

**Sinking Sovereignty? How do Small Island Developing States navigate climate-induced migration through international agreements and domestic governance strategies? The Case of Tuvalu.**

Name: S.M. Rieper

Submission date: 30.06.2025

Public Governance across Borders

University of Twente, Enschede and University of Muenster

Word count: 11973

Ethical Approval: 250819

First Supervisor: Dr. Ola El-Taliawi

Second Supervisor: Dr. phil. Hendrik Meyer

In this work, I made use of generative artificial intelligence. Please see the Appendix (A) for the disclosure statement.

## **Table of Content**

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Literature Review .....	6
2.2 Multilevel Governance (MLG).....	8
2.3 Collaborative Governance (CG).....	9
2.4 Applying MLG and CG to Climate-Induced Migration .....	10
<b>3. Methods .....</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1 Research Design & Method of Data Collection .....	10
3.2 Method of Data Analysis .....	12
3.3 Limitations of Research.....	13
<b>4. Analysis .....</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1 Statehood and Sovereignty .....	14
4.2 Sub-Question I.....	17
4.3 Sub-Question II.....	22
4.4 Sub-Question III .....	24
4.5 Sub-Question IV .....	29
<b>5. Discussion and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>6. List of References .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>7. Appendix .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis examines how international agreements and domestic governance strategies collectively enhance the capacity of Small Island Developing States to manage climate-induced migration and preserve their sovereignty. To answer this, the study uses a qualitative research approach focusing on a single case study, namely that of Tuvalu, a Small Island Developing State of just 11,800 inhabitants in the Pacific Ocean. Two theoretical frameworks guide this analysis: Multi-Level Governance and Collaborative Governance. These frameworks assess how actors at different levels interact and how inclusive governance processes shape migration policy. The data collection draws on two main methods: i) a literature and policy analysis of scholarly articles and legal documents, for example, the Falepili Union Treaty, and ii) semi-structured interviews with experts who work within the Australian Government and the Tuvaluan Government. The findings show that both international agreements and domestic governance strategies can effectively enhance the capacity of Small Island Developing States to manage and plan for long-term sovereignty in the face of the existential threat of climate change. Nevertheless, these frameworks must adopt a dignity-, community- and participatory-based approach to mobility.

Keywords: Tuvalu, SIDS, climate-induced migration, sovereignty, Falepili Union Treaty, Future Now Project

## 1. Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are on the frontline of the climate crisis. Characterized by their low elevation, geographic isolation, and reliance on natural resources, SIDS are increasingly exposed to rising sea levels, ocean warming, and salination of freshwater and soil, as well as the intensification of extreme weather events such as cyclones and drought (WMO, 2024). Despite contributing to less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS face the biggest environmental risks. This underscores a core issue of climate justice: those least responsible for global warming are forced to make existential decisions about their future (UNDP, 2022). In the case of Tuvalu, these environmental shifts threaten not only the physical safety of the Tuvaluan population but also the long-term viability of the landmass to sustain life and livelihoods; therefore, existential questions about national identity, sovereignty, and statehood are raised. An important question surfaces: Is a nation still a nation if it does not have the physical territory to call 'home'? And with that, what mechanisms exist to not only support the potential forced displacement and climate-induced migration of an entire nation but also retain sovereignty?

As the international community grapples with the increasingly complex issues of climate mobility governance, SIDS like Tuvalu are left to navigate a complex policy landscape with limited resources and uncertain protections. While international agreements increasingly acknowledge the role of climate change in shaping migration flows, for example, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration 2018, a lack of coherent frameworks remains to secure the rights, dignity, and identity of climate-affected populations (IOM, 2024). For Pacific Island communities, migration is not just about relocation, it is about the survival of their culture, sovereignty, and having a political voice even if their land is lost (Rothe et al., 2024).

Tuvalu is a SIDS that consists of nine islands. Located halfway between Australia and Hawaii in the South Pacific, it is inhabited by approximately 11,204 people (DFAT, n.d.(a)). With an average elevation of just 1.83 meters, Tuvalu is among the world's most vulnerable nations to climate change. Rising sea levels, increased storm frequency, and coastal erosion make the islands increasingly uninhabitable (World Bank Group & Asian Development Bank, 2021). According to Milan et al. (2016), between 2005 and 2015, 97% of Tuvaluan households reported experiencing the effects of natural disasters, with over 90% affected by droughts and erratic rainfall. In addition, intensifying cyclones, rising sea levels, and king tides pose severe threats to Tuvalu's territory (Fainu, 2023). In 2015, Cyclone Pam alone displaced approximately 45% of Tuvalu's population, highlighting the gravity of its vulnerability (GCF,

n.d.). These environmental stresses are making food and water shortages worse, raising the question about the nation's physical and political survival in the future (McCubbin et al., 2014). Tuvalu is a particularly relevant case study because it has charted a unique pathway to address the twin issues of climate mobility and preservation of sovereignty. Tuvalu is the first SIDS to negotiate a substantial agreement with Australia, trying to proactively tackle the consequences it is facing due to climate change. The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty (FUT), signed in 2023, is the world's first bilateral agreement on climate mobility (Huckstep & Dempster, 2023). This agreement establishes a special visa pathway for Tuvaluans to migrate to Australia, acknowledging the existential threat of climate change and ensuring their safety and well-being (Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union [ATFU], 2023).

Not only does The FUT position Tuvalu as a pioneer, but its Future Now Project (FNP) also reinforces this status by making Tuvalu the first digital nation. In response to the climate crisis, Tuvalu's administration is proactively challenging traditional concepts of statehood, rather than passively accepting circumstances or relying solely on external aid (Rothe et al., 2024). Tuvalu's effort to preserve its nationhood in digital form, from digitizing governance structures to archiving cultural expressions, aims to maintain Tuvalu's presence and identity even in the event of physical submersion (Rothe et al., 2024). It is essential to recognize that this is not merely a local issue, but a global responsibility, as the effects of climate change are felt worldwide (Prete, 2024).

While Tuvalu's initiatives have gained global attention, their governance implications remain underexplored in academic research. Little is known about how domestic and international strategies intersect to preserve sovereignty, and how inclusive and collaborative these processes are. This bachelor's thesis tries to address this gap by investigating how Tuvalu navigates climate-induced migration through both international agreements and national governance strategies, with a focus on maintaining its sovereignty.

Therefore, the main Research Question is:

“How do international agreements and domestic governance strategies collectively enhance Tuvalu's capacity to manage climate-induced migration and safeguard its sovereignty?”

The Sub-Questions are:

1. What potential do international cooperation and domestic governance strategies hold for supporting Tuvalu's capacity to carry out climate migration management?
2. In what ways do international agreements and domestic governance strategies complement each other? What gaps remain?

3. In what ways do international agreements and domestic governance strategies contribute to preserving Tuvalu's sovereignty amid climate-induced migration?
4. How inclusive are these specific domestic and international mechanisms?

To answer these questions, this thesis employs a qualitative case study approach, combining semi-structured expert interviews with desk research. The data is analyzed through thematic analysis to examine the empirical data, facilitating the identification of patterns and narratives in both policy papers and interview data. Furthermore, the study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Multi-Level Governance, which helps understand how responsibilities are distributed across national and international levels, and Collaborative Governance, which assesses the inclusiveness of cooperation between Tuvalu and external actors. The aim is to explore how Tuvalu's domestic policies and international agreements work together in managing climate-related migration. It also examines how Tuvalu can safeguard its sovereignty in the future as it confronts significant climate threats.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter provides the academic foundations for the analysis. It begins with a review of existing literature on climate mobility, climate impacts, international migration frameworks, and related policy responses in SIDS. Following the literature review, the chapter introduces the theoretical framework, which consists of two complementary approaches, Multilevel Governance (MLG) and Collaborative Governance (CG).

### **2.1 Literature Review**

Climate mobility management will be increasingly important. The impacts of climate change are exacerbating drivers of displacement, both within and beyond national borders. Over the past decade, weather-related disasters have resulted in approximately 220 million internal displacements, equivalent to around 60,000 displacements per day (IDMC, 2025). While conflict remains the primary global driver of forced displacement, climate change becomes a bigger threat, aggravating existing tensions and generating new ones (UNHCR, 2024). According to projections, climate change could force up to 216 million people to relocate within six global regions by 2050. Involuntary, unplanned, or inadequately supported relocation can lead to loss and damage, impact social cohesion, livelihoods, and overall well-being (McAdam & Wood, 2023). Planned mobility, on the other hand, can serve as a deliberate and adaptive response to environmental change, thereby enhancing resilience and providing new opportunities. SIDS are particularly vulnerable to migration due to their geographic isolation, low elevation, and limited resources (Brownbridge & Canagarajah, 2024). Reports such as "The

State of Climate Ambition: Snapshot SIDS" by UNDP (2023) or "Climate Change Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Public Debt Sustainability in Small Island Developing States" by Brownbridge and Canagarajah, (2024) highlight the vulnerability of SIDS to climate impacts. Rising sea levels and salt accumulation are gradually reducing arable land, posing challenges to food security and increasing the need for both voluntary and forced migration (UNDP, 2023).

Campbell and Barnett (2010) emphasize that Tuvalu is experiencing environmental degradation that interferes with traditional activities, such as fishing and agriculture, contributing to the loss of habitable land and predicting increased cross-border migration, especially to nearby nations like Australia and New Zealand.

Scholarship has increasingly turned to the governance dimension of climate-induced migration and mobility. Robinson (2018) employs a meta-paradigmatic approach to examine how SIDS are adapting to climate change at the national level. She stresses that single-theory approaches are insufficient to capture the full complexity of adaptation processes and calls for more integrated and flexible frameworks. Scobie et al. (2022) incorporate a community-level perspective by presenting a case study from Trinidad and Tobago that examines the involvement of local community groups in the governance of climate change and health adaptation. Their findings indicate a substantial disparity between regional and national policy and community priorities.

Reviewing policy responses specific to Tuvalu, scholars such as Barnett et al. (2024) focus on the Australian-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty and the treaty's structured migration pathways, as well as its role in preserving cultural and political identity, while Green and Guilfoyle (2024) critically assesses the Treaty's implications for Tuvalu's sovereignty and climate security.

These studies collectively indicate that, although there is increasing attention to climate-induced migration in SIDS, many policy responses remain fragmented. Cohesive frameworks that address both urgent migration needs and long-term adaptation strategies are still under development; therefore, the literature is limited. Despite the growing body of literature addressing climate-induced migration in SIDS, several gaps remain. First, studies emphasize fragmented or sectoral policy approaches, with inadequate integration between migration planning and long-term adaptation plans. Second, there is a lack of research on how national and international governance frameworks intersect with the lived experiences and needs of affected communities.

