

# **Executive Summary**

## **Child Poverty in Tonga**

Nuku'alofa, Kingdom of Tonga

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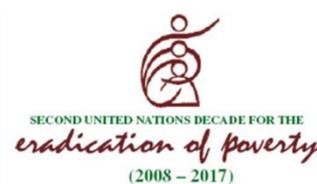
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# Child Poverty in Tonga

## Summary

- This is the first study of child poverty in the Kingdom of Tonga and the results show that: around one in seven children (13%) do not have adequate diets by today's standards; their families cannot afford to provide their children with 'three meals a day' or 'one meal with fish, meat or vegetarian equivalent daily'. Food deprivation is worse in the rural islands compared with Tongatapu.
- Around one in five children do not have essential clothing items such as new properly fitting shoes, all school uniforms and equipment, or new clothes when the old clothes wear out.
- About a third of the children in Tonga suffer from social deprivation. Their families cannot afford celebrations on special occasions such as the children's birthdays, they cannot afford school trips and school events which cost money, or equipment for outdoor leisure activities, like a bicycle.
- Three out of every five (59%) children live in households which cannot afford to maintain adequate living standards for all household members. That is, they cannot afford regular savings for emergencies or all medicines prescribed by a doctor when sick or their own means of transportation. They are also unlikely to be able to afford to replace worn-out furniture or repair broken electrical goods, like refrigerators.
- About one in every 10 children in Tonga live in households who either cannot afford enough bed and beddings for every child or a suitable place for study or do homework at home.

## Introduction and background information

Poverty in Tonga has been mainly measured using only information about household incomes collected by the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES). This is what has been used to report the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). However, there is a widespread international consensus that there are non-monetary aspects of poverty which are not captured using such approaches. This is an important issue, especially for Small

Islands Developing States (IDS) like Tonga as our people also rely on their own production and often give and receive gifts and other 'resources in-kind' from relatives, friends and neighbours, through traditional customs of sharing and exchange. Such practices are often not recorded in the income data in the HIES.

Collecting reliable data on household and personal income is always challenging, particularly in low income or developing countries. As a result, there has been a shift to a wider focus to collect information on important *non-monetary aspects* of poverty (i.e. more than simply a low income).

This is the first systematic scientific study of child poverty in Tonga. It is part of a larger study assessing poverty of both adults and children in Tonga, using a 'Consensual Deprivation Approach'. The Consensual Approach is democratic as it takes into account the views of the general public, rather than relying solely on the views of 'experts'. It effectively democratises the definition and measurement of poverty and has been used successfully in many countries, including all 29 European Union countries and many middle and low income countries including Bangladesh, Vietnam, Mali, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Benin and South Africa. Countries in the Pacific region, including Japan, Australia and New Zealand have also applied the approach successfully.

In each of these studies, a representative sample of the population is provided with a list of items and activities and asked to identify which are necessities of life that everyone should be able to afford to have or do. Those items/activities for which more than 50% of the population think everyone should be able to have/do are considered to be socially perceived necessities and then used for further scientific analyses. Popular consensus therefore decides the social norms of Tongan society and thus how poverty is defined and assessed (i.e. as enforced exclusion from these social norms due to a lack of money and other resources).

### **Basic necessities for Children in Tonga**

Basic necessities for children in Tonga were determined by a nationally representative sample of adults who took part in the Tonga National 2012 Demographic Health Survey

(DHS). Fifteen items and activities relating to the needs and development of children were considered essential by almost everyone. This means each of these items were considered to be ‘socially perceived necessities’, as shown in **Table 1**

**Table 1 – Perception of children necessities and how many lacked them**

| Children's items   | %<br>Essential | % of<br>children<br>being<br>deprived |
|--|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| One meal with meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent daily        | 99%            | 8%                                    |
| Three meals a day  | 99%            | 8%                                    |
| Enough beds and bedding for every child in the household       | 98%            | 11%                                   |
| All school uniform and equipment required                      | 97%            | 6%                                    |
| New properly fitting shoes                                     | 97%            | 12%                                   |
| A suitable place to study or do homework                       | 96%            | 10%                                   |
| Celebration on special occasions                               | 96%            | 17%                                   |
| Some new not second-hand clothes                               | 95%            | 15%                                   |
| Participate in school trips and school events that costs money | 95%            | 11%                                   |
| Bicycle  | 77%            | 24%                                   |
| <b>Household items</b>   |                |                                       |
| Enough money to repair any broken goods (e.g. Refrigerator)    | 98%            | 43%                                   |
| Enough money to replace any worn out furniture                 | 97%            | 44%                                   |
| Having your own means of transportation (e.g. Car, boat, etc)  | 95%            | 33%                                   |
| All medicine prescribed by your doctor when you are sick       | 95%            | 24%                                   |
| Regular savings for emergencies                                | 94%            | 32%                                   |

Source: Tonga 2012 Demographic Health Survey

There is a wide consensus across Tongan society that these fifteen possessions and activities are necessities which all families with children should be able to provide for their children. It does not matter whether respondents are men or women, young or old or even where they live; everyone agrees on what are necessities for children in Tonga today.

