. The greatest impact was in Shefa and Tafea provinces, with severe damage reported in 23 islands. After TC Pam, the Vanuatu Government established a national cluster system which prior to this was not yet in place.



Source: https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-foreign-military-deployed-assets-29-march-2015

CIVIL–MILITARY AND INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION

The VPF coordinated closely with the NDMO, provincial disaster committees, and international partners to support evacuation and shelter management, and assist with clearing debris from roads. Over 5,000 people were evacuated to designated shelters, with VPF officers ensuring safety, registration and orderly distribution of relief supplies. Police maritime units assisted in inter-island transport of medical teams and relief goods to remote communities. Special police units maintained law and order in Port Vila and Lenakel, preventing looting and safeguarding warehouses storing relief supplies.

Key Learnings

- **Pre-established coordination mechanisms for facilitating multi-agency collaboration are essential.** The Vanuatu Government national cluster system illustrates the importance of having established coordination frameworks in place to enable efficient and timely disaster response. The TC Pam response demonstrated the value of multi-agency collaboration between VPF, NDMO, provincial disaster committees, and international partners, particularly in managing evacuations, shelter operations, and debris clearance.

- **Decentralised response is required for localised impact.** The widespread destruction across 23 islands, particularly in Shefa and Tafea provinces, highlighted the critical need for decentralised disaster response capacity at both provincial and community levels. Strengthening local preparedness ensures faster, more locally-driven responses in geographically dispersed emergencies such as in Vanuatu.

- **VPF played a key role in law enforcement and logistics.** VPF played a vital role in maintaining law and order, preventing looting, and securing aid warehouses, and ensuring the safe and rapid distribution of relief supplies. In addition, VPF maritime units facilitated the transport of medical teams and relief goods to remote islands, demonstrating the critical value of mobility assets in reaching isolated communities. This underscores the need for sustained investment in inter-island transport infrastructure and contingency logistics planning to support effective emergency response.

- **Strong link between response coordination mechanisms and police operations are essential.** One of the key recommendations from the TC Pam 'Lessons Learned' workshop was to strengthen the connection between the NEOC and the JPOC to better leverage VPF resources during emergencies. Embedding police coordination into national disaster mechanisms has proven critical, bridging community-level response, technical coordination and international support. This integration enhances operational efficiency and ensures that law enforcement capabilities are effectively aligned with broader humanitarian and disaster response efforts.