## **2.2 Multilevel Governance (MLG)**

MLG emerged as a conceptual response to the increased complexity in governance resulting from globalization, regionalization, and decentralization (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). State-centric governance models often seem insufficient for answering questions that are of a global nature (Hooghe et al., 2020). According to Saito-Jensen (2015), States are no longer the monopolizing central actors of policy-making, and the power of governance is increasingly shaped among actors at multiple levels.

The concept was formulated to analyze political processes associated with the development of supranational institutions, such as the European Union, and to examine the growing role of sub-national governments and civil society in decentralized decision-making structures (Saito-Jensen, 2015). In contrast to conventional hierarchical models, this paradigm emphasizes that decision-making power is distributed among various players and throughout several levels of government rather than being contained within national borders and or within one level of governance (Hooghe et al., 2020).

“MLG is a response to functionalist pressures for the efficient provision of public goods from the local to the global levels.” (Hooghe et al., 2020, p. 97).

According to Bache and Flinders (2004), MLG is used in various ways, which means there is no single definition as there are two types of MLG for example, MLG I and MLG II, according to Hooghe and Marks (2001).

In this thesis, MLG refers to the dispersion and interaction of decision-making power across multiple levels of government, including local, national, regional, and international levels (Hooghe et al. 2020). It challenges the traditional notion of a sovereign, centralized state authority and outlines a framework for governance where authority and responsibilities are distributed and negotiated among various levels. This idea recognizes that governance is more than just formal institutions; it also includes numerous processes by which various stakeholders formulate and implement decisions (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Fundamentally, MLG underlines that national governments do not have exclusive authority over decision-making. Instead, non-state actors, subnational governments, and transnational entities frequently share authority (Hooghe, et al. 2020). According to Hooghe and Marks (2001) this leads to a system in which states are incorporated into a multi-level polity that is influenced by the activities and interactions of both horizontal (such as between sectors or non-state actors) and vertical (such as national to local) components.

Global challenges such as climate change and migration transcend national borders, therefore



necessitating equally transboundary cooperation. MLG is a framework for understanding how different actors interact to shape policy outcomes and share responsibilities. It does this by examining the distribution of authority vertically, meaning between levels of governance in decision-making (Bache & Flinders, 2004).

This framework is particularly applicable for analyzing governance arrangements in response to global issues, such as climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives, where countries like Tuvalu must coordinate efforts to enhance sustainability, resilience, and sovereignty across various levels and actors. In effect, a local-level issue, experienced by Tuvalu in the context of its geographic boundaries, demands a response on an international level.

This thesis will focus on the vertical dimension of MLG, the horizontal dimension will be acknowledged through CG. This study anticipates that vertical coordination, policy coherence, and inclusive participation across governance levels will enhance Tuvalu's capacity to manage climate-induced migration while preserving its sovereignty and national identity. In contrast, fragmented governance and misaligned efforts risk creating policy gaps and undermining effective responses (Saito-Jensen, 2015).

### **2.3 Collaborative Governance (CG)**

CG complements the structural focus of MLG by emphasizing governance processes, particularly stakeholder collaboration and joint problem solving (Ansell et al., 2008). While there is no universally agreed-upon definition (Gash, 2017), one widely cited definition comes from Emerson et al (2012), who describe CG as:

“processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage actors constructively across boundaries [...]” (p.2).

Ansell and Gash (2008) argue that for CG to be effective, stakeholders must be actively involved in decision making, develop a shared understanding of the issues at hand, and operate within an institutional setting that enables dialogue. Fostering mutual understanding and trust among stakeholders enhances the efficacy and sustainability of collaborative results (Ansell, 2008).

Emerson et al. (2012) also identify five critical qualities for CG. First, public agencies often commence the process. Second, non-state actors are more than just viewers, they actively participate. Third, rather than being limited to consultation, these participants are directly involved in joint decision-making. Fourth, the collaboration occurs within a formally organized forum with the explicit aim of reaching collective decisions. Finally, the process is oriented toward the shared management of public resources or the co-creation of public policy.

In this thesis, CG will be used as an analytical lens to evaluate how inclusive and participatory

decision-making processes contribute to effective policy responses to climate-induced migration.

This framework is addressing complex, cross-cutting issues, such as climate-induced migration, where solutions require coordination across different sectors and involve local, national and international actors. In the context of Tuvalu, this framework helps to assess how inclusive and participatory governance processes align with local needs and international responsibilities. Employing CG in this thesis examines if the five qualities by Emerson et al. (2012) are met and how inclusive governance processes featuring diverse actors, such as local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are. Moreover, if they safeguard Tuvalu's cultural identity and sovereignty, ensuring that migration policies reflect local needs and values. Since governance processes that reflect local values and aspirations, are more likely to produce legitimate and sustainable outcomes (UNESCO, 2022)

## **2.4 Applying MLG and CG to Climate-Induced Migration**

Integrating MLG and CG provides an analytical framework to examine both the structural and procedural dimensions of governance. The structural lens offered by MLG helps to clarify how authority and responsibilities are distributed across governance levels, revealing how international treaties and national policies interact and affect overall governance potential particularly through vertical coordination. In this thesis, MLG is used to assess whether and how different governance levels local, national, and international are involved in shaping Tuvalu's climate mobility policies. CG focuses on the procedural dimension, examining the inclusivity and quality of stakeholder engagement. It determines whether a diverse set of actors, including civil society, communities, and non-governmental organizations, have access to decision-making processes and influence over policy outcomes.

These two frameworks work together to provide a detailed study of how coordination and participation influence Tuvalu's climate mobility governance.

## **3. Methods**

The objective of this chapter is to present the methodological framework used in this study. It introduces the case study design, describes the data collection methods, and explains the data analysis process. Together, these elements provide the methodological foundation for addressing the study's research questions.

### **3.1 Research Design & Method of Data Collection**

The research design for this thesis will be a single case study, which focuses on Tuvalu, and employs a qualitative method to analyze the role of international agreements and domestic

governance strategies in addressing climate-induced migration. A case study is well-suited for this research as it enables an in-depth examination of a complex issue within a real-world context (Yin, 2018).

The research outlined below analyzes existing international collaborations and domestic policy strategies related to climate migration in Tuvalu to establish a foundational understanding of Tuvalu's governance strategies.

Expert interviews were conducted to gather insights from policymakers. Interviews provide valuable qualitative data by capturing firsthand experiences and perspectives on the effectiveness of existing policies, challenges in implementation, and potential improvements (Given, 2008).

Secondary data includes policy documents such as the treaty text itself and academic literature, providing critical contextual information regarding institutional frameworks, policy approaches, and implementation dynamics.

It is important to note that this thesis explores a topic that is very new and has yet received significant attention in social science research. The FUT, for example, was negotiated and agreed in 2023 and went into force in 2024. Literature sources are therefore not extensive. Therefore, the primary data, captured through semi-structured interviews with experts, is critical and supplements the limited literature.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a qualitative research method due to their ability to strike a balance between structured inquiry and open-ended flexibility. This approach allows interviewees to articulate their perspectives in their own words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008) and enables questions to be tailored to each individual's role, experiences, and expertise, while follow-up questions support deeper exploration or clarification of complex issues (Brancati, 2018).

The interviews conducted for this research explore the effectiveness, feasibility, and limitations of international agreements, such as the FUT, and domestic governance strategies, like the FNP, in safeguarding Tuvalu's sovereignty and migration management in the face of the climate crisis. The qualitative nature of the data allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives, underlying assumptions, and governance dynamics that are crucial to understanding how climate-induced migration is managed in a complex, multi-level context.

An interview guideline was developed to structure the interviews around key themes relevant to the research question. The questions were tailored to each participant's professional role and experience (see appendix).

The interviews were conducted between 21.05.2025 and the 05.06.2025 with each interview

lasting approximately 30 to 50 minutes.

Participants were asked for their consent to be audio recorded prior to the interview. Where consent was granted, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. In the cases where a recording was declined, detailed notes were taken during the conversation, and a memorandum was written immediately afterward to document the key insights. To protect confidentiality and privacy, all interview data were anonymized and assigned numbers referred to participants.

Interviews were conducted with:

Participant 1 (P1) holds a senior leadership role within the Pacific Division of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Participant 2 (P2) works within DFAT's Pacific Mobility section, contributing to Australia's engagement in regional mobility initiatives.

Participant 3 (P3) occupies a high-level position within Tuvalu's Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communication, and Innovation, providing insights from the national government's perspective.

Each interview is assigned a code and cited in a corresponding footnote, further information on the interviewees' is provided in the Appendix.

### **3.2 Method of Data Analysis**

To analyze the data collected through semi-structured interviews, this study used thematic analysis. This method is widely used in qualitative research and is:

“a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57).

The themes obtained from the data explicitly create patterns that contribute to the resolution of the research topic.

This study employs a structured coding framework, beginning with open coding to identify concepts and patterns inductively.

These initial codes were then refined and organized into broader themes through a systematic process of categorization. This approach ensures that the final themes accurately capture the key narratives emerging from the data. Coding was supported with the software ATLAS.ti, which supported the organization, retrieval, and visualization of data throughout the analysis.

Relying on the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012), the data analysis was structured according to the phases they outlined. First, an in-depth familiarization with the data was conducted, which involved repeated reading of relevant documents, as well as initial notetaking to highlight initial ideas.

Following that, the codes were grouped into more general themes that highlight significant trends to Tuvalu's policy responses to migration brought on by climate change. The appendix displays the final coding scheme used in this thesis.

### **3.3 Limitations of Research**

Several limitations should be acknowledged in this study. First, the interview sample is non-representative and based on purposive sampling, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all stakeholders included in climate migration governance. Secondly, civil society perspectives were not included due to challenges in securing interviews within the available research timeframe, which may limit the reflection of community-level views and concerns.

In the case of the FUT, there have only been interviews with the Australian side, which restricts a balanced assessment of the treaty's development and implementation on both sides.

During the interviews, practical challenges arose, which complicated the process. For example, a national power cut in Tuvalu, for which the interviews with Participant 3 had to be postponed once. The interview with Participant 4 was attempted twice. However, due to ongoing technical difficulties and later their participation in international conferences during the research period, it had to be conducted in writing, which led to a restricted depth of the interview, and therefore it was not utilized in this thesis.

As the subject is highly topical, documents such as the Falepili Mobility Pathway Exposure Document were only released during the research period. Since the FUT and the Future Now Project are still in the implementation stage, it is challenging to assess the policy's efficacy or its long-term effects. As a result, this thesis offers a preliminary analysis based on available data and expert insights at the time of writing.

