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Migration to Australia under the *Falepili Union* Treaty: advancing climate change adaptation.

Submission to Inquiry: The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union, Australian Parliament

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Introduction

The *Falepili Union* treaty is a response to what Tuvalu considers to be the greatest threat to its security: climate change. The treaty includes a provision for citizens of Tuvalu to live and work in Australia. This submission puts forward recommendations for the migration provision to successfully operate as a mechanism for climate change adaptation, not maladaptation, in Tuvalu.[1] It is grounded in the state of knowledge about climate change risks, adaptation and migration in Tuvalu and the Pacific Islands region.

[1] We base our submission on each of our human geographic research in Tuvalu and with Tuvaluan migrants in Australia; Bateteba Aselu and Taukiei Kitara's Tuvaluan indigenous knowledge and their lived experience as

Tuvalu has a unique culture, two Indigenous languages (Tuvaluan and Nui), and a small population of 11,000 people with strong commitment to self-determination and Tuvaluan sovereignty. The population is spread over nine islands with minimal transport and digital connectivity. National and household incomes are low, with GDP of USD$5,222 per capita. Impacts of climate change in Tuvalu include higher mean and extreme sea-levels, stronger storms, more variation in rainfall, and impacts on coral reefs that threaten food and water security. Without adaptation, the long-term habitability of Tuvalu is at risk (Mycoo et al. 2022). The Tuvalu government's objective, as stated in the *Falepili Union,* is to support a 'desire of Tuvalu's people to continue to live in their territory where possible'. *Te Sikulagi,* Tuvalu's foreign policy, similarly 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).

The Tuvalu government, along with local civil society organisations in Tuvalu, is focusing on a range of adaptation measures designed to ensure its people and environment are resilient in the face of climate change, particularly sea-level rise. Meeting adaptation needs exceeds the budget of Tuvalu's government, meaning that securing external financial support and technical assistance is important. Current major 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, focusing on cultural values-based diplomacy, digital connectivity and achieving permanent statehood (Kofe 2021).

Successive Tuvaluan governments have had an overarching clear policy position that mass migration is not an adaptation strategy, at the same time supporting migration as a matter of household choice and as an important component of the national economy (Kagan 2016; Farbotko et al. 2022). Migration, indeed, has long been recognized in Tuvalu as a mechanism for increasing incomes via remittances, as well as improving human capital through access to better funded education and health systems. Tuvaluans have historically engaged in internal and international mobility to access education, health services and economic opportunities, as

Tuvaluan citizens who have migrated between Tuvalu and Australia; and Taukiei Kitara's experience in the Tuvaluan diaspora community as a member, and past president, of the Tuvalu Brisbane Community.

well as through the cultural practice of malaga[2] (Evans 2022). Overseas employment in mining and seafaring was important to the Tuvaluan economy for decades before and after independence from Britain in 1978. Opportunities to move temporarily from Tuvalu to Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia for work schemes are of more recent importance. These include the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, which are now replacing seafaring due to diminishing opportunities in the commercial shipping industry (Bedford et al. 2016).

There is no empirical evidence of climate change being a major driver of migration among Tuvaluans (Mortreux et al. 2023), but awareness of current and future climate risks, including possible uninhabitability, is high (Falefou 2017). Climate change is increasingly a component of the complex decision-making about mobility among families - although not always in the direction that might be expected (Mortreux et al. 2023; Farbotko 2022): rural outer islands continue to be viewed by Tuvaluans as a source of resource, cultural and health security, and have been destinations for internal mobility during war, disaster and pandemic (Farbotko 2021). For some Tuvaluan workers in Australia on temporary employment contracts, the large land area and opportunities for employment observed in Australia are attractive and they seek to migrate to Australia longer term. Others, however, are sensitive to negative social experiences in new countries (Yates et al. 2023), and their experience of working abroad reinforces the importance of family, land and culture, and so they desire to return to Tuvalu (Farbotko et al. 2022). Indeed, most Tuvaluans want to stay in Tuvalu, while respecting decisions of those who may wish to move away. To date, policy in Tuvalu has broadly recognized international mobility and climate change adaptation as having potentially mutually beneficial outcomes, although the mechanisms through which this is to be achieved have not been fully developed (Farbotko et al. 2022).[3]

Fale pili means 'looking after your neighbours as if they were family' (Kitara et al 2024; Kitara and Farbotko 2023). The *Falepili Union* offers Tuvaluans open access to long-term residence in Australia. This migration pathway is at risk of being viewed by the international community as a one-way exit from Tuvalu for 'climate refugees'. However, it is clear from the above-discussed policy and migration context that the migration pathway of the *Falepili*

[2] Malaga are group visits, which can be both within and beyond Tuvalu, to visit family and friends, which signify and strengthen relations among Tuvaluan communities.
[3] Institutions in the region are also responding to climate mobility risk, with the recent development of several frameworks to help minimise the human costs of climate migration and advance adaptation outcomes from migration, including the Pacific Regional Framework For Climate Mobility.

