Te Waa of Future Mobilities:

A Model for Adaptation in Kiribati

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University

School of Regulation and Global Governance
College of Law, Governance and Policy
The Australian National University

2025

Australian
National
University

Dedication

Nakoia au karo: *Maroti Rimon & Temamro Tokamaen Maiu*

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Abstract

Climate change presents profound and escalating risks for low-lying states, with Kiribati experiencing these pressures in particularly acute and profound ways. As sea level rise, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion intensify, the biophysical limits of in-situ adaptation are becoming increasingly evident, raising critical questions about the long-term viability of place-based resilience strategies. This context underscores the need for integrated, inclusive, innovative and transboundary approaches that extend beyond the scope of national adaptation planning. Among the emerging responses, labour mobility initiatives—most notably the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme—are gaining prominence as potential mechanisms for enhancing climate resilience, diversifying livelihood options, and expanding adaptive capacity for highly vulnerable populations.

In the absence of robust international legal frameworks or dedicated climate protection mechanisms for communities facing displacement from sea level rise, this research examines how labour migration to Australia can function as a consequential form of climate adaptation for Kiribati. Although labour mobility is increasingly recognised for its adaptive potential, substantial knowledge gaps remain in understanding how such pathways operate within, and contribute to, the adaptive capacities of climate-exposed small island economies. This study addresses this gap by analysing labour migration not merely as an economic opportunity, but as a strategic, anticipatory adaptation mechanism embedded within broader socio-ecological resilience processes.

This thesis investigates the multi-faceted relationship between labour migration and climate adaptation, examining how both temporary and permanent forms of mobility—collectively referred to in this study as labour migration—can function as anticipatory, forward-looking responses to escalating climate threats. Central to this inquiry are questions about how labour migration can strengthen adaptive capacity and foster long-term resilience for communities on the front lines of the climate crisis. Employing *Te Waa*—the canoe—as a guiding metaphor for both research and migration, the study centres the lived experiences and voices of those most exposed to climate risks. It examines I-Kiribati perspectives on the value of labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy. Through this metaphorical vessel, the research co-creates knowledge that re-stories and re-journeys migration in an increasingly uncertain world. By foregrounding community agency and self-determined adaptation, the study offers nuanced insights into how labour mobility is increasingly perceived as a facilitator of both in-situ and ex-situ adaptation. It expands the understanding of labour migration's potential to alleviate pressure on frontline communities, reduce exposure to environmental stressors, and foster

long-term resilience across social, economic, and cultural dimensions—grounded in the lived realities of I-Kiribati communities.

Motivated by Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy and the imperative to challenge climate apathy and climate coloniality, this research embraces the philosophy that migration, when approached strategically and voluntarily, is not a failure of adaptation nor a sign of weakness. Rather, it is a powerful act of resilience—an intentional and dignified choice that enables individuals and communities to navigate climate challenges with agency and foresight, especially within a global system lacking adequate protections for climate-induced migration or, better still, climate mobility. Ultimately, this thesis contributes a spiritual and cultural lens to the evolving discourse on climate mobility, resilience, and climate justice. It affirms that migration is not merely a reactive measure, but a proactive, personal, and economic choice—one that empowers communities to confront the challenges of climate change with hope, dignity, autonomy.

Positionality

As an I-Kiribati–Banaban woman, migration is not merely a chapter in my life—it is a way of being, a lived reality that I deeply understand and embody. While migration is often framed through the lens of international movement, my journey began much earlier, rooted in childhood travels across the islands of Kiribati with my paternal grandparents, Reverend Robuti Rimon and Mataa Eria Rimon, who served as missionaries throughout the nation. Those formative years on the outer islands were later deepened by my upbringing in Fiji with my maternal grandparents: Tokamaen Maiu, a journalist on Rabi Island, and Tenamauea Kabanti (Kaka Maue), a renowned Banaban nationalist and anti-mining activist. My parents' scholarship journey opened further opportunities for me to study in Fiji and Australia, and to complete my final years of high school at Lelean Memorial, while in Davuilevu, where they both served with the Methodist Church. These movements across islands and countries shaped my transnational identity and grounded me in a deep pride in my culture—foundations I carried into more than two decades of public service, walking alongside my people and honouring the values instilled in me from a young age.

I have grown across multiple spaces, carrying with me the values of my *Katei ni Kiribati ao Banaba*. Like my parents and grandparents, who led transnational lives shaped by service, study, and heritage, I am now reproducing this journey with my own children. Our movements across borders are not just acts of migration, but expressions of identity and responsibility—carrying culture, faith, and the spirit of home and loved ones across oceans. This interwoven life story enables me to critically engage with both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, and to learn how best to centre Pacific voices and worldviews in my research.

My positionality is also shaped by direct professional engagement with the research topic. During my tenure with the Government of Kiribati, notably at the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development, I was actively involved in the formative stages of the Migration with Dignity policy. In this space, I served as a learner, a servant, and a leader, contributing to the development and implementation of initiatives that emerged from this landmark policy. This close involvement offers a unique insider perspective, allowing me to understand the policy's intentions, challenges, and impacts from within the system.

I acknowledge that this proximity introduces a potential bias. However, I view this as an advantage to the research, enriching it with contextual depth and lived insight. To navigate this, I have adopted a

reflexive approach—constantly interrogating my assumptions, positional power, and the ways my experiences shape interpretation. As an I-Kiribati national, I too have lived with the realities of climate change: the anxiety of rising seas, the emotional weight of potential displacement, and the enduring hope rooted in community resilience.

I acknowledge the privilege of my position. I do not claim to speak for the communities at the heart of this research, but I remain committed to honouring their resilience, wisdom, and lived realities. This research is not merely academic—it is a personal and ethical commitment to truth-telling, to amplifying Indigenous perspectives from the frontline, and to contributing meaningfully to the discourse on climate justice and mobility in the Pacific.

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Glossary of Kiribati Terms

Aba	Land
Aro	Faith or religion
Amarake n Imatang	Non-traditional foods (imports)
Babai	Giant taro
Bibitakin kanoan boong	Climate change
Buia	A traditional hut (also bungalow)
Ewenako	Resilience
Ingoa	Namesake
Imatang	White person
Katei	Culture
Kabwaia	Good fortune, prosperity, and dignity
Kainga	Extended family (clan)
Kammwakuri	Forms of employment (also used to refer to labour schemes)
Manea (also mwanea)	Embrace
Marawa	Ocean
Mauri	Greetings (also peace)
Mwakuri	Work
Maiuraoi	Wellbeing
Mweraoi	Welfare
Oi n Aomata	Worthiness (also dignity and personhood)
Rikoan bwain te waa	Collection of te waa materials
Taraan raoi karaoan te mwakuri	Supervising the work in progress
Te	The
Te Ie	The Sail
Te Borau	The navigation
Te Itaritari	Brotherhood/sisterhood
Te Kabwaia	Prosperity
Te Kainano	The hardship (mostly economical); also, poverty
Te Kaba Waa	Canoe building
Te Kammwakuri itinaniku	Overseas employment
Te Karaki	The story or storytelling
Te Karekemwane ae raka	A diversified economic income

Te Kareke mwane ae tamaroa	A vital source of income
Te Karinerine	The act of respect
Te Katei n Kiribati	The Kiribati way of life (also the Kiribati culture)
Te Kora	The coconut sinnet
Te Oi n Aomata	A worthy or real person (also personhood)
Te Kokoraki	Forging new familial bonds
Te Mai	The breadfruit
Te Maneaba	The traditional village meeting hall
Te Maroro	The dialogue or conversation
Te Tobwa	The adoption
Te Toronibwai	Self-sufficiency (also dignity, self-worth)
Te Waa	The canoe (also spelled as te wa)
Tinaniku	External or overseas
Toronibwai	Self-sufficiency or self-reliance
Utu	Nuclear family

List of Acronyms

ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANU	Australian National University
APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
ATMs	Automated Teller Machine
AUD	Australian Dollar
AUKUS	Australia United Kingdom and the United States
BTC	Betio Town Council
CLOs	Country Liaison Officers
COP	Conference of Parties
CWM	Council of World Mission
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EEZs	Exclusive Economic Zones
EFTPOS	Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale
EQAP	Educational Quality and Assessment Programme
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoA	Government of Australia
ICDF	International Cooperation and Development Fund
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
JSS	Junior Secondary School
KANI	Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative
KDP	Kiribati Development Plan
KIT	Kiribati Institute of Technology
KPC	Kiribati Protestant Church
KV20	Kiribati Vision Strategy 20
LDC	Least Developed Country

LMS	London Missionary Society
LSU	Labour Sending Unit
MEHR	Ministry of Employment and Human Resources
MIRAB	Migration Remittance Aid Bureaucracy
MLC	Maritime Labour Convention
MOE	Ministry of Education
MTC	Marine Training Centre
NAWPP	Northern Australia Workers Pilot Program
NCDs	Non-Communicable Diseases
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSO	National Statistics Office
OB	Office of Te Beretitenti (President)
PAC	Pacific Access Category
PACC	Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PDBs	Pre-Departure Briefing
PEV	Pacific Engagement Visa
PICs	Pacific Island Countries
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PIFS	Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SfEP	Skills for Employment Program
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
SPMS	South Pacific Marine Services
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
STCW	Standards for Seafarer Training and Certification
SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TKP	Tobwaan Kiribati Party

TTI	Tarawa Technical Institute
TUC	Teinainano Urban Council
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
TVETSSP	Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Strengthening Program
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States of America
WBG	World Bank Group
WHO	World Health Organization

Acknowledgements

Embarking on a research project is akin to building a canoe—it demands navigation, collaboration, and perseverance. Just as a canoe is crafted from various components pieced together by a village working collaboratively, so too is a research project, strengthened by the contributions of mentors, peers, and communities who help steer its course. All journeys carry the weight of not knowing what lies ahead, and this one was no exception. This research would not have materialised without all who have shaped and nurtured its growth. To them I owe my deepest kakaitau.

First and foremost, I offer thanks to the master canoe-builder—Te Atua, my Creator and Almighty God. This journey has been filled with promise and excitement yet also shaped by its share of trials and tribulations. Navigating it as a PhD Mama with four children aboard is an undertaking of immense magnitude—and a profound blessing. Their presence, and their future, like that of all young I-Kiribati, is the very purpose that anchors and propels this research. When we made the decision, three years ago to leave behind the familiar shores of home in Kiribati, it was a leap into the unknown—an uprooting from comfort and community, and a step into unfamiliar terrain, where we would all learn and grow together. This voyage began in the turbulent waters of the COVID-19 pandemic; we arrived in Canberra on a brisk, chilly day, ironically in the height of summer, and were ushered straight into quarantine. Two weeks later, we emerged not into calm but into the heart of a housing crisis that carried us through Goulburn and Crookwell in New South Wales, before we finally anchored in Canberra eight months later. The daily commute between Crookwell, where we made our home—to Goulburn, where my children attended school—and the ANU in Canberra where this study was grounded, is comparable to traversing the open seas between South Tarawa and an outer island in central or southern Kiribati—long, wearying, and at times unnervingly unpredictable. It served as a reminder that distance is measured not just in kilometres, but in patience, resilience, and the quiet hope of safe arrival. Yet each day, I felt the presence of a divine force; the *mana* or mwaaka of my forebears and the spirit of the land itself—watching over us, embracing us, and urging us to live and learn in the moment. As someone studying the migration of I-Kiribati to Australia, I could not have asked for a more immersive experience than to live through it with my family. This journey has been a living testament to the sacrifices, pain, and uncertainty of migration—but also to its lessons, joys, and triumphs. To this, I honour the custodians of the land on which this work was produced: The

Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I pay my respects to their Elders, Women, Youth, and Children, past, present, and emerging. Their resilience, endurance, and connection to Country reminds me that every story of arrival unfolds on lands that have been cared for since time immemorial. Second, I extend te kaaitau ae takaburinako to the Government of Kiribati for the research permit approval, and to the communities without whom this project would not be possible. Au kaitau nakoia unimwane, unaine, roronrikirake, utuu, taan mwakuri, ao ai bon kain kawa nikabane n butimwaeau n maroro ma ngaia. Kam rabwa for entrusting me with your rich insights, enriching this work and reinforcing its purpose. I am honoured for the privilege of learning from you and collaborating with you to build this Waa of Knowledge together. This project is about you—it is your voice, your story, and your future. Au kantaninga bwa ena uaana nakoimi ao nakoia natimi ma tibumi n taai aika na roko.