The focus is narrowed down deliberately to these two governance initiatives to ensure analytical depth and feasibility within the constraints of a bachelor's thesis. Expanding the scope to additional case studies or broader stakeholder groups would have exceeded the available time and scope.

## **4. Analysis**

The analysis begins with a brief overview of the concepts of statehood and sovereignty. Following this, the chapter introduces the FUT and the FNP as two central pillars of Tuvalu's strategic response to climate change and migration. These mechanisms are then examined with the collected data and guided by four sub-questions that assess their potential, complementarity, inclusivity, and whether they safeguard Tuvalu's sovereignty amid climate-induced

displacement.

#### **4.1 Statehood and Sovereignty**

In this context, climate-induced migration and mobility are not just consequences of environmental change but central challenges to the continuity of statehood and the exercise of sovereignty for SIDS like Tuvalu, where planned mobility is envisioned as a sovereign response to climate threats, allowing populations to relocate with dignity before territorial loss makes displacement inevitable. These challenges prompt a re-examination of what constitutes a state under international law.

One of the foundational definitions of statehood is articulated in Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933).

“The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications:

- a. a permanent Population;
- b. a defined territory;
- c. Government; and
- d. capacity to enter into relations with other states.”

While countries in the two Americas originally adopted the Montevideo Convention, its principles are frequently referenced in international legal discourse and practice (Somers, 2023).

Historically, the dominant understanding of sovereignty has been shaped by the concept of Westphalian sovereignty, which emerged from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. It ties sovereignty directly to territorial statehood and the exclusive authority of a state to govern within defined borders without external interference (Kasner, 2021). As Bauder and Mueller (2023) explain, Westphalian sovereignty allows a state to exercise control over both domestic and foreign affairs based on a territorial logic.

Applying the above-mentioned logic to SIDS, pressing questions are raised about how statehood can be upheld when one of its fundamental requirements, namely territory, is directly threatened, considering climate change.

The capacity of political communities to exercise both self-determination and territorial authority is a component of sovereignty, as advances in political theory and international

relations have brought to light (Kasner, 2021). According to Kasner (2021), the normative concept of sovereignty serves as the foundation for both global peace and local political autonomy. Given this, it could be argued that upholding Tuvalu's sovereignty in the face of possible territorial loss aligns with broader pledges to uphold international justice, stability, and the rights of vulnerable states. This perspective is reflected in political developments, such as the Boe Declaration in Regional Security (2018), in which Pacific leaders reaffirm that climate change is the region's most significant threat to the livelihoods, wellbeing, and security of the people in the Pacific (PIF, 2019).

Stressing the significance of protecting each member state's sovereign right and safeguarding territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of climate threats (PIF, 2019). Another development is the 2023 UN General Assembly request for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), reflecting rising concerns over the legal protection of climate justice (UN, 2023). The request specifically asks the ICJ to clarify the obligations of states regarding climate action and the legal consequences for those whose acts or omissions have caused significant harm to the climate system and environment.

That is why Tuvalu has been developing two major strategies, which have not been practiced anywhere else in the world, to preserve its statehood and sovereignty. Namely, the Falepili Union Treaty and the Future Now Project.

*The Falepili Union Treaty* was signed between Tuvalu and Australia on November 9, 2023, and entered into force in August 2024 (DFAT, n.d.(b)). It comprises eight articles and is accompanied by an explanatory memorandum. The FUT establishes the Falepili Union, a partnership based on the values of good neighborliness, mutual respect, care, and solidarity (DFAT, 2024 (b)). As part of the FUT, Australia formally recognizes Tuvalu's continuing statehood and sovereignty, regardless of potential land loss due to sea level rise and other climate-related hazards, while maintaining its rights and responsibilities under international law (Article 1). Furthermore, the FUT acknowledges Tuvalu's deep ancestral and cultural connections to its land and maritime territory (ATFU, 2023). A central element of the agreement, and of importance to this study, is the introduction of a special human mobility pathway for Tuvaluan citizens to Australia (Article 3). It offers Tuvaluan nationals the chance to immigrate to Australia, either temporarily or permanently, to live, work, or study as a permanent resident under the new Treaty visa stream. Australia would promote human mobility with dignity, following the objectives of the Treaty (DFAT, 2025). This marks a significant point, as it explicitly frames mobility as a proactive adaptation strategy tied to sovereignty

preservation, rather than as a last-resort response to displacement. In doing so, the Treaty directly addresses one of the central concerns of this thesis: how international cooperation can support climate-affected states like Tuvalu in managing mobility while safeguarding their statehood and autonomy.

This is intended to enable movement in the context of climate-related challenges and is based on a shared commitment by both countries to ensure “mobility with dignity” (DFAT, 2024 (b)). Both governments are working on this together to develop this pathway and make it operational by mid-2025 (DFAT, 2024 (a)). The pathway is expected to include provisions for access to residency, employment, and services in Australia for eligible Tuvaluan nationals (DFAT, 2024 (a)). Additionally, the FUT includes clauses related to security cooperation (Article 4). Tuvalu has agreed to consult and mutually agree with Australia before entering any partnership or engagement with other states on matters related to defense or security (ATFU, 2023).

*The Future Now Project*, also called “Te Ateao Nei Project,” is a domestic climate mobility strategy of Tuvalu. The Tuvaluan government launched it in October 2021, and it has since expanded through new initiatives led by the Ministry of Justice, Communication and Foreign Affairs, aiming to strengthen digital infrastructure and international advocacy (Kofe, 2021). Rooted in Tuvaluan culture through the construction of a Digital Nation, it is grounded in the cultural concept of *Fenua* (Rothe et al., 2024). As Participant 3 notes, a high-ranking government representative from Tuvalu, the concept of *Fenua* encapsulates cultural continuity, faith in leadership, and a community vision where choices are collectively decided<sup>1</sup>. Tuvalu's digital preservation initiatives are premised on this sense of belonging, demonstrating how traditional values are not abandoned but rather reframed for resilience.

It is structured around three key components designed to ensure Tuvalu's national identity, governance, and sovereignty continuity in the face of physical disappearance.

One of the first parts of this project was amending Tuvalu's constitution to safeguard the country's statehood and sovereignty even if its physical territory becomes uninhabitable (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). This reform is intended to reinforce Tuvalu's claim to continued statehood under international law despite it not existing physically as a land mass. The legal aspect of the project responds to the principle in customary international law that statehood depends on having a defined territory (Montevideo Convention, 1933). It aims to affirm that Tuvalu should continue to hold its sovereign rights and responsibilities as a nation, even in the

---

<sup>1</sup> I02, P3, Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communication, and Innovation (MTECI), 27 May 2025



absence of physical land.

Secondly, the project focuses on the digital preservation and reconstruction of Tuvalu, using 3D modeling, photogrammetry, and geographic information systems. Tuvalu's land environment and cultural sites are being replicated, and it aims to document the physical and cultural landscape for future generations (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). The project also includes archiving traditional knowledge, oral histories, and significant cultural artifacts to preserve Tuvaluan identity in digital form. While other countries have experimented with virtual environments, such as the Maldives opening an embassy in Second Life in 2006 (Rothe et al., 2024), Tuvalu is the first to develop a full-scale digital twin in response to climate change. The third component of the FNP involves the digital migration of Tuvalu's governmental functions and public services. This involves moving governance procedures, civil registries, and administrative functions to safe cloud-based platforms (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). Regardless of physical dislocation, the objective is to allow the Tuvaluan government to continue functioning and providing remote services to its citizens. This virtual infrastructure will not only preserve state operations but also give the Tuvaluan diaspora a way to access government services, engage in civic life, and maintain ties to their cultural heritage (The First Digital Nation, n.d.).

Since announcing the First Digital Nation initiative, Tuvalu has made significant progress toward digitally securing its sovereignty. It has completed a full 3D LIDAR scan of its islands, begun upgrading its communications infrastructure, and initiated the development of a blockchain-based digital ID system. A living archive of Tuvaluan culture is still being developed (The First Digital Nation, n.d.).

#### **4.2 Sub-Question I**

What potential do international cooperation and domestic governance strategies hold for supporting Tuvalu's capacity to carry out climate migration management?

This question is answered by shortly explaining the “best practices” of climate mobility management. Following, the general potential of the FUT and the FNP are analyzed by drawing on the data of the interviews, which were conducted with experts.

Effective climate mobility governance is increasingly understood to be human-rights-based, participatory, and focused on preserving the dignity, identity, and agency of individuals and communities at risk of displacement (IOM, 2021). Good practice approaches aim to enable people to migrate voluntarily and safely, rather than being forced to relocate in emergency conditions. Moreover, they should also include legal protection, cultural preservation, and the right to return (McAdam & Wood, 2023). This means that successful strategies do not only

facilitate adaptive migration but also enable the preservation of sovereignty and identity of climate-affected communities.

According to the expert interviews conducted, the FUT and the FNP provide significant potential for Tuvalu to navigate the complex challenge of climate-induced migration, not only to manage physical relocation, as an adaptive strategy, rather than a loss and damage-related consequence but also, to preserve Tuvalu's sovereignty.

The FUT has remarkable potential, as it provides a bilateral, legally enforceable framework to promote mobility with dignity. One of its features is the formal recognition and protection of Tuvalu's sovereignty, politically, legally, and territorially, even in the face of existential threats such as sea-level rise (Article 1). Including the commitment of Australia to support Tuvalu in emergencies. This is highlighted by Participant 1, who holds a senior leadership role within the Pacific office Division of DFAT:

*"Australia has a treaty commitment to come to Tuvalu's aid in times of military aggression, a public health emergency of international concern, or a major natural disaster"*<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the treaty marks a precedent in international law by the formal recognition of Tuvalu's enduring statehood, it is the first time a treaty-level instrument has recognized the concept of enduring statehood notwithstanding the impacts of sea-level rise<sup>3</sup>. This shows that the treaty strengthens Tuvalu's long-term viability and legal identity as a sovereign nation despite climate threats.

The treaty also established the Falepili Mobility Pathway. This program allows 280 Tuvaluan nationals to immigrate to Australia each year from 2025 onwards, regardless of age or disability (DFAT, 2024 (a)). Participant 2, who works within DFAT's Pacific Mobility section, contributing to Australia's engagement on regional mobility initiatives, stated that the number was chosen with consideration to achieve a balance between reducing the likelihood of rapid depopulation or service strain in Tuvalu and generating mobility opportunities<sup>4</sup>. While this figure can be renegotiated, its symbolic and strategic value lies in the co-creation of the program, emphasizing the flexibility and partnership of both sides in the treaty.

As of June 16, 2025, the Falepili Mobility Pathway opened its registration for the first balloting round (Wong, et al., 2025, 2025). Since its opening, over 3000 Tuvaluans have entered the ballot, which is nearly one-third of Tuvalu's population (The Guardian, 2025).