Union is, more comprehensively, an opportunity for Tuvalu - in partnership with Australia - to expand migration benefits, such as skills acquisition and remittances, in ways that increase adaptation among Tuvaluan households, and the nation as a whole.

In a country with a population as small as Tuvalu's, however, migration can be socio-economically detrimental if the numbers migrating lead to significantly reduced populations, and therefore capacity for sustainable livelihoods and public good provision, particularly in the already sparsely populated outer islands. Migration can also result in different or exacerbated forms of hardship for migrants in the new country. Many Tuvaluans desire the option of migration for some length of time for education and employment reasons, while appreciating that this can conflict with the common good of their communities and the nation when large numbers of people are engaging in international mobility. The *Falepili Union* migration pathway may bring benefits to Tuvalu and Tuvaluans, but only if it is operationalised with specific policies and measures, on the part of Australia and Tuvalu, that maximize adaptation and sustainable development benefits both in Tuvalu itself and for Tuvaluan communities in Australia.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Movement away from sites of hazards must protect the vulnerable, including in destination areas.

The *Falepili Union* can possibly assist people move away from sites of hazard, a benefit that is maximised when those who migrate are those who are the most exposed to climate risks. However, targeted selection processes should be developed to ensure the *Falepili Union* addresses the needs of the most vulnerable, particularly those who need assistance to finance movement. The benefit of movement away from sites of hazard depends on the new location, as well as the movement process (Black et al., 2011, Campbell 2023). Migrants may simply move to environments in which there are hazards about which they have no understanding, and a restricted ability to access information about risk management, as has been shown to be the case for migrants moving to wildfire exposed peri-urban environments in Australia (Eriksen and Prior 2011). In the context of the *Falepili Union*, moving people from hazardous locations in Tuvalu - where they have the existing benefits of awareness of risks, some voice in governance, and access to social networks - to possibly hazardous locations in Australia

(such as floodplains) where they have less awareness, voice, and social support, would indeed be maladaptive. Given these issues, in-situ adaptation and local mobility are more likely to be adaptive options than international migration, and should not be forgotten when the *Falepili Union* is operationalised.

Recommendation 2: Engagement with the Tuvaluan community in Australia

A small number of Tuvaluans in Australia (several hundred[4]) have migrated to Australia in the past through pathways such as skilled work visas and the open-border system between Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. A widespread concern with the *Falepili Union* is that the Tuvaluan diaspora in Australia, as well as Tuvaluan communities in Tuvalu, had no involvement in its development. Without sufficient public consultation, the sentiment among many Tuvaluans is one of scepticism about whether its substance and symbolism reflect the priorities and values of the most important stakeholders in the treaty, the Tuvaluan people themselves, including the diaspora. While many Tuvaluans welcome *prima facie* the idea of a new migration opportunity, there are serious concerns among them about the lack of consultation and the lack of detail available to fully understand how the scheme works. There is also concern that the framing of the migration opportunity in terms of climate mobility will create the stigma of 'climate refugees' for those who do choose to migrate. Some are worried that the treaty is a sign that the Tuvaluan government is giving up its fight on climate change and many feel that Australia is deflecting attention from the issue of its emissions reductions responsibilities (Kitara 2023).

In this context, we recommend much closer engagement by the Australian government with Tuvaluan communities in Australia (as well as in Tuvalu). Tuvaluans who choose to move in the future will be supported by Tuvaluan communities in Australia, using customary practices such as *fale pili*, which guide the sharing of housing and other resources (Kitara et al. 2024). International mobility decisions are not typically a matter of individual choice among Tuvaluans, but are made within families according to the system of Tuvaluan cultural care and support that takes into account responsibilities to land, family, island community and

[4] The Australian Census records 250 people in Australia who were born in Tuvalu in 2022, but this does not include those who identify as Tuvaluan but were born elsewhere. The Tuvaluan community in Australia is estimated to be around 700 people.

