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PROCEEDINGS OF THE AODRO SEMINAR ON THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF DISASTER EMERGENCY AID ON DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

This special edition of the AODRO NEWSLETTER contains the full text of papers presented at the AODRO Non-Government Organisation seminar, held in Sydney, 4 August 1986. Representatives from Australian, Pacific and International non-governmental and governmental agencies, disaster research institutes and disaster management services, and representatives from disaster-impacted countries addressed and/or attended the meeting.

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Mr Tevita Latukefu



[Mr Latukefu was born on the island of Tongatapu in Tonga. He migrated to Australia to study carpentry at Sydney Technical College. After qualifying he moved to Canberra to study architectural drafting, where he now works as an Architectural Draftsman in the Department of Housing and Construction. Following the impact of Isaac Mr Latukefu returned to Tonga to assist his kin-folk, working for two months on housing reconstruction, mainly in his birth place, Kolovai.]

INTRODUCTION

Tonga, a small independent Kingdom and a member country of the Commonwealth of Nations, is situated about 17,000 km, North-east of New Zealand. It is made up of

three main island groups: Tongatapu group in the south; Ha'apai group in the centre; and Vava'u group in the north. The total area is 697 sq km and the main island, Tongatapu, is only 260 sq km. There are 169 small islands in the Kingdom and only 36 are permanently inhabited. Some are volcanic and others coral. The total population is a little less than 100,000 people, most of whom are Polynesians. The climate is mild to warm, and is quite humid, and cyclones occur from time to time. Copra and bananas provide the basis of its mixed economy. Yam, taro, tapioca and sweet potatoes, banana and breadfruit provide most of the people's food crops. The capital is Nuku'alofa on the main island, Tongatapu. Communications in the form of telephones and radio broadcasting are provided on all except the very remote islands. There is also a well developed road system for motor vehicles and buses. There are also regular shipping and air services.

CYCLONE ISAAC

Tropical cyclones have occurred in Tonga from time to time, mainly between December and March. Some were quite severe, some moderate and others only relatively mild.

Isaac, however, proved to be the most horrifying and most destructive in living memory. No one could recall anything so frightening and so devastating as this before.

Most people were caught unprepared when Isaac struck. The people have long term indicators that they usually look for to make some rough predictions as to whether or not there is going to be a cyclone when the "season" approaches. One of these indicators is plenty of rain. Whenever there is heavy and continual rainfall at the beginning of the rainy season, which arrives towards the end of the old year and the beginning of the New Year, the people would say with a great deal of optimistic expectation, "Ngalingali te afa 'uha pe he ta'u'ni" (It looks as though we are going to have a rainy hurricane (without wind) this year).

About two or three months before Isaac struck, there had been a great deal of rain, and there had therefore been great optimism among the people that the New Year (1982) was going to be "safe".

Another indicator was the new crop of bread-fruit which arrives with the rainy season towards the end of the year. If a bumper crop arrives, the people would point to this as a possible sign of a severe cyclone to follow, and they would lament the fact that a potentially beautiful crop could be severely damaged, if not completely destroyed by the ensuing cyclone. The new crop of bread-fruit which arrived towards the end of 1981 was far from being bumper, and one of my brothers who was holidaying in Tonga at the time, remembered how he himself remarked on this fact to villagers who readily agreed with him that this was one of the signs that the New Year was going to be safe.

Another indicator was the abundance of spider webs across bush tracks which people use to go to their gardens. It was pointed out to my brother on New Year's Eve, 1981-2 in one of the islands of Ha'apai, that the bush tracks were full of spider webs. They told him that spiders could feel if there was going to be a cyclone in the near future or not. If there was to be a cyclone, spiders then would not waste their time weaving their webs across the bush tracks only to be destroyed by the strong wind.

The general expectation therefore, was that the New Year, 1982, was going to be a safe

year, free from tropical cyclones.

DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF ISAAC

1. Housing

Since World War II, there has been a gradual moving away from building houses with bush materials. To build a traditional Tongan house, coconut trees had to be cut down, the trunks were used to build the framework of the house, and leaves were used for thatching. Coconut leaf thatching has to be renewed every two to three years. This meant cutting off more and more coconut leaves. This affected copra production which together with bananas provide the basis of Tonga's mixed economy. The other type of traditional roofing materials were made from the leaves of a special type of sugarcane called au. This type of roofing material lasts three or four times longer than the roofing material made from coconut leaves. However, au takes a lot out of the soil, and once planted they are required to remain in that piece of ground for several years. In small islands with limited area of land available for gardening, it is no longer economical to continue planting au. The trend, therefore, had been to build houses with permanent materials, using imported timbers and corrugated iron.

Some houses had been well designed, solidly built and properly furnished, while others, the majority of houses in the villages, were only very simple single-room structures without furniture. These were quite functional, however, once they were put up, and there was no need to renew the roofs, walls or floors every two or three years. When the owners could afford it, they tried to improve the original house by adding a room or two to it, and so on. These houses could also withstand bad weather and cyclones better than average Tongan houses.