Third, I gratefully acknowledge the guidance and expertise of my primary supervisor, Professor Alan Gamlen, and panel advisors Professor Stephen Howes and Sala Dr. George Carter. Their collective wisdom and unwavering support were instrumental in steering this study from its inception to completion. To Professor Gamlen, Chair of my Supervisory Panel—this project simply would not have materialised without your steadfast mentorship and profound wisdom. Your faith in my work, your timely and incisive feedback, and constant encouragement, never wavered, even as I progressed at my own Kiribati pace. Your concept of imatang time was a gentle reminder that life beyond the PhD holds its own richness. Thank you for your sharp insights and continued guidance right through to the very memorable oral examination and coaching support during the final stages of the thesis. You ensured I remained on track and supported me in bringing this thesis to its final form. Thank you for the summer gatherings and the opportunity to connect with our Migration Hub families, including your own. To Professor Howes, thank you for your early support and mentorship, beginning with the Pacific Update in 2019, where this journey first took shape. Your expertise in migration and development has profoundly shaped my thinking. I've learned immensely from your work and appreciated your thoughtful engagement with this research and the Kiribati component of the Pacific Engagement Visa project. I'm excited to see how this PhD might contribute to shaping these programs further—not just economically, but by foregrounding the human face of climate and Pacific migration. Thank you for the pizza nights and the opportunity to get to know you and Clare more. To Sala Dr. George Carter, what an extraordinary privilege to learn from a fellow Pasifika and I-Kiribati scholar. Thank you for the excellent support and guidance throughout the journey and for shaping my work in profound ways. Ko rabwa for the opportunity to collaborate in spaces where I could both re-learn and unlearn through security dialogues, the Pasifika philosophies, and the Oceanic Diplomacy which became far more than just platforms; they evolved into a collective campaign for Pacific-led, people-

centred and climate justice work that shaped Pacific representation within Australia, and globally. Ko rabwa for being so inclusive and supportive, through networks such as the ANU Climate Alumni and our Pacific Institute *Bungs/Talanga*/*Maroro* series. Your contributions within ANU and across regional institutions, embody the very essence of Pacific regionalism and an apt reminder that our work must always serve our villages, our communities, and our people of our Blue Pacific. Most of all, thank you for being a staunch supporter of our Pacific Family in Canberra—always ready to uplift, guide, and see us and our families strive toward our best.

I extend deepest gratitude to the Pacific Security College for the scholarship that made this study possible, and for the generous support that enabled my family to accompany me on this journey. I am especially thankful to Professor Meg Keen, Professor Dave Peebles, and Dr. Henry Ivarature for their sterling leadership and the professional relationships cultivated through thoughtful engagement fostered through the College's activities and regional dialogues. These were more than academic opportunities—they were spaces of exchange, reflection, and growth, which became invaluable sounding boards for testing ideas and crafting maroros, policies, and debates, on issues close to this research. To the dedicated and welcoming staff at the College, thank you for creating an environment of genuine support, from my early days as a student, through to the time I joined you as a member of the team.

I am deeply indebted to the incredible team at the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) where this project materialised. To Professor Kate Henne and Professor Miranda Forsyth: thank you for the incredible support and leadership that made my transition into the school both smooth and deeply affirming. I'm especially grateful for the generous RegNet funding and the support to me throughout the process. Thank you also to Dr. Nick Bainton, Dr. Jenna Harb, Dr. Elena Escalante Block, Dr. Amy Carrad, Dr. Binota Dhamai, Dusanka Kolundzija (fondly Duska), Danielle Anderson, Yeet Mei Foo, and all supporting staff. A big kam rabwa to the amazing PhD colleagues: my fellow Fijians Dr. Lakshmin Mudaliar, Dr. Romulo Nayacalevu, my roomie, soon to be Dr. Hannah Lord, and all the amazing fellow RegNetters. I deeply value our camaraderie, the bonds we built, and the steady support we offered one another. A big kam bati n rabwa also to the steadfast support of mentors and colleagues at the Department of Pacific Affairs—Dr. Rochelle-lee-Bailey where this project first took root, deep thanks and karabwarabwa to Rochelle for helping me lay the foundation of this work. A sincere kaitau also to Dr. Amanda Watson, for the invaluable support during the first year of PhD. My sincere gratitude to Dr. Henrietta McNeill-Stowers for her genuine and inclusive spirit, always making time to sit with me, listen deeply, and offer thoughtful guidance and support. Together with Professor

Sinclair Dinnen and James Batley, kam rabwa for the invaluable teaching opportunities. Being part of Australia's largest Pacific Studies program, especially the Understanding the Pacific diplomacy course, has been hugely rewarding. Engaging with curious young minds and an inspiring, expanding cohort of Australians, revealed Australia's growing interest in the Pacific, and its genuine sense of care. These interactions offered a live, dynamic form of diplomacy that no textbook could replicate. Thank you also to Dr. Judy Putt for the writing and labour mobility project engagements.

Reflecting on the PhD journey, a defining moment was the examination process—a bittersweet milestone that marked both the culmination of three years of intense work and the anxious anticipation of the examiners' outcome. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my examiners, Emeritus Professor Richard Bedford, Professor Karen McNamara, and Professor Catherine Frieman for making this experience truly engaging and profoundly memorable. I felt deeply connected, genuinely received, and truly heard. Kam bati n rabwa for endorsing this thesis but above all, for imparting your wisdom and guiding it to where it stands today.

To my ANU Oceania family: the amazing neikos and PhD Mums: Natasha Turia, Telusa Tu'i'onetoa, Lee Brentnall, Anna Naupa, Geejay Milli, Annie Kwai, and your beautiful families and pikininis. Thank you for defying the stereotypes of motherhood and for embodying the strength of our Pacific matriarchs who paved the way for us. To dear friends and family of Te Maneaba: HRH Princess Angelika Lātūfuipeka Tukuʻaho, Amelia Faotusia, Pip Louey, Soli Middleby, Vehia Wheeler, Eileen Bobone, Mercy Masta, Theresa Meki, Gemma Malungahu, Keresi Fotofili, Moira and Etta Simmons, Suzanne O'Neill, Naomi Maheu, Romitesh Kant, Opeta Alefaio, Jope Tarai, Jordie Kilby, Jayden Evett, Michael Kabuni, Raihaamana Tevahitua, Subrata Barnajee, Sione Likiliki, Pete & Helen Connolly, and the rest of te kainga—affectionately known as 'The Cannobles of Coombs'. Thank you for transforming Canberra from a place of arrival into a place of belonging. As the largest Pacific PhD cohort, our critical mass became a strength, shaping our collective insights, and deepening our shared values of care, service, and love of our people and region. May your endeavours be blessed wherever you serve in our Blue Pacific home.

To my dearest Fefe, Teri-Rose, Goya, and Mimin—thank you for inspiring this work. Naomi my dearest karimoa, you carried far more than your share. Ko rabwa neiko for your wisdom, immense heart, quiet strength, and for being a steadfast pillar of our family when I needed you most. My babies Goya, Teri, and Fefe—how fast you grew! Now that you finally understand Iʻm not the kind of doctor who wears a white coat, I hope this study stands as a reminder of the dignity it seeks to honour in you and in

every I-Kiribati. May it inspire you to chase your passions boldly and to never forget where you come from. I am endlessly proud of the fine women you've all become. To my brothers, Rimon and Wendt: kam aaitau for always standing by me. This journey reflects the resilience and dreams of our parents, and with them no longer here, it drew us closer, grounding us in their memories. I see them in both of you as you selflessly showed up taking over my routine of babysitting, school runs, winter camps, sports events, braiding hairs, and home-made meals, while I focused on writing. And those biriyani and barramundi sushis nights were truly the stuff of legends. Kam rabwa for unfailingly setting aside your own family commitments, to take care of mine. To Papa Betarim, Uncle Amoti thank you for your wisdom and fatherly love, Aunty Reteta and Aunty Berita, I appreciate you deeply. Kaka Florence and Kaka Koria—thank you for being such an integral part of our lives. Are ieta ami unwavering love and care and for standing by us through storms and still waters. Thank you also tariu Grace Tabao, Tereua Kaintoka Oliphant, Temakua Tom, Sally Rimon, and Kerry Orme for being there in the moments I needed you most, and for showing me through your own example, what resilience looks like. To two of my favourite people: my sister Jolee Wakefield and my niece, Maya Katee Rimon: what wonder women you both are. Thanks for being there for us. To Anote and Bernadette Meme Tong, thank you for the Canberra visits, the wisdom, and motivation.

To Professor John Connell: thank you for your superb help locating my father's thesis at the University of Sydney; It restored a missing piece of my story. To Matt and Susanna Dornan, thank you for entrusting your home in my care. And to my good friends and neighbours who have become our Australian family: dear Kaka Jill Fraser, Jon Real, Ellie and Reuben: words cannot fully capture or repay your kindness. You stood with us through every milestone, in both the joyful and challenging moments. Thank you for being our true Pacific family, showing us that Australia is indeed home to deeply kind-hearted people who embrace others as their own. I am deeply grateful to my Watson community at St. Margaret's Uniting and Holy Cross Anglican, for your prayers and blessings. Pastor Julie Connah, John Goss, and dear friends at the congregation: thank you for the many support networks and for embracing us as part of the vibrant church family. I also remember with gratitude our early days in Goulburn and Crookwell—Rev. Daniel Mossfields and Pastor Amy Junor, thank you for embracing us with such warmth. To my Kiribati family in Canberra—the KICSA ambassadors of the University of Canberra and the ANU—kam rabwa n ami boutoka, ongotaeka, ao karinerine. I'm excited with the leadership roles that await you at home ao tekeraoi n tibwangami nako.

Finally, to Dad and Mum—you may be gone, but your presence never left me. Kam aaitau nikabane, Te Mauri, Te Raoi, ao Te Tabomoa!

Preface

This research began with a compelling question: *Should Australia consider establishing a permanent visa pathway modelled on New Zealand's Pacific Access Category—one that could ultimately support dedicated climate-related mobility for nations like Kiribati?* This question sits at the heart of broader debates on how states respond to the needs of countries on the frontline of the anthropogenic climate crisis. As a regional leader with longstanding ties to the Pacific, Australia plays a significant role in shaping movement that support the security, dignity, and resilience of its Pacific family.

For any Pacific citizen, the historical and economic ties binding the Blue Pacific Region to Australia and New Zealand are impossible to ignore. These relationships are deeply rooted in a shared colonial past, when both countries administered parts of the Pacific. In post-independence-Kiribati, both countries played a pivotal role in the country's economic and political landscape, notably through the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the region's elite political organisation.

Given this shared legacy, it is striking that only New Zealand has maintained a permanent migration program for Pacific peoples for more than two decades. This disparity raises important questions: Why has Australia not adopted a similar scheme? The contrast is even more pronounced considering both countries' active roles in promoting regional economic integration and diplomacy. New Zealand offers dedicated migration pathways for its Pacific partners, while Australia has no equivalent arrangement. Thus, when this inquiry emerged at the commencement of this research, it was both timely and relevant, surfacing at a politically charged moment marked by renewed regional solidarity and a surge in Pacific climate diplomacy. As the impacts of climate change intensify, the need for proactive and regionally coherent migration policies becomes increasingly urgent.

I arrived in Australia at the beginning of the Albanese government's term, a period marked by a declared commitment to strengthening ties with the Pacific. The region, long marginalised in global discourse, was suddenly at the centre of Australia's foreign and development policy. A few years later, the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) was launched, marking a significant shift in migration policy for the Pacific, in Australia, and one that responded to the very question that initiated this research.

As this thesis nears completion, the Pacific Region's political landscape remains charged for migration and climate change debates. The return of the Albanese government amid global economic uncertainty underscores the fragile and evolving nature of climate mobility policies. Yet, it also reaffirms the urgency of this work. If Australia proceeds to host COP31, as it has consistently

advocated, the event will not only bring heightened scrutiny to its positions on renewable energy, emissions reduction, and the phasing out of coal, but it will also present a critical opportunity to demonstrate regional climate leadership. For this research, the significance of COP31 extends beyond the negotiation of technical climate agreements—it represents a pivotal moment for Australia to affirm its political commitment to climate mobility and the Pacific region more broadly.

While the primary focus of COP negotiations has traditionally centred on mitigation and adaptation, it is increasingly evident that human mobility must be recognised as a core dimension of climate response. As such, Australia's role as host, along with the Pacific, should include a deliberate effort to integrate migration as adaptation in its broader climate agenda, particularly support through the various climate finance channels. Hosting COP31 offers Australia a platform to reframe migration not as a failure of adaptation, but as a legitimate and strategic response to climate impacts—especially for vulnerable low-lying nations like Kiribati. Centring migration within the Australia-Pacific climate dialogue ensures mobility is not sidelined or reserved for the privileged few but instead embedded as a key pillar of regional cooperation, adaptation, and resilience, including through access to labour migration schemes, such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility program.

This research is grounded in a commitment to human dignity, climate justice, and the recognition of the Pacific Region as a site of knowledge, resilience, and innovation. By centring Kiribati and the broader Pacific Region in the climate change discourse, this thesis challenges dominant narratives of a passive Pacific and asserts that the 'Blue Continent' holds vital insights and solutions to the global climate crisis.

Inspired by the scholarship of Epeli Hau'ofa, this thesis embraces the Pacific not as an empty expanse, but as a thriving force of life—a region rich in culture, agency, mobility, and indigenous epistemologies. Hau'ofa's vision reminds us that reclaiming the dignity and sovereignty of Pacific peoples begins with recognising their voices, experiences, and knowledge systems as central to global conversations on climate-induced migration.