During the interview, which was conducted in May, Participant 2 expressed that the government

---

<sup>2</sup> I01, P1, Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> I01, P2, Pacific Partnerships Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025.

had not anticipated a flood of applications in the first year, assuming that most people would still prefer to remain in Tuvalu<sup>5</sup>. The unanticipated strong interest demonstrates the treaty's potential as a crucial mechanism for climate mobility. Due to recent events, it is not yet to fully determine the specific reasons for the registrations.

The mobility pathway builds on a circular migration model, which allows Tuvaluans to travel between Australia and Tuvalu without losing their resident status (DFAT, 2024 (a)). The Falepili Mobility Pathway differs from both Australia's standard permanent residency system, which includes strict age, skills, and sponsorship criteria (DHA, n.d. (a)), and for example, the Pacific Engagement Visa, which operates via a separate ballot for broader Pacific nations but does not offer the same co-designed bilateral guarantees or recognition of climate mobility (DHA, n.d.(b)).

As Participant 2, who works within DFAT's Pacific mobility department, highlighted, unlike standard permanent residency arrangements in Australia, Tuvaluan participants under this agreement are not subject to the usual travel restrictions or minimum residency requirements, allowing them greater flexibility to move between Tuvalu and Australia without jeopardizing their residency status<sup>6</sup>. The flexibility given by this, supports transnational livelihoods, where Tuvaluans can gain education and employment and return with skills that benefit their communities.

Reflecting this Participant 2 emphasized that:

*"Tuvaluans will be able to get an education and take those skills back to Tuvalu. That's another measure to address the potential of brain drain, which is a real concern."*<sup>7</sup>

This shows that the mobility component of the treaty is designed not as a forced relocation scheme, but as a structured and voluntary pathway that respects Tuvaluans' agency and the people's right to choose. This aligns with climate mobility practices as mentioned above, emphasizing voluntary participation in the face of displacement risks.

It is embedded in the treaty that holders of these visas are not classified as refugees or humanitarian entrants. As Participant 1 explained:

*"Tuvalu was very strong on this point, this program is not a climate refugee program by any means. It's about giving people choices and even expanding their ability to stay in Tuvalu after building up skills in Australia."*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> I01, P2, Pacific Partnerships Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> I01, P2, Pacific Partnerships Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025.

<sup>8</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

Tuvalu's rejection of the climate refugee label under the FUT reflects its determination to preserve both its sovereignty and national dignity, as labeling Tuvaluans as "*refugees*" risks implying state failure, which can undermine their sovereignty and shift the narrative from sovereign agency to one of victimhood. As Bender (2024) notes, the concept of "*climate refugee*" strips away agency and reduces people to passive subjects. Additionally, he notes that Pacific Island nations have consistently rejected the refugee label, asserting that it overlooks their cultural resilience and political agency (Bender, 2024).

The FUT frames climate mobility as a matter of choice and opportunity, not forced displacement. This approach empowers Tuvaluans to upskill and migrate on their own terms while maintaining strong ties to their homeland. It also sets a new precedent for climate-related migration that avoids the limitations of the refugee framework and supports a development-oriented, rights-based model of mobility.

Participant 1 pointed out that this reflects Tuvalu's core principle of mobility with dignity, allowing people to choose when, how, and if they want to move.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the program mirrors key principles from Australia's *National Settlement Framework* and *Humanitarian Entrant Integration Outcomes Framework* (DFAT, 2025), particularly in its emphasis on long-term integration, cultural sensitivity, and individual agency. These principles are operationalized through a wide range of settlement, education, and cultural services designed to prepare Tuvaluan migrants for life in Australia. Participant 2 described:

*"We have a range of pre-departure activities, making sure people have all the information, opportunities and challenges such as digital literacy, financial literacy, how to get a job [...]"*<sup>10</sup>

Not only are pre-departure preparations, such as briefings on life in Australia, undertaken (DFAT, 2025), including outlining which mobility pathway holds potential, post-arrival support mechanisms are also in place. For example, liaison officers with Tuvaluan backgrounds, who are intended to help bridge cultural and institutional gaps (DFAT, 2025).

At the same time, the treaty is not solely oriented toward facilitating migration but also explicitly supports in-place adaptation efforts through climate financing and land security measures. Australia has committed AU\$47 million in development assistance to Tuvalu, targeting key sectors including climate adaptation, telecommunications, infrastructure, health, and education for 2025-2026 (Wong, et al., 2025). This includes direct support for Tuvalu's flagship national initiatives, the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP) and the Vaka Cable

---

<sup>9</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>10</sup> I01, P2, Pacific Partnerships Branch, DFAT 20 May 2025.

(Wong, et al., 20252025).

As Participant 1 articulated:

*“It’s about ensuring there is safe land available for Tuvaluans who choose to stay.”<sup>11</sup>*

The FNP also holds substantial potential for supporting Tuvalu’s capacity to manage climate migration. As part of the FNP, Tuvalu amended its constitution to preserve its statehood even in the event of total physical submergence (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). This legal change represents a proactive effort to maintain sovereign continuity in line with best practice principles that prioritize legal and cultural resilience alongside mobility. It shows an increasing trend away from reactive relocation and toward anticipatory governance, which aims to maintain the political and symbolic status of affected communities.

According to Participant 3, a key actor in the Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communication, and Innovation of Tuvalu, the acceptance of the new definition of statehood by the United Nations would be a crucial step toward preserving Tuvalu’s national identity. Moving into the digital space, they added, would help safeguard Tuvaluan culture and ensure that traditions remain accessible online<sup>12</sup>. With that the FNP seeks to safeguard Tuvalu’s sovereignty and statehood through digital preservation mechanisms. The project's further potential incorporates the digital nation, with the digital twinning of the Islands, as well as the Digital Ark. Both are mechanisms for archiving and uploading the Tuvaluan Islands' and cultural heritage into a cloud-based platform (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). The name “Digital Ark” itself carries a strong symbolic meaning of the biblical Ark of Noah<sup>13</sup>, explains Participant 3. Evoking a vision of cultural and spiritual preservation amidst existential threat, expressing Tuvalu's will to preserve its identity, memory, and spiritual values in addition to its statehood.

These initiatives represent an ambitious attempt to digitize the national identity. As Tuvalu's Minister of Justice, Communication, and Foreign Affairs explained, the goal is to:

*“secure our statehood and safeguard our heritage, history, and people by archiving it in the cloud”* (The First Digital Nation, n.d.).

In addition to these cultural efforts, the project is also developing digital infrastructure, including digital ID systems (The First Digital Nation, n.d.), to ensure that Tuvaluan nationals remain legally and politically recognized even if they are forced to migrate. This would allow

---

<sup>11</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>12</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

continued access to services and affirmation of national belonging regardless of geographic location or territorial status (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). As Participant 3 emphasized:

*“It ensures the survivability or the recognition of our identity as Tuvaluan people.”<sup>14</sup>*

In this sense, the FNP can be understood as a form of digital migration into the metaverse one that prioritizes continuity over displacement. Rather than tying sovereignty exclusively to physical territory, it reconceptualizes it through digital presence, collective cultural memory, and the pursuit of international recognition of these artefacts.

Together, the FUT and the FNP demonstrate the strong potential of international cooperation and domestic governance strategies to support a human-rights, social justice modality of climate-induced migration management, which is future-oriented. The FUT showcases the potential of international cooperation to operationalize mobility with dignity through a co-designed, legally binding migration framework. The FUT enhances Tuvalu's capacity to manage climate-related mobility holistically by offering a safe and voluntary approach grounded in dignity, reaffirming Tuvalu's long-standing sovereignty, and facilitating both migration and in situ adaptation. Complementing this, integrating legal, technical, and cultural instruments into a national framework, a SIDS can proactively influence its future, as demonstrated by the FNP. It provides a compelling model for preserving national identity in the face of territorial loss due to its emphasis on digital sovereignty and cultural continuity.

Taken together, these initiatives represent a multidimensional approach to resilience enabling Tuvalu to confront climate change not through retreat, but through agency, innovation, and strategic cooperation.

#### **4.3 Sub-Question II**

In what ways do international agreements and domestic governance strategies complement each other? What gaps remain?

While Sub-question I examines the general potential of these strategies, Sub-question II investigates how they complement each other and identifies areas where gaps remain.

First, both mechanisms ultimately aim at safeguarding Tuvalu's sovereignty and its enduring statehood. They take different approaches to achieving this objective. Through formal international cooperation, the FUT obtains legal legitimacy, formally acknowledging Tuvalu's enduring statehood. In contrast, the FNP focuses on digital preservation and anticipatory

---

<sup>14</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

governance. It envisions continuity through constitutional amendment, digitized identity, and cultural memory even in the face of total territorial loss.

Second, the two strategies are driven by different levels of governance. The FUT represents an external, bilateral agreement, while the FNP reflects an internally developed, nationally led innovation. Together, they bridge global and local governance levels, reinforcing the structural coherence of Tuvalu's climate response.

Third, the mechanisms are functionally complementary in their design. The FUT addresses physical mobility through structured migration opportunities and development cooperation. The FNP, on the other hand, secures non-physical continuity by anchoring Tuvaluan statehood and identity in the digital realm. Together, they broaden the possibilities of climate governance by integrating tangible and symbolic forms of resilience migration with dignity and sovereignty without territory.

However, despite their complementarity, several gaps remain in Tuvalu's climate migration governance strategy. While the idea of enduring statehood is affirmed in the FUT and echoed in the FNP, there is currently no multilateral legal framework in place to ensure Tuvalu's continued recognition as a sovereign state in the event of total land loss. Australia's recognition of Tuvalu's sovereignty, "notwithstanding the impacts of sea-level rise" (ATFU, 2023), marks a historic legal precedent. Yet, this recognition remains bilateral and isolated. Although other Pacific Island nations have voiced strong political support for Tuvalu's sovereignty through regional declarations (PIF, 2019), no other country has formally recognized enduring sovereignty through law. Without broader international consensus or UN-level recognition, the principle of sovereignty without territory remains legally invalid and potentially symbolic. Hence, although groundbreaking in nature, the FUT and the FNP both remain vulnerable to contestation.

Adding to that, Tuvalu's Future Now Project is currently self-funded, relying on limited national resources. As Participant 3 noted, who works within the ministry, the project is under:

*"We are currently using our own funds in our budget [...] we're funding this project throughout."*<sup>15</sup>

The absence of international or multilateral financial backing limits the scalability and durability of the project, as there are no connections to global climate financing options.

While offering development funding for physical climate adaptation, the FUT does not allocate funding to support the digital preservation components of the FNP. This highlights a disconnect between external support and internal innovation.

