



CLIMATE CHANGE, INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION: LESSONS FROM TUVALU

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Carol Farbotko is a cultural geographer who conducts research on Pacific places, mobilities and cultures in a changing climate. She is currently Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, leading a four-year project on Indigenous Solutions to Global Challenges in the Pacific. Prior to joining Griffith University, she worked at the Australian government's research organisation, CSIRO, and completed her PhD at the University of Tasmania. Carol's research focuses on climate mobilities and immobilities as an empirical phenomenon, and as political and policy discourse. She undertakes co-production of knowledge with Pacific communities based in Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural protocols, together with critical discourse analysis of climate mobility in knowledge, the media, and governance, at local, national, regional and international scales.

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Introduction

Tuvalu, a small island state in the Pacific of 11,000 people, is exposed to significant climate change impacts. In particular, climate change poses a habitability risk to Tuvalu associated with sea-level rise, and Tuvalu has become somewhat of a poster child for existential climate change crisis. It is not certain, however, that Tuvalu as a whole will become uninhabitable and that Tuvaluans will need to relocate away from their islands. Indeed, in line with the current state of scientific knowledge, Tuvalu's policy priority is to invest in securing the islands against uninhabitability, and for the nation as a whole to continue in-situ, through adaptation measures that respond to climate change's impacts. To ensure Tuvaluan culture, Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination can continue on Indigenous land and sea territory, relocation of the entire population is felt to be unacceptable – at the government level and among the people.

It is in this context that policy in Tuvalu increasingly recognizes that different types of existing and new voluntary international migration of its citizens can contribute to climate resilience, both at the family level and for the nation as a whole. Contrary to what seems to be popular opinion about Tuvalu among outsiders, relocation of Tuvaluan citizens to escape climate change impacts is not the purpose of Tuvalu's migration policies (Barnett et al. 2024). Instead, migration has already long been a component of national economic development policy and is now a part of Tuvalu's climate change adaptation efforts. International migration, both temporary and longer term, has, throughout the last century, seen Tuvaluan people gain enhanced access to education and skills-building opportunities, expanded social networks, income diversification, and alternative employment. The benefits of migration, particularly financial ones, have flowed to both Tuvaluans at home and to those who are part of the Tuvaluan diaspora. International migration can help build climate resilience in Tuvalu in the future through policy to incentivize climate resilient investments from remittances and climate resilient skills building among migrants, and indeed this potential is being recognized in policy in Tuvalu (Farbotko et al. 2022; Barnett et al. 2024). New opportunities for Tuvaluans to engage in different types of mobility—temporary, circular and permanent—are thus important, but as a sub-set of Tuvalu's overall strategy to build climate resilience and maintain the habitability of the islands, not because habitability is rapidly declining and nothing more can be done. The ultimate goal of the Tuvaluan people is not to move away from their islands, but to ensure continuation of Tuvaluan self-determination and sovereignty, in a climate-warming world, and for this to occur in-situ unless as an absolute last resort.

This paper specifically examines two international migration pathways for Tuvaluans: one forthcoming and one proposed, for how well they align with Tuvalu's goal of ensuring Tuvaluan self-determination and sovereignty in-situ. A forthcoming migration pathway, between Tuvalu and Australia under the new Tuvalu-Australia Falepili Union Treaty which was signed in 2023, is partially in harmony with Tuvaluan sovereignty. The second, the suggestion by Rising Nations Initiative (part of the Global Centre for Climate Mobility) to relocate the entire national population of Tuvalu does not harmonise well with the goal of maintaining Tuvaluan sovereignty in place. By way of conclusion, the paper will put forward a recommendation for international partners to focus on helping climate vulnerable communities manage their habitability risk, rather than prioritise movement away in contravention of sovereignty and self-determined visions of a communities' own future.

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Migration as a response to climate change in Tuvalu: The policy context

Many outsiders assume that Tuvaluan people desire an immediate one-way migration exit route from their ‘disappearing country’, given the considerable risks of climate change, particularly sea level rise. However, this assumption is misguided for three reasons. First, there is no certainty in science that an uninhabitable future for atoll islands is inevitable, although the risk of uninhabitability is clear (Barnett et al. 2020; Brown et al. 2023).[1] Second, there is no evidence that climate change is driving migration away from Tuvalu (Mortreux et al. 2023). Third, the connection between Tuvaluan Indigenous people and their land and sea territory is remarkably strong, spiritually, culturally, practically and emotionally (Lusama 2022; Falefou 2017). Tuvaluan people, whose languages and culture are unique, value their self-determination highly. Tuvaluans voted overwhelmingly for separation from Kiribati before gaining independence in 1978, and remain focused on exercising their right to self-determine their own future, in their own territory, as an independent nation and as an Indigenous people (Kitara 2019). Tuvaluan people, in short, are seeking to protect their islands, not planning to leave en masse.

