



2006 Tonga National Disability Identification Survey

Conducted through the Tonga Red Cross Society on behalf of DACTION, the Tonga Disability Action Committee

Executive Summary – English

The Tonga Red Cross Society has in partnership with the Disability Advisory Committee (DACTION), completed the National Disability Identification Survey, in the Kingdom of Tonga. This survey was aimed at identifying the prevalence of disability, major causes of disability, the level of involvement of people with disabilities in the community, educational and employment sectors, and the needs of people with disabilities in Tonga.

This survey has identified 2782 people with disabilities in Tonga, which represents approximately 2.8% of the total population. This is significantly lower than the disability figures of 10% of total populations estimated by the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). This discrepancy is partly because the survey did not include people with mild impairments. This is also due to the social stigma attached to having a disability in Tonga which prevented some people taking part in the survey. Because of this, the given results should be read as a conservative estimate of the actual number of people with disabilities in Tonga.

The most common types of disabilities identified in the survey were physical disabilities (36% of disabilities) followed by visual impairments (24%), and intellectual and learning disabilities (11% combined).

53% of people with disabilities experienced more than one disability (eg: physical disability and visual impairment), which has a compounding effect on the level of functioning of a person, the type of support they require and social stigma they experience.

The prevalence of disability was shown to increase dramatically with increasing age, 52% of people with disabilities were over the age of 61 years. The remaining disability population breakdown is as follows; working age (27%), youth (9%), primary school age (9%) and infants (1%).

The most significant cause of disability is the non-communicable diseases of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure (810 disabilities combined). 95% of people with a disability caused by non-communicable diseases were over the age of 40 years. These conditions often result in physical disabilities (80%) such as strokes (20%) and amputations (12%), as well as vision impairments (63%).

The aging process was the second most common cause of disability (767 disabilities) which often results in physical disabilities (70%), vision impairments (66%) and hearing impairments (28%), often experienced together (11%).

The onset of disability was most commonly over the age of 31 years (55%), with 30% of disabilities starting after the age of 61 years.

An early age of disability onset (15 years or below) was shown to dramatically reduce a persons access to educational opportunities, marriage prospects and increased the likelihood of the person being a single parent.

Many children with disabilities do not receive compulsory primary education, despite the Ministry of Education's claim of full primary education for 100% of Tongan children. This is because they either do not attend school at all (76 children), they are not given the support they require at school (up to 14% of children attending Government Primary Schools), or they attend Tonga Red Cross Society's Special Educational Facilities that are not recognised by the government as providing a formal education as they do not have trained teachers or a formal curriculum (24 children between the ages of 5-14 years).

Of the 2460 people with disabilities over the age of 15 years there are few in formal employment (3%). This is more than thirteen times less than the national formal employment rate of 39%. Many of these people are unemployed (33%). This is more than double the national unemployment rate of 13.3%. This is despite the fact that 37% of these people are independent in self-care, mobility and communication.

People with disabilities are up to twenty three times more likely to be living below recognised poverty indicators, as compared to the rest of the Tongan population.

People with disabilities have a great need for technical aids such as wheelchairs (813 people) and other mobility aids (587 people), and glasses (718 people). There is a great identified need for health care such as medical advice (1133 people), and access to therapy services (745 people). There is also a great need for wheelchair access to public built environments (671 people) as well as in people's private homes (583 people).

The greatest identified need was for improvements in attitudes towards and the inclusion of people with disabilities in to mainstream society (1608 people).

There are many ways in which different sectors in Tonga can work together to create a more inclusive society and address the needs of people with disabilities. These issues can be addressed by individuals, Government Ministries, non-government and international organisations.

Some of the most significant steps that Tonga needs to take in becoming a more inclusive society include:

- Developing a National Disability Coordinating Committee, composed of people with disabilities, government and non-government stakeholders, under the government to promote inclusive practices throughout Tonga;
- Consulting people with disabilities in any decisions that will directly affect them. This should be done through consultation with the disability self advocacy organisation, Naunau 'o e 'Alamaite Tonga Association (NATA);
- Creating an inclusive education system;
- Ensuring that people with disabilities have access to public built environments and public transport;
- Increasing the level of health care and community support available to people with disabilities;
- Improving the employment and income generation opportunities of people with disabilities; and most importantly by
- Improving the attitudes of society towards people with disabilities.

There are many models of inclusion, several of which can be found in other Pacific Island Countries. The potential benefits of an inclusive society are not only to people with disabilities and their families, but to Tonga as a whole through improved economic and social development, and strengthened international partnerships.