CASE STUDY: PORT VILA EARTHQUAKE 2024

17 December 2024 | **7.3 magnitude** | **80,000 affected** | **14 fatalities** | **USD 230 million**

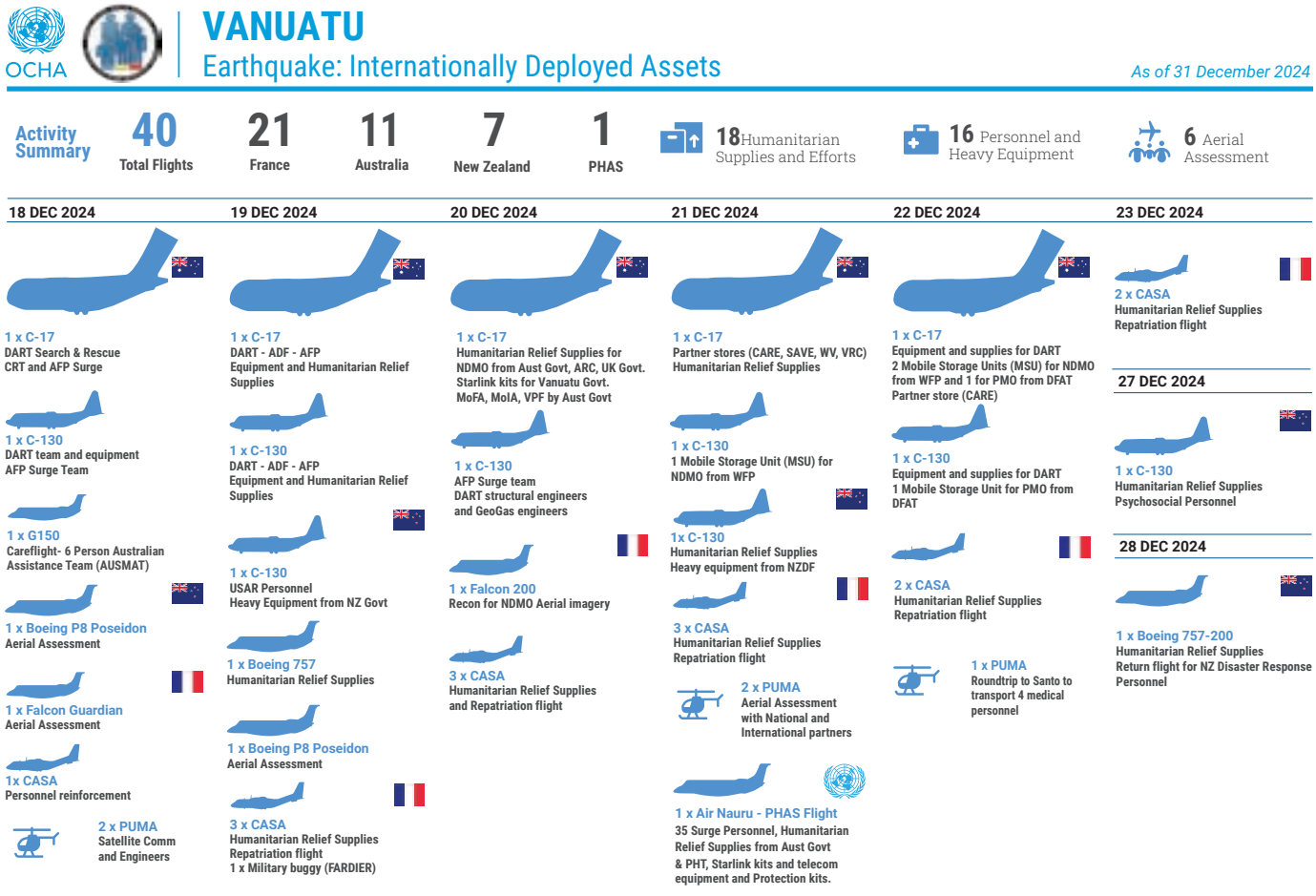
OVERVIEW

On 17 December 2024, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck 30 km west of Port Vila, Vanuatu, at 12:47 pm local time. A tsunami warning was issued but then lifted. Search and rescue operations were led by the VPF, with support from regional militaries and humanitarian organisations. Port Vila and surrounding areas on Efate Island were severely impacted with 14 confirmed fatalities. The Government of Vanuatu declared a state of emergency and mobilised a national response through the NDMO, with the VPF central in leading security, crowd management, and logistics for humanitarian delivery.

CIVIL–MILITARY COORDINATION

The VPF was deployed immediately following the earthquake, assisting with search-and-rescue alongside Fire Service and health teams (NDMO, 2024). VPF is a member of the National Security Taskforce, which was activated immediately after the earthquake struck. The JPOC was also rapidly utilised to lead search and rescue and reported on the number of injuries sustained in the population.

VPF maintained law and order in the declared state of emergency to ensure that orders issued, including curfew orders, were adhered to by the public.



Source: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-earthquake-internationally-deployed-assets-28-december-2024

The state of emergency remained in effect for Port Vila until 24 December during which a 7-day movement restriction was in effect in the heavily impacted business district of Port Vila. Officers coordinated traffic management to facilitate the movement of ambulances, heavy machinery and relief convoys in Port Vila. The VPF set up security perimeters around collapsed infrastructure and high-risk zones to protect civilians.

Working closely with the NEOC, the JPOC led search and rescue operations, in partnership with Pro-Medical, Australia, and New Zealand USAR teams and private companies, including militaries from other countries such as France and Papua New Guinea. The VPF also continued in its role to deal with increased gender-based violence following the earthquake and subsequent displaced populations, as per VPF records.

The VPF enforced the closure of the Port Vila central business district (CBD) following the earthquake, which left collapsed and unsafe buildings and widespread destruction. Community policing units were mobilised to support psychosocial first aid, communications and trust-building with affected communities. The VPF also worked with regional defence partners to secure airports and seaports for incoming humanitarian flights and shipments. The VPF maintained law and order throughout the emergency response period.