nation among those moving and those staying in Tuvalu (Kitara et al. 2024). Tuvaluans also often perceive migration as primarily for the benefit of children, especially for providing educational opportunities. Engagement with Tuvaluan community members should involve the co-development of targeted and culturally appropriate support services, as well as culturally specific monitoring, evaluation and learning about Tuvaluan migration to Australia. The Australian government can and should draw upon expertise among the Tuvaluan diaspora to provide cultural advice on issues such as *fale pili*. Consultations with the different Tuvaluan communities around Australia, such as the Brisbane and Melbourne Tuvaluan communities, could very usefully be held as part of the *Falepili Union* implementation. A liaison officer with Tuvaluan cultural expertise and language skills could assist in facilitating activities such as post-arrival programs. Engagement with Tuvaluan communities among Australian organisations should be facilitated and in many cases led by professionals fully equipped to engage with Tuvaluan communities in their languages, using methods that centralise Tuvaluan culture and values, in order to ensure ongoing dialogue and trust (Kitara et al. 2024; Kitara and Farbotko 2023).

Recommendation 3: Australia to provide extensive support for Tuvaluan settlement in Australia

Research on the experience of Tuvaluan migrants in Australia is scant, but there are important lessons to be learned from Tuvaluan migration to Aotearoa New Zealand: extensive and culturally specific support is needed to ensure Tuvaluan migrants do not experience economic and social hardship. Since 1986, Tuvaluans have migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand under various schemes. From 2002, this has included a ballot and employment-based migration pathway to Aotearoa New Zealand called the Pacific Access Category (PAC), which post-Covid currently offers visas to 150 Tuvaluan citizens each year (75 per year prior to the pandemic). Today there is a population of first, second and third generation Tuvaluan migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand officially numbering 4,653. Many Tuvaluans in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly those without tertiary qualifications, struggle with the high cost of living and insecure housing, live undocumented and at risk of deportation, have difficulty finding training or well-paid jobs, experience social issues such as racism and language barriers, experience loss of cultural cohesion, and overall find that life in Aotearoa New Zealand is harder than in Tuvalu (Emont et al. 2021; Yates et al. 2023).

In Australia, there is currently a crisis in housing affordability and increasing living costs. There is also very limited access to affordable or public housing, and an increasing number of homeless families. While cost of living challenges will likely be partly offset through customary *fale pili* relations between the small Tuvaluan community in Australia and new arrivals, it is not certain that such customary practices, even combined with access to income, family and health support offered by the Australian government under the Treaty, will be sufficient to overcome the structural economic challenges currently being faced by households in Australia. The Australian government will thus need to provide extensive and culturally aligned support for Tuvaluan migrants to achieve social and financial well-being in Australia. Australian governments have historically done relatively well in this area (Fozdar and Hartley 2013), albeit less so over time, particularly with respect to migrant workers from the Pacific (Wright et al. 2022). Tuvaluans migrating to Australia are likely to benefit from support before and after departure to understand rights and social opportunities, customs, costs of living, and – given Australia is itself exposed to climate change – to understand climatic hazards since migrants may be unaware of the risks of fires, floods and heat. There is also a need for support in Australia to help migrants access education, housing and work. Australian-Tuvaluans should be centrally involved in designing support for new arrivals, to capture the culturally specific ways in which Tuvaluans perceive and use support services (Emont et al. 2021).

However, even well-intentioned support from Australian governments and other organisations may be inadequate while conditions in Australia remain extremely challenging for those on low wages, such as current public housing waiting lists of up to 175,000 families[5]. Support must also be tailored to the specific ways in which Tuvaluans view migration as an investment in their children: Tuvaluan migrants are more likely to be receptive to educational and youth programs than to programs targeting adults. Existing models of past successful education programs involving Tuvaluan youth in Australian education are available (see Kitara 2023).

Tuvaluan cultural systems of support, furthermore should not be expected to substitute for, but work in complementarity with, pre-departure and post-arrival support, particularly on the part of the Australian government, helping alleviate the burden placed on diaspora.

[5] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-08/public-housing-wait-list-is-soul-destroying/102698048

Recommendation 4: Ensure Tuvalu does not experience population decline

A concern about the *Falepili Union* is that the number of places per year is too high and, if actual numbers approach the current quota of 280, it could cause deleterious population. In a country with a population as small as Tuvalu's, too few people can significantly constrain sustainable development as this limits the availability of labour and skills necessary to deliver public goods, as well as vibrant communities and culture, and perhaps most fundamentally, puts sovereignty and self-determination at risk (Bedford et al. 2016).