Indeed, the Tuvalu government has a multi-pronged approach to addressing climate change risk, with the goal of ensuring long-term habitability of its islands. In taking this position, they are, in agreement with civil society, asserting the right of the Tuvaluan nation to continue in place (Iyer and Schewel 2024). Te Sikulagi, Tuvalu's foreign policy, states:

Tuvalu stands against relocation as a solution to the climate crisis because Tuvalu is a sovereign country, and its population has the right to live, develop, and prosper on its own land (Government of Tuvalu 2020).

Tuvaluan civil society, in its Toku Fenua Toku Tofi Report on Climate Change Induced Displacement declared similarly:

We recognize, in relation to the impacts of climate change, that climate change induced displacement will negatively transform our society as a whole, and fear that the loss of our ancestral lands will force us into extinction, and therefore affirm with one voice that migration from our ancestral lands, territories in the name of climate change shall not take place without exploring all possible alternate avenues for climate change adaptation (TANGO 2018).

Investment in coastal protection and land reclamation projects is supporting Tuvalu’s goal of long-term habitability (Webb et al. 2023). The Tuvalu Long-term Adaptation Plan (LTAP) responds to scientific projections of long-term sea level rise, seeking to build raised, protected, safe land, that the Tuvalu people will continue to be able to call home and which is intended to ensure habitability of Tuvalu beyond 2100. Other initiatives addressing climate risk include: advocacy in international relations for Tuvaluan sovereignty to be recognized as permanent and its maritime boundaries as fixed under international law, and Digital Tuvalu, in the event of a worst-case scenario where habitable land is no longer available (Kofe 2021). Current major adaptation projects include the Tuvalu Climate Adaptation Project (TCAP) focusing on coastal protection, land reclamation, and building adaptive capacity (Webb et al. 2023), and the Future Now: Te Ataeao Nei project, which is building cultural values-based diplomacy, digital connectivity and recognition of permanent statehood (Kofe 2021). Tuvalu has also for decades lobbied extensively for significant global emissions reductions.

[1] Apparent scientific certainty on this issue is worthy of significant interrogation and critique (Horton et al. 2021; Farbotko and Campbell 2022).

Migration, then, is a component of a larger strategy of building climate resilience in Tuvalu. Migration of individuals and families works within, not against, the goal of staying in place and protecting sovereignty for the nation as a whole. Tuvaluan migration abroad, some of it long-term but much of it circular and temporary, has long benefited the Tuvaluan population at home as well as its diaspora, given the limited employment opportunities available within Tuvalu itself. From colonial times until the early 2000s, international seafaring and mining work, both of which involved temporary working periods abroad, were common among Tuvaluans, with financial remittances long being an important contributor to the national economy. Since then, Tuvaluan economic migration opportunities have included the Pacific Access Category (PAC) permanent pathway to Aotearoa-New Zealand, and the Recognized Employer Scheme (RSE), for temporary work in Aotearoa-New Zealand, both for Tuvaluans of working age. The Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM) and its precursors have similarly provided some Tuvaluans with temporary work in Australia. All of these pathways have quotas and some are filled via a ballot mechanism.

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Most of Tuvalu's international economic migration opportunities have, to date, arisen due to demand for labour in foreign countries. The various schemes and opportunities were thus not designed for the Tuvaluan economy or climate adaptation needs in Tuvalu, but for addressing labour supply issues in industries such as horticulture in countries such as Australia. However, both the Tuvalu National Strategy for Sustainable Development and National Labour Migration Policy recognize a link between sustainable development, climate change adaptation, and international migration (Farbotko et al. 2022). Economic migration is expected to help increase climate resilience in Tuvalu, with a particular focus on social and financial remittances. However, to date, there are few policy mechanisms in place either in Tuvalu or in the labour-receiving countries, such as Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, to ensure climate resilient outcomes (Barnett et al. 2024). For example, labour mobility schemes do not facilitate workers from abroad gaining skills in such areas as climate resilient horticulture (Dun et al. 2023).

Despite such policy gaps, policy in Tuvalu sees migration as contributing to Tuvalu's climate resilience-building as follows:

1. Individuals and families can engage in international migration opportunities where available.
2. No national population relocation is desired unless all other options are exhausted: ensuring the islands remain habitable is the priority.
3. International migration, including temporary and circular migration, is intended to help build climate resilience in Tuvalu including through financial remittances, education and expanded social networks.

It is in this policy context that new international migration pathways which have been proposed or are becoming available to Tuvaluan people need to be understood. Both the Falepili Union migration route between Australia and Tuvalu, and the Rising Nations Initiative apparent plan to relocate the entire population of Tuvalu are two examples of such pathways, which are explored in the next sections.