Most of these houses built of permanent materials were paid for with money earned overseas, particularly in New Zealand, by members of various families working there, or by owners themselves who had gone to New Zealand to work for three, six, nine or more months. They live simply and inexpensively, in order to save money for the purpose of building a permanent house on their return to Tonga. By the end of 1981, no traditional Tongan house could be seen any longer in most of the villages on the main island of Tongatapu. In the remote islands of Ha'apai and Vava'u, Tongan houses still remained.

Normally, when people expected a cyclone, they would put up strong supports to their houses and provide braces to hold down the roofing. But as people in 1982 were caught unprepared, and as the ferocity of Cyclone Isaac was unprecedented, the devastation was extremely frightening. In some villages, except for a church or school building, not a single house survived. In others, only the few well planned and properly constructed houses withstood the destruction. In my village, for example, one of the larger villages in Tonga, our family house was one of the few that survived Isaac. The plan for the house was from Canberra, and it was built by the first Tongan fully qualified carpenter who had his training in Sydney. Twelve families, large families, lived under the house during the cyclone and for a few days after, before emergency aid became available. There was only enough room for crawling, sitting and lying. A three bedroom house, about thirty metres in front of our house, was smashed to pieces, and a huge hunk of it was lifted into the air and thrown against one corner of our house. One member of the family was hurt, but only slight damage was done to the house by it.

Some houses in other villages disappeared altogether, and houses in low lying areas were flooded by the big storm surge brought by the cyclone. Occupants had only time to swim to safety. There was no chance of rescuing their possessions. People were really stunned, and it took several days to recover from the shock and the horror of the experience.

2. Food Supply and Vegetation

Tongans eat more vegetables than meat, a diet which until very recently had been denounced by dietary experts. They obtain their vegetables from root crops such as yam, taro, tapioca and sweet potatoes, and from fruit trees such as bread-fruit, coconut and banana. Early in 1982, the people could not weed their yam gardens because of the rain. Any attempt to do so, would have killed the yams, and the fast growing weeds checked the yams' growth seriously. In addition, the heavy rainfall saturated the soil and caused most of the root crops to rot. The arrival of Isaac accelerated the process.

Fruit trees were laid bare of their fruits, and because the ground was so soft after two or three months of heavy rain, most trees were completely uprooted. The very few that

were able to stand, had all their branches stripped off them, and only the bare trunks remained. The same applied to other fruit trees such as mango trees, paw-paw trees and citrus trees. Other trees and bushes were equally devastated. The land was bare, and people could look in any direction for miles, for hardly any vegetation was there to obstruct their vision. It was a land of absolute desolation, and food crops were almost non-existent. Some animals miraculously escaped, but many were either drowned where land was flooded or killed by falling trees and flying debris. Fish traps which provided most of the fish for local consumption were also destroyed.

3. Communication

Radio and telephone communication with the outside world, as well as within the country were completely destroyed. It took several days for engineers to restore vital communications. Roads were cut off either by floods or by trees, especially tall coconut trees, blown across them. It took days, and in some cases, weeks to clear and repair the roads. Boats and canoes were either badly damaged or disappeared altogether, and those small isolated islands that were dependant on them entirely for communication were completely isolated.

4. Economy

Copra and banana form the basis of the Tongan economy. Other crops such as watermelon, pineapple and vanilla were also grown for both internal consumption and export markets. All these were destroyed and the economy was in tatters. While some crops such as corn and potatoes for home consumption would have taken six or eight months to mature, others for export, such as bananas and pineapples would have needed eighteen to twenty-four months, and coconut trees seven to eight years to produce. To add to this unprecedented problem, a severe and long drought followed Isaac. This was, again, very unusual and, as a result, the time it took for the economy to recover was unusually long and painful. Water supplies were also affected in most areas by the destruction of catchment areas on housing roofs, and some water tanks were damaged.

AUSTRALIAN AND OTHER FOREIGN AID AND THEIR EFFECTS ON TONGAN SOCIETY

The Australian aid was prompt and effective. When Isaac struck in Tonga in 1982, a well oiled machine was there, ready to move at a

moment's notice. Hence the promptness of Australia's response which, together with our much closer neighbour, New Zealand, provided the immediate aid that the little Kingdom badly needed. Later, aid from our Pacific Island neighbours and the United Kingdom also arrived to provide not only for the short-term needs, but also for the long-term needs of the people. A closer examination of the effects of foreign aid reveals that it produced both positive and negative effects.

1. Beneficial Effects

Although the entire Kingdom was badly affected, the centre of Isaac appeared to have gone through the small isolated islands of the Ha'apai group and the western side of the main island of Tongatapu where I come from. The immediate needs of the people were shelter, clothing, food, and most importantly, psychological comfort. The shock and the feeling of helplessness among the people of small isolated and remote islands must have been devastating. The people are all Christians and are quite devout. At a moment like this, they automatically turn to God for help, comfort and guidance. The impact on them of the arrival of helicopters and transport planes filled with tonnes of emergency supplies was regarded as blessings and reassurances.

