

# Meet the young people who could outlive their own country

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After Australia and Tuvalu signed a world-first treaty for climate migration, young Tuvaluans are reflecting on the future of their land, culture and national identity.

While Australia's landmark climate migration pact with Tuvalu has broad support, many Tuvaluans have mixed feelings about Australia. Grace Malie's home island of Funafuti in Tuvalu is beautiful — its pristine coastline is dotted with coconut trees and flanked by a jelly-blue ocean.

But its extreme vulnerability to rising seas and changing climate is becoming more pronounced every day.

Malie tells SBS News that the beaches she played on as a child have washed away; seawater regularly gurgles up through the ground and roads become ocean when the king tide washes in.

"It's an everyday battle for us to witness these impacts of climate change and the sea level," Malie says.

Tuvalu's nine islands — of which Funafuti is one — are also prone to extended droughts, which has led the government to ration buckets of fresh water for families.

The fluctuating droughts and rising tides are destroying traditional agricultural practices in Funafuti, Malie explains.

The 25-year-old remembers her grandmother's garden "flourishing" when she was young, but encroaching saltwater has rendered the island's soil infertile: Locals now rely on large planter boxes that sit above Funafuti's soil.

## **A sinking nation**

The impacts of climate change are imminent in Tuvalu.

Its low-lying archipelago of six coral atolls and three reef islands is located in the South Pacific, spanning around 25 square kilometres and home to around 11,000 people.

Tuvalu's atolls, including Funafuti, are formed around a central lagoon with extremely narrow coastlines. Funafuti's lagoon is the largest, stretching 400 metres at its widest point, while the narrow outer rim of the island is less than two metres above sea level.

With global sea levels rising, Tuvalu's islands have narrowed and small islets have disappeared completely.

Researchers predict that Tuvalu will be nearly fully submerged by the end of the century.

In 2021, Tuvalu's then foreign minister Simon Kofe famously addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP26, saying the island nation was "sinking" and climate mobility had to become a priority — all whilst standing knee-deep in the ocean at a lectern. Malie has also attended two UN Climate Change Conferences to advocate for the future of her country.

She says she's driven to activism because she wants to live out the rest of her life in her homeland and try to preserve its culture, traditions and environment for the next generation. "We want to remain on our land as long as we can and we want our kids to experience the same childhood memories that we experienced — on our own land, with our own people [and] very closely tied to our land and seas," she says.

### **A 'groundbreaking agreement'**

At the opening of the Pacific Islands Forum in Tonga last month, Australia and Tuvalu ratified an agreement called the Falepili Union. It's a comprehensive pact between the two countries that offers 280 visas every year to Tuvaluans and funding for climate adaptation and development projects.

The union is named after the Tuvaluan term for values of neighbourliness, care and respect and is the first agreement of its kind in the world, opening migration pathways for people facing the threat of climate change in their home country.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Tuvalu and Australia were making "history" with a "groundbreaking agreement" after signing the treaty.

Tuvaluan citizens will have access to live, study and work in Australia and be eligible for the same subsidies as Australian citizens for schools, universities and vocational facilities.

They can also enrol in Medicare and the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and access family tax benefits and child care subsidies.

The pathway means that, theoretically, all Tuvaluans could migrate to Australia by mid-century. Professor Jane McAdam is an expert in refugee and migration law, specialising in climate change and disasters, and says the Falepili Union is a world first.

But she has concerns about how services will be made accessible for Tuvaluans and how cultural barriers may be overcome.

"I think a lot of people in Tuvalu don't necessarily have a good sense of what life is like in Australia," McAdam says.

"We've got a very different context and even in terms of supports like going to hospital, all of that stuff would be very, very different.

"You can imagine just living in a major city like Sydney could be incredibly overwhelming, let alone knowing how do you go about accessing all those sorts of things."

## **Economic opportunities**

Bernard Kato Ewekia, who goes by Kato, is a Tuvaluan who migrated to Australia last year. He tells SBS News he appreciates the opportunity to live and work in Australia because it means he can send money back to his family and community in Tuvalu, in particular, his father, who started facing health challenges last year.

"I believe the reason why the majority of people come from Tuvalu to Australia is just to support their family because, in Tuvalu, there's not a lot of jobs available for everyone," he says.

Ewekia, who is 27 years old, has been living in Perth for the past year while his wife completes her studies to become a lab technician.

Ewekia works as a security guard and says he has bonded playing rugby with a tight-knit community of fellow Pacific Islanders, despite being the only Tuvaluan on the team.

As a climate activist, he also spends a lot of time considering the future of his country and the implications of communities moving permanently to Australia.

While the Falepili Union gives his community access to education and work experience they may not have otherwise, Ewekia says his home is "irreplaceable".

Like Malie, Ewekia hails from Funafuti and says he started witnessing the degradation of the island as a child.

Now, the beaches he played rugby on growing up have disappeared beneath the rising tides.

"I was really shocked when I saw what was happening with our beaches, with our land. It makes me really sad," Ewekia says.

"I don't have kids yet but when I have kids, when [they grow up, they] may not have a homeland anymore."

## **'Severed connections'**

Tamala Juliana Pita, a 27-year-old Tuvaluan who is currently in Auckland studying on a scholarship, shares Ewekia's concerns.

She tells SBS News that while she believes the Falepili Union is a positive agreement overall, she's worried about the continuity of her nation's culture without their land.

"Of course, we carry our culture with us always — we express it, we dance to it, we sing our songs; we have that community within ourselves and our families who travel with us," she says.

"But it gets quite difficult and there are limitations to what we're able to practice out of our land because the connection has been severed."

Pita explains that Tuvaluan culture and identity are embedded in the land, which is being swallowed by rising waters.

"These are our lands that we grew up in; that's where our ancestors are from and even where they're buried ... We can't really just dig them all up and bring them all with us."

Pita has three children who were born in Tuvalu. She says traditional birthing practices, like the

one she observed with her children, are also under threat.

"When a child is born the placenta that they're born with is buried with a tree, so either a coconut or a breadfruit tree; something that can ... sustain that child when they're grown," she says.

But it gets quite difficult and there are limitations to what we're able to practice out of our land because the connection has been severed.

The prospect of losing these cultural ties to the land is deeply saddening to Pita.

"It's a lot of severed connections, there's a lot of things that we lose."

### **'It's not a solution'**

While the Falepili Union has received broad support, many Tuvaluans have complicated feelings about Australia's continued support for the fossil fuel industry.

Leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum called on Australia to address the root cause of climate change and to stop funding fossil fuel projects, as well as subsidising and exporting fossil fuels.

Tuvalu's climate change minister Maina Talia spoke on the sidelines of the forum, saying:

"Fossil fuels are killing us — all of us. Opening and subsidising and exporting fossil fuel is immoral and unacceptable."

Back in Funafuti, Malie says she commends Australia's leaders for establishing a "plan B" to address the worst-case scenario for Tuvalu, but she also says it is "not a solution to our problem".

She feels a strong sense of injustice for younger generations of Tuvaluans who have played no part in climate change but who will bear the brunt of its effects.

"It is their lives that are being endangered. It is their not knowing their true identity," she says.

Despite her frustrations, Malie says she has faith in the government and her community's continued fight for the future of their nation.

"I thank God for the resilience of our community and our leaders and our youth these days. They're really fighting to get our voices out in international conferences.

"They're out there in the international world to push to them that there's a difference between talking or negotiating and actually living and seeing the impact of climate change."

SBS news website reference (photos included):

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/meet-the-young-people-who-could-outlive-their-own-country/bm48uccaw>