Example 1: The forthcoming Tuvalu-Australia Falepili Union Migration Pathway

The Falepili Union Treaty between Australia and Tuvalu was announced in 2023 and ratified in 2024. The treaty formally recognizes both Tuvalu's goal of continuing to live in Tuvaluan territory and Tuvalu's permanent statehood. Article 2 of the Treaty ('climate cooperation') commits both Australia and Tuvalu to work together 'in the face of the existential threat posed by climate change', and recognises that 'the statehood and sovereignty of Tuvalu will continue, and the rights and duties inherent thereto will be maintained, notwithstanding the impact of climate change-related sea-level rise'. Article 3 ('human mobility with dignity') establishes that Australia will create 'a special human mobility pathway' for citizens of Tuvalu to live, study and work in Australia, including the provision of health, income and family support. Article 4 ('cooperation for security and stability'), stipulates that Australia shall 'provide assistance to Tuvalu in response to a major natural disaster', and that Tuvalu 'shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters'.

The Falepili Union Treaty formally aligns with Tuvalu's overall approach to climate risk and continued sovereignty, arguably with the exception of the controversial security clause and the omission of action on emissions reductions. The Treaty's migration pathway is different to the aforementioned labour mobility schemes to Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand available to Tuvaluans, such as the [PALM](#), [PAC](#) and [RSE](#), as it is specifically articulated as a climate change initiative, rather than functioning as a source of labour supply for foreign employers. It also differs from existing schemes in having no requirement for an employment contract in Australia. However, the Falepili Union Treaty, like the existing labour mobility schemes, has little in place for incentivising the advancement of climate resilience from migration between Tuvalu and Australia (Barnett et al. 2024). New Tuvaluan migrants in Australia, with its vastly different socio-economic, environmental and cultural context to Tuvalu, face considerable risks, including housing insecurity, high cost of living, and new climate risks unknown in Tuvalu such as bushfires and river floods. The existing small Tuvaluan diaspora living in Australia, many of whom are already struggling financially, will bear a sizeable burden in supporting the new arrivals (Kitara 2024). There is the possibility that, with no incentives, social and financial remittances from new migrants are channelled into expenditure and activities which do little for climate resilience (Barnett et al. 2024).

Furthermore, the pathway increases some challenges for Tuvalu, including brain drain, loss of labour supply, and depopulation (Barnett et al. 2024), presenting an insidious risk to Tuvalu's sovereignty created by the Falepili Union. While the Falepili Union formally states that the Parties, Australia and Tuvalu, recognise that 'the statehood and sovereignty of Tuvalu will continue, and the rights and duties inherent thereto will be maintained, notwithstanding the impact of climate change-related sea-level rise', the migration pathway between Tuvalu and Australia may insidiously undermine Tuvalu's capacity to function as a nation-state, due to high numbers of people migrating abroad, potentially leading to depopulation in Tuvalu. Since Tuvalu has a population of only 11,000, too few people constrain sustainable development, with decreasing availability of labour and skills necessary to deliver public goods, and negative impacts on communities and culture (Barnett et al. 2024; Bedford et al. 2016). The current quota for the Falepili Union migration pathway is 280 people per year, which is in addition to other migration opportunities available to Tuvaluans, such as the Aotearoa-New Zealand PAC, whose quota is typically 75 people per year. If Tuvalu experiences net losses to its population of even 200 people per year, its population could be in decline by 2030 (Bedford et al. 2016). Thus, the current Falepili Union quota does not even need to be at capacity for Tuvalu to expect population decline by 2030. In the absence of a comprehensive strategy to address the risk of rapid population decline, the Falepili Union presents a new risk to Tuvalu's sovereignty and self-determination (Barnett et al. 2024). It is unclear whether the Tuvalu government (and indeed the Australian government) overlooked this issue when drafting the Falepili Union Treaty and what, if any, measures are being implemented to address depopulation risk. The new migration pathway between Australia and Tuvalu can serve Tuvalu in the long term, but only if circular forms of mobility are incentivized, so that as some people leave, others return with skills and capital to Tuvalu, and in turn ensure that Tuvaluan sovereignty and self-determination does not suffer from a diminished population (Barnett et al. 2024).

Example 2: Rising Nations Initiative’s proposed relocation of the Tuvaluan population

Rising Nations Initiative (RNI) (part of a new organisation called Global Centre for Climate Mobility) is a somewhat opaque ‘UN startup’ that ‘aims to protect the statehood of Pacific Atoll countries, preserve their sovereignty and safeguard the rights and heritage of affected populations’. RNI’s publicity material frequently deploys statements such as ‘Tuvalu will become uninhabitable by 2050’, and does not acknowledge Tuvaluan policy on staying put. Efforts of the Tuvaluan people and their government to envision and create an inhabitable future for their islands do not feature in RNI’s public narratives. RNI’s director, Kamal Amakrane, posits not that self-determination of Tuvalu is important, but instead paternalistically proclaims that the international community has a ‘moral imperative to save these populations’ (Amakrane 2021, 27). RNI’s public narratives are ambiguous as to whether the preservation and safeguarding of sovereignty is being anticipated to unfold in a habitable Tuvalu, or elsewhere.