---

<sup>15</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

The mobility with dignity pathway is an encouraging step forward. Nevertheless, while the program is positioned as voluntary and development-oriented, the underlying cause of the migration opportunity is climate change, particularly the rise in sea levels.

In this light, the distinction may be more political and discursive, i.e., rather than being positioned as a climate change adaptation strategy, it frames the issue primarily through the lens of protection of sovereignty within the borders of another country. Australia and other industrialized nations whose continued use of fossil fuels has contributed to global warming, are able to support mobility without engaging in political discussions around loss and damage or responsibility. It allows Australia to sidestep the legal and ethical obligations while still facilitating movement driven by climate vulnerability.

In summary, international agreements and domestic governance strategies in Tuvalu complement each other in their shared goal of safeguarding sovereignty and human dignity amid climate change. Nevertheless, gaps persist, legal recognition of post-territorial sovereignty is not globally established, financial backing for innovative projects is insufficient, and political considerations risk undermining the justice dimension of climate mobility governance.

#### **4.4 Sub-Question III**

In what ways do international agreements and domestic governance strategies contribute to preserving Tuvalu's sovereignty amid climate-induced migration?

While Sub-questions I and II explore the general potential and gaps of the FUT and the FNP, this section focuses specifically on how these mechanisms contribute to the preservation of Tuvalu's sovereignty. Sovereignty here is understood in the previously outlined way.

The notion of Tuvaluan sovereignty is being shaped and redefined by both international agreements and domestic governance strategies. The concept of sovereignty consistently intersects with the themes of statehood, digital migration, and mobility, all of which are deeply linked to the goal of maintaining dignity, as shown in the thematic analysis of policy documents and expert interviews.

The FUT is the first legally binding instrument that acknowledges Tuvalu's continued statehood as Participant 1 highlights:

*"This is the first time in a treaty-level instrument that two countries have recognized the concept of enduring sovereignty and Tuvalu's continued statehood notwithstanding the impacts of sea level rise."*<sup>16</sup>

This recognition is a major success for Tuvalu, as it reinforces the country's efforts to ensure

---

<sup>16</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025



its statehood and maritime entitlements (ATFU, 2023).

According to Article 1(b) of the Montevideo Convention (1933), a defined territory is one of the key criteria for statehood. The FUT addresses this challenge by accepting Tuvalu's constitutional amendment, which states that :

“The State of Tuvalu within its historical, cultural, and legal framework shall remain in perpetuity in the future, notwithstanding the impacts of climate change or other causes resulting in loss to the physical territory of Tuvalu.”  
(Constitution of Tuvalu, 2023)

This reflects a progressive attempt to redefine statehood beyond physical territory.

At the same time, the FUT introduces certain complexities. Article 4.4 requires Tuvalu to consult and mutually agree with Australia before entering any security or defense arrangement with a third country (ATFU, 2023). This raises concerns about Tuvalu's foreign autonomy and, with that, its sovereignty. Referring to the Montevideo Convention (1933), for a state to be defined as a person of international law, it must fulfill Article 1(d).

This capacity could be seen as constrained by the obligations set out in the treaty. According to Westphalian norms, sovereignty is the right of a state to govern its own affairs and territory free from outside intervention (Kasner, 2021).

While acknowledging these concerns, Participant 1 who worked to establish the treaty, argued that:

*“There's been a lot of focus on Article 4.4 and a perception that it curtails Tuvalu's sovereignty,” but overall, “the treaty enhances our individual and collective sovereignty.”<sup>17</sup>*

In a comparable manner, Participant 2 described the agreement as a careful effort to strike a balance between reciprocity and sovereignty. This reflects the agreement's paradoxical nature, which reinforces new dependencies in one area while reaffirming Tuvalu's statehood in another. Simultaneously, this dynamic raises the question of whether the FUT fully lives up to its namesake of Falepili, which means neighborly care, or whether it also serves broader geopolitical interests for Australia. As Participant 1 acknowledged:

*“Our Foreign Minister has been quite clear that what happens in the Pacific matters to Australia. And when she was elected, she wanted to look at measures to transform our relationships in the Pacific. The Falepili Union is*

---

<sup>17</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

*the first of what was a series of steps the Australian government has taken on that behalf.*”<sup>18</sup>

This quote, along with that in the opinion of Participant 1:

*“There are clearly some parts of the treaty that reflect Australia's own interests in the region. But Tuvalu's interests are also clearly balanced in the treaty.”*<sup>19</sup>

highlights the dual function of the agreement. It is both a response to climate vulnerability and a strategic move in Australia’s regional positioning.

The power imbalance between a powerful Pacific country like Australia and smaller island governments is evident in this dynamic.

The FNP is composed of three interlinked components, which emerged from the interview with Participant 3: first, international lobbying to redefine statehood in the context of climate-induced territorial loss; second, the digital nation initiative; and third, the digital preservation of Tuvaluan culture. The heart of this approach is the attempt to safeguard Tuvalu's sovereignty and identity beyond physical territory, with the digital nation serving as both a symbolic and practical tool for continuity (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). As P3 explained:

*“Once our land’s gone, that’s gone, but if we are able to use technology to preserve our identity in the digital space, I think every Tuvaluan would be glad. We have not lost our identity we have not lost our land.”*<sup>20</sup>

This quote captures the strong symbolic value that the digital nation holds. It is more than trying to digitalize the country. Through 3D scanning (digital twinning) of the islands, blockchain-based national IDs, and the digital Arc, the project aims to save and preserve Tuvalu’s culture and identity (The first Digital Nation, n.d.). As emphasized by Heslin (2019), cultural heritage, including language, communal structures, and sacred spaces, is integral to national identity and the overall well-being of communities. For low-lying island states, preserving culture is not only a social imperative but also a key element of political continuity and sovereign legitimacy amid climate-induced migration

As Tuvalu embeds its heritage digitally, it moves beyond the Westphalian model, anchored in fixed borders, and toward a sovereignty defined by cultural continuity, relational identity, and

---

<sup>18</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

memory. This resonates with Pacific epistemologies where sovereignty is grounded in stewardship, kinship, and caring responsibilities rather than territorial ownership (Bambridge et al., 2021). As Draper (2023) argues, such a shift toward de-territorialized statehood would decouple sovereignty from physical territory, allowing SIDS to maintain statehood and self-determination without exclusive jurisdiction over a geographic area.

The project's complete self-funding underscores national ownership and the political significance that Tuvalu attaches to digital continuity.

Notably, the project includes an amendment to the Tuvaluan constitution, which redefines the term of statehood, in a worst-case scenario (The first Digital Nation, n.d.). Under current international law, Tuvalu risks losing its sovereignty if it loses its land, looking back at the Montevideo Convention of 1933. Its continued recognition as a nation-state, along with its maritime boundaries and other entitlements, is contingent on international recognition. As of November 2023, 25 nations have formally acknowledged Tuvalu's new definition of statehood, affirming its right to exist as a sovereign entity even without territory (The First Digital Nation, n.d.). While these acknowledgements are politically meaningful, they do not yet constitute a legal or multilateral legal recognition.

Nevertheless, this is more than just a symbolic gesture they form part of a broader legal strategy aimed at shaping new international norms to lobby at the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral institutions to redefine statehood in the age of climate change.

*"If we're able to get the UN to accept our definition of statehood [...] then we would ensure our culture is preserved and our traditions are online."*<sup>21</sup>

While neighboring island states and the Pacific Island Forum support Tuvalu's change of statehood, further international recognition is still lacking. Participant 3 acknowledges that the long-term outcome remains unclear:

*"Well, I think time will tell, a lot of our neighboring islands, or Pacific Island brothers and sisters have agreed with the definition or the statehood movement or changing the definition of statehood. I think the sole purpose of them agreeing to it is because, we all know what it's like to be affected and impacted by climate change."*<sup>22</sup>

The project also demonstrates the constraints that SIDS face in a global system that frequently favors more powerful nations; this dynamic is echoed in Participant 3's thoughts on the difficulties of achieving wider solidarity and recognition. He expressed disappointment with

---

<sup>21</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

what is perceived as the selective enforcement of international standards, pointing out that powerful nations often disregard rules when it suits them, leaving less powerful nations like Tuvalu feeling unsupported<sup>23</sup>.

Participant 3 emphasized the necessity for an international system that can uphold the sovereignty of the most vulnerable and hold powerful actors accountable. As they put it:

*“we understand our circumstances. We know we are small, and we can’t change our size or geography. But what would really benefit us, and not just us,[..], is an international system where we are treated as equals. That kind of inclusivity and fairness would make a real difference, not just for the Pacific, but for the global community.”*<sup>24</sup>

This criticism points out an asymmetry in the way global climate governance works. While major polluting countries often face little to no consequences for breaking international commitments, nations like Tuvalu are expected to remain resilient. This unfairness is one of the key reasons behind Tuvalu’s push to institutionalize new norms of sovereignty and recognition at the multilateral level.

In response to climate change, Tuvalu is advancing an ambitious redefinition of both concepts. The FUT offers a unique bilateral recognition of Tuvalu’s sovereignty “notwithstanding sea-level rise,” lending external legitimacy to this evolving model.

Meanwhile, the FNP addresses the erosion of territorial sovereignty by transferring core state functions into the digital realm, preserving population identity through blockchain-based IDs, archiving land and culture via digital twinning, and amending its constitution to enshrine non-territorial statehood.

By claiming that sovereignty can be preserved through recognition, cultural identity, and governance continuity notwithstanding territory loss, these strategies work around traditional legal barriers. Ongoing tensions are, however, visible in both frameworks. For example, the FUT contains strategic concessions that raise questions about autonomy. Meanwhile, the FNP, currently holds more symbolic than legally binding weight.

However, Tuvalu's case challenges the limits of international law, showing that a nation's sovereignty in the twenty-first century may be determined not just by its territory but also by its institutions, will, and capacity to be recognized as a nation beyond its physical appearance.

---

<sup>23</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.5 Sub-Question IV

##### How inclusive are these specific domestic and international mechanisms?

To answer this sub-question, the thesis will use the theoretical framework mentioned above, applying the principles of MLG and CG. MLG allows us to assess the degree of vertical integration, i.e., how well coordination occurs across local, national, and international levels, while CG focuses on the inclusiveness of decision-making processes, particularly the participation of non-state actors and affected communities. The information received from the interviews will shed light on this sub-question.

From a CG perspective, the FUT reveals limitations in inclusivity during the early stage of development. The treaty is a result of a bilateral cooperation between Australia and Tuvalu (ATFU, 2023), the initial decision-making processes remain at the executive level in both countries, with little participation from sub-national actors or local communities.

