

Australia-Tuvalu mobility pathway: does it address the climate crisis?



Tuvalu

Photo Credit: Jess Marinaccio

by Jess Marinaccio

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On 11 June 2025, the Tuvaluan and Australian governments **issued press releases** announcing that the inaugural ballot for the Falepili Mobility Pathway would open on 16 June. Part of the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty, **the mobility pathway** falls under Article 3 of the treaty, “Human mobility with dignity”, and promises to allocate Australian permanent resident visas to **280 Tuvaluan citizens** each year, in the context of the impacts of the global climate crisis on Tuvalu. With **Tuvalu's population** standing at approximately 11,200 people, under the pathway every person currently in the country could potentially gain permanent residence in Australia within the next 40 years or so.

Since the announcement of the **Falepili Union Treaty** at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands in 2023, the treaty has been **widely viewed** as part of Australia's strategy to counter growing Chinese influence in the Pacific. The mobility pathway under the treaty has been **hailed by some**, including the Australian government, as a groundbreaking arrangement allowing for Tuvaluan mobility with dignity to avoid the impacts of climate change. Yet, detractors **have noted** that the mobility pathway is “eliminating the survival of the Tuvaluan people” by resettling Tuvaluans in Australia without resolving the climate crisis that threatens Tuvalu's territorial integrity.

Tuvalu's Prime Minister Feleti Teo **has emphasised** that:

The Falepili Mobility Pathway is not just a one-way traffic. Tuvalu stands to benefit greatly from those that return to Tuvalu after exposure to work, study and life in Australia.

However, as Tuvaluans register for the pathway's inaugural ballot, which enters them into a random selection process for Australian permanent residence, the potential impacts of the pathway on Tuvalu, in both generating a population shift and forestalling real solutions to the climate crisis, must be reckoned with.

At the time of a joint Tuvalu-Australia **information session** about the mobility

pathway held in Tuvalu's capital Funafuti on 18 June, there were already over 300 primary applicants for the pathway and over 1,500 total registrations including secondary applicants. This ballot registration total — accumulated only three days after registrations opened on 16 June — represented nearly 15% of the population of Tuvalu and will increase given that **registrations are open** until 18 July. More recent media reporting has **noted** that a total of 3,125 Tuvaluans had registered for the pathway by the fourth day and that 4,052 had **registered** by 27 June. (Citizens living outside Tuvalu can also register for the pathway, so registrants are not necessarily all part of the population living on Tuvalu.)

The high and growing registration total is due in part to a notable **promotional campaign** by the Australian High Commission in Tuvalu, featuring promotional videos, targeted social media posts and the establishment of a hub in the capital where citizens can access computers and application assistance as necessary. It also comes despite the Australian High Commissioner to Tuvalu, David Charlton, noting **initial uncertainty** about whether people would even register for the scheme.

Although visas issued under the pathway are currently limited to 280 per year, and elected officials insist that **the pathway** is a two-way street — meaning there would be movement back and forth between Tuvalu and Australia — the pathway seems geared to shift Tuvalu's population to Australia. For example, the focus in **promotional materials** on Tuvaluans' learning how to acclimate to life in Australia suggests one-way, Australia-bound movement. Claims in promotional videos that if a Tuvaluan becomes homesick in Australia they can simply **hop on a plane** back home are not borne out given exorbitant air fares between Australia and Tuvalu, approximately US\$1,600 (A\$2,472) for a round trip. Additionally, examples of population shift to New Zealand from the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, whose citizens maintain New Zealand passports, demonstrate how populations in these island nations **have declined** even when the possibility for movement is bilateral.

As has been **previously argued**, while the mobility pathway purports to promote **climate cooperation** between Tuvalu and Australia, neither the pathway nor the broader treaty to which it belongs actually address Australia's role as part of the climate crisis. Australia is **responsible for 4.5%** of global carbon dioxide emissions and is one of the largest exporters of fossil fuels in the world. While the Falepili Union Treaty supports the mobility pathway and land reclamation in Tuvalu as **climate adaptation measures**, there are no provisions actually aimed at increasing Australia's commitment to stop drivers of climate change like greenhouse gas emissions.

If initial Tuvaluan interest in the Falepili Mobility Pathway signals a more long-term shift in Tuvalu's population toward residence in Australia, this will divert attention

from the very real threats climate change and sea level rise pose to Tuvalu's land territory, regardless of the impact of any land reclamation projects. If Australia does not take tangible action to stop the climate crisis, the mobility pathway will not support "the desire of Tuvalu's people to continue to live in their territory" as the Falepili Union Treaty **claims it does**. As the Trump administration in the US **wholly denies** the climate crisis, Australia must supplement resettlement and reclamation schemes with tangible climate mitigation strategies to act as a true partner for Tuvalu in these uncertain times.

Author/s:

Jess Marinaccio

Jess Marinaccio is a technical advisor in Tuvalu's Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communication and Innovation. Marinaccio previously worked as Assistant Professor of Asian Pacific Studies at California State University, Dominguez Hills and for Tuvalu's Department of Foreign Affairs and Embassy in Taiwan.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australia-tuvalu-mobility-pathway-20250701/>