

Tuvalu's national labour migration policy ten years on

by Charlotte Bedford

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Officials from Tuvalu and New Zealand launch migration resources, Funafuti, May 2026

Photo Credit: IOM

A decade ago, the Government of Tuvalu, with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO), released the country's first **National Labour Migration Policy** (NLMP). Its long-term vision was not large-scale migration, but to provide Tuvaluan citizens with increased opportunities for safe, managed temporary work and residence overseas.

The small central Pacific archipelagic state — with an **estimated population** of 9,420 in 2026 — is at the forefront of the **climate change crisis**. The country, which has a long history of labour migration, notably in phosphate mining (Nauru and Ocean Island) and seafaring in the decades before and after British Independence in 1978, seeks to retain **self-determination and sovereignty in situ**. In this context, migration is seen as an important component of **climate adaptation** efforts, helping to build Tuvalu's climate resilience through enhanced access to education, skills, income diversification and alternative employment.

Ten years on, much of the landscape the NLMP addressed has changed. Seafaring, once the anchor of Tuvalu's engagement with labour migration, has declined dramatically. Temporary migration has shifted to seasonal work under New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and longer-term employment (for up to four years) under Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

Most significantly, the **Tuvalu-Australia Falepili Union Treaty** has introduced a permanent migration pathway to Australia — akin to (but more generous than) New Zealand's **Pacific Access Category** — of a kind the NLMP never anticipated.

From the late 1970s onwards, seafaring underpinned Tuvalu's overseas employment. The **Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute (TMTI)**, established just after independence in 1979 with Australian and German support, trained cadets to International Maritime Organization standards for employment on merchant ships. In 2015, when the NLMP came into force, it was the country's only formal post-secondary vocational program, enrolling up to 20 men per intake.

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In the early 2000s, more than 350 Tuvaluans were employed offshore as seafarers at any one time. **Seafarers' remittances** provided a crucial source of income for many Tuvaluan families, exceeding A\$4.7 million in 2000, with 50-60% of the population directly dependent on them.

Following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and amid growing competition in global shipping, work on board merchant ships became harder to secure. By the mid-2010s fewer than 100 Tuvaluan seafarers held jobs at sea, from a qualified pool of around 800.

Ten years on, the numbers have fallen further still. A recent **ILO report** found that only six Tuvaluan seafarers were employed in 2024. The reasons for the decline are cumulative: advances in maritime technology, stricter international regulation, the rising costs of training and recruitment, and the **COVID-era crew-change crisis** that stranded Tuvaluan and I-Kiribati seafarers and has had a lasting deterrent effect on potential recruits.

The TMTI continues to train, however, and, early in 2026, **announced plans** to upgrade its facilities and seek new vessel partnerships. Fishing offers a related alternative. As a party to the **Nauru Agreement**, Tuvaluans can be employed on purse seiners operating in the region. A **Tuvalu Fisheries Authority** advertisement in February 2024 listed at least 30 positions on Tuvalu-flagged vessels. The **ILO** notes, however, that there is no obligation to employ Tuvaluans on foreign vessels licensed to fish in Tuvalu's waters, or on commercial ships registered under the Tuvalu flag, leaving the opportunity far from guaranteed.

As seafaring has receded, seasonal and longer-term jobs under the RSE and PALM schemes have become Tuvalu's main offshore opportunities. The numbers were initially small: in 2015 Tuvalu sent 64 RSE workers to New Zealand, of whom 31% (20) were women. Fewer than five Tuvaluans were recruited under Australia's Seasonal Worker Program (now the short-term component of PALM) in the same year.

Participation in New Zealand's RSE scheme has remained steady, if modest. Between 2007 and 2025, 677 individuals accounted for just under 1,500 Tuvaluan RSE arrivals, sustained by a handful of employers with long-standing recruitment relationships. One strength has been the high female participation rate: 30% of Tuvaluan RSE workers have been women, more than double the **12% average** across the nine Pacific source countries.

Tuvalu's participation in Australia's PALM scheme has followed a different path. Tuvalu joined the Pacific Labour Scheme (now the long-term component of PALM)

in 2018, with 42 participants in its first year. Since then, the country has concentrated on longer-term work. In [April 2026](#), 285 Tuvaluans were in Australia on long-term PALM placements, mostly in meat processing; no Tuvaluans were employed as seasonal workers under the short-term component of PALM.

Tuvalu is keen to expand its PALM participation. In May 2026, the labour-sending unit held online briefings with PALM-approved employers to showcase the skills of Tuvaluan workers. RSE numbers remain stable, with around 140 Tuvaluans currently employed for seasonal work.

The most significant change to Tuvalu's migration landscape, however, is of a different order. The Falepili Union Treaty provides 280 places each year for permanent residence in Australia, under [unusually generous terms](#): no work requirement, no maximum age limit, no disability restrictions, and access to benefits and Medicare.

When the [first ballot](#) was drawn in 2025, it was heavily over-subscribed, with more than half the population applying. At 280 places a year, Falepili alone represents almost 3% of Tuvalu's population. Combined with another [100 places](#) under Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa, as well as New Zealand's 75-place per annum Pacific Access Category, the figure rises to 455 visas or almost 5% of the population. This is a per capita level of out-migration [Stephen Howes has described](#) as "extraordinarily high ... in a single year, let alone in repeated years". Earlier modelling suggested that sustained net losses of around 200 people a year would see Tuvalu's population begin to decline by 2030.

Tuvalu's overriding priority, however, is to protect and maintain the habitability of the islands for its people. Temporary and permanent migration pathways are seen as important components of the country's overall strategy to build climate resilience and enable people to circulate within the region or remain in their island homes. Under the Falepili Union Treaty there is no ["use it or lose it"](#) provision — Tuvaluans are granted indefinite permanent residency, with the intention that people will move back and forth between Tuvalu and Australia (high travel costs notwithstanding). The challenge for policy is to make remaining in Tuvalu attractive.

Looking ahead, Tuvalu's migration landscape in 2026 bears little resemblance to the one for which the NLMP was written. The decline of seafaring, the pivot towards long-term work in Australia, and the arrival of the Falepili Union Treaty are not changes at the margin — they reset the assumptions on which the NLMP was built. It is time to review the policy so that it reflects Tuvalu's priorities in this new landscape.

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