Howes (2023) shows that the 280 per year cap on Tuvaluans having access to the *Falepili Union* migration pathway represents 2.5% of population, in comparison to other migration pathways available to Pacific Islanders which are typically less than 0.5% of population. Adding the *Falepili Union's* 280 to the 150 places available under the Aotearoa New Zealand PAC means up to 3.8% of the population may be able to migrate per year, and this is likely to be even higher when Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa commences (Tuvalu will likely receive a quota of around 100 places under that scheme). Net annual migration of -3.8% represents an 'extraordinarily high level of out-migration in a single year, let alone in repeated years' (Howes 2023). Bedford et al. (2016) calculated that after accounting for births and deaths, if Tuvalu experiences net losses to its population of 200 people per year its population will begin declining by 2030. It will be important for Australia and Tuvalu to work together to monitor the effect of the *Falepili Union* and other migration agreements to ensure that the scale of migration supports adaptation and sustainable development. A comprehensive strategy to address the risk of rapid population decline may be necessary, including re-evaluating the annual migration quota and coordinating the *Falepili Union* with other migration pathways.

Recommendation 5: Australia-Tuvalu cooperation to ensure benefits flow back to Tuvalu

A key method through which migration can improve adaptation is through remittances, and remittances have long been important in sustaining livelihoods in Tuvalu. Across the Pacific Islands remittances continue to be sent from second and even third generation migrants, and flows of remittances increase after disasters and so provide an important informal insurance institution (Brown 1997, Campbell 1990, Paulson 1993, Storey and Steinmayer 2011). There

is also abundant evidence that remittances from workers participating in seasonal worker schemes in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are often invested in improvements to homes, school fees, farming and fishing materials, community projects such as improving water supply, and investment in new businesses (Gibson and Bailey 2021). These benefits are not restricted to households who send workers, but benefit members of communities of origin more broadly as well as having positive macro-economic impacts (Gibson and Bailey 2021). Remittances that are invested in livelihood capital such as rainwater tanks, improvements in housing, small boats, and ICT services can significantly reduce vulnerability to climate change. Remittances are also beneficial when they are invested in services that enhance adaptive capacity, such as education of children or investment in social capital such as churches although remittances spent on consumer items that create inorganic wastes can have negative local environmental impacts. Financial remittances, however, are not assured. In Tuvalu, while almost all rural households have traditionally relied on remittances to pay for their consumption of market goods, remittances to Tuvalu have been declining. In 2006, remittances accounted for 15% of Tuvalu's GDP, but by 2022 this was down to 4.2% (World Bank 2023). Higher levels of economic hardship in the diaspora are likely to continue to erode remittances.

While the erosion of remittances is undesirable, migration can also have significant other benefits, improving the human capital of Tuvalu and Tuvaluans and enhancing capacity to adapt to climate change (Barnett and Chamberlain 2010). Asymmetries in education, training and skills between Australia and Tuvalu mean that the *Falepili Union* migration pathway may result in improved education and skills among Tuvaluans, through the education and training system, and through work in sectors that involve skill acquisition. Evidence shows that people from Pacific Island countries who can migrate to developed economies such as Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand tend to have higher levels of human development and wealth spread across their transnational kinship networks (Gibson and Bailey 2021, Howes and Orton 2020, Oakes 2019). Migrants sharing their knowledge and skills (social remittances) can help families and communities in Tuvalu to better understand and implement adaptation, as well providing assistance to others to access education, health and work opportunities abroad.

In the (many) situations where migrants return to their home islands, they bring back with them knowledge, skills and capital and apply them in areas such as business, coastal

engineering, fisheries management, government, plumbing or construction, that can further reduce vulnerability to climate change. Return migrants often have good education levels, and in other contexts this has been shown to improve public health outcomes and reduce disaster risk (Lutz et al., 2014, Muttarak & Lutz 2014). Migrants may also return with expanded and strengthened transnational networks that can enhance access to information and capital (Maron and Connell 2008, van der Ryn 2012). For returning migrants, moving home can be a window of opportunity to invest and live differently (Barnett and Adger 2018), and can result in a pulse of adaptation activity, such as returning farm workers trialling new agricultural methods learned abroad on crops at home (Dun et al. 2023). Entrepreneurial Tuvaluans are developing businesses that build on financial capital and their understanding of and access to Australian markets developed as a consequence of migration, in turn helping to grow the private sector and alleviate pressures on public sector employment in Tuvalu.

The potential benefits of human capital formation in Tuvalu are nevertheless not guaranteed under the *Falepili Union*. Much depends on how the scheme is administered in Tuvalu and Australia. In terms of migration and human capital development specifically, Australia could support Tuvalu in its selection of people eligible for migration. Current migration schemes to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand tend to favour people with existing high skill levels and/or capital, which are those Tuvalu can ill-afford to lose. Current seasonal worker schemes also appear to be recruiting Tuvaluans with strong work histories and education standards, which again creates a bias in migration of more highly skilled individuals. Regulating migration under the *Falepili Union* to ensure it does not deplete – but rather over time enhances – the stock of skilled people in Tuvalu is therefore necessary. The Tuvalu government is currently proposing to use a ballot system, which should ensure a distribution of migrants that reflects the distribution of skills across the country. Also needed, however, is greater recognition of workers in Tuvalu who possess critical skills, and higher wages in critical sectors within Tuvalu, to incentivise people to remain. Costs of such initiatives could be at least partially supported by Australia.

