



‘OFA TUI mo e AMANAKI’ CENTRE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

**Tonga Red Cross Society: “LOVE, FAITH AND
HOPE CENTRE FOR CHILDREN WITH
DISABILITIES**

CASE STUDY

Photo description: ‘Ofa Tui mo e ‘Amanaki Centre following a major renovation.
Photo credit: Tonga Red Cross



Photo description: A photo from 1979 showing the early beginnings of the 'Ofa Tui mo e Amanaki Centre'. It features some of the first students alongside their parents, highlighting the initial community that came together in support of the Centre's mission. Photo credit: Tonga Red Cross.

Background

The 'Ofa Tui mo e Amanaki' (OTA) Centre is a living legacy of the late Queen, Her Majesty Halaevalu Mata'aho, who served as the President of the Centre from October 1972 until her passing in 2017. The name 'Ofa Tui mo e Amanaki' translates to: Love, Faith and Hope in Tongan, embodying the Centre's mission to provide compassionate and hopeful support to persons with disabilities.

Inspired by Her Majesty's vision and compassion, the Centre was established in 1976 under the auspices of the Tonga Red Cross Society to address the growing needs of people with disabilities in the Kingdom of Tonga.

Originally functioning as part of the Tonga Red Cross Society, the OTA Centre holds the distinction of being the first formal institution in Tonga dedicated to the care, support, and development of persons with disabilities. During its early years, the Centre provided services to a wide demographic supporting people of all ages and a range of disabilities, including visual and hearing impairments.

Over time, and in response to evolving priorities and funding limitations, the OTA Centre has refined its focus. It now primarily serves children with disabilities between the ages of 5 and 18, placing a strong emphasis on early intervention, education and skill development. This targeted approach enables the Centre to make a lasting impact during critical development years, fostering inclusion and empowerment for children with disabilities in Tonga.

Who was Supported and How

Historically, individuals with disabilities in Tonga have encountered substantial challenges, including limited access to education, social participation, healthcare, and specialized support services. These barriers often resulted in isolation, reduced opportunities and a lack of advocacy for their rights and inclusion within society.

In response to these longstanding needs, the Ofa Tui Amanaki Centre supports children and young adults with a range of disabilities (physical, intellectual, sensory) by providing a specially designed school environment, daily living skills training, transport/ access support, home outreach, recreation/inclusion activities and for older learners, vocational training. The OTA Centre remains one of the key specialised services in Tonga, run by the Tonga Red Cross Society.

Services and Support Provided

- i. Education: The OTA Centre provides classroom lessons and training in an educational environment for children aged roughly five through young adulthood.
- ii. Daily Living Skills & Socialization: The Centre focuses on helping students develop fundamental daily life skills, socialization, recreation and safe learning environments.
- iii. Transport/ Access Support: The OTA Centre received a dedicated vehicle to transport students, acknowledging mobility and access barriers.
- iv. Home-visiting and Outreach: The OTA Centre runs home- visiting programmes for children and families who cannot attend the Centre regularly. This is not only part of the OTA Centre but also contributes to the wider disability inclusion services and support that the Tonga Red Cross Society provides from time to time.
- v. Vocational and Life Skills for older students: For students over 18 years of age, the OTA Centre offers programmes to build skills such as sewing, handicrafts, computers to stimulate income generation and empower greater agency and independence.
- vi. Recreation and Inclusion activities: The OTA Centre works with organizations such as the Tonga Football Association to engage children and adults in fun activity programmes to promote health, inclusion and physical activity.

