



► Tonga: Country Factsheet

[Working Draft]

2024

Key Points

- Tonga has a labour force participation rate of 59.6 per cent.
- Tonga has ratified one in-force ILO convention; future ratification priorities include the remaining fundamental conventions including on forced labour (C029 and C105), and the right to organise and collectively bargain (C087 and C098).
- Priority labour rights challenges in Tonga include combatting child labour and discriminatory gender norms and introducing labour rights legislation.
- Tonga's tripartite constituents are the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development; Tonga Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and the Tonga National Workers Council.

► Country overview

The Kingdom of Tonga is a Polynesian archipelago in the South Pacific. Tonga has a population of 100,179 people in 2021.ⁱ Tonga has a narrow export base in agricultural goods and experienced negative growth at -2.44 per cent in 2022, when GDP per capita was US\$4,548.ⁱⁱ It is categorised as an upper-middle income country by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD.ⁱⁱⁱ Tonga lies on the Pacific Ring of Fire, an area of dynamic geological activity. It is ranked the second most vulnerable country to natural hazards (after Vanuatu).

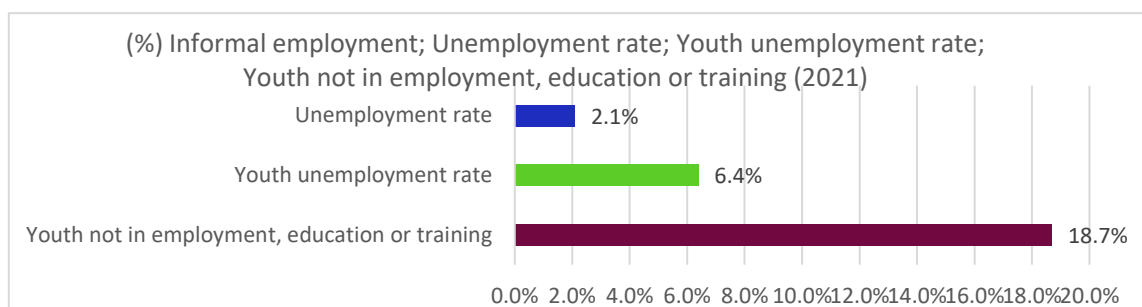
Key Data

- **Population:** 100,179
- **Working-age population:** 64,900
- **Labour force participation rate:** 59.6%
 - Women: 50.5%
 - Men: 70.1%

Source: ILO, "ILO modelled estimates database", ILOSTAT, accessed 12 April 2024.

► The labour market and the labour force

The most recent labour force information can be drawn from the 2021 Household Income and Expenditure Survey.^{iv} At this time the working-age population of Tonga was 64,900 and the labour force participation rate was 59.6 per cent, which is higher for men (70.1 per cent) than women (50.5 per cent). Unemployment was at 2.1 per cent, and higher for youth at 6.4 per cent. Around a fifth of youth (18.7 per cent) are not in employment, education or training. Just over half (53.7 per cent) of employment is in waged or salaried employment, with 45.2 per cent classified as self-employed (including employers, own account workers and contributing family workers). Informal employment makes up 97.1 per cent of employment. 45.4 per cent of employed persons are in the services sector, with 27.2 per cent in industry and 26.5 per cent in agriculture. The economy is dominated by the public sector with small amounts of private sector activity in construction, services, manufacturing, fisheries, forestry, and tourism. A large share of agricultural production is for subsistence and own production, but this is declining.



Source: ILO, "ILO modelled estimates database", ILOSTAT, accessed 12 April 2024.

► Labour rights challenges

In their 2019 concluding observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child noted with concern that there was no law in Tonga prohibiting the worst forms of child labour and that children were reportedly engaged in the worst forms of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation.^v Street vending by children and non-attendance at school also remained a challenge as did the involvement of children in non-economic activities within the home.

Labour Administration System

- **Labour market research and analysis:** The Tonga Ministry of Trade and Economic Development; Tonga Statistics Department.
- **Wages policy:** The Tongan Remuneration Authority makes recommendations on remuneration of specified senior public office holders. There is no equivalent process for the private sector.
- **Labour policy:** The Tonga Ministry of Trade and Economic Development.
- **Employment promotion:** The Tonga Ministry for Trade and Economic Development supports job placements in Tonga. The Tonga Department of Foreign Affairs facilitates foreign employment within Tonga. The Tonga Public Service Commission has responsibilities for public sector employment
- **Labour mobility programmes and worker welfare abroad:** The Tonga Ministry of Internal Affairs, Overseas Employment Division.
- **Public employment services:** The Labour Division of the Tonga Ministry of Trade and Economic Development.
- **Labour Inspection:** None; included in the Employment Relations Bill 2020 (awaiting Royal Assent).
- **Occupational safety and health policy:** Although there is no national OSH policy, public sector and public health legislation include OSH requirements. The Tonga Public Service Commission is the responsible body for the public sector. The Tonga Ministry of Health is the responsible Ministry in relation to requirements under the Public Health Act.
- **Occupational safety and health inspection:** Tonga is not conducting OSH inspections, pending Royal Assent to the Employment Relations Bill 2020.
- **Dispute resolution:** Tonga's Ombudsman (jurisdiction limited to individual complaints in the public sector). Tonga's Employment Relations Bill 2020 (awaiting Royal Assent) will provide for independent mediation in employment disputes, with recourse to the Supreme Court where mediation fails.
- **Social Protection:** National Retirement Benefit Fund administers the Tongan social welfare scheme for the private sector (age pension). Retirement Fund Board provides civil service benefits on retirement, death in service, redundancy and injury/permanent disablement.
- **Tripartite Boards:** A new Tripartite Labour Advisory Committee (to replace the National Tripartite Consultation Committee) has been established under the Employment Relations Bill 2020.