Chapter 1 : Labour Migration and Te Waa of Future Climate Mobility

"Rather than be regarded as 'climate refugees' – a term that has no definition or status in the international legal system – I seek migration with dignity for my people" (Tong, 2018).

1.1 Introduction

In 2014, former Kiribati President Anote Tong addressed the United Nations General Assembly with a message that powerfully reframed the global climate discourse. Confronting the dominant narrative of victimhood and displacement, Tong advanced a bold and visionary proposition: that his people should migrate with dignity, not be reduced to the label of climate refugees. His call was not merely a policy appeal—it was a moral and existential intervention from one of the world's most climate-exposed nations. For Kiribati, a nation defined by its vast ocean territory and fragile atoll geography—Tong's intervention marked a pivotal shift in climate adaptation that asserts his nation's agency to choose, prepare, and navigate futures. Tong's vision offered a human dimension—a radical reimagining of mobility as a proactive, rights-based strategy for adaptation. This chapter begins by revisiting that moment, situating it within the broader climate mobility debate and exploring how labour migration—particularly through structured programs in Australia—can operationalise the ethical governance of migration and the principles of dignity, agency, and resilience that Tong so powerfully articulated (McCLain et al., 2022 ; McNamara, 2015; Oakes, 2019).

Fast forward eleven years, and Tong's proposition remains foundational. It continues to inform how Kiribati and its partners might chart adaptive futures through labour mobility and permanent migration schemes. In the face of intensifying climate disruption and narrowing livelihood options, Kiribati stands at a critical crossroads—where the limits of in situ adaptation confront the urgent imperative to safeguard dignity, sovereignty, and future possibility. Among its national adaptation strategies, labour migration has emerged not only as a coping mechanism but as a deliberate and adaptive response to escalating climate pressures. This chapter introduces the central inquiry of this thesis: whether labour migration, particularly through structured programs such as Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, can be understood as a legitimate, empowering, and ethically sound form of climate adaptation.

Anchored in the Te Waa framework—drawn from Kiribati's rich seafaring epistemology—this study reframes mobility not as displacement, but as navigation: a relational, spiritual, and strategic journey

shaped by collective wisdom and lived experience. Through this lens, adaptation is not a top-down intervention but a co-authored process, one that honours the voices, values, and aspirations of those most affected. The voyage begins here, with an exploration of how labour mobility can chart new futures for Kiribati, steering through uncertainty not merely toward survival, but toward resilience, dignity, and self-determined choices.

Despite growing recognition of labour mobility's potential to contribute to climate adaptation, a significant knowledge gap remains concerning its role as a deliberate and strategic adaptive mechanism—particularly within the context of low-lying, climate-vulnerable atoll nations such as Kiribati (Farbotko et al., 2022; Remling, 2020). While policy interest in mobility as resilience has expanded, the empirical foundation underpinning such claims remains limited. There remains a notable dearth of robust evidence on the direct and differentiated impacts of climate change on mobility patterns, including how environmental stressors shape decisions to move, stay, or adapt in place (Mortreux et al., 2023). This gap underscores the need for context-specific research that centres lived experience and examines how labour migration serves not only as an economic strategy, but as a potential climate adaptation pathway.

This thesis investigates the complex nexus between labour migration and climate adaptation, with the aim of deepening understanding of how both labour mobility and permanent migration—collectively referred to herein as labour migration—can operate as strategic responses to escalating climate threats. Critical questions persist regarding the extent to which labour migration can alleviate demographic and economic pressures on frontline communities, mitigate exposure to environmental stressors, and foster long-term resilience across social, economic, and cultural dimensions. By foregrounding community perspectives in Kiribati, this research highlights the potential for mobility to function not only as a pathway to adaptation but also as a mechanism for shaping sustainable and self-determined futures.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1.2 provides key background, and Section 1.3 presents an overview of Kiribati as the research setting. Section 1.4 describes the research motivation, Section 1.5 presents the research puzzle, and Section 1.6 outlines the research inquiry. Section 1.7 describes the research methodology, Section 1.8 provides the research contributions, and Section 1.9 outlines the thesis structure. Finally, Section 1.10 concludes the chapter.

1.2 The Problem: Kiribati and the Climate Crisis—Confronting an Existential Threat

Climate change poses an existential threat to low-lying communities across the globe, but nowhere is this more acute than in Kiribati—one of the world's most climate-affected nations (IPCC, 2014, 2023; Klein et al., 1999; Office of Te Beretitenti, 2019). In Kiribati, the physical limits of in situ adaptation are no longer theoretical; they are increasingly visible in the erosion of coastlines, the salinisation of freshwater lenses, and the narrowing of viable livelihoods. Climate change is not a distant or future event—it is a lived reality, unfolding daily across Kiribati's atolls, as in other vulnerable island nations. This reality is further exacerbated by entrenched economic and social pressures—such as high unemployment, rapid population growth, overcrowding, and strained infrastructure and services—which place an overwhelming toll on the government's capacity to respond to both climate and economic stressors in a timely and effective manner (Government of Kiribati, 2013, 2020).

In 2023, as in previous assessment cycles, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Synthesis Report issued a clear and urgent warning regarding the acute vulnerability of small island states such as Kiribati to sea level rise (IPCC, 2023). This reaffirmation not only strengthens the scientific consensus on climate risk trajectories but also serves as a sobering reminder of the imperative to design and implement robust, context-specific adaptation and resilience-building strategies. In this context, the urgency for inclusive, strategic, and culturally grounded adaptation has never been greater. As a leading challenge, Kiribati is confronted today with the growing risk of climate-induced displacement, primarily driven by sea level rise (Hugo, 1996; Kolmannskog, 2012; Vinke & Hoffman, 2020). This slow-onset phenomenon is compounded by rapid-onset events such as spring tides, coastal flooding, and severe storms, which undermine the integrity of land, food and water ecosystems, and the very survival of low-lying island nations (Barnett, 2019; Kuruppu & Willie, 2015; Mimura et al., 2007).

The country's infrastructure remains underdeveloped, and its natural, human, and economic resources are limited relative to the needs of its growing population. These constraints contribute to Kiribati's heavy reliance on external aid and development assistance to meet basic needs and support national development efforts. These structural constraints contribute to a low climate adaptive capacity (Kiribati, 2020; Rimon, 2022; Siddle, 2014), leaving Kiribati exposed to the escalating impacts of climate change. Addressing this existential threat requires not only technical and environmental solutions but also human-centred strategies that empower communities to respond with agency and resilience.

The severing of communities from ancestral lands that have shaped their way of life is deeply unsettling and poses profound moral, social, and political challenges. In the Pacific, where Kiribati and other small island nations sit at the epicentre of climate change impact, this is not a hypothetical concern. Pacific peoples are increasingly at risk of some form of movement and forced climate-induced relocation, as they adapt to climate impact—often with little global recognition or protection (Kolmannskog & Trebbi, 2012; Kuruppu, 2009; McAdam, 2010).

Crucially, this unfolding crisis is not of their making, yet Pacific communities face the prospect of displacement without the legal safeguards typically granted to conventional refugees or more politically visible climate migrants. Their vulnerability is compounded by the absence of international law and formal protection frameworks, leaving them at risk of exclusion, invisibility, and prolonged uncertainty in the face of irreversible environmental change. This unfolding reality has elevated climate migration and (im)mobility to one of the most urgent and polarising topics in the Pacific Region today—sparking vigorous debates across policy, legal, and grassroots spaces (Barnett & McMichael, 2018; Farbotko et al., 2016; Ferris, 2020).

The complex interplay between forced displacement, limited international protection mechanisms, cultural attachment to place, and constrained mobility options underscores both the immediacy and sensitivity of these conversations, which continue to shape regional agendas and global advocacy efforts (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019; M. Taylor, 2024). The current climate reality confronting Kiribati underscores the critical imperative for international policy frameworks in shaping the nation's adaptive capacity. Over the past two administrations, Kiribati's climate strategies have garnered significant international attention—not only for their contrasting political orientations but largely for the substantial investments they have attracted. These include scaled-up infrastructural reform programs supported by multilateral development banks, international organisations, and bilateral partners (Kupferberg, 2021).

This research builds upon two key policy paradigms: Migration with Dignity and Resilience-Building. Despite their political divergence, these paradigms converge on a shared foundational principle: the centrality of the I-Kiribati people. While the international discourse has often emphasised the stark differences between these policy approaches, this study does not seek to contribute to that narrative. Rather, it draws from the strengths and best practices of both frameworks to inform a rights-based analysis of labour migration and climate adaptation.

While this research examines labour migration as a potential climate adaptation strategy, it remains critically attentive to debates of climate coloniality and climate apathy, and to the risk that labour migration pathways may deepen existing injustices if they fail to address the structural causes of climate-induced vulnerability. Acknowledging these concerns, this research argues that for low-lying nations like Kiribati, time is an urgent and non-negotiable factor. Even if global emission targets are met, the lived realities of communities suggest that it may already be too late to reverse the climate impacts that threaten the with uninhabitability within the next 50 years. In this context, labour migration emerges as one of several necessary strategies that can offer viable options for safeguarding I-Kiribati futures. This study contends that Pacific nations must be actively included in global policy debates—particularly those concerning migration—given the growing confidence of climate science regarding human mobility. Too often, these conversations presume to speak on behalf of I-Kiribati communities instead of engaging with them directly. A decolonial and justice-oriented approach must ensure that Pacific voices are not only present but central in shaping the policies that will determine their futures.

1.3 Kiribati—An Overview

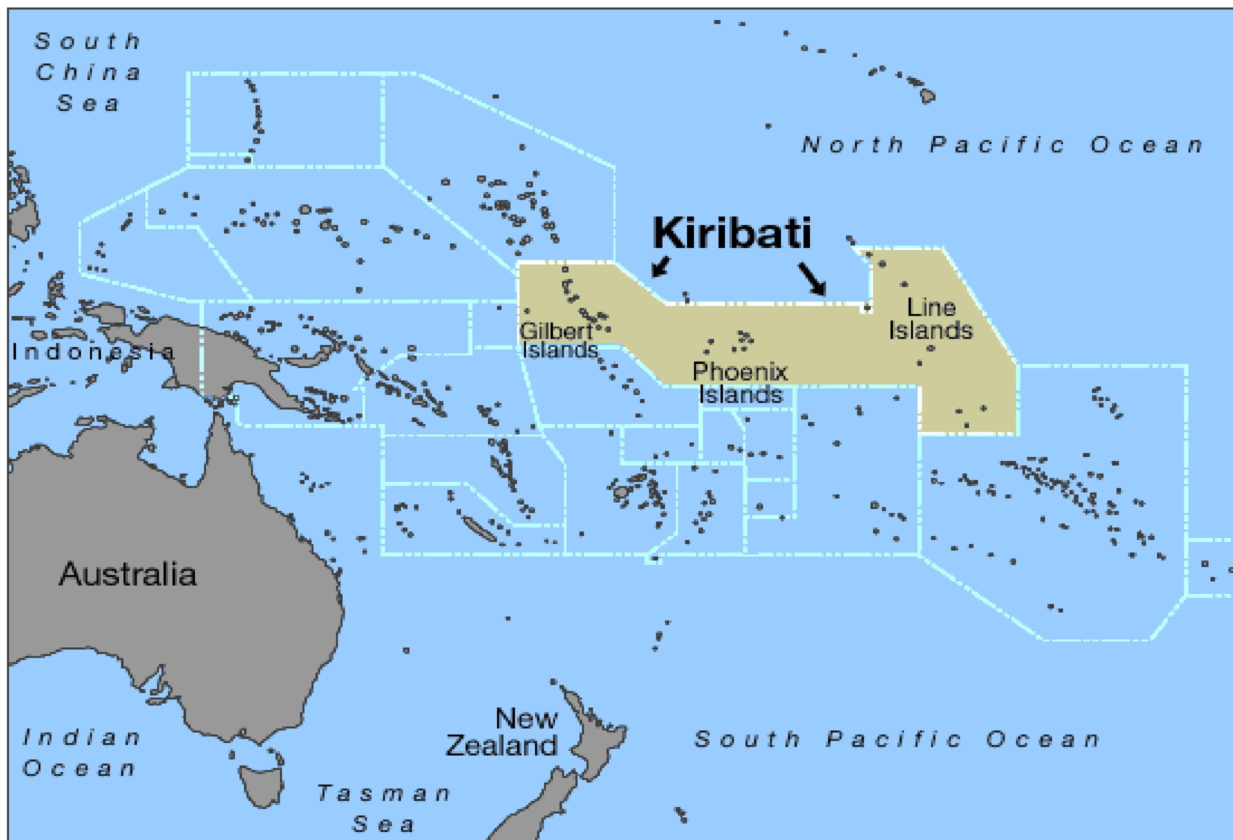

Figure 1.1: Map of Kiribati

Source: Tye, A. (n.d) Map of Kiribati showing Gilbert, Phoenix, and Line Islands. *Birdlife International.* *Retrieved from* https://maps.birdlife.org/

Kiribati is situated in the central Pacific Ocean, equidistant between Australia and Hawai ʻi (Figure 1.1). Its total land area of just 811 square kilometres is scattered across a vast maritime territory of approximately 3.5 million square kilometres—an expanse comparable in size to the Indian subcontinent or mainland Australia. It is the only sovereign nation in the world to span all four hemispheres, underscoring its unique geopolitical and geographic positioning. Although frequently classified as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), Kiribati is more accurately recognised as a Big Ocean Sovereign State (BOSS)—a term coined by the Pacific Islands Forum's Small Island States grouping in the 2010s (Meg Taylor, 2024) to affirm the material reality of vast Pacific maritime jurisdictions which far exceed their landmass. With an average elevation of less than three metres above sea level, Kiribati faces acute vulnerability to the impacts of climate change (Donner & Webber, 2014). The combination of limited land mass, a fragile freshwater lens, and an expansive surrounding ocean presents existential challenges, where competition over scarce resources is no longer abstract but increasingly experienced in daily life.