Successes

The OTA Centre continues to strive to make a lasting impact in the lives of children with disabilities and their families, while also contributing to broader societal change. Key achievements include:

i. Empowering families through Training and Support

Families have received hands-on training in caregiving, equipping parents and guardians with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to better support their children's unique needs. This initiative has strengthened family bonds, improved daily care practices, and fostered a deeper understanding of disability within the home environment.

ii. Influencing national policy and promotion of disability inclusion

The OTA Centre has played a key role in advocating for disability rights and accessibility at the national level. Its continuous engagement with government bodies, NGOs, and community leaders has helped shape public dialogue and policy reforms aimed at creating a more inclusive and equitable society for individuals with special needs.

iii. Supporting recovery efforts Post-Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai Eruption

Following the devastating Hunga Tonga- Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption in January 2022, the OTA Centre actively participated in recovery efforts, focusing on the needs of current students and former students. Initiatives included providing psychological support, facilitating access to essential services, and ensuring continuity in education and care despite the challenges posed by their disaster.

iv. Advocacy with Ministry of Education

Tonga Red Cross Society’s vision for the OTA Centre focusing on providing quality education and like skills training for children with disabilities, has significantly influenced the Tonga Ministry of Education’s approach to inclusive education. The OTA Centre’s success in creating a safe and nurturing learning environment has highlighted the potential for inclusive practices and has encouraged the Ministry to review and adapt its own policies and programs to better support students with disabilities.

The OTA has influenced the Ministry of Education to benchmark:

- Demonstrating the need: The OTA Centre has shown that children with disabilities can learn and thrive in a supportive educational setting, challenging the societal belief that they cannot.
- Promoting inclusive practices: The Centre’s success in providing fundamental life skills and fostering independence has encouraged the Ministry to consider integrating similar approaches into mainstream schools.
- Advocating for resources: The Tonga Red Cross has actively advocated for increased resources and support for special education, which has prompted the Ministry to allocate more funding and develop programs for students with disabilities.
- Shifting mindsets: The OTA Centre’s work has helped to shift public perception and attitudes towards disability, encouraging more inclusive and accepting society.
- Providing training and support: The OTA Centre’s experience had informed the Ministry’s teacher training programs, equipping educators with the skills and knowledge to support students with diverse learning needs.

These milestones are a testament to the OTA Centre’s holistic approach addressing both the immediate needs of children and families while championing long term-systematic change.

Challenges and Difficulties

Despite its ongoing impact, the OTA Centre continues to navigate several key challenges that affect the scope and delivery of its services:

i. Financial constraints

Limited and inconsistent funding remains a significant barrier. It restricts the Centre’s ability to expand its programs, invest in resources, and continue providing services to individuals with disabilities beyond the age of 18. Long term financial sustainability is crucial to meeting growing community needs.

The Government of Tonga provided assistance to the OTA Center since its beginning in the late 1970’s to 2016 of TOP1,000 annually. However, in 2017 the government increased its contribution to TOP40,000. Unfortunately, in 2019 the government suspended all their financial support and that remains the present status.

ii. Stigma and social barriers

Cultural misconceptions and deeply rooted stigma surrounding disability continue to hinder the full social participation of children with disabilities. These societal attitudes often limit opportunities for inclusion, acceptance, and understanding within both schools and communities.

iii. Shortage of specialized personnel

There is a persistent need for trained professionals, including speech therapists, occupational therapists, special education teachers, and mobility specialists. The limited availability of such expertise in Tonga challenges the Centre's ability to offer comprehensive and specialized support.

iv. Adapt to crises and disasters

The OTA like any other service provider also faces challenged when hit by uncertainty and crisis. During situations like COVID19 the best interest of the students are considered and services are suspended to ensure safety and well-being of students. This is something the National Society will consider in longer term planning on how to best to continue the curriculum for students to ensure minimal disruption casued by disasters and crises.

Lessons Learned

To build on its successes and address existing gaps, the Centre is focused on a strategic vision for sustainable growth and inclusive development:

1- Expansion of Early Intervention Programs

Increase outreach to younger children to provide development support at the earliest stages. Early intervention is critical in improving long-term outcomes for children with disabilities.

2- Strengthen Collaborative Partnerships

Foster stronger collaboration with mainstream schools, government ministries, and local and international NGOs. These partnerships are vital for promoting inclusive education, shared resources, and advocacy efforts.

3- Securing Long-Term Funding and Broadening Services

Advocate for increased financial support to enable service expansion beyond the current age limit. This includes developing pathways for continued education, vocational training, and independent living support for youth transitioning into adulthood.