Source: ILO, "Baseline Study of the labour administration systems in eleven Pacific Island Countries that are members of the International Labour Organization", (unpublished); ILO, "Mapping of labour administration systems in Pacific Island Countries: Tripartite bodies and social dialogue", (unpublished).

Migration dynamics

Labour migration – generally into maritime and seafaring – has played a longstanding role in addressing lack of employment opportunities in Tonga. In 2020, there were 74,550 Tongans abroad and personal remittances accounted for 38.3 per cent of GDP – the highest that remittances contribute to GDP among the Pacific Island Countries. Migration is generally into seafaring and the maritime and fisheries sector. Two key labour mobility schemes also include the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme and New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. Both of these schemes are designed to fill seasonal labour shortages, largely in agriculture and horticulture industries. The PALM scheme generally allows workers to work short-term for up to nine months, or long-term roles between one and four years, in unskilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled positions; the RSE scheme allows seasonal workers to stay in New Zealand up to nine months in any 11-month period. In the 2022-2023 period, 1,930 migrants joined the RSE scheme and 4,519 joined the PALM scheme.

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “International Migrant Stock 2020 [Total, origin]”, UNDESA dataset, accessed 14 April 2024; The World Bank, “Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Palau”, World Bank staff estimates based on IMF balance of payments data, and World Bank and OECD GDP estimates, accessed 14 April 2024; Charlotte Bedford, “Pacific labour mobility over the last year: continued growth”, DevPolicyBlog, 8 August 2023.

► Legal and policy framework

Tonga has started preliminary work on the development of a National Employment Policy as well as a National Apprenticeship Policy. In addition to this, Tonga published its first Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy in 2023, which identifies several occupations across economic sectors facing acute skills shortages, likely driven by widespread worker-participation in temporary labour mobility schemes. Tonga’s Strategic Development Framework 2015-2025 contains relevant employment and other work-related targets and desired outcomes. The draft Employment Relations Bill 2020 has been approved by Parliament but remains under consideration by His Majesty in Privy Council.

Tripartism in action

The Tonga Ministry of Trade and Economic Development is the lead Government constituent. The key workers’ constituent is the Tonga National Workers Council. Employers’ representatives primarily represented by the Tonga Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Other stakeholders include the Council of Churches, the Tonga Aid Coordination Unit, the Attorney General’s Office, and the Bureau of Statistics as well as workers’ organisations including the Tonga Public Service Association, Friendly Islands Seafarers Union, nurses’ and teachers’ associations.

Employer and business organizations register under the Incorporated Societies Act administered by the Tonga Ministry of Trade and Economic Development, Business Registry and Intellectual Property Division. Organizations of workers register and are known as ‘associations’, not trade unions. Tonga has a Trade Union Act 1964, which is not in effect. The Employment Relations Bill 2020 (awaiting Royal Assent) refers to employee associations registered under regulations made under the proposed legislation. The National Tripartite Consultation Committee was helpful in the consultations of the Employment Relations Act 2020. The body is now no longer active, however, with a new Tripartite Labour Advisory Committee awaiting the passing through of the Employment Relation Bill 2020, before it is convened.

Ratification

Tonga has ratified one ILO convention that is currently in force. In addition, Tonga has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Fundamental

C182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)

► ILO's support to Tonga centres around the following key priorities:

1. Addressing skills shortages through the analysis of sectoral skills needs and the piloting of applicable models of work-based learning;
2. Building capacity of strong and representative employers' and workers' organizations that influence economic, social and governance policies; and
3. Ratification and application of International Labour Standards, including the adoption of labour standards covering the private sector.

The ILO is also committed to supporting Tonga to ratify a number of conventions, including the following:

- C029 – Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)
- C081 – Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81)
- C087 – Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
- C098 – Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)
- C100 – Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)
- C105 – Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)
- C111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)
- C122 – Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122)
- C129 – Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No. 129)
- C138 – Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)
- C144 – Tripartite Consultation (ILS) Convention, 1976 (No. 144)
- C155 – Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155)
- C160 – Labour Statistics Convention, 1985 (No. 160)
- C161 – Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161)
- C187 – Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187)

ⁱ Tonga Statistics Department, *Tonga 2021 Census of Population and Housing*, 2022.

ⁱⁱ United Nations Trade & Development, "General profile: Tonga", UNCTADstat database, accessed 14 April 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD, "DAC List of ODAW Recipients".

^{iv} Tonga Statistics Department, *Tonga 2021 Household Income and Expenditure Report*, 2022.

^v Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the initial report of Tonga, CRC/C/TON/CO/1, (2019).

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