Tuvalu's Digital Nation: why hope, not doom, drives climate adaptation

by Colette Mortreux and Bateteba Aselu

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Community event in Vaiaku, Tuvalu (Winston Chen, Unsplash)

This article builds on a previous Devpolicy Blog piece written by Edwin Venu Pedro and Jess Marinaccio, government employees engaged in Tuvalu's Digital Nation project. They highlighted growing frustration with media portrayals of the Digital Nation as "a cry for help" and reframed the project as one promoting hope. We offer a complementary, outside-in perspective.

While critiquing international media, we recognise that the Government of Tuvalu has, at times, played into media framings of the "sinking nation". Nonetheless, the way in which the Digital Nation is being implemented signals a government recalibrating towards hopeful governance. Consistent with hope theory, the framing of the Digital Nation as a project of hope and community development shows a government keen to author its own framing, one that prioritises Tuvaluan agency and resilience.

Tuvalu has long punched above its weight in international climate negotiations. It has used media opportunities to pressure global leaders to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As political leaders arrived at the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, they passed Tuvaluan children seated in a channel of water, symbolic of rising sea levels threatening future generations. It was an effective media moment, pressuring delegates to think of the children's future, and, as cameras flashed, reminding them that the world was watching.

In 2022, when Tuvalu's then Minister for Justice, Communication and Foreign Affairs, Simon Kofe, announced Tuvalu's plan to become the world's first digital nation, he did so from what looked to be an idyllic islet. The camera panned back to reveal the islet was digitally constructed: swaying palm trees and pixelated sands glitching against a dark void. The powerful visual was interpreted by some as a nation surrendering to an inevitable climate fate.

Small island states have few levers, and dramatic imagery like this has been effective in gaining diplomatic influence, to some extent. It should be said that peril

framings of Tuvalu's climate vulnerability have largely been driven by global media outlets, not from Tuvalu itself, and that Tuvalu has sparingly used this kind of framing. Tuvalu's political nous and domestic strategies to drive climate resilience have been mostly overlooked by media reporting. Residents of Funafuti are understandably frustrated, attuned to being asked the same questions by journalists flying in and out, taking the same photos of children playing in puddles. Carol Farbotko captured this well in 2010 and yet 15 years later the journalistic approach remains. This doom framing, without a sense of agency, is unhelpful — not only for Tuvalu, but for our global efforts to tackle the climate crisis.

Hope theory is instructive here. To navigate the climate crisis, we must foster hope. Hope can be understood as "the belief in the possibility of a favourable outcome". It allows people to feel emotionally strong in the face of uncertainty even though success is not guaranteed. Cognitive hope relies on two mechanisms: our sense of agency to pursue an identified goal (willpower) and our capacity to identify pathways to meet that goal (waypower). Together, these mechanisms allow individuals and groups to trust their capabilities, deploy multiple strategies and persist in the face of obstacles. A study on Senegalese farmers found that a one-point rise on Snyder's hope scale doubled the likelihood of adopting drip irrigation, outperforming education, income and proximity to markets. Conversely, narratives of inevitable doom can become self-fulfilling prophecies, eroding the collective efficacy necessary for sustained adaptation effort. Alarmingly, a study on mental health found that despairing narratives about Tuvalu's climate future were having a greater impact on Tuvaluans' mental health than sea level rise itself.

Taken from this perspective, the Government of Tuvalu's push to author its own narrative is not merely a communication strategy but an act of hope-building. Pedro and Marinaccio's article is itself an expression of this pivot, with government employees taking to the media to recast the Digital Nation as a project enhancing local capacity. The project's YouTube videos show GPS and drone mapping being used to monitor landscape changes to guide adaptation investments, and a newly announced partnership with Pacific Kids' Learning to explore ways to create digitally animated local content in cooperation with Tuvaluan youth. On their LinkedIn site, government-led interviews emphasise that residents view the Digital Nation as an expression of hope and commitment to life in Tuvalu. One resident hopes that the project and its partners will establish digitised travel documents to facilitate outer island mobility. Another looks to preserve knowledge on making and giving traditional fans as a symbol of love, belonging and connection to *fenua* (land).

This kind of commitment to adaptation is not surprising for the Government of Tuvalu. It published its first National Adaptation Program of Action in 2007. It has invested in coastal protection: reclaiming 16 hectares of land under phase I and II of

the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project, and planting 116,000 mangroves since 2006. The government has established migration pathways with Australia through the Falepili Union Treaty and continues its climate advocacy work internationally. Far from being an act of resignation, the Digital Nation is one project amongst a suite of policies. Now the Tuvaluan Government begins its implementation, we are seeing how this project is evolving, shifting from a focus on international audiences to pragmatic in-situ adaptation.

Being hopeful in the midst of a climate crisis is not easy terrain for a small island state. It is a form of labour which involves negotiating risk, protecting its citizens and sustaining motivation despite setbacks. The Tuvaluan Government is showing its skills in navigating this terrain, demonstrating a form of hopeful governance and recalibrating its narratives to support a sense of agency, continuity and possibility at home. Media, governments, non-governmental organisations and researchers should all play their role in fostering climate hope. We should spotlight Tuvalu's successes in local adaptation, share experiences of collective efficacy of other small island states, focus on the agency and resilience of communities living with climate impacts and support multiple pathways to achieve climate safety — including but not limited to worst-case scenarios.

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Link:
https://devpolicy.org/tuvalus-digital-nation-why-hope-not-doom-drives-climate-adaptation-20260704/