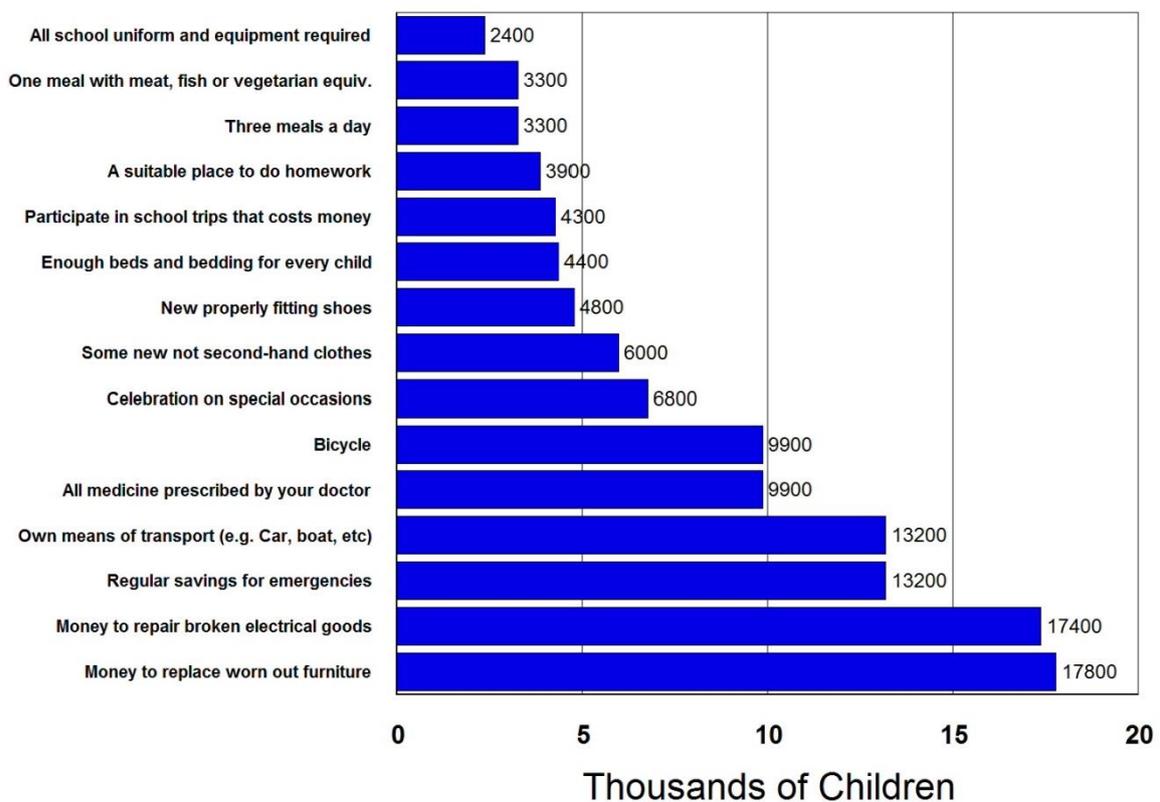
The people of Tonga do not restrict their interpretation of what is ‘essential’ for children to the basic material needs for survival or subsistence diet, shelter and clothing. A substantial majority of Tongans identified other dimensions related to *social customs, obligations* and *activities* as top necessities of life for children. For example, nearly everyone identified events to do with food as necessities and these items extend the dietary needs well beyond the provision of the minimal calories required for mere survival. *Social customs* are important to Tongans: children need clothes that do more than just cover their bodies for warmth, they need shoes which fit properly and do not harm their growing feet, they need

the required school uniform and to replace worn out clothes with some new clothes. Similarly, Tongan’s believe that children need beds to sleep in and a suitable place for study and do homework

### How many children lack necessities in Tonga

Figure 1 shows how many children in Tonga lack the necessities of life due to their families having too little money.

**Figure 1: Number of Deprived Children in Tonga**



The percent of children deprived of socially perceived necessities are shown in the final columns of **Table 1**. A large proportion of children live in households unable to afford items considered essential by Tongan society. About a quarter of children (9,900) live in households who cannot afford ‘*all medicine prescribed by doctor when sick*’, and one-third (13,200) cannot afford either ‘*regular savings for emergency*’ or ‘*own means of transportation*’. Nearly half of children (17,800) live in households who either cannot afford to ‘*repair worn out furniture*’ or ‘*repair electrical goods*’.

Similarly, around a quarter of children are not able to have a hobby or leisure activity due to a lack of money, 8% (3,300) live in households who cannot afford either *'three meals a day'* or *'one daily meal with fish, meat or vegetarian equivalent'*.

These items can be grouped to see how many children are deprived of clothing, food, etc and this can be useful for policy makers. Table 2 shows that over half the children in Tonga suffer at least one household deprivation including around a third suffering from social deprivation and a fifth from clothing deprivation.

**Table 2 – Proportion and Estimated number of deprived children in Tonga**

| Deprivation Group     | Percent | Number of Children |
|-----------------------|---------|--------------------|
| Household             | 59      | 24,000             |
| Social                | 32      | 13,200             |
| Material              | 29      | 11,600             |
| Clothing              | 20      | 8,300              |
| Children's facilities | 14      | 5,700              |
| Food                  | 13      | 5,200              |
| Education             | 6       | 2,300              |

Source: Tonga 2012 Demographic Health Survey.

### The number of poor children in Tonga.

The number of poor children in Tonga can be estimated from the deprivation data as poverty is closely associated with multiple deprivation. In this research, children lacking five or more socially perceived necessities were considered to be living in poverty. Using this threshold:

- 29% of children in Tonga were classed as living in poverty - around 11,800 children;
- 36% of children did not experience any of deprivation of any SPN.

Rates of child poverty were highest among:

- The rural islands;
- Large families, particularly with more children;
- Children of parents with low educational attainment;

- Children in households with a disable household member.

The strengths of this approach is that it is based on the real living conditions of children and the beliefs of the Tongan people about how children should be able to live..

### Conclusion

This is the first study of child poverty in Tonga. Large numbers of children are suffering from deprivation and almost a third (29%) of Tongan children are poor – they suffer from five or more deprivations. A large majority of people in Tonga want to see children having better lives. It is very important to continue to measure the extent and nature of child poverty in Tonga as good measurement is needed to anti-poverty policies are working effectively and efficiently.

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August 2015