Figure 1.2: An aerial view of South Tarawa, Kiribati.

The national economy remains small and structurally constrained, with limited prospects for growth due to its geographic isolation, both externally—being far removed from major trade corridors—and internally, as a highly dispersed archipelago. Kiribati's GDP per capita was over USD 2,000 in 2023 and its population over 130,000 (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2025). The government faces

mounting pressure to address intersecting challenges of youth unemployment, climate vulnerability, and economic fragility. Its capacity to absorb new entrants into the labour force, especially as the population continues to grow, is especially strained. Expanding access to international labour markets is therefore not only a development priority but a resilience imperative to alleviate domestic employment pressures and enhance adaptive capacity (Government of Kiribati, 2016a; Rimon, 2022).

According to the 2020 Census (NSO, 2020), the total national unemployment rate in Kiribati is 11.3%.[1] While this figure captures only those actively seeking but unable to secure work, it reveals only a narrow slice of labour vulnerability. More than half of the adult population is engaged in informal or subsistence sectors that fall outside the International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of unemployment and therefore remains statistically invisible. This underscores that unemployment in Kiribati is not merely a matter of joblessness, but a persistent structural challenge shaped by demographic pressures, geographic isolation, and the limited capacity of the formal labour market to absorb a growing workforce. Permanent migration to other countries "does not currently appear to be a significant factor in the population dynamics of Kiribati" (NSO, 2020, p. 6), yet mobility itself is far from new for I-Kiribati communities. The country has a long history of labour migration, drawing on nearly sixty years of participation in the fisheries and seafaring sectors (Borovnik, 2003; Voight-Graf, 2016), and before that in the phosphate industries of Banaba and Nauru (Connell, 2021). More recently, labour schemes in New Zealand and Australia employ over 3,000 I-Kiribati at the time of writing. Remittances have already become a key source of income for households, accounting for nearly 10% of GDP in 2020 (Curtain & Dornan, 2019; Doan et al., 2023; ILO, 2024).

1.4 Research Motivation

This research is motivated by a critical gap in understanding how labour mobility functions as an adaptation strategy for climate change in Kiribati. While the Migration with Dignity policy represents a deliberate act of agency in the face of disproportionate climate vulnerability, it remains unclear how it translates from policy to practice or how it helps form part of Kiribati's response strategy to climate impact. Despite Kiribati's negligible contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, it stands among

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[1] The National Statistics Office's (NSO) unemployment rate follows the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition, counting only those who are without work, available to work, and actively seeking work. In the Kiribati context, this excludes large numbers of subsistence fishers, informal workers, and unpaid family labourers, who are classified outside the labour force rather than unemployed, and instead as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

the most exposed countries to climate-related risks. This research explores how mobility can serve as a dignified and intentional response to the existential challenges posed by climate change. The research motivation is also driven by a dearth of empirical evidence how communities perceive migration as a form of adaptation. It investigates the complex nexus between labour migration and climate adaptation, with the aim of deepening understanding of how both labour mobility and permanent migration—collectively referred to herein as labour migration—can operate as strategic responses to escalating climate threats. Critical questions persist regarding the extent to which labour migration can alleviate demographic and economic pressures on frontline communities, mitigate exposure to environmental stressors, and foster long-term resilience across social, economic, and cultural dimensions. By foregrounding community perspectives in Kiribati, this research endeavours to enhance understanding of labour migration and whether it offers a pathway to adaptation while also serving as a mechanism for shaping sustainable and self-determined futures.

1.5 Research Puzzle

The introduction of Australia's labour mobility and permanent migration programs in Kiribati and across the Pacific has been widely documented, particularly in relation to their perceived potential to deliver a **"**triple win"—benefiting sending countries through remittances and skill development, receiving countries through labour market support, and migrant workers through income and training opportunities (Curtain & Dornan, 2019; Doan et al., 2023). More recently, there has been growing recognition of the potential for migration to serve as a climate adaptation strategy, especially for low-lying nations facing existential threats. However, despite this emerging narrative, there remains a significant gap in empirical data on how labour mobility is contributing to climate adaptation and resilience in Pacific countries, particularly in terms of economic growth, wellbeing, and long-term climate security.

1.6 Research Inquiry

The research addresses the central inquiry: *Does labour migration in Australia facilitate climate adaptation in Kiribati—and if so, how?* This question lies at the intersection of climate resilience, human mobility, and development policy. It is particularly urgent for low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati, where the impacts of climate change are not only environmental but existential. As traditional adaptation strategies become increasingly constrained by geographic and economic limitations, labour migration has emerged as a potential pathway for enhancing household and community resilience.

1.7 Thesis Structure

To help guide the reader, the research breaks down the central inquiry into five interrelated sub-questions. These sub-questions form the analytical framework of the thesis and are addressed across the following chapters:

Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework

In Chapter 2 (next chapter), the thesis critically examines the concept of adaptation through the lens of Kiribati communities, unpacking its locally grounded meanings and interpretations. It also engages with the broader scholarly and policy debates surrounding adaptation, particularly its conceptual and practical intersections with the notions of vulnerability and resilience. The chapter then discusses the theoretical underpinnings of this research, namely Te Waa of Mobility theoretical framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach, introducing Te Waa methodology. This Indigenous Kiribati research tool serves as a metaphorical and cultural apparatus guiding the research from an I-Kiribati community lens to foreground perspectives of those at the forefront of the climate challenge whose stories are often told by external researchers.

Chapter 4: Understanding the labour mobility landscape in Kiribati

Chapter 4 is a context-setting chapter providing a comprehensive overview of the labour mobility landscape in Kiribati. It explains the formal education system, vocational training programs, and early labour mobility schemes leading towards the introduction of Australia's labour mobility pathways.

Chapter 5: Does labour migration facilitate adaptation, and if so, how?

This first empirical chapter investigates the central research question. It examines the role of labour mobility in Australia—through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme—as a mechanism for climate adaptation. It draws on participant narratives to assess how migration contributes to climate resilience and increases understanding of the value such a scheme brings to I-Kiribati at the household and community levels. The chapter further examines the specific climate-related hazards facing Kiribati, including sea level rise, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather events. It contextualises the socio-economic and environmental pressures that shape the need for alternative adaptation strategies, including migration.

Chapter 6: To what extent has geopolitics influenced the development of labour mobility policies and conceptions of sovereignty in Kiribati?
This second empirical chapter explores the geopolitical dimensions of labour mobility and their influence on national sovereignty and migration decisions. By understanding these dynamics, the research explores how these impact I-Kiribati conceptions of geopolitics, particularly in relation to migration decisions.

Chapter 7: In what ways has labour mobility in Australia cultivated resilience for Kiribati and I-Kiribati, and how can this be further strengthened for climate adaptation?
This final empirical chapter explores how labour mobility contributes to building resilience among I-Kiribati individuals, families, and communities. It examines ways in which migration experiences—particularly in Australia—enhance adaptive capacities and discusses the challenges and opportunities that workers face, and how these could be addressed to maximise benefits and success stories.

Chapter 8: Conclusion
This final chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the key findings, confirming that labour migration is indeed facilitating adaptation and discussing what this means for Kiribati as an active player in regional labour mobility schemes, particularly in employing such a pathway for climate adaptation and resilience agendas. This chapter also presents policy recommendations and examines the research limitations.

By structuring the thesis as presented, the research aims to provide a comprehensive and grounded understanding of how labour migration intersects with climate adaptation in Kiribati. It also seeks to contribute to broader policy discussions on climate mobility in the Pacific, offering insights that are both academically rigorous and practically relevant.

1.8 Methodology

1.8.1 Overview

Using *te waa* (the canoe) as a metaphor for research and migration, the study centres the lived experiences and voices of communities at immediate risk of climate impact, to co-create knowledge for re-storying and re-journeying migration in an increasingly changing world. By foregrounding community agency and self-determined adaptation, the study contributes nuanced insights to the evolving discourse on climate justice, mobility, and resilience.

The research employs two primary research methods: qualitative research (via semi-structured interviews) and multi-sited ethnography. These methods are grounded in three culturally embedded I-Kiribati data collection systems: *te maneaba* (the town hall system), *te maroro* (the dialogue), and *te karaki* (the storytelling). As a multi-sited study, the research spans five locations—three island councils in Kiribati, namely Betio (referred to herein as BTC), South Tarawa (TUC), and Marakei, and two states in Australia.

This research strategically selected South Tarawa (TUC) and Betio (BTC) as primary urban field sites due to their high population density, elevated rates of youth unemployment, and concentrated exposure to climate-related stressors. These locations offer critical insight into how labour mobility is perceived and enacted within densely populated, economically constrained environments. In contrast, Marakei was chosen to represent a rural and geographically isolated context, characterised by low population density and limited formal employment opportunities—providing a valuable counterpoint to urban dynamics and illuminating the differentiated pressures and adaptive capacities across Kiribati's socio-spatial landscape. Complementing the Kiribati-based fieldwork, the research extended to several locations in Australia where I-Kiribati workers are employed, with a focus on New South Wales and Queensland. These transnational sites enabled a comparative lens on labour migration experiences, aspirations, and the perceived role of mobility in building climate, economic, and cultural resilience.

The timing of this doctoral research coincides with a dynamic political shift in the Pacific region, particularly following the election of the Albanese government in Australia in 2022. The new administration's Pacific Family diplomacy signalled a renewed commitment to regional engagement. A landmark development in this context was the introduction of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), which offers permanent residency to 3,000 individuals annually from Pacific Island nations and Timor-Leste. Modelled on the U.S. Green Card system, the PEV—launched in 2025—represents a transformative shift in regional migration policy and is poised to significantly influence migration patterns in Kiribati and the broader Pacific, particularly in the context of climate change and adaptation (Howes & Sharman, 2023; Rimon, 2022; Turia & Rimon, 2024). As Howes and Sharman (2023) note, the PEV reflects a growing recognition of the need for migration frameworks that are not only economically beneficial but also responsive to the long-term vulnerabilities of Pacific nations. Rimon (2022) and Turia and Rimon (2024) further argue that such initiatives must be grounded in Pacific values and perspectives, ensuring that migration is not merely a response to crisis, but a pathway to dignity, agency, and resilience.

1.8.2 Research design: participatory action research

Te waa is employed in this research as a culturally grounded metaphor and a critical tool of positionality, citing its symbolism of life, dignity, mobility, and evolving cultures and identities, while embodying the epistemological and ontological dimensions of migration from a Pacific lens. Te waa transcends its nature as a vessel, representing the pursuit of new horizons, opportunities, and knowledge—paralleling the lived experiences of migration and adaptation. Conceptually, te waa is a tool of relationality, emphasising its existence not in isolation, but through its interdependence with the environment, its components, and the people who give it meaning and function. In alignment with this metaphor, the study adopts a participatory action research (PAR) approach, which similarly values collaboration, contextual knowledge, and collective agency (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014).

The building of te waa draws upon the collective strength of a community: the availability of natural resources, the wisdom and leadership of elders, the craftsmanship of master builders, and the indispensable contributions of women and youth. It is a process rooted in intergenerational knowledge, relational labour, and shared purpose. Yet once constructed, te waa does not move by human effort alone—it requires the cooperation of natural forces, such as wind and waves, to chart its course. In this same epistemological and methodological spirit, participatory action research (PAR) is contingent upon the voices, agency, and lived experiences of the community it seeks to serve. It is shaped by the policy currents that have defined the labour migration landscape within which this study is situated, and it is guided by the leadership and collective insight upon which this research hopes to build. Just as te waa cannot navigate without the alignment of human skill and environmental forces, PAR cannot generate meaningful knowledge without the co-authorship of those most affected.

