**Disaster Preparedness: A View from the Border**

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Thank you very much, for giving me the floor.

**Play the soundtrack**

What you just heard is the sound of the Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha‘apai undersea volcano in Tonga erupting on the January 15 2022, the largest volcanic eruption in the 21st century.

**Context**

Tonga is a small island developing state located in the Southwest Pacific. Tonga’s geological, and geographical location makes the country highly susceptible to hydro-meteorological events such as tropical cyclones, tsunamis, sea-level rise, earthquakes, and droughts which has resulted in causalities, property damage, affecting agriculture, fisheries and tourism facilities and the displacement of people.

The magnitude of the Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha‘apai volcanic eruption had eruption plumes that dispersed ash of between 5 to 50 mm thickness across the Ha‘apai, Tongatapu and ‘Eua island groups while the subsequent tsunami had waves of up to 15m, these events were entirely unexpected and unprecedented in nature. This led to other complexities, the submarine fibre optic cable for telecommunications was severed during the volcanic eruption, thus disconnecting internet and telephone lines and isolating Tonga’s communication to and from the rest of the world and internally. The already dire situation on the ground was further exacerbated with Tonga recording its first cases of community transmission of COVID-19 in February 2022. A country-wide lockdown was in place as the Government of Tonga prioritised containing the spread of the virus.

Due to climate change, Tonga has experienced more frequent and severe tropical cyclones and natural disasters, hydro-meteorological in nature. The Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha‘apai volcanic eruption and tsunami in 2022 though most recent and smaller in terms of economic damages US$90.4M or 18.5% of GDP compared to Cyclone Gita and Harold however, for the tourism sector, potentially more damaging. To illustrate this, Tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020 had economic damages equivalent to greater than US$111M or 25% of GDP, and Tropical Cyclone Gita in 2018 had US$164.1 million in damages or 38 % of GDP.

**Experiences and highlighting challenges faced in moving relief supplies across international borders during times of crisis**

During the Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha‘apai crisis, there was no internet connectivity due to the damage of the submarine telecommunications fiber optic cable, the blackout made it difficult to assess the damage and really know what Tonga needed. Not only that but stringent COVID-19 protocols implemented nationally on a “no-contact” [shipments of aid](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/tonga-volcano-eruption-tsunami-aid-aquaman-swim-rcna12851) arriving in from governments and humanitarian and relief agencies were applied. Tonga's borders remain closed, and all pandemic protocols remain in place, including a three-week quarantine for anyone arriving from outside the country.

This affected the response on how relief supplies were to be handled. All relief items arriving into Tonga through the main point of entry (port or airport) was held in the government relief supply warehouse for 72 hours before being released, as part of the government’s contactless response.

Logistics challenges impacted the timely shipment of equipment to Tonga, including disruptions in global supply chains, issues with import levies, and the availability of flights for cargo. The COVID-19 lockdown enforced in Tongatapu since 3 February 2022 impacted the availability of humanitarian focal points on the ground.

But this also means that aid groups must work with Tonga remotely, which is not easy. But the groups were willing to do whatever it takes to help, and that included the International Federation of the Red Cross relied on skeleton staff and a core group of volunteers to do essential “contactless” distribution.

1. **Role the humanitarian agencies played**

During the drastic events of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai, Governments, donor partners and humanitarian and relief agencies swiftly mobilised to deliver the need required consisting of humanitarian relief supplies, assisting with the restoration of the communication, cash grant and direct funding arrangements for recovery efforts.

Humanitarian supplies arrived in the capital, Nuku'alofa, through contact-less drop-off and release. All shipments had to undergo disinfection and 72-hour quarantine before being moved.

Localisation of humanitarian action in Tonga has been influenced by recent humanitarian responses, including the response to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Gita in 2018.