After leadership transitioned from the NEOC under the NDMO to the Recovery Operations Centre (ROC) within the PMO, the VPF continued to maintain law and order, ensuring security at ROC premises and enforcing government orders related to CBD closures and demolition of unsafe buildings. Following the earthquake experience, the NDMO established the National Search and Rescue cluster and the USAR cluster, as part of the national cluster system with VPF as lead.

The Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act, enacted in 2024, just prior to the earthquake, provided the framework for recovery efforts. As part of its implementation, the Government of Vanuatu developed a comprehensive Recovery and Resilience Plan. This plan builds on the rapid response and assessments carried out by the NDMO and the newly established ROC.

Key Learnings

- **Rapid activation of police-led search and rescue operations is essential.** The immediate deployment of the VPF, in coordination with the Fire Service, health teams and international partners, demonstrated the importance of pre-established emergency protocols. The swift activation of the JPOC enabled timely search and rescue efforts and injury reporting, reinforcing the value of having dedicated command centres for multi-agency coordination.
- **Law enforcement is a pillar of emergency management.** The VPF played a central role in enforcing the state of emergency, including curfews and CBD closures, ensuring public compliance and safety. The presence of VPF was critical in maintaining law and order, securing high-risk zones and protecting civilians from further harm. This highlights the need for clear legal frameworks and operational readiness for police forces during emergencies.
- **Integrated civil–military and inter-agency coordination has significant impact.** The earthquake response showcased effective collaboration between the VPF, the NEOC, regional defence partners, humanitarian organisations and private sector actors. This multi-layered coordination was essential for securing airports, seaports and facilitating the movement of relief convoys. It underscores the importance of joint planning, shared protocols and interoperability among agencies.
- **Connecting response to recovery aids resilience.** Despite the short timeframe of the earthquake response phase and the leadership shift from NEOC to the ROC under the Prime Minister's Office, the VPF continued to play a vital role in enforcing government orders, securing ROC premises, and supporting recovery activities. This demonstrates the importance of continuity in law enforcement roles throughout the disaster cycle from response to recovery. The enactment of the Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act (2024) also provided a clear mandate for VPF's role in disaster recovery, including road clearance, infrastructure repair, evacuation support and security provision. This legal clarity strengthens institutional accountability and ensures that police contributions are formally recognised and resourced.
- **Dedicated search and rescue clusters streamlines coordination.** Following the earthquake, the NDMO established the National Search and Rescue Cluster and USAR Cluster, with the VPF as the lead agency. This structural reform enhances the incorporation of VPF's work into the humanitarian space, signifying the critical role of VPF in disaster emergencies.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACMC	Australian Civil–Military Centre
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CCDRR	Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction
CDC	Community Disaster Committee
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
DREE	Disaster Response Exercise and Exchange
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EMT	Emergency Medical Team
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FRANZ	France-Australia-New Zealand Arrangement
HPA	Humanitarian Partnership Agreement
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JPOC	Joint Planning and Operations Centre
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoCC	Ministry of Climate Change
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NAB	National Advisory Board
NDC	National Disaster Committee
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NDRRP	National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy
NEOC	National Emergency Operations Centre
NFI	Non-Food Items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PEOC	Provincial Emergency Operations Centre
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
RCRC	Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
ROC	Recovery Operations Centre
SCA	Save the Children Australia
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TC	Tropical Cyclone
UN	United Nations
UN-OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNDAC	United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAR	Urban Search and Rescue

VANGO	Vanuatu Association of NGOs
VAPJP	Vanuatu–Australia Police and Justice Program
VHT	Vanuatu Humanitarian Team
VMF	Vanuatu Mobile Force
VPF	Vanuatu Police Force
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

RESOURCES

Australian Civil-Military Centre. (2015). *Cyclone Pam roundtable outcomes* report. https://www.acmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-11/ACMC_Cyclone-Pam_Roundtable_Outcomes.pdf

Australian Department of Defence. (2024). *Strengthening ties in Vanuatu*. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2024-09-19/strengthening-ties-vanuatu

Government of Vanuatu. (2015). *Tropical Cyclone Pam post-disaster needs assessment* (PDNA). https://dsppac.gov.vu/images/docs/PDNA/PDNA_Cyclone_Pam.pdf

Government of Vanuatu. (2019). *Disaster Risk Management Act No. 23 of 2019*. https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/van194358.pdf