1.8.3 From policy to people: a governance lens on climate mobility

As a community study, particularly one grounded in participatory methodologies, this research is embedded in a policy and governance discipline, which offers a critical vantage point for examining how regulatory frameworks are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted at the local level. In the context of climate change and labour migration, global governance structures—such as bilateral labour agreements, visa schemes, and international adaptation agendas—do not operate in a vacuum. Their legitimacy and effectiveness depend on how they align with, or disrupt, community values, aspirations, and lived realities. By foregrounding Kiribati's community perspectives, this study interrogates the scalar dynamics of governance: how decisions made in Canberra, Wellington, or at the Pacific Islands Forum, reverberate through households in South Tarawa or the outer islands. It

reveals the regulatory frictions and ethical tensions that arise when global policy instruments meet local contexts marked by cultural continuity, resource scarcity, and existential climate risk. As such, this study contributes to global governance scholarship by re-centring the margins: showing how frontline communities are not passive recipients of policy, but active navigators of complex regulatory landscapes. It challenges the discipline to move beyond abstract models and engage with grounded, culturally resonant understandings of resilience, mobility, and justice.

1.9 Research Contribution

This research offers two principal contributions to the field of migration studies. First, it introduces an Indigenous Kiribati methodology—Te Waa methodology. *Te waa*, meaning 'canoe' in Kiribati, serves as a powerful metaphor for the deliberate, skilled, and communal preparation required for migration. It symbolises the journey toward a secure and dignified arrival at one's destination, guided by ancestral knowledge, collective effort, and spiritual purpose. While te waa has been referenced in broader Pacific scholarship as a symbol of mobility and resilience, this study marks its first formal application as a research methodology in the context of migration studies specific to Kiribati. Rooted in the traditional practice of canoe-building, Te Waa methodology emphasises the importance of process, preparation, and purpose—both in research and in the lived experiences of migration. Further, it provides a culturally grounded lens through which to understand the aspirations, challenges, and agency of I-Kiribati migrants navigating climate-induced mobility.

The second contribution lies in centring the perspectives of frontline communities, not merely as passive subjects of displacement, but as active agents making complex decisions about their futures—particularly through labour migration. This research amplifies how I-Kiribati individuals interpret and engage with labour mobility and permanent migration schemes, situating these within broader strategies for climate adaptation, cultural continuity, and intergenerational resilience. It does so through the development of a theoretical framework—Te Waa of Mobility—which critiques the limitations of dominant migration theories that often overlook values central to Pacific worldviews, such as culture, spirituality, and collective responsibility. By foregrounding community perspectives, spiritual values, and Indigenous agency, this research argues that migration studies must evolve to better inform climate adaptation and policy responses that are just, inclusive, and contextually relevant.

Such an investigation is particularly vital given Kiribati's unique climate vulnerabilities as a big ocean state—a geographically remote, low-lying island nation with limited economic diversification, constrained infrastructure, and an absence of economies of scale. In this context, migration is not

simply a response to environmental pressures, but a deeply cultural and strategic act of survival, stewardship, and self-determination.

1.10 Conclusion

Guided by the foundational principle of Migration with Dignity, this chapter asserts that migration must be reimagined not solely through the lens of state-centric policy frameworks, but through the lived experiences, aspirations, and epistemologies of communities on the frontlines of climate change. It challenges dominant narratives that position mobility as a last resort or as evidence of adaptive failure, arguing instead that migration—when grounded in agency and informed choice—constitutes a deliberate act of resilience. For nations such as Kiribati, where the physical limits of in situ adaptation are increasingly breached by rising seas, salinised freshwater lenses, and narrowing livelihood options, labour mobility offers more than economic reprieve; it presents a navigational strategy anchored in dignity, sovereignty, and self-determination.

As the findings of this research will demonstrate, compelling evidence emerges of the economic stress induced by unemployment, the demographic strain on natural and public resources, and the growing popularity of migration as a strategic response. Labour migration is prominently viewed not merely as an economic mechanism but as a vital tool for adaptation and resilience-building. Participants articulated values that extended well beyond remittances—describing labour migration as a pathway for strengthening climate preparedness, expanding educational and economic opportunities, and reinforcing cultural continuity across transnational spaces.

However, such pathways cannot be ethically or effectively charted without the meaningful participation of those most affected. Migration governance must transcend technocratic design and elite-driven agendas to embrace participatory, culturally resonant frameworks that reflect the values, knowledge systems, and adaptive capacities of Pacific communities. Adaptation, in this sense, is not a top-down directive but a co-authored process—shaped by relational accountability and grounded in collective wisdom. As this study has shown, when migration is framed through community voice and navigational metaphors such as Te Waa, it becomes not a departure from resilience, but its embodiment: a way of steering through uncertainty with purpose, courage, and shared strength.

Chapter 2 : Migration as Adaptation—A Critical Review of Labour Migration as a Climate Resilience Strategy in the Pacific

"Our ancestors were great ocean voyagers who traversed the vast Pacific for food, employment, and adventure. They saw the ocean not as a barrier but as a pathway to new opportunities and connections. This tradition of mobility and exploration continues to define the lives of Pacific Islanders today" (Hau'ofa, 1994).

2.1 Introduction

Labour migration is defined as 'the movement of persons from one state to another, or within their own country of residence for the purpose of employment' (IOM, 2019, p. 123). For centuries, it has been a fundamental aspect of human life, shaped by a diverse range of drivers including social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors. The global recognition of labour migration has grown significantly over the past few decades, as countries increasingly acknowledge its vital role in economic development, knowledge and skills acquisition, social cohesion, and international cooperation. More recently, the growing knowledge of its potential as a climate change strategy has been pivotal to climate change and adaptation discourses, especially in regions such as the Pacific where environmental degradation and climate change disasters pose existential threats (Bailes et al., 2014; Barbosa, 2020b; Barnett & & Webber, 2010).

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the key debates surrounding the phenomenon. It examines its emerging criticality in the Pacific as a vital adaptation strategy, where climate change poses significant threats. Despite its growing importance, limited research explores the direct link between climate change and migration decisions (Mortreux et al., 2023). This literature review unpacks labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy, outlining its implications for policy and development in low-lying island economies like Kiribati. By examining its role as a coping mechanism for climate impacts and a means of strengthening community resilience, this chapter advances understanding of the complex interrelationships between climate change, migration, and development in Pacific Island contexts.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2.2 provides an overview of climate adaptation and migration dynamics, examining definitions of climate adaptation and offering a critical analysis of the broader debates surrounding the concept of migration. Section 2.3 offers a critical analysis of the debates on labour migration as an adaptation strategy. Section 2.4 investigates the Kiribati policy of Migration

with Dignity as a groundbreaking labour migration model for climate change in Kiribati. It examines how I-Kiribati people perceive and experience this policy within the context of climate adaptation. Section 2.5 presents the theoretical underpinning of this research, namely Te Waa of Mobility Framework. Finally, Section 2.6 concludes the chapter by identifying gaps in the existing literature, offering a nuanced understanding of Pacific peoples' interpretations of adaptation through migration.

2.2 Climate Adaptation and Migration Dynamics

A widely accepted definition of adaptation—used across disciplines and policy frameworks, is that provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC defines climate adaptation as the process of "adjusting to actual or expected climate change and its effects, to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities (p.4). In human systems, adaptation seeks to reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience to climate-related risks; in natural systems, it involves human intervention to assist adjustment" (IPCC, 2022). These adjustments may entail capitalising on opportunities such as those arising from response measures, including but not limited to migration, such as modifying practices, economic or subsistence behaviours and systems to minimise harmful consequences of climate change impacts on natural resources and ways of life.

By leveraging existing knowledge, including traditional knowledge and new technologies, adaptation strategies can enhance preparedness, coping mechanisms, and resilience in the face of climate adversity. As defined by the IPCC, adaptation is 'various actions' aimed at reducing the risks associated with climate change impacts, such as droughts, floods, and sea level rise. The concept of adaptation is also grounded in the definition provided by the United Nations (UN), which is a foundational reference point. The UN frames adaptation as "adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects" (United Nations, 2025, para. 2). Both framings of adaptation emphasise proactive measures for mitigating climate threats.

The concept of adaptation has shifted from a generic idea of change to a nuanced, context-specific process of adjusting to new environments, including climate-induced ones (Piggott-McKellar, 2020; Smit & Pilifosova, 2003). Its evolving, multidisciplinary nature is evident in diverse scholarly definitions (Guillén Bolaños, 2022; Hansen, 2017; Mertz et al., 2009) reflecting that adaptation options are inherently context-dependent and shaped by local, social, economic, and political conditions. As the United Nations notes:

“Adaptation actions can take on many forms, depending on the unique context of a community, business, organization, country or region. There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.” (United Nations, 2021, para. 3)

This understanding is echoed by the UNFCCC, which emphasises the success of adaptation via context-specific measures, addressing the unique needs and circumstances of the location in which they are implemented whether through flood defences, early warning systems, integration of traditional knowledge, or policy reforms at the governmental level (United Nations, 2025). This context-specific approach is corroborated by Noll et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of customising adaptation measures to specific needs and circumstances of climate-affected households or communities.

Additionally, the impact of climate change is disproportionately distributed across communities, resulting in varying levels of vulnerability and adaptive capacity. Smit and & Pilifosova (2003) define adaptation from the perspective of reducing vulnerability, emphasising understanding of the degree of exposure to climatic events and the adaptive capacity of communities to manage or cope with the impacts of such events. Building on this evolving understanding of adaptation is crucial for acknowledging that while humans, societies, and economies have historically adapted to environmental changes (Smit et al., 1999), the current context of rapid anthropogenic climate change has elevated adaptation to a paramount concern (O’Brien & Hochachka, 2010). Cascading climate impacts therefore demand expanded adaptive measures, underscoring adaptation’s foundational role in informing impact assessments, guiding response measures, and shaping sustainable development trajectories.

Adaptation’s complexity is further compounded by inconsistent and ambiguous definitions in the literature (Fankhauser, 2017; Guillén Bolaños et al., 2022; Owen, 2020). This definitional ambiguity hinders efforts to coordinate, strengthen, and draw lessons from adaptation initiatives. In the Pacific, where country-specific contexts differ markedly, contextualising adaptation and streamlining definitions is crucial. Although Pacific countries share broad climate priorities, the region’s diversity produces disparate exposure, experiences, and adaptive capacities. Climate impact is disproportionate on vulnerable communities who contribute negligibly to global emissions yet bear significant costs and face limited capacity to finance adaptation (Dorkenoo, 2022; Inbar and Sheffer, 1997; Guivarch et al., 2021; Havea, 2010). This underscores the need for a tailored approach to addressing the challenge. Moreover, Smit and Pilifosova (2003) argue that this challenge is exacerbated by the interplay of various factors, including social, economic, and technological

developments, as well as the availability of resources and wealth, which are unique to the country implementing adaptive measures:

> *"Adaptation to climate change and risks takes place in a dynamic social, economic, technological, biophysical, and political context that varies over time, location, and sector. This complex mix of conditions determines the capacity of systems to adapt." (Smit & Pilisolova, 2003, p. 895).*

A further complexity in the definition of adaptation stems from the often-obscured distinction between adaptation and mitigation in climate change discussions, leading to confusion of specific strategies and approaches required by each to effectively address climate impacts. While adaptation involves adjusting to the consequences of climate change, mitigation seeks to prevent or minimise the impact of climate change through targeted interventions. However, a critical nuance that warrants clarification is the practical applicability of both concepts, particularly in the context of low-lying regions, including Kiribati, where climate change impacts are already manifest and irreversible, thus mitigation efforts may already be limited in reversing climate impacts including rising sea levels. Adaptation is therefore crucial for fostering resilience and sustainability. Yet, it has limits, particularly in small island ecosystems unable to renew or replenish. In such cases, transboundary options such as labour mobility or permanent migration, may become necessary.

Within Pacific discourse, adaptation is often conflated with resilience, a term that has gained significant prominence. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) states that since 2009, it has been "laying the groundwork for more resilient Pacific communities" (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2025, para. 1). While resilience is a valid response to climate challenges, this research suggests that emphasising it may impose unrealistic expectations on atoll geographies that are inherently vulnerable and often lack the foundational capacity for a resilience agenda. Promoting resilience where systemic vulnerabilities persist risks obscuring urgent needs requiring immediate intervention and oversimplifying the distinct yet interconnected roles of adaptation and resilience in climate response.