Indeed, Kitara and Farbotko (2023) noted that the signing of the treaty in 2023 came as a surprise to many, as there had been no prior consultations with local communities or NGOs beforehand. The absence of early consultations limits the inclusiveness and participatory quality of the agreement, raising questions about the extent to which the perspectives of Tuvaluan citizens, particularly those most affected by climate impacts, were incorporated into the decision-making process. According to CG theory, trust-building and joint ownership are key to successful implementation, both of which were initially lacking in this case.

This concern was noted by Participant 1, who stated that the previous Tuvaluan government signed the treaty just before the election, allowing the people to consider it and for the new government to decide about its entry into force<sup>25</sup>. Participant 1 added that a new government was elected and a new Prime Minister (the Hon Feleti Teo OBE)

*“was aware of the problem and wanted to do more community consultation before proceeding with the entry into force”<sup>26</sup>*

This demonstrates how initially exclusive the development of the treaty was. Without formal involvement from state- or community-level players in Australia or local communities in Tuvalu, decisions were made at the executive level (Green & Guilfoyle, 2024). This means that those most impacted, including island residents and diaspora communities, had fewer opportunities to influence the agreement's fundamental provisions because the process lacked early participation mechanisms. Rather than being integrated from the beginning, this top-down strategy created a pattern in which inclusion was reactive.

---

<sup>25</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Participants 1 and 2 emphasized that both parties strove to make the treaty procedure as transparent and accessible as possible, with all the key documents available online, for example, the FUT text itself, the Explanatory Memorandum, and the Falepili Mobility Pathway exposure document (DFAT)<sup>27</sup>. Moreover:

*“the signing of the Explanatory Memorandum was broadcast over all Islands” and the “Prime Minister just returned again from a 3 1/2-week trip across all of the islands in Tuvalu, and Australia's High Commissioner went with him with fact sheets and information about the mobility pathway to support engagements in every island community”*<sup>28</sup>

These efforts demonstrate a shift to making it to a broader community engagement, once the FUT was agreed upon.

In Australia, the federal government negotiated and signed the treaty, yet many services sectoral responsibilities, such as healthcare, education, and settlement support, fall under state-level jurisdiction<sup>29</sup>. This creates a need for close coordination across government tiers in Australia. Nevertheless, there is no indication that Australian state-level bodies were directly consulted during the development of the treaty; therefore, it was not a participatory development process within Australia either.

Diaspora members in Australia were invited to engage via parliamentary procedures. Some submitted comments or testified before Parliament, and as Participant 1 explained:

*“we've tried to create opportunities for people to be part of the discussion and help shape the decisions we make together.”*<sup>30</sup>

However, interviews did not provide specific examples of how these inputs altered policy content. Hence, much of this inclusion remains consultative and ipso facto rather than reflective of planned, co-development built on strong inclusion principles.

The implementation phase of the treaty, i.e. the Mobility Pathway is structured to be more inclusive, at least as it pertains to information provision. It includes a multi-level mechanism to inform and support Tuvaluans who choose to go to Australia, such as digital access centers, diaspora liaison officers, pre-departure briefings, and cultural retention initiatives (DFAT, 2025). These demonstrate improved vertical and horizontal cooperation throughout the implementation phase, prioritizing informed service delivery, information dissemination and decision-making (DFAT, 2025).

---

<sup>27</sup> I01, P2, Pacific Partnerships Branch, DFAT 20 May 2025.

<sup>28</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> I Ibid.

The FNP demonstrates strong national leadership. The initiative is auspiced under the Office of the Prime Minister, managed by the Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communication and Innovation in collaboration with other ministries. Participant 3 described the project's structure as top-down in nature:

*“When our leaders say this is something that we need to do, everyone gets on board quite quickly because we trust their vision.”<sup>31</sup>*

This shows a form of centralized governance that, while rooted in cultural values of respect and cohesion, raises questions about the depth of participatory inclusion. While trust in leadership enables collective cohesion, CG principles emphasize shared authority and iterative consultation, especially in innovation-driven processes like the Digital Nation.

Interestingly, Participant 3 pointed out, a cabinet-approved task team is being formed to resolve overlaps and improve coordination<sup>32</sup>, illustrating the necessity of horizontal integration at the national level as well as the complexity of concurrent digital and climate resilience initiatives. Technical assistance to support the project comes from the foreign consulting firm Accenture (The Digital Nation, N.d.), otherwise there is little international engagement.

Nevertheless, the project incorporates participatory elements, particularly through the Digital Ark, a cultural preservation platform designed to store Tuvalu's artifacts, heritage, and collective memory in a secure digital space<sup>33</sup>. Currently, it is still in the beta phase and has only been tested by engaging youth<sup>34</sup>.

Participant 3 mentioned that in early workshops they trained participants in using the Digital Ark platform to upload their stories for cultural preservation; however, the public's understanding of the project is inconsistent<sup>35</sup>.

Recognizing these challenges, the government of Tuvalu is actively working to enhance awareness and inclusivity. It is conducting communication campaigns and making efforts to involve more NGOs and community stakeholders in the development and expansion of digital storytelling tools.

*“Public awareness is something that we really need to focus on in order to get everyone on board and on the same page,”<sup>36</sup>*

Examining the sub-question *How inclusive are these specific domestic and international*

---

<sup>31</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

*mechanisms?* Reveals that both initiatives show progress in inclusivity but still have significant limitations. The FUT was initially developed through high-level diplomacy with minimal input from the community. However, its implementation now involves broader outreach and engagement with the diaspora. Similarly, the FNP exhibits strong national leadership and cultural unity, but its participation mainly remains consultative and top-down. In both cases, while inclusion is increasing, genuine co-decision-making and shared authority are still limited.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This section revisits the guiding question of this thesis: How do international agreements and domestic governance strategies collectively enhance Tuvalu's capacity to manage climate-induced migration and safeguard its sovereignty?

The findings show that Tuvalu is pursuing a dual strategy: externally, through the FUT with Australia, and internally, through the FNP. Together, these instruments reflect a deliberate attempt not just to respond to displacement but to proactively reshape the meaning of statehood and sovereignty when the physical basis for both is under threat. While these governance strategies do reflect innovation, resilience, and sovereignty, there are also limitations, legal ambiguities, and open questions such as: Can Tuvalu's amendment of statehood gain multilateral legal recognition under current international law?

The FUT and the FNP represent pioneering efforts to address climate-induced migration. These strategies complement each other in their shared aim of safeguarding Tuvalu's sovereignty and future: the FUT facilitates managed, circular mobility and external recognition, while the FNP centers national agency and cultural preservation.

Their complementarity does not imply empowerment or equal standing. While the FUT is framed around the shared value of Falepili, signifying good neighborliness and mutual care (DFAT, 2024 (a)), its geopolitical dimensions be overlooked.

Participant 1 acknowledged that the FUT is intended as a balanced instrument between the two nations, parts of it were shaped by Australia's strategic interests in the region. However, in their assessment, this did not happen at the cost of Tuvalu's interest<sup>37</sup>. Article 4.4 requires Tuvalu to consult with Australia before entering into security agreements with third states, which raises concerns about constraints on Tuvalu's foreign policy autonomy. Although Tuvalu gains vital international recognition through the FUT, it simultaneously enters a relationship of increased dependency with Australia, and persistent power asymmetries between the two countries are becoming evident. This reflects a broader dilemma: Even well-intentioned climate mobility

---

<sup>37</sup> I IO1, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025



agreements, grounded in regional solidarity, can reproduce structural inequalities, raising difficult questions about how much sovereign agency a SIDS can retain when it is reliant on a more powerful partner for its long-term adaptation pathway.

With the FUT, the Mobility Pathway opens, offering 280 annual migration placements. Its circular migration structure provides an orderly and dignified alternative to forced displacement, allowing Tuvaluans to move while maintaining connections to their homeland.

In contrast, the FUT is domestically driven and built on Tuvaluan values. Rooted in cultural concepts such as Fenua, it aims to preserve identity and statehood in the absence of physical territory, representing a powerful act of self-determination. Rather than relying on external recognition, Tuvalu is asserting sovereignty through digital continuity, building a “digital nation” that preserves its governance, population identity, and cultural heritage in a virtual form. This initiative challenges conventional notions of statehood based on territory, as defined by the Montevideo Convention (1933). Tuvalu is actively questioning whether territory is an essential requirement for sovereignty in the context of climate-induced land loss. Yet, this legal argument remains unsettled.

Seen through the lens of MLG, Tuvalu’s climate mobility governance reveals a fragmented landscape of coordination. International agreements, such as the FUT, do not officially align with national strategies like the FNP and demonstrate limited integration with local and sub-national actors. From a CG perspective, the case highlights persistent power imbalances that hinder truly equitable cooperation. While both initiatives involve forms of consultation and outreach, the initial stages of decision-making were confined to national executives, with broader community inclusion occurring mainly during the implementation phase, and they are consultative and not collaborative. This underlines the need for more participatory and inclusive governance frameworks in the future.

Both initiatives are still in their early stage of implementation and face significant uncertainties. The FUT has just opened its first balloting round, leaving open questions about how the mobility pathway will function in practice. It remains unclear how the Tuvaluan diaspora will manage integration into Australia, and what mechanisms will support circular migration and maintain connections to the homeland. A further concern is whether increased migration opportunities could lead to brain drain, weakening Tuvalu’s domestic capacity at a time when strong local leadership and technical expertise are essential for adaptation and cultural preservation.

The FNP, while symbolically powerful, must address concrete technical and security challenges to become a functioning tool for sovereignty. Participant 3 acknowledged concerns around

cybersecurity, an issue that is particularly pressing for a SIDS with limited technical capacity<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, funding remains a critical constraint. The structural shortcomings that many SIDS have when attempting ambitious governance innovations without sustained international support are highlighted by Tuvalu's reliance on domestic resources to maintain a digital nation. Despite these limitations, both efforts are deeply tied to Tuvalu's political identity and rejection of externally imposed labels.

*"Tuvalu was really clear about it for Tuvaluans, it is in no way a signal that they are giving up on preserving their territorial country and that they want, and many and most people want to stay in Tuvalu,"*<sup>39</sup> was pointed out by Participant 1.

Its rejection of the "climate refugee" label reflects Tuvalu's effort to maintain self-determination. According to Scholars like Farbotoko and Lazrus (2012), the term "climate refugee" often narrates that Pacific islanders are passive victims deprived of agency. Likewise, climate activist Ursutla Tiimon emphasized that "Climate change is not just about moving people to a safer place. It is about equity, identity, and human rights" (Tiimon, 2010, as cited in Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012).