Given that RNI seems to expect Tuvalu to become uninhabitable by 2050, and does not appear to prioritise managing Tuvalu’s habitability risk in-situ, RNI seems to be suggesting that movement away from Tuvalu’s islands is imminent and inevitable. Indeed, some of their projects seem to bear out an assumption that the whole nation will be moving elsewhere, with RNI’s direct support. As part of its first visit to Tuvalu in mid-2023—to establish substantive projects with the Tuvalu Government—RNI did not bring experts in atoll adaptation and climate resilience, but rather NASA scientists whose expertise was in sea level rise modelling.

They also brought documentary-makers from Channel 4 News in the United Kingdom. The latter were offered ‘behind-the-scenes access’ by RNI to their meetings with the Tuvalu government to ‘chart an era-defining project to negotiate a future for the first nation to be lost to climate change’. [2] Subsequently, the documentary produced by Channel 4—‘Losing Paradise’—first screened at COP28 2023 in Dubai. The screening was hosted by RNI, NASA and Channel 4, and not, notably, the Tuvalu government. Channel 4 advertised the film as ‘THE story of our century’, ‘charting a ground-breaking project of how to move a nation, its government, culture and people’. The full documentary is, however, very scant on the details of this ‘project’. The likely explanation is that RNI tried to establish a project that would relocate the Tuvaluan population, and Channel 4 was brought on board to film its unfolding ‘behind-the-scenes’ with an expectation that Tuvalu would agree to such a move. Given the clear Tuvaluan position on staying put, and that the Tuvalu government typically announces any major climate projects formally to the global media, the documentary’s claims about a ‘ground-breaking project of how to move a nation’ seem inaccurate and misleading.

Overall, it appears that at least some of RNI’s initiatives have been formulated against Tuvalu’s self-determined position on maintaining the habitability of its islands. Indeed, Rising Nations Initiative appears to be collaborating with a media organisation to colonize ideas about Tuvalu’s future—perhaps to create an air of certainty that Tuvaluans will have to move—without any indication that Tuvaluan people have consented to this, all in the name of outsiders ‘saving Tuvalu’. RNI therefore seems to be impinging on Tuvalu’s people’s right to narrate, own and shape their own future (Farbotko et al. 2023). RNI seems to be driving activities that contradict Tuvalu’s clear position on self-determination and staying put, while on the surface presenting itself as supporting the protection of statehood and sovereignty.

[2] The author was a member of a team of two consultants who were engaged by RNI to conduct a community consultation in Tuvalu on climate risk and culture as part of RNI’s initial visit to Tuvalu in 2023. The author’s team asked RNI for, but was not given, behind the scenes access to meetings with the Tuvalu government. The author’s team compiled a report on their consultation for RNI, keen to see this distributed to participants in the consultation, the Tuvalu government, and other interested parties. To the best of the author’s knowledge, the consultation report has not been circulated or released by RNI.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report has considered international migration opportunities in light of Tuvalu's policy to secure its islands as habitable, in order for the nation as a whole to continue in-situ. Tuvaluans highly value their culture and their Indigenous sovereignty. Relocation of the entire population is their option of last resort. This report has discussed two international migration pathways for Tuvaluans in relation to Tuvalu's rights to stay, and to self-determine their own future in a changing climate. The forthcoming migration pathway between Tuvalu and Australia under the new Falepili Union treaty formally seeks to operate in harmony with Tuvaluan sovereignty, but presents an insidious risk to sovereignty in the form of potential depopulation.

The second international migration proposal by Rising Nations Initiative seems to involve a suggestion that relocation of the entire national population of Tuvalu is needed to 'save' Tuvaluan people. This proposal does not harmonise well with Tuvaluan sovereignty, as it contradicts the clear intention of Tuvaluan people and their government to stay in place.

The key policy recommendations, arising from the Tuvalu case, for states and international partners looking to address situations of habitability risk are:

- Focus broadly on managing habitability risk at the outset, rather than pre-emptively jump to relocation planning;
- Ensure habitability knowledge centralises local and traditional forms of habitability knowledge and governance, and, where relevant, is not dominated by Western knowledge systems.
- Honour the visions and policies of the future of impacted populations, as articulated in their own governance systems.
- Identify and address insidious risks to sovereignty (such as depopulation through increased out migration).



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