The term 'resilience' has emerged as a dominant policy idiom across the Pacific, frequently invoked by governments to frame climate policies and align development agendas with resilient systems, communities, and ecosystems. Yet its rapid uptake often outpaces the careful analysis required to address underlying structural and contextual challenges essential for genuinely enhancing people's actual resilience (McDonnell, 2020; United Nations, 2025). While resilience is critical to climate response, its emphasis in the Pacific frequently coincides with sedentary adaptation policies that

prioritise staying in-place solutions, inadvertently marginalising migration and mobility as legitimate adaptive strategies. This convergence of concepts warrants closer examination about what resilience is assumed to mean, who defines it, and whose experiences it reflects. Against this backdrop, the thesis positions resilience as a central analytical lens through which the lived experiences and adaptation practices of I-Kiribati are examined, interpreted, and understood. While governments often promote resilience as a hallmark of development and climate readiness, its translation from policy rhetoric to everyday practice remains uneven and ambiguous. Chapter 7 unpacks this gap by revealing how I-Kiribati themselves articulate resilience, how they enact it, and how these definitions diverge from institutional framings. As the findings revealed, I-Kiribati definitions of resilience transcend rhetoric and tied deeply to dignity (toronibwai), identity (oi n aomata), and prosperity (kabwaia). Subsequent chapters extend this analysis by exploring the implications of promoting resilience in contexts where ecological fragility, geographic constraints, or socio-economic pressures limit people's capacity to adapt or recover after climatic events. While affirming the importance of both adaptation and resilience, this research recognises the complexity of the vulnerability-resilience dichotomy. Certain Pacific climate vulnerabilities, exceed what resilience-building alone can address, demanding context-sensitive adaptation approaches that integrate resilience with broader strategies–including mobility—rather than treating it as a standalone solution.

Beyond its scientific and institutional definitions, adaptation in the Pacific carries deeper significance. It entails not only adjusting to environmental changes but also accessing support—financing, training, education, and skills—essential for livelihoods, safety, and wellbeing. Nevertheless, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) continue to face limited access to climate finance intended for their support (Guivarch et al., 2021), a paradox that highlights a systemic disconnect between global climate finance frameworks and Pacific lived realities (IPCC, 2022).

Although labour migration has deep historical roots dating to early human settlements, a range of theoretical perspectives have emerged to explain its evolution. One prominent view, advanced by Castles and Miller (2009), attributes the contemporary scale and complexity of labour migration to the forces of globalisation, which have intensified economic interdependence and mobility across borders. This perspective posits that nations are becoming increasingly interdependent within an integrated global economy, leading to profound transformations in labour market dynamics. These shifts are driven by several key factors, including technological advancements (particularly in transportation and communication), expanded international trade and financial flows, and widespread economic and market liberalisation. Together, these forces contribute to the emergence

of new employment sectors while rendering others obsolete, reshaping the global landscape of labour mobility.

This theory contends that globalisation accelerates the flow of capital and innovation across borders, significantly intensifying international movement of people while expanding transnational labour networks, enabling individuals to pursue emerging economic opportunities beyond their countries of origin. Consequently, destination countries increasingly host migrants from a wide array of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds (Mackie & Pendleton, 2010, p. 10). This evolving landscape produces more fluid and strategic patterns of international labour migration, functioning both as a consequence and catalyst of global economic integration. Such migration is continually reshaped by dynamic labour markets and global challenges including demographic shifts, technological advancements, epidemics, and climate change. Reflecting this, globalisation is defined as "growth in breadth, intensity, speed, and impact of world-wide interconnectedness" (Held et al., 1999, p. 2).

Central to this globalisation-centric view, Salt (1992), argues that the contemporary geography of labour migration mirrors the increasing integration of the world economy, shaped by evolving labour market dynamics. He introduces the concept of the "globalisation of international labour migration" (p. 1080), emphasising that more countries now actively participating in global migration systems. He argues that virtually all nations are engaged in migration networks that are expanding in scale and complexity, generating increasingly diverse and multidirectional flows.

In contrast, several scholars challenge the globalisation-centric theory of migration, particularly its assumption of a widespread and uniform increase in international mobility. While traditional and neoclassical theories stress economic aspirations, wage differentials, and individual decision-making, globalisation theory emphasises stresses macro-level forces like capital flows and economic integration. Massey (1999) advocates a multi-level approach in which migration arises from a complex interplay of factors—individual aspirations, household strategies, labour demands, and social networks. While acknowledging globalisation's influence, the author treats it as one among multiple interacting forces, driving migration, not the exclusive determinant. Massey et al. (1993) conclude from their comprehensive review of international migration theories, that individuals often migrate to maximise income and employment opportunities, typically moving from low-to high wage regions.

Zelinsky (1971), argues that migration patterns shift with economic development, particularly with industrialisation and urbanisation whereas Sen (1993) frames migration through a pursuit of greater

freedoms and opportunities, rather than merely economic gain. Two scholars whose work has been particularly influential in shaping this research are Graeme Hugo and Hein de Haas. The former contributed significantly to the discourse by highlighting the role of development disparities and demographic transitions in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, suggesting that migration is a response to uneven development rather than a direct outcome of globalisation.

More recently, de Haas (2021), on advancing the aspirations-capabilities framework, argues that migration results from the interaction of people's desires to improve their lives and their ability to act on those desires. This framework is revisited throughout the empirical chapters, where migration emerges not simply as movement, but as an expression of informed choice and decision to remain in place or to pursue opportunities elsewhere. Consequently, migration flows exhibit distinct directionality and regional concentration, challenging conventional assumptions of a homogenously global phenomenon. Rather than spanning vast distances indiscriminately, migration often reflects nuanced patterns rooted in geography, migration options, and the socio-political contexts supporting accessibility to these options.

Pacific migration scholarship is diverse. Most influential is Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Sea of Islands' (1993) which challenges Western notions of isolation and marginality by emphasising historical mobility, social networks, and cultural continuity across the ocean. Hau'ofa frames migration as a natural and enduring element of Pacific life, not merely a recent outcome of globalisation. Other Pacific scholars similarly critique economistic and globalisation-centric models. Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009) argues that migration is a social and cultural act, rooted in indigenous concepts of space, movement, and kinship, challenging theories that overlook Pacific Islanders' relational and place-based motivations. Likewise, Lee (2009) emphasises transnationalism's multidirectional flow of people, goods, and ideas, critiquing narrow economic framings and highlighting how migration remains embedded in cultural and familial obligations.

These scholars prioritise Pacific worldviews, historical continuity, and social relationships over macro-economic framings of migration. Others, reject organically globalised phenomenon, instead positing that migration is shaped by historical elements, development imperatives, bilateral agreements, and regional policy frameworks that reflect negotiated relationships and geopolitical realities. As Underhill-Sem and Marsters (2017) highlight, Pacific labour mobility remain embedded in structured programs such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Australia's Pacific Labour Mobility initiatives. These agreements serve as development tools and diplomatic instruments,

beyond economics, meeting host country labour needs, designed to address labour shortages in host countries while supporting poverty alleviation and climate resilience-building in sending nations. Migration is thus reframed as shaped by policy and regional cooperation, not global economic determinism. For Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Kiribati, with limited permanent migration, and small diasporas (Voigt-Graf & Kagan, 2017), these agreements offer rare and critical economic and adaptive strategies against climate threats.

The Pacific has distinct migration experiences shaped by historical, cultural, and geographical factors. Over recent decades, labour migration has gained significant traction across the Pacific Rim, with Australia and New Zealand emerging as key destinations through structured labour mobility schemes. These programs facilitate Pacific Islanders' access to employment opportunities while becoming central to regional development strategies. Awareness of labour migration has grown with increasing recognition of its role as a catalyst for economic growth, social cohesion, and international cooperation (Connell, 1990, Cornish et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2023b). No longer viewed merely as a response to economic hardship; labour migration is now a strategic tool for enhancing livelihoods, fostering regional integration, and building climate resilience.

In particular, the long-term impacts of labour mobility on small island economies have been a subject of considerable interest and debate (World Bank, 2017b). Migrant workers contribute meaningfully to both their host and home countries—addressing labour shortages, supporting key industries, and sending remittances that sustain households and stimulate local economies. These remittances often serve as vital means of livelihood for families, enabling support to education, healthcare, and improved living standards, while also contributing to national development indicators (ILO, 2019, 2022). From the perspective of island communities—such as Kiribati, adaptation is deeply connected to continuity, longevity, and survival, realised through informed decision-making (Lal, 2011), and the protection of human rights including the freedom of choice, movement, dignity, access to employment and essential resources such as water, food, sanitation, healthcare, and economic stability.

As the research reveals, I-Kiribati communities deeply value labour migration not only as a means of subsidising living costs but also as a vital strategy for adapting to environmental, social, and economic pressures. This interpretation underscores the importance of centring frontline perspectives in climate adaptation discourse—perspectives often underrepresented yet crucial for shaping responsive and equitable policy. By amplifying voices of those most affected by climate change, this research

contributes nuanced understanding of adaptation in the Pacific by moving beyond abstract policy frameworks to highlight lived experiences, cultural values, and community-driven strategies. By situating adaptation within everyday realities in vulnerable regions, this approach deepens the climate-migration narrative. It also reinforces collaborations among governments, multi-stakeholder groups, and partners who co-design technically sound, socially and culturally resonant solutions with communities (Braunschweiger & Pütz, 2021).

Simultaneously, international organisations responsible for labour migration have recalibrated their strategies, adopting a proactive decent work agenda that prioritises fair, safe, and dignified pathways, while advocating policies to uphold migrant rights and foster inclusive economic growth (IOM, 2021). Organisations including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and regional bodies, have been pivotal in demonstrating labour migration's capacity to reduce vulnerability. By enabling financial stability, enhancing individual and community resilience, and enabling skills, knowledge, and resources transfer, labour migration is increasingly recognised as a driver of positive social and economic transformation.

Kiribati has emerged as a global leader in positioning labour migration as a deliberate climate-adaptation strategy, shaped by the country's unique geography and acute exposure to sea level rise, coastal erosion, and freshwater scarcity. In response to these escalating threats, the former government under President Anote Tong (2003-2016) developed the Migration with Dignity policy—a forward-looking framework that positioned migration not as a last resort, but as a planned pathway to safeguard the future of I-Kiribati people. The vision emphasised equipping citizens with education, skills, and agency so they could migrate voluntarily and with dignity, not forced or displaced (Voigt & Kagan, 2017). Building on this foundation, the National Labour Migration Policy was developed in 2015, explicitly linking overseas employment to climate resilience (Voigt, 2016). Together, these policies sought to reduce pressure on limited domestic resources, generate remittances, and ensure the continuity of Kiribati's people, culture, and identity amid climate uncertainty. They prioritised safe, productive, and rights-based migration pathways, designed to protect migrants and maximise the developmental benefits of mobility for both sending and receiving countries. Despite this visionary approach, Kiribati continued to face barriers to labour market access in Australia and New Zealand, underscoring the need for sustained international support and coherent regional policy. Even so, the Migration with Dignity framework remains a significant human-centred model of climate adaptation, reframing migration as a pathway of opportunity, resilience, and dignity (Curtain and Dornan, 2019).

The formal recognition of labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy began in the early 2000s, but it was during the 2010s and beyond that the concept gained substantial international attention and policy traction. A significant turning point came with the UNFCCC's Cancun Adaptation Framework (2010), which explicitly acknowledged migration as a form of adaptation and highlighted the growing influence of climate change on human mobility (UNFCCC, 2010; Warner, 2012). This foundation was reinforced by the Paris Agreement, which urged to address displacement and integrate migration considerations into national adaptation planning (Ferris, 2020). Momentum continued to build, culminating in the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in 2018—a major milestone that positioned labour mobility as a central component of migration governance in the context of climate change (Desmond, 2020).

By the 2020s, labour mobility had gained further prominence as an adaptation strategy, particularly in the Pacific region, where mobility schemes were increasingly used to strengthen economic security, and to some extent, climate resilience. This trajectory was further validated in 2022 when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) affirmed that migration, when governed safely and effectively, can support climate-resilient development pathways. This recognition underscores the importance of designing migration policies which are economically viable, socially just, and environmentally responsive, ensuring that mobility contributes meaningfully to both individual wellbeing and collective resilience (ILO, 2024). At the same time, climate change emerged as an increasingly significant driver of permanent migration for Pacific Islanders, adding to long-standing political and socio-economic motivations (Weber, 2017). The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) acknowledges the multifaceted nature of migration, highlighting its potential to be a 'source of prosperity, innovation, and sustainable development' (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). To optimise these positive impacts, effective governance and policy frameworks are essential. Moreover, addressing these adverse drivers and structural factors underpinning migration decisions, is critical for ensuring that migration is a choice rather than a necessity.

A plethora of debates have since entered the climate-migration discourse. While there is growing consensus of the impact of climate change on human mobility and of migration's utility in strengthening adaptation to climate and disaster risks (Kupferberg, 2021; O'Brien, 2013; Upreti & Shrestha, 2017), an equally expanding body of discourse has also emerged, to counter this argument, claiming that labour mobility and migration in general, is a failed climate adaptation strategy (Barnett et al., 2024). These, along with several other key debates in the forthcoming chapter, shape the migration scholarship significantly.

2.3 Migration as Adaptation or Maladaptation

This section critically engages with a central debate within the migration-adaptation nexus, focusing on the conceptual tension between adaptation and maladaptation. At the heart of this debate lie two contrasting theoretical perspectives. On one hand, scholars such as Black et al. (2011) argue that labour migration can serve as a vital adaptation strategy, enabling individuals and communities to respond proactively to environmental and climatic stressors. Migration, in this view, facilitates access to income, resources, and opportunities that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability. Conversely, a growing body of scholarship—including Barnett et al. (2024)—raises critical concern about the potential adverse consequences of framing migration as an adaptive response to climate change.