Australia and Tuvalu can also work together to develop policies to ensure remittances are directed into forms of consumption that sustain ecological resilience and support adaptation, as opposed to consumption of commodities with little additional benefit and/or which generate inorganic waste. For example, subsidies and promotion can help encourage investment in technologies for sustainable livelihoods such as rainwater tanks and ICT

technologies suitable for remote connectivity. Schemes that match funding for remittances by diaspora groups in community projects such solar photo-voltaic units, reverse osmosis water systems, community gardens, and disaster shelters can also help steer investments for adaptation. Indeed, a similar scheme already exists in the Tuvalu government's Falekaupule Trust Fund, which enables the government to match money raised by communities for development in outer islands.

More broadly, migration should not be the sole or even the most important means to enhance human capital in Tuvalu. Instead, the main focus should be on enhancing educational attainment in Tuvalu through investment in the Tuvaluan education and training sector itself, in which Australia can play an active role. Migration is also no substitute for supporting in-situ adaptation to climate change in Tuvalu, but rather should be considered one among many measures needed to pursue the ultimate objective, to ensure Tuvalu remains habitable. Australia must support the full suite of adaptation actions in Tuvalu, ranging from financial and technical support for ecosystem and nature-based adaptation, and coastal protection and management, and to improve: communications, energy, housing, transport, water, sanitation and waste systems and infrastructure; human resources; and enhanced fiscal and governance capabilities.

The Tuvalu and Australia governments can also cooperate to harness the benefits of skills and training for both economies, providing training and employment services to match Tuvaluan migrants to sectors where there are key shortages of workers in Australia, and to develop skills that are needed in Tuvalu. To offset skills and labour losses from increased migration, both government cooperation could focus on encouraging circular movement between Tuvalu and Australia. People returning to Tuvalu for periods of time to work and live bring with them their human and financial capital that can benefit the Tuvaluan economy and communities, and in turn enjoy sharing in and sustaining the cultural practices that are unique to life in Tuvalu. Indeed, this is already happening among skilled professionals and business owners, beyond the requirement to return home for government service following tertiary education scholarships to study abroad. But it is a practice that could be expanded, for example, by prioritising Tuvaluan language and cultural skills in all development projects in Tuvalu, government-sponsored *malaga* targeting particular adaptation priorities, and labour twinning agreements that enable employees to work in both countries for periods of time in comparable sectors such as medicine, education, and health care.

There is a clear need for the Tuvalu and Australia governments to cooperate in comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and learning of the *Falepili Union* to ensure it continues to support adaptation in Tuvalu and enhances the rights and well-being of Tuvaluans in Tuvalu and in the diaspora. The number of people who move from each island needs to be monitored to ensure that the benefits (and potential costs) of the scheme are shared equally across Tuvalu's island populations. Equally, there should be monitoring of the welfare of migrants in Australia and the ways in which their migration experience is related to the well-being of their families in Tuvalu.

Recommendation 6: Improved communication about the *Falepili Union* treaty

Internally, if the *Falepili Union* is seen by some Tuvaluans as a signal that the government is giving up on climate change adaptation, this may prompt higher levels of migration than is useful for adaptation, or migration that does not consider reinvestment of skills and remittances back home as a priority. The Tuvalu and Australian governments must therefore play an active role in communicating the role of the *Falepili Union* among a comprehensive set of adaptation policies and strategies to sustain the islands beyond 2100. Additionally useful would be a communication plan to inform Tuvaluans of the risks and benefits of migration to Australia, including how it differs from migration to Aotearoa New Zealand or Fiji.

Improved communication about the *Falepili Union* to the international community is also necessary. Key here is to communicate that the treaty in no ways signals that Tuvalu is 'giving up', as so much of the academic and popular media is prone to believe (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012, Mortreux et al 2023). Instead, the *Falepili Union,* with an adaptive approach to implementation of the migration pathway, could be promoted as an innovative strategy to support the human rights of Tuvaluans and the sovereignty of Tuvalu. Adaptation, too, must not be framed as a substitute for mitigation. Here Tuvalu may well pair all discussions of the *Falepili Union* with its strong diplomatic and legal efforts to ensure countries reduce their emissions beyond their existing pledges and commitments.

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