A central conclusion is that climate justice must be at the heart of any long-term solution. Tuvalu's predicament stems not from internal governance failures but from external drivers, namely, the disproportionate emissions of industrialized nations. While governance innovation and mobility pathways are vital, they cannot substitute for structural change in the global climate regime. True justice demands that high-emitting countries reduce emissions, acknowledge historical responsibility, and support governance strategies financially, legally, and politically.

By reframing statehood, Tuvalu offers a model of agency and leadership. It redefines what it means to be sovereign and resilient in a world changing due to climate change. But for these innovations to be meaningful, they must be supported, not only with funding but with global recognition and legal reform. High-emitting countries must not only fund adaptation but also recognize the legitimacy of non-territorial states and stop reproducing neocolonial structures of dependency in the name of climate partnerships.

Future research could explore how similar governance strategies are pursued in other SIDS, allowing for comparative insights into digital sovereignty, climate mobility management, and multilevel governance regarding climate-induced migration.

---

<sup>38</sup> I02, P3, MTECI, 27 May 2025

<sup>39</sup> I01, P1 Polynesia Branch, DFAT, 20 May 2025

Additional investigation into the intersection of international law and climate-induced state transformation could help clarify whether existing legal frameworks can adapt to non-territorial statehood models. And a complementary analysis of economic and social dimensions, such as diaspora dynamics, remittances, and community resilience, would enrich the understanding of long-term adaptation pathways.

Tuvalu's experience sends a clear message: this is not a disappearing nation but a leading one. It does not ask for rescue. It asks for recognition, respect, and reciprocity. The real question is not whether Tuvalu can adapt- the evidence shows that it already is- but whether the global community is ready to meet Tuvalu's courage with solidarity and justice.

Only then will tools like the FUT and the FNP serve not merely as symbolic gestures but as blueprints for a more just and resilient future

Tuvalu's experience sends a clear message not a passive or disappearing state, but one actively shaping its own future.

The Falepili Union Treaty and the Future Now Project reflect a deliberate and forward-looking response to existential climate challenges.

While these governance strategies are still in their early stages, they can demonstrate how mobility, sovereignty, and identity are reimagined through innovative forms of cooperation and digital migration.

The relevance of these strategies is already evident, offering valuable lessons for other SIDS facing threats to territorial integrity and self-determination. Their broader impact, however, will depend on the implementation in practice and whether the international community provides sustained support through legal recognition, financial assistance, and equitable partnerships, ensuring they can move beyond symbolic value.

## 6. List of References

- Ansell, C. (2007). Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 818(4), 543-571.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/JOPART/MUM032>
- Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty [ATFU]. (2023). Australian Government Department Of Foreign Affairs And Trade. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/australia-tuvalu-falepili-union-treaty>
- Ayres, L. (2008). Semi-structured interview. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. (Vol. 1&2, pp. 810-811). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Bache, I. & Flinders, M. V. (2004). *Multi-level Governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Bambridge, T., D'Arcy, P. & Mawyer, A. (2021). Oceanian sovereignty: Rethinking conservation in a sea of islands. *Pacific Conservation Biology*, 27(4), 345–353.  
<https://doi.org/10.1071/PC20026>
- Barnett, J., Farbotko, C., Kitara, T. & Aselu, B. (2024). Migration as Adaptation? The Falepili Union Between Australia and Tuvalu. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 16(1), e924. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.924>
- Bauder, H & Mueller, R (2023) Westphalian Vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance, *Geopolitics*, 28:1, 156-173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1920577>  
Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance, *Geopolitics*, 28:1, 156-173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1920577>
- Bauder, H. & Mueller, R. (2023). Westphalian Vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance. *Geopolitics*, 28(1), 156-173.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1920577>
- Bender, F. (2024). Climate Refugeehood: A counterargument. *European Journal of Political Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851241254819>
- Bettini, G. (2013). Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A critique of apocalyptic narratives of climate refugees. *Geoforum*, 45(4), 63-72.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.09.009>
- Brancati, D. (2018). *Social Scientific research*. Sage Journals
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol.2, pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Brownbridge, M & Canagarajah, S. (2024). *Climate change vulnerability, adaptation, and public debt sustainability in small island developing states*. World Bank Group.
- Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2008). Interviewing. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. (Vol. 1&2, pp. 470-472). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Campbell, J., & Barnett, J. (2010). *Climate Change and Small Island States. Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific*. (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Constitution of Tuvalu. (2023). *Article 1. Principal Legislation Act 1986* (amended).

- [https://tuvalulegislation.tv/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1986/1986-0001/1986-0001\\_2.pdf](https://tuvalulegislation.tv/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1986/1986-0001/1986-0001_2.pdf)
- Department of Home Affairs. (n.d (a)). *Meeting our requirements*. Australian Government. Retrived on 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2025. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-support/meeting-our-requirements/health>
- Department of Home Affairs. (n.d. (b)). *Pacific Engagement Visa (subclass 192)*. Australian Government. Retrieved on 6<sup>th</sup> of June.2025. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/pacific-engagement/subclass-192-pacific-engagement-stream>
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d.(a)). *Tuvalu Country Brief*. Australian Government. Retrieved on 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2024, from <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/tuvalu-country-brief#:~:text=Overview,islands%20and%20five%20coral%20atolls>)
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (n.d. (b)) *Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union treaty*. Australian Government. Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2025. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/australia-tuvalu-falepili-union-treaty>.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024a). *Explanatory memorandum - Falepili Union between Tuvalu and Australia*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/explanatory-memorandum-falepili-union-between-tuvalu-australia.pdf>
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024b, May 9). *Joint Statement on commitment to the Falepili Union*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/joint-statement-commitment-falepili-union.pdf>
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2025). *Falepili Mobility Pathway Exposure Document*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/mobility-pathway-may-2025-exposure-document.pdf>
- Draper, J. (2023). *Climate displacement*. Oxford University Press
- Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T. & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* DOI: 10.1093/jopart/mur011
- Fainu, L. (2023, June 27). *Facing extinction, Tuvalu considers the digital clone of a country*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/27/tuvalu-climate-crisis-rising-sea-levels-pacific-island-nation-country-digital-clone>
- Farbotko, C., & Lazrus, H. (2012). The first climate refugees? Contesting global narratives of climate change in Tuvalu. *Global Environmental Change*, (22)2, 382-390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.11.014>
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vols. 1-0) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. (Interviews)
- Green, A. & Guilfoyle, D. (2024). The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty: Statehood and Security in the Face of Anthropogenic Climate Change. *American Journal of International Law*, 118(4), 684-703. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2024.54>

- Green Climate Fund. (n. d.). Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP).  
<https://www.greenclimate.fund/project/fp015>
- Hedge A. (2024) Digital Nations and the Future of the Climate Crisis. *International Journal of Communication*, 18(2024), 755-761.
- Heslin, A. (2019). Climate Migration and Cultural Preservation: The Case of the Marshallese Diaspora. In R. Mechler, L. M. Bouwer, T. Schinko, S. Surminski & J. Linnerooth-Bayer (Eds.), *Loss and Damage from Climate Change* (p383-391). Springer Cham.
- Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. W. (2001). *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hooghe, L., Marks, G. & Schakel, A. (2020). Multilevel Governance. In D. Caramani (Ed.), *Comparative Politics*. 193-210. Oxford University Press.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/1814/70417>
- Huckstep, S., & Dempster, H. (2023). The Australia-Tuvalu Climate and Migration Agreement: Takeaway and Next Steps: Center for Global Development
- ICJ (2023) *The General Assembly of the United Nations requests an advisory opinion from the Court on the obligations of States in respect of climate change*. <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/202669>
- IDMC (2025) Global Report on International Displacement 2025. *Internal Displacement Monitoring Center*. <https://doi.org/10.55363/IDMC.XTGW2833>
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2021). *Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change 2021–2030 For a comprehensive, evidence and rights-based approach to migration in the context of environmental degradation, climate change and disasters, for the benefit of migrants and societies*. IOM, Geneva.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2024, February 26). *Strengthening Global Cooperation Vital in Addressing Climate-Induced Migration: IOM*. Retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2025. <https://www.iom.int/news/strengthening-global-cooperation-vital-addressing-climate-induced-migration-iom>
- Kasner, J. (2021). *Climate Change and Sovereignty. An Essay on the Moral Nature and Limits of State Sovereignty*. Springer Cham.
- Kitara, T., & Farbotko, C. (2023, November 13). *This is not climate justice: The Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union*. *Global Outlook: Climate Change and Conflict*. Toda Peace Institute. Retrieved 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2025 from <https://toda.org/global-outlook/2023/this-is-not-climate-justice-the-australia-tuvalu-falepili-union.html>
- Kofe, S. (2021). Tuvalu’s Future Now Project: preparing for climate change in the worst-case scenario. *Devpolicy Blog from The Development Policy Centre*. Retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2025. <https://devpolicy.org/tuvalu-preparing-for-climate-change-in-the-worst-case-scenario-20211110/#:~:text=Wednesday%2027%20October%20marked%20the,Justice%2C%20Communication%20and%20Foreign%20Affairs>
- March, J. G. & Olsen, J. P. (2009). Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”. In S. A. Binder, R. A. W. Rhodes, & B. A. Rockman (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (3-20). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548460.003.0001>

- McAdam, J & Wood, T. (2023). *Kaldor Centre principles on climate mobility*. UNSW Law & Justice, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law.
- McCubbin, S., Smit, B. & Pearce, T. (2014). Where does climate fit? Vulnerability to climate change in the context of multiple stressors in Funafuti, Tuvalu. *Global Environmental Change*, 30, 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.10.007>
- Milan, A., Oakes, R., and Campbell, J. (2016). *Tuvalu: Climate change and migration – Relationships between household vulnerability, human mobility and climate change*. (Report No.18). United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).
- Montevideo Convention on the Right and Duties of States, December. 26, 1933  
<https://www.ilsa.org/Jessup/Jessup15/Montevideo%20Convention.pdf>
- Pacific Islands Forum (2019). *Boe Declaration: Action Plan*.  
<https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/BOE-document-Action-Plan.pdf>
- Prete, G. (2024, 28. Oktober). *Tuvalu's Sinking Reality: How Climate Change Is Threatening the Small Island Nation*. Earth.Org. Retrieved on 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2025.  
<https://earth.org/tuvalu-sinking-reality-how-climate-change-is-threatening-a-small-island-nation/>
- Robinson, S. (2018). Climate change adaptation in small island developing states: Insights and lessons from a meta-paradigmatic study. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 85, 172–181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2018.03.030>
- Rothe, D., Boas, I., Farbotko, C. & Kitara, T. (2024). Digital Tuvalu: state sovereignty in a world of climate loss. *International Affairs*, 100(4), 1491–1509.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae060>
- Saito-Jensen, M. (2015). *Theories and Methods for the Study of Multilevel Environmental Governance*. Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)
- Scobie, M., Gopinathan, U., Kelman, I. & Myhre, S. L. (2023). The agency of community groups in health and climate change adaptation governance and policy in SIDS: The case of in Toco, Trinidad and Tobago. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 147, 116–125.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.05.006>
- Somers, W. (2023). The Montevideo criteria of statehood. In *The state of Taiwan: From international law to geopolitics* (pp.210-285). BRILL.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004538153\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004538153_006)
- Speelman, L. H., Nicholls, R. J. & De Campos, R. S. (2021). The role of migration and demographic change in small island futures. *Asian And Pacific Migration Journal*, 30(3), 282–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01171968211044082>
- Squires, V. (2023). Thematic Analysis. In J. M. Okoko, S. Tunison & K.D. Walker (Eds.), *Varieties of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 463-468). Springer Cham.
- The Guardian. (2025, June 26). *Nearly a third of Tuvalu citizens enter ballot for climate linked visa to relocate to Australia*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/26/nearly-a-third-of-tuvalu-citizens-enter-ballot-for-climate-linked-visa-to-relocate-to-australia>