These scholars caution that while migration may alleviate immediate environmental pressures, it can also produce unintended and potentially adverse outcomes for sending communities. Among these are erosion of human capital or brain drain, increased dependency on remittances, and the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities. Such outcomes reflect the risk of maladaptation, wherein strategies intended to enhance resilience may inadvertently deepen existing vulnerabilities or create new ones. The critique underscores the importance of governance, planning, and safeguards in the design and implementation of migration-based adaptation strategies.

The research contends that maladaptive outcomes are more likely to occur in contexts where migration programs lack adequate oversight, inclusive planning, and community engagement. From this perspective, the potential for maladaptation is not inherent to migration itself but arises from systemic failures in governance, planning, and accountability. Specifically, maladaptive outcomes often stem from negligence, poor program design, or failed due diligence in the implementation of labour mobility schemes. More critically, maladaptation emerges when there is an absence of meaningful consultation with affected communities, and when political commitments—both from sending and receiving countries—fail to translate into sustained support and sustainable coordination mechanisms.

This may include inadequate liaison between migrant workers and their sending governments and labour units, resulting in a breakdown of communication, oversight, and support—as was the experience of some I-Kiribati workers in Australia. The lack of structured feedback loops, grievance mechanisms, and pastoral care services can leave workers vulnerable to exploitation, isolation, and economic precarity. While such support systems are formally available in Australia under the Pacific

Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, their effectiveness was significantly undermined by the absence of language accessible and culturally sensitive approaches tailored to the needs of I-Kiribati workers, many of whom faced difficulties, not because migration itself is inherently maladaptive, but because the support systems in place were insufficiently equipped to meet their specific needs in a foreign context.

Comparable challenges have been documented among I-Kiribati migrant workers, particularly in relation to mental health, substance use, and gender-based vulnerabilities. For instance, high rates of alcohol misuse and incidents of suicide among I-Kiribati seafarers have been linked to prolonged periods of isolation at sea, extended separation from family, and the absence of adequate pastoral care and psychosocial support. These outcomes are not merely individual failings but reflect systemic gaps in the provision of culturally appropriate mental health services and long-term welfare monitoring for seafarers working under extreme and isolating conditions.

Similarly, I-Kiribati women participating in labour mobility schemes such as the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) programs have faced significant risks, including alcohol-related harm and unplanned pregnancies. A critical concern has been the lack of gender-sensitive accommodation arrangements, with many women forced to share living spaces with male workers—conditions that have, in some cases, led to experiences of sexual harassment, coercion, and violence. These issues are compounded by the absence of clear reporting mechanisms, limited access to culturally and linguistically appropriate support services, and insufficient oversight by sending and receiving authorities.

This research argues the presence of such challenges should not be interpreted as evidence of failure, but as a broader process of policy adaptation and iterative learning, particularly in regions like the Pacific where migration is deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts. Poor leadership and fragmented communication between authorities and overseas workers have been identified as key contributors to maladaptive outcomes, undermining the potential benefits of migration and eroding trust in the system. Such challenges, while significant, are not insurmountable, as alluded to earlier, but are part of the learning process, from which labour schemes are continually reviewed, improved, and adapted to fit the changing times and landscapes, including evolving labour dynamics and needs. These challenges may include the erosion of human capital or brain drain, increased dependency on remittances, and the deepening of socio-economic inequalities.

The Pacific is home to one of the most mobile populations globally, with migration rooted in its cultural fabric. The region's renowned seafaring traditions and navigational expertise reflect a longstanding relationship with this movement—not as a disruption, but as a way of life. This perspective is echoed in the seminal works of Hau'ofa (2008), who described the Pacific as 'Our Sea of Islands,' where movement is intrinsic to identity. Teaiwa (2017b) reinforces this view by emphasising mobility as central to the resilience and adaptability of Pacific peoples. In the same vein, this literature review posits that migration is not merely a response to external pressures but an intrinsic aspect of Pacific epistemology and cultural continuity.

In Chapter 5, findings reveal the value that I-Kiribati place on family links and cultural ties made possible through migration—both within and beyond Kiribati. Interestingly, some of these elements cultivate migration decisions among I-Kiribati to join their families wherever they migrate. In contrast, others see migration as a channel through which the Kiribati culture can be passed on to alternative homes where it can be preserved and their long-term security guaranteed, in the worst-case scenario of climate-change displacement. Understanding migration through this lens challenges dominant narratives and calls for adaptation frameworks that are culturally grounded, historically informed, and responsive to the lived realities of Pacific communities. Imperatively, labour migration must be understood as a continuation of Pacific epistemologies of mobility—an adaptive strategy aligning both historical traditions and contemporary development goals. As climate change continues to reshape the region, migration offers a pathway for choice, enabling Pacific communities to navigate uncertainty with agency, dignity, and hope. In the absence of adequate protective frameworks, labour migration can serve as a crucial adaptive strategy (Donner & Webber, 2014).

2.3.1 A dual perspective of climate vulnerability and resilience within the migration discourse

Migration has long been central to Pacific Island economies, particularly for small states like Kiribati, where labour mobility is a longstanding economic phenomenon. Recent expansions of Australian and New Zealand schemes have accelerated this trend, with nearly 1000 I-Kiribati in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, and close to 2000 in Australia's Labour Mobility (PALM) program. Regionally, the RSE recorded 36,675 participants since 2007 (Bedford, 2023), while PALM, reached 31,195 in just three years (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 2025). Across the Pacific and globally, migration is widely recognised as a multifaceted socio-economic adaptive strategy (IOM, 2024). Its primary value lies in employment and income-generation, helping address persistent unemployment and limited domestic opportunities (ILO, 2019; Underhill-Sem & Marsters, 2017). In contexts of slow economic growth, a rapidly expanding youth population, and constrained labour

markets (Firth, 2018; ILO, 2016), labour mobility and permanent migration, provide essential pathways that strengthen stability, and contribute to broader climate resilience. Another essential benefit is the facilitation of skills acquisition, enabling individuals to develop new competencies, work ethics, and communication skills. The accumulation of human capital significantly enhances migrants' adaptive capacities, empowering them to navigate complex socio-economic environments and respond to emerging challenges (Connell & Conway, 2000). The acquisition of new skills and experiences also fosters personal growth, increasing individuals' resilience and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances while positively impacting their families and communities, as the empirical chapters will cover.

Migration's potential to generate remittances, providing households with a vital and diversified source of support, is well documented. Remittances help meet essential needs such as health care and education, while also cushioning families against economic shocks, natural disasters, and extreme climate events. Extensive research highlights the role of remittances in sustaining livelihoods, reducing poverty, and strengthening resilience to socio-economic pressures, environmental degradation, and climate change (Corno et al., 2022; Curtain et al., 2019; Doan et al., 2023). By supplementing household incomes and enabling investment in adaptation measures, remittances remain a critical pillar of community resilience, reinforcing migration's importance as a key component of Pacific development. With the deepening integration of Pacific economies and societies—and the evolving landscape of regionalism and development, the role of Australia and New Zealand, in absorbing members of the Pacific Family, has become increasingly significant. As mobility between these countries expands, remittances will continue to play a key part in the lives of Pacific Island peoples, sustaining national economies, subsidising livelihoods, supporting village systems, strengthening family units, and enabling households to adapt to the growing impacts of climate change (Brown et al., 2014; Connell & Conway, 2000).

2.3.2 Disaster recovery

Migration also plays a crucial role in disaster recovery across the Pacific, with remittances consistently supporting households in the aftermath of cyclones, droughts, and other climate-related shocks. Evidence from the region shows that both temporary and permanent diaspora communities are central to financing recovery efforts, helping families rebuild homes, restore livelihoods, and manage disaster-related risks (Corno et al., 2022). Examples of this transnational support include a Sydney-based Fijian community raising AUD15,500 to assist recovery efforts following Tropical Cyclones Yasa and Ana (Mudaliar, 2025), and an Auckland-based group sending non-perishable items to households

affected by Tropical Cyclone Winston. More recently, Vanuatu's twin cyclones and the 2025 earthquake, further underscore the central role of diaspora communities in disaster response and recovery. Vanuatu’s diasporas in Australia and New Zealand mobilised rapidly, organising fundraising campaigns and providing direct support to affected households. These cases illustrate how diaspora networks mobilise rapidly across borders, demonstrating the transnational nature of disaster response and the critical role of remittances and in-kind support in helping affected communities rebuild (Vivekananthan & Connors, 2019). This nexus between migration, remittances, and disaster resilience underscores the need for deeper research to better understand how human mobility contributes to development, and recovery in an increasingly climate-vulnerable region. For smaller PICs like Kiribati, large-scale disaster relief fundraising efforts may be less common due to the country's relatively lower exposure to certain types of disasters.

2.3.3 The diaspora effect

The role of diasporic communities in shaping migration experiences and outcomes is increasingly recognised as a critical dimension of the migration-adaptation nexus (Gamlen, 2014). In the Pacific context, diasporic networks—particularly those rooted in kinship and cultural solidarity—continue to play a pivotal role in influencing migration decisions, facilitating settlements, and providing informal support structures for migrants navigating life in host countries. Among I-Kiribati and broader Pacific communities in Australia and elsewhere, these networks remain vibrant, fostering mutual aid, advocacy, and collective resilience. Migration decisions are often influenced not solely by economic or environmental factors, but by the presence of established familial and cultural ties that offer emotional, logistical, and financial support.

These networks frequently mobilise to assist vulnerable members of the diaspora, demonstrating a form of community-led adaptation and care. A notable example is the fundraising campaign initiated by a diaspora group, the Victorian Kiribati Association, to support a pregnant I-Kiribati worker with medical expenses. Such acts demonstrate the community’s strong capacity for solidarity and collective action, where decisions are shaped by familial and social networks that foster mutual support—including campaigns and advocacy efforts for vulnerable members of the diaspora (Humans of Kiribati, 2022; Smith, 2022). These instances highlight the need to recognise diasporic agency as a central element in migration governance and policy design. Such a relationship also underscores the strong cultural and spiritual ties that transcend geographical boundaries, highlighting the importance of cultural networks in providing safety nets and support systems for community members in times of need. Anecdotal evidence from social media and news stories highlights the crucial role of Pacific

diaspora members in Australia, providing informal support networks for vulnerable and disengaged workers, particularly in cases where formal PALM arrangements are inadequate (Mudaliar & Voigt-Graf, 2021). Further research into this informal protection system could yield valuable insights into its implications and potential contributions to climate adaptation, providing an evidence base to better inform policy and practice.

By the same token, this initiative exemplifies the resilience and resourcefulness of the Pacific diaspora in leveraging collective strength to address social and economic challenges faced by their members, thereby fostering and enhancing the migration experience (Faleolo, 2021). The benefits extend across families and communities in countries of origin, underscoring the transnational nature of diaspora support networks. The I-Kiribati diaspora, like other Pacific diasporas, reflects a distinctive cultural dynamic characterised by the formation of kainga or utu, family units, that transcend geographical boundaries. These units are grounded in shared cultural bonds, kinship, and spirituality, enabling individuals to maintain their cultural identity in new environments (Taylor & Lee, 2017). Notably, in the absence of established Pacific communities, migrants often form unique regional networks anchored in cultural affinity through sports clubs such as rugby, religious networks, or cultural gatherings rather than blood ties. Similarly, Pacific islanders whose cultural presence in a foreign community is numerically small, often identify collectively as Pacific islanders rather than by their specific national identities, such as I-Kiribati or Fijian. This exemplifies the strong sense of community and belonging that emerges when islanders settle away from home: in the absence of sizeable national groups, they naturally gravitate toward the closest cultural or ethnic networks with whom they can connect and build relationships.

While diaspora communities are pivotal in enabling access to migration and expanding migrant networks, their role in shaping successful migration outcomes remains underexamined in the literature (Beine et al., 2011; Gamlen, 2014; Teaiwa, 2017b; Vivekananthan & Connors, 2019. Further research is imperative for expanding understanding on contributions of diasporic networks to social safety nets and community cohesion efforts (Gamlen, 2014). Chapter 7 explores this relationship in depth, specifically investigating the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative program's established network and its utility in supporting current and future migrants in the nursing and aged care sectors.

2.3.4 Protection mechanisms for climate migrants

There is a growing recognition of the lack of robust international laws and protection mechanisms for climate-displaced individuals (Bailes et al., 2014; Biermann & Boas, 2008; Byravan & Rajan, 2006;

Cundill et al., 2021; Saddington, 2021). This gap underscores the need for a dedicated climate-mobility pathway and special legal categories, defining and protecting displaced communities due to climate impacts. The current international system's limitation in addressing climate-induced migration highlights a significant governance gap, revealing the inadequacy of the existing climate refugee framework (Kolmannskog, 2012; Kupferberg, 2021; McAdam, 2010; McClain, 202). Specifically, the 1951 Refugee Convention's narrow scope—limited to individuals fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion (Sritharan, 2023; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, 2025)—excludes those displaced by environmental degradation and climate change. This legal lacuna exacerbates the vulnerability of climate-displaced persons, who often lack access to asylum procedures and protection mechanisms afforded to refugees.