Government of Vanuatu. (2024). *Bill for the Disaster Recovery and Resilience Act*. https://parliament.gov.vu/images/Bills/Bill_for_the_Disaster_Recovery_and_Resilience_Act_No._of_2024.pdf

Government of Vanuatu, & Pacific Community. (2015). *Tropical Cyclone Pam lessons learned workshop report*. https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/wordpresscontent/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/TC-Pam-Lessons-Learned-Report.pdf

Government of Vanuatu, & Pacific Community. (2021). *Strategic roadmap for emergency management (SREM)* 2021–2023. https://spccfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/48/48ad785079a9fd1b618f504cc7c29199.pdf

Indo-Pacific Defense Forum. (2025). *Allies, partners aid humanitarian efforts in earthquake-damaged Vanuatu*. https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/01/allies-partners-aid-humanitarian-efforts-in-earthquake-damaged-vanuatu/

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2018). *Cyclone Pam case*. https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/node/39

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2024). *Emergency appeal operational strategy*: Vanuatu. https://www.ifrc.org/emergency/vanuatu-earthquake

Government of Vanuatu (2025). *MOIA business plan*. https://moia.gov.vu/images/moia/PDF%20File/2025%20MOIA%20BUSINESS%20PLAN.pdf

National Disaster Management Office. (2024). *Situation report: Vanuatu earthquake response*. https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-earthquake-neoc-situation-report-10-09-january-2025

National Emergency Operations Centre. (2024). *Situation report #4 – Vanuatu earthquake*. https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-earthquake-neoc-situation-report-4-20-december-2024

Pacific Community. (2022). *Community policing & disaster preparedness in Vanuatu*. https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2022/05/pacific-led-emergency-management-system-helping-community-policing-in-vanuatu

Pacific Humanitarian Team. (2025). *Situation report #2 – Vanuatu earthquake*. https://pic.or.jp/ja/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20250107_PHT-SitRep-2_Vanuatu-EQ_FINAL.pdf

U.S. Army. (2016). *Pacific resilience disaster response exercise and exchange*. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/905364/pacific-resilience-disaster-response-exercise-and-exchange-kicks-off-in-port-vi/

United Nations Children's Fund. (2015). *UNICEF Cyclone Pam Relief and Recovery Situation Report*. https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/unicef-cyclone-pam-relief-and-recovery-situation-report-19-6-16-may-2015

United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination. (2025). *UNDAC deployment to Vanuatu earthquake response*. https://undac.un.org/en/article/undac-deployment-vanuatu-earthquake-response

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2015). *Tropical Cyclone Pam – Humanitarian snapshot (as of 19 March 2015)*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-tropical-cyclone-pam-humanitarian-snapshot-19-march-2015

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2015). *Vanuatu: Tropical Cyclone Pam situation report No. 15*. https://education.gov.vu/docs/press-releases/tc-pam/OCHA%20Tropical%20Cyclone%20Pam%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2015_as%20of%201%20April.pdf

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2024). *Flash update No. 1 – Vanuatu earthquake*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-earthquake-flash-update-no-1-17-december-2024-2000-local-time

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2024). *Flash update No. 4 – Vanuatu earthquake*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-earthquake-flash-update-no-4-20-december-2024-2200-local-time

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). *Humanitarian coordination structure (as of 30 June 2025)*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-humanitarian-coordination-structure-14-november-2023-0

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). *Humanitarian coordination structure – Vanuatu*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-humanitarian-coordination-structure-14-november-2023-0

United Nations News. (2024). *UN Surge Teams Mobilise as Vanuatu Hit By Second Earthquake*. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158471

Vanuatu Daily Post. (2024). *More assaults of women since Vanuatu earthquake – police inspector*. https://www.dailypost.vu/news/more-assaults-of-women-since-vanuatu-earthquake—-police-inspector/article_b38baa4e-f311-5972-995b-8383f915d9d4.html

Vanuatu National Disaster Management Office. (n.d.). *About us and resources*. https://ndmo.gov.vu/about-us

Vanuatu National Disaster Management Office. (2025). *NDMO website and resources*. https://ndmo.gov.vu/bi/

Vanuatu Police Force. (n.d.). *Emergency management*. https://police.gov.vu/what-we-do/safety-security/emergency-management

World Vision. (2015). *Response to Cyclone Pam*. https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/8411_CyclonePam_casestudy_FINAL.pdf