Tents, sheets, blankets, clothing and food were unloaded and immediately distributed among the people. Builders and engineers, both local and overseas, and materials arrived and started to clear the roads connecting villages and the main centres.

The bulk of the supplies were stored in the capital, Nuku'alofa, in big warehouses, from which they were taken to the main centres in Ha'apai, Vav'u and the two Niuas, for distribution to the villages. A Disaster Relief Committee was set up by the Tongan Government to be in charge of collecting and distributing the aid, within the Ministry of Works headed by Dr. Langi Kavaliku, the Minister for Education and Works.

With the help of modern equipment supplied by the emergency aid, the villagers were organised to clear the land. This work took a few months to complete for trunks of fallen trees were not easy to cut and clear away. The drought that followed Isaac, helped to make this work easier. However, it made any attempt at immediate replanting of crops virtually impossible, prolonging the length of time it took to achieve self

sufficiency in locally produced vegetables. Seeds of fast growing crops such as corn and Irish potatoes and other vegetable seeds, were still distributed to families for planting, and when rain eventually arrived it ensured their tremendous success.

Families who lost their houses, were given the opportunity of depositing seven hundred pa'anga (dollars) and the Relief Committee supplied the balance (two thousand pa'anga) for the building of a relief house for the family. It was a properly built simple single-room structure, which the people could improve and enlarge when they obtained enough money to do so. People were allowed to borrow the seven hundred pa'anga from the Bank of Tonga if they did not have the cash for the deposit. Very generous donations were also obtained from various churches and private donors by local churches and private organisations to rebuild church and school buildings, boats and cement tanks for the people.

For long-term development, help was given to the people to replant their banana and coconut trees. Seeds and fertilizers were distributed free by the Department of Agriculture. Animal feed was also donated to individuals who ventured into raising pigs and chickens scientifically.

The disaster relief aid did not have any major or significant effects on the culture of the people. Cultural change had always been there in Tonga, although not markedly until the experience of World War II. The impact of the presence of the U.S. and New Zealand service-men and women were extremely significant. After the war, the momentum was maintained by overseas travel, education migration and tourism. The trend to use more and more imported foods, clothing and building materials had been going on for decades before Isaac.

What the disaster relief did however, and this was indeed very significant, was to bring home rather vividly and dramatically to the minds and hearts of the Tongans, the realisation that Australia and New Zealand where some of their relatives and friends had gone to live, study or work, had found out about their plight, cared enough about their sufferings, and had come to their rescue in a remarkably practical way. It must have been a tremendous comfort to them, lifting their spirits, boosting their morale, reviving their courage and renewing their hope for a promising future.

2. Negative Effects.

Apparently, there have been some negative effects of the foreign disaster relief aid. What I have to say here is based entirely on second-hand information. I had no opportunity to check these rumours.

It has been said that the amount of foreign aid supplied on account of Isaac, was far too much and was more than what Tonga needed at the time. It somehow destroyed the sense of responsibility and the initiative of many people. In the past, so the argument runs, our ancestors had to rely on their own resourcefulness, and their readiness to help each other to overcome the problems they had to face as a result of natural disasters. But this time, many people developed a shamefully dependent mentality, relying on the aid to supply what they needed, and the community feelings for each other were somehow seriously compromised.

Deep, ill-feelings developed because some believed that other people received more aid supplies than they really deserved due to despicable favouritism on the part of certain officials. This ill feeling has poisoned social relationships.

The severity of Isaac and the great fund of good will among many Australians and New Zealanders towards the little Kingdom caused many private donors to be over-generous with their aid to Tonga. It has been alleged that certain individuals with good contacts and knowledge of how to exploit these resources managed to get huge grants from these donors for projects supposedly for the benefit of the victims of Isaac.

Apparently, a large proportion of these funds were used instead to build up family interests. Very few checks were ever made to see if the aid funds were properly used. There was, unfortunately, a great deal of misplaced trust in these cases.

The decision of the Disaster Relief Committee to make everyone pay a deposit of seven hundred pa'anga for their relief houses appears to have been an unfortunate mistake. While public servants and people with secure jobs, and those with financial help from relations overseas could afford to pay the seven hundred pa'anga, many who had to borrow the amount from the Bank could not pay back the loans, and the bank has now repossessed these houses. The poor people who needed the aid the most, have suffered greater hardship and also the social stigma of having their houses repossessed on account of their insolvency.

CONCLUSION

In the main, foreign disaster relief aid to Tonga on account of Isaac, served its purpose well. It was a tremendous success. The few things that appear to have gone wrong, were due mainly to lack of planning, co-ordination and proper supervision both among the Tongans and among generous foreign donors. We always have a lot to learn from past experiences and mistakes, and these problems could be ironed out quite easily in future cases of emergency disaster relief aid. The positive effects of the whole exercise in Tonga on account of Isaac, however, will be remembered by our people for many years to come, with deep gratitude and affection.