- Tuvalu Country Brief. (n.d.). Australian Government Department Of Foreign Affairs And Trade. Retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> of Oktobre 2024, from <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/tuvalu-country-brief#:~:text=Overview,islands%20and%20five%20coral%20atolls>)
- The World Bank Group, & Asian Development Bank. (2021) *Climate Risk country Profile: Tuvalu*.
- Tuvalu (n. d.). *The First Digital Nation*. Retrieved on 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2025. <https://www.tuvalu.tv>
- UN. (2023, March 29) *General Assembly adopts resolution requesting International Court of Justice provide advisory opinion on States' obligations concerning climate change* [Press release]. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12497.doc.htm>
- UNESCO. (2023). *Cutting Edge: Small Island Developing States: Cultural diversity as a driver of resilience and adaptation*. Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-small-island-developing-states-cultural-diversity-driver-resilience-and-adaptation>
- UNDP. (n.D.). *Climate-induced relocation and land disputes: Stories from Tuvalu*. <https://www.undp.org/pacific/stories/climate-induced-relocation-and-land-disputes-stories-tuvalu>
- UNDP. (2022 December). *The State of Climate Ambition, Snap Shot, Small Island Developing States (SIDS)*
- UNDP. (2023). *What is climate security and why is it important?* <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-climate-security-and-why-it-important>
- UNHCR. (2024). *No escape – on the frontlines of climate change, conflict and forced Displacement*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- WMO. (2024, August 27). *State of the Climate in the South-West Pacific 2023*. <https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-climate-south-west-pacific-2023#:~:text=The%20WMO%20State%20of%20the,the%20global%20average%20since%201980>.
- Wong, P., Burke, T., & Conroy, P. (2025, June 11). *Supporting stronger relationships in the Pacific through the opening of the Falepili Mobility Pathway ballot* [Media release]. Australian Government. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/supporting-stronger-relationships-pacific-through-opening-falepili-mobility-pathway-ballot>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications. Design and Methods*. Sixth Edition. Sage Publishers.



## **7. Appendix**

### **Appendix A: Use of AI during the Bachelor's Thesis**

During the preparation of this work, the author used Transcriptor in order to transcribe audio recorded interviews. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the work.

Moreover, the Author used Grammarly to check grammar and spelling in the report. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the work.

### **Appendix B: Interview Guidelines**

#### **Interview Guideline for Participant 1 and Participant 2: The Falepili Union Treaty**

1. Please introduce yourself, what is your role experience related to climate change, migration or governance in Tuvalu?
2. The Falepili Union Treaty is the first of its kind. Since the treaty is in force what has happened? In Australia
3. Where does the number of 280 annual visa places come from, and how is this figure perceived by Tuvaluan or Australian communities?
4. What aspects of the Treaty need improvement? Are there elements you believe are missing or are underdeveloped?
5. Beyond the migration pathway, what kind of additional support measures are needed to help Tuvaluans integrate and adapt to life in Australia?
6. How can a treaty like this be made more inclusive? (I read that this treaty came as a surprise to some Tuvaluans)
7. Critics, such as former Tuvaluan Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga, say it was a geopolitical decision. Do you think the Treaty was driven more by geopolitical interest, such as Australia's strategic concerns in the Pacific, than humanitarian goals like 'mobility with dignity'?
8. Article 4 requires Tuvalu to consult with Australia before entering any security or defense agreements with other countries. How do you think this limits Tuvalu's sovereignty?
9. Critics as for example Claire Francis say: the Treaty suggests Australia and Tuvalu have "giving up" on the climate fight. In your view, does the Treaty undermine

climate justice, especially considering Tuvalu's minimal contribution to global emissions?

10. There are concerns about an unequal or even neocolonial dynamic in this partnership. What is your perspective on the power balance between Australia and Tuvalu in this Treaty? (outlook question if there is time)

### **Interview Guideline for Participant 3: The Future Now Project**

1. Could you please introduce yourself and your role?
2. In which state is the Future Now Project currently?
3. Who are the stakeholders involved in this project?
4. What is your understanding of Tuvalu's plan to become the world's first digital nation?
5. How are local communities being included in the development of this project?
6. What do you see as the main opportunities and limitations of Tuvalu's digital nation approach?
7. In your opinion, how can digitalization contribute to safeguard Tuvalu's' sovereignty and cultural continuity?
8. What does sovereignty mean to you as a Tuvaluan?
9. Can you explain the concept of Fenua and what it means in the context of a digital nation?
10. In your opinion, how do Tuvaluan communities perceive this project?
11. Keeping in mind that Tuvalu is one of countries with less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions: Some critics argue that combining the Digital Nation Project with the Falepili Union Treaty suggest that Tuvalu has given up on in country adaption or preservation measures what is your response to this perspective?
12. Tuvalu has amended its constitution to include the protection of statehood and identity in the context of climate change. How do you see the idea of a virtual territory being received within the international community?
13. What recommendations would you suggest improving int. cooperations and policies to better support Tuvalu's climate resilience?

## Appendix C: Coding Scheme

Codes	Description	Sub-Codes
Challenges	Challenges Tuvalu Faces	
Consultations	Talks with Inhabitants	
Cultural Preservation	Preservation of Tuvaluan Culture	
Decision Making	Who is actively making decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Executive level (government)</li> <li>- Local Communities</li> </ul>
Domestic Strategies	Domestic governance strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital Nation TCAP ( Tuvalu costal adaption project)</li> </ul>
Falepili Union Treaty	Implementation of the Treaty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pre-Departure Services</li> <li>- Post-Arrival Services</li> <li>- Security</li> <li>- Other commitments</li> <li>- Power asymmetries</li> </ul>
Inclusion	Inclusion of different stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inclusion of Tuvaluans</li> <li>- Inclusion of Australians</li> <li>- Inclusion of Tuvaluan Diaspora</li> <li>- Inclusion of NGOS</li> </ul>
Institutional Capacities	ability of governmental and supporting institutions to design, implement, and sustain effective climate governance strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Australian capacities</li> <li>- Funding</li> <li>- Tuvalu's Capacities</li> </ul>
Migration Pathways	Possibilities of Movement of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Migration to Australia</li> </ul>

	people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital Migration</li> <li>- Circular Migration</li> </ul>
Mobility with dignity	Best Practices	
Multilevel Coordination	Distribution of authority between different levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International</li> <li>- Regional</li> <li>- National</li> <li>- State</li> <li>- Local</li> </ul>
Narrative	How is Migration from Tuvalu viewed	
Participation	Are there participation possibilities	
Statehood	What is a State?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Montevideo Convention Definition</li> <li>- Tuvaluan Definition</li> <li>- International recognition</li> </ul>
Sovereignty	Exercise independent decision making and maintain control	

#### Appendix D: Interviews which were coded and cited

Code	Date and Time	Participant	Organization	Role	Topic	Note	Interview format
I01	20.05.2025	Participant 1	DFAT	Manages bilateral relations with Tuvalu; works with Australian diplomatic mission	The FUT	Participant 1 and 2 work in different divisions however due to time constraints on their side, they wanted to do 1 interview with both of	MS Teams

						them.	
I01	20.05.2025	Participant 2	DFAT	Oversees implemen tation of the Tuvalu- Australia mobility agreement	The FUT		MS Teams
I02	27.05.2025	Participant 3	Ministry of Transport, Energy, Communica tion and Innovation Tuvalu	Senior official overseei ng digital governan ce and innovatio n, including the Digital Nation initiative	The FNP		MS Teams
I03	First interview: 03.06.2025	Participant 4	TCAP		Tuvalu Costal Adaption Project	Due to technical problems on the side of the Participant (internet connection) the interview was uncompleted and a second date was fixed. However the next possible time is the 15 th after the first draft. The	MS Teams

						interview will still take place.	
--	--	--	--	--	--	----------------------------------	--

## Appendix E: Coded Documents

Titel	Authors	Year	Document Type
Falepili Union Treaty	Singed by Australia and Tuvalu	2023	Treaty
Explanatory Memorandum- Falepili Union Between Tuvalu and Australia	Singed by Australia and Tuvalu	2024	Explanatory Memorandum
Falepili Mobility Pathway Exposure Document	DFAT	2025	Exposure Document (From DFAT)
The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili unioin Treaty: Statehood and security in the face of anthropogenic climate change	Alex Green, Douglas Guilfoyle	2024	Journal Article
Migration as Adaption? The Falepili Union Between Australia and Tuvalu	Jon Barnett, Carole Farbotko, Taukiei	2024	Journal Article
Digital Nations and the Future of the Climate Crisis	ALFONSO HEGDE	2024	Journal Aticle
Adaptation to Climate Change:	Patrick D. Nunn, Roger McLean,	2020	Book Chapter

Contemporary Challenges and Perspectives	Annika Dean, Teddy Fong, Viliamu Iese, Manasa Katonivualiku, Carola Klöck, Isoa Korovulavula, Roselyn Kumar, and Tammy Tabe		
Digital Tuvalu: state sovereignty in a world of climate loss	DELF ROTHE, INGRID BOAS, CAROL FARBOTKO AND TAUKIEI KITARA*	2024	Journal Article
Boe Declaration	Pacific Island Forum	2019	Policy Declaration

### **Appendix (uploaded separately)**

Appendix 1:

Ethical Approval of the Ethics Committee in Enschede: 258029

Informed Consent Sheet

Consent Form: Signed consent forms have not been uploaded in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the interview participants. However, they are available upon request.

Appendix 2

Anonymized interview Transcripts:

ATLAS.ti project files for the interviews