The humanitarian response architecture in Tonga uses the cluster system, the Government of Tonga has adopted a localised cluster approach with ten clusters, including Safety and Protection; Health, Nutrition and Water, Sanitation; and Education. with support from international and regional agencies within the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT). All the clusters are led by government ministries and coordinated by the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO). While the NEMO reports to the National Disaster Council of the Cabinet.

1. **Lessons learned**

In mitigation of the crisis dynamics, the Government immediately activated its key emergency institutions to lead the post-disaster response and coordinate humanitarian aid. Tonga has a well-developed disaster recovery framework, which has been strengthened in recent years through the generous support of development partners.

On January 18, the Government activated the “cluster” system to coordinate humanitarian partners. The National Emergency Fund (NEF) was fully drawn down to finance urgent repairs to key infrastructure and commence the ash clean-up.

The Government also quickly initiated a package of relief measures to mitigate the negative impacts on households, communities, and businesses.

This is where I will start to discuss overlaps with Trade Facilitation Agreement issues.

Through the Expedited Clearance to Facilitate the import of Vaccines, Medicines and Medical Products what worked was

* establishing a small multi-agency lead team comprised of Trade, biosecurity, health, and Customs officials.
* Expedited Clearance Briefing to Border Organisations.
* physical walk through and observation of each border agency process, identified areas for improved coordination and a real time understanding of the logistics procedures to support timely delivery of vaccines.
* Multiple public and private sector consultations.
* development of coherent, fit for purpose fact sheets for commercial and private importers as required by the Private sector in turn will also be useful for donors and guideline relating to the importation of critical vaccines, medicines, and medical products in response to Covid-19 preparedness, critical humanitarian, and relief shipments and in strengthening the resilience of Tonga’s national and international pharmaceutical supply chain.
* agency coordination and understanding enabled quick mobilisation for expedited clearance of the first consignment of covid vaccines (completed within 3 hours). The documentation requirements and encourages pre-clearance arrangements to be in place.
* implementation of further facilitation measures including Authorised Operators for trusted importers, improved coordination within the Ministry of Health.

The World Customs Organisation conducted a workshop for Tonga in September 2022 through support from the Government of Japan to develop standard operating procedures that refines the roles and procedures with a view to facilitating the processing of relief consignments.

* The outcome from this was robust standard operating procedures which resulted in the establishment of a list of essential and relief goods, coordination mechanisms, and cooperation with other government agencies.
* The important role that Customs play in managing disruptions and the perspective of humanitarian actors alongside the operational challenges they are facing, providing a platform to unite efforts and strengthen cooperation among disaster management stakeholders in Tonga.
* A practical guide to Customs clearance and regularisation of relief consignments in the event of natural disasters and other disruptive events was developed. This will be used in conjunction with the Tonga Disaster Management Act when it is adopted.
* While considering efficiency in the supply chain in relation to medicines, transport, and cross-border trade rules applicable to consignments containing humanitarian assistance other factors must be taken into consideration such as, several ministries and cross-border regulatory agencies have key roles in facilitating humanitarian and relief consignments. All need to be involved in disaster management preparedness and relief planning and implementation – particularly for highly regulated items such as, foodstuffs, vaccines, medication, medical equipment, vehicles, and telecommunications that may require specialist or rapid release at the border.

**Potential future work the WTO TFC could undertake to streamline and expedite humanitarian shipments**

Ensuring that Customs and other border clearance procedures are streamlined, coherent and operable, including during disasters and this in turn could be areas where the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement could help.

Development of standard operating procedures that are fit for purpose, plays a critical element in ensuring that all relevant agencies (at and behind the border) are aware of their roles in expediting the release and clearance of humanitarian shipments.

Experience from natural disasters and emergency situations has focused on the Tonga Customs and border agencies to give this issue due consideration, the performance at the border has improved but what remains is realising existing gaps in policies, plans, budgets, and decision-making processes. Ongoing reforms, training and awareness raising will assist in facilitating a coordinated and efficient approach to expediting national resilience and preparedness for unforeseen disasters or pandemics.

I thank you.