A re-evaluation of existing categorisation and protection regimes is necessary to ensure the welfare and security of climate-affected populations in the absence of proper laws and governing systems (Hugo, 1996; Kalin, 2010; Klein et al., 1999; Maclellan & Mares, 2006; McAdam, 2010; McNamara, 2015; Noel, 2023). While comprehensive legal reforms through the UN framework may be a protracted process, labour migration pathways could provide an interim solution. These pathways can offer protection benefits and essential goods and services to Pacific nationals whose lives may be compromised by disasters or climate change effects. Labour migration could serve as a conduit for climate-displaced individuals to access safer and better living conditions (Curtain et al., 2022; Hennebry, 2012; Hermann & Kempf, 2017; IOM, 2022). However, these pathways must be well-managed to avoid maladaptation and the potential risks of poor planning and preparation, which could further deepen the vulnerability of migrants who leave home to enhance their security (Barnett et al., 2024; Remling, 2020).

2.3.5 Migration with dignity, not climate refugees, as climate adaptation

Complementing the migration-adaptation argument is the Pacific Region’s strong cultural emphasis on dignity, which significantly shapes its resistance to framing citizens as ‘climate refugees’. This ethos is exemplified by Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy which underscores the preference for proactive, empowered mobility rather than narratives of victimhood or forced displacement (McNamara, 2015; Tong, 2014). As discussed later in this chapter, the policy prioritises the rights and dignity of I-Kiribati, by enabling them to choose whether to remain in-country or migrate with dignity and merit. This approach is reinforced by the Boe Declaration, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, and the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018, 2019a, 2024b), which advance people-led, human-centred definitions of security in response to

adverse climate impacts. These frameworks assert the importance of agency and self-determination for Pacific Islanders, empowering them to make informed decisions about their future. In the absence of robust legal channels to implement these rights, labour migration pathways offer a vital means of exercising agency, human rights, and dignity. By facilitating voluntary migration, individuals maintain control over their lives, rather than being coerced into uncertain, potentially insecure situations associated with refugee status or a compromised quality of life due to climate change.

Labour migration is a crucial mechanism for building adaptive capacity to climate stressors (ILO, 2023; IOM, 2017, 2024); yet significant challenges persist. Labour migrants—often climate-vulnerable themselves, face major obstacles in accessing legal protection and support due to inadequate protective mechanisms. This challenge is especially acute for low-mobility atoll nations like Kiribati, where structural and geographical constraints significantly limit participation in migration pathways, including labour schemes, (Howes et al., 2022; Rimon, 2024; Turia et al., 2024). A critical examination of Australia's labour mobility landscape reveals significant limitations in addressing climate mobility concerns, as detailed in Chapters 4-7. Earlier schemes, such as the Seasonal Worker Program and the Northern Australia Workers Pilot Program (NAWPP), besides being economically-driven, were initially designed to support unique economic challenges for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu (GSP, 2016). However, their subsequent iterations, notably the Pacific Labour Scheme (today called the PALM) and the newly launched Pacific Engagement Visa, have failed to enhance labour accessibility and participation of low-mobility atoll nations highly exposed to climate impact.

While the schemes are predominantly driven by employer demand, there is no transparent or consistent formula on how participation is allocated across the Pacific. The competitive nature of these programs further disadvantages smaller island economies, which must compete with larger PICs that have far greater labour pools, administrative capacity, and established access to Australian markets. This reinforces both the absence of climate-migrant protection frameworks and the central role of existing labour migration pathways, in addressing the needs, rights, and long-term security of climate-vulnerable communities. Yet, labour migration remains complex, entailing social challenges, including worker exploitation and the erosion of family units and cultural values (Barnett et al., 2024; Chand, 2024; Cockayne et al., 2024). Robust dialogue between PICs and labour-receiving countries is therefore essential for well-managed systems that optimise benefits and mitigate risks (IOM, 2017, 2022; Westbury, 2021).

2.3.6 Alleviation of population pressures

Labour migration alleviates population pressure in densely populated Pacific Island Countries, by providing a vital outlet for excess labour and reducing strain on local resources. Kiribati embodies this dynamic: limited land, high population density, and constrained employment and services—including health care and sanitation—place acute pressure on already strained resource base. Yet Kiribati’s labour mobility options remain limited, particularly as domestic economic diversification has not expanded employment prospects. Facilitating greater access to international labour markets would ease demographic pressure, generate remittances, and support livelihoods and economic development amid growing economic uncertainty and climate stressors.

The relationship between migration and population pressures in PICs is, however, complex. While migration can alleviate population pressures in densely populated regions, it also poses significant risks, including brain drain and skills shortages in key professions, skills, and trade areas. Outmigration impacts vary across PICs. Kiribati exhibits relatively low outmigration compared to high-mobility countries like Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, which face substantial labour outflows, that challenge domestic growth. Fiji, for instance, has experienced a substantial outmigration of its labour force, driven by increasing opportunities for skilled temporary migrants in Pacific Rim countries (Liu & Howes, 2024). Between 2022 and 2024, it witnessed a marked shift in outward migration, with approximately 10% of its formal labour force migrating to neighbouring countries in pursuit of better economic prospects (Curtain & Howes, 2024; Gosai, 2025; Ministry of Finance, Republic of Fiji, 2024; IOM, 2024b). This trend has precipitated concerns among policymakers regarding the country's ability to sustain economic growth (Edwards et al., 2024; Ministry of Finance, Republic of Fiji, 2024). Skilled labour loss is impeding productivity, underscoring the need for effective migration management to mitigate adverse economic impacts. The PALM and the RSE schemes are key drivers of these dynamics in Fiji and other PICs (Curtain & Howes, 2024).

Samoa is also significantly affected by outmigration, particularly among its working-age population, creating pressures analogous to Fiji’s. Substantial outflows of Samoan nationals have altered population dynamics, raising concerns about a potential decline if trends continue (Koro & McNeill, 2024). Driven by better economic prospects abroad, migration contributes to maladaptation by undermining Samoa's economic growth and accelerating human capital loss. The departure of young, working-age adults threatens demographic stability—especially amid population ageing –by diminishing the labour force and straining social support systems. Samoa's former Prime Minister has criticised labour mobility schemes as exploitative, noting asymmetrical benefits that favour Australia

while Pacific states bear the costs of human capital depletion. In 2024, Samoa declined a share in Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa scheme, underscoring the country's apprehensions about the long-term implications of labour migration on its development trajectory. Rather than fostering adaptive resilience to economic, environmental, and climate-related stressors, migration is instead perpetuating maladaptation through counter-growth initiatives, compromising PICs' sustainable development and nation building prospects.

Moreover, the changing migration landscape is also having profound social and cultural implications. The increasing participation of women is a step in the right direction for promoting equal rights for women at work, but the labour migration schemes are increasingly leading to family separations, breakups, and increased incidences of abandoned children as both parents work abroad (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2024).This highlights the need for policymakers to consider broader social and economic implications of labour mobility and develop strategies to mitigate its negative consequences. Labour mobility programs also pose significant social challenges, particularly in relation to family separations and reconfigurations. The departure of Pacific Islanders for better-paid work in Australia and New Zealand has led to increased instances of divorce, abandoned spouses, a suicide case in Kiribati, and child neglect. Although Australia's Family Accompaniment program aims to mitigate this issue, its limitations leave many workers and their families unsupported.

2.3.7 Impact of shifting gender roles on family units

Empirical evidence from fieldwork highlights the adverse effects of parental absence on children, including increased dropout rates and behavioural issues. Shifting gender roles within transnational families have yielded both positive and negative outcomes (Chattier, 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Petrou & Withers, 2024). As women increasingly participate in labour mobility schemes, men are assuming traditionally feminine roles, such as childcare and household work, fostering greater understanding and flexibility in household responsibilities. This shift has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of gender roles, challenging colonial-era stereotypes and promoting collective responsibility-sharing within families. In addition, labour migration has expanded economic opportunities for women, acknowledging their productive value beyond domestic duties. For instance, between 2012 and 2022, Kiribati had the highest percentage of women participating in all labour schemes in New Zealand and Australia combined, standing at 31 percent (World Bank, 2022). However, both men and women face new challenges in navigating shifting household and economic roles, often bearing extra loads as caregivers and breadwinners (Hill et al., 2018). Women left behind often assume additional care and domestic responsibilities, including managing agricultural or fishing activities traditionally undertaken

by men, while men working abroad may struggle with their new roles. In disaster contexts, the burden of recovery falls disproportionately on women, often exceeding their physical capacities, in turn deepening maladaptation (United Nations Children Fund, 2022; Petrou & Withers, 2024). This highlights a gap in the current literature, underscoring the need for further research on this aspect of labour mobility.

2.3.8 Reproducing colonial legacies

The persistence of colonial systems in labour migration frameworks is a pressing concern in the Pacific, where escalating instances of worker exploitation and modern slavery (Australian Institute, 2024; Cockayne et al., 2024) are manifest. Stead & Altman (2019) and Mar (2015) highlight the enduring echoes of shadow labour systems and imperialistic colonial labour practices. These dynamics raise concerns that current labour practices replicate colonial structures, positioning Pacific peoples as subaltern actors in labour migration arrangements that disproportionately benefit employers and the Australian economy, over workers. This exacerbates the Pacific Region's historical trauma and ongoing struggles to overcome colonial legacies.

A similar dynamic exists in alarmist climate change narratives, predominantly originating from Global North scholarships, which often sensationalise the vulnerability of the Pacific to climate impacts and emphasise the region's dependency on external aid and support. While such narratives contain elements of truth, they frequently portray the Pacific as a weak and dependent region, undermining its agency and autonomy. This framing subtly deflects accountability from Global North countries, which bear significant responsibility for climate action and justice, including the full cost of climate impacts borne by the Pacific. The persistence of such narratives, coupled with the misleading implication that migration is a consequence of failed adaptation strategies, exacerbates maladaptation.

2.3.9 Geopolitics and migration policies

Labour mobility policies in the Pacific are profoundly shaped by geopolitics and the strategic interests of major powers such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and China. Chapter 6 examines how geopolitical dynamics have influenced labour policies in the Pacific—particularly in Australia and Kiribati—and how these dynamics influence whether migration is adaptive or maladaptive. The rise of China in the region has significantly transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Pacific, prompting substantial policy shifts that have produced both advantages and disadvantages for PICs like Kiribati. As China's influence grows, Australia has recalibrated its Pacific diplomacy, integrating a stronger

emphasis on people and culture into its statecraft. This strategic shift has intensified geopolitical competition, with mobility and security policies becoming central. This raises concerns about the motivations underpinning emerging policies- whether they are genuinely altruistic or merely diplomatic conveniences to inform Australia's statecraft tactics, while accommodating its security expansionist agenda (Farbotko et al., 2016; Keen & Tidwell, 2024; Koro et al., 2023; Saddington, 2021).

The Falepili Union Treaty between Tuvalu and Australia is a case in point. While praised for its mobility pathway allowing Tuvaluans to live and work in Australia in the event climate change renders their nation uninhabitable (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), certain aspects of the agreement have sparked significant debate. Specifically, the Treaty's security architecture has been criticised for granting Australia veto power over Tuvalu's sovereignty in making its own security decisions. By linking Tuvalu's security to Australia's broader military ambitions in the region, including the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security deal, the Treaty has been condemned as neocolonial, given the underlying security motives (Herr, 2023). This highlights that despite Tuvalu initiating the deal, Australia's interest in the Treaty extends beyond merely assisting with climate mobility. Additionally, this raises questions about Australia's true intentions in the agreement:

> *"Tuvalu shall mutually agree with Australia on any partnership, arrangement, or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters. Such matters include but are not limited to defence, policing, border protection, cyber security, and critical infrastructure, including ports, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure." (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024, Article 4).*

Beyond the Treaty's novelty as a climate mobility mechanism offering a pathway for Tuvaluans in the absence of proper legal protections and governing structures (Rothwell, 2023), its neocolonial attributes can be maladaptive. This tension stems from controversy surrounding Australia's strategic use of Tuvalu's mobility request to advance its own regional and strategic security interests. Such dynamics risks producing maladaptive outcomes that undermine mobility as a form of agency and distort public perceptions of migration's genuine benefits for climate adaptation. More concerning is the instrumentalization of mobility framed primarily through the lens of the strategic Australia-China competition rather than the existential climate threats facing Tuvalu and the wider region (Farbotko et al., 2016).

This complex interplay of historical, economic, environmental, and geopolitical factors underscores the need for critical research examining the implications of labour mobility schemes for the Pacific

and their benefits for adaptation. While critiques of labour migration's poor handling of worker rights are valid (Australian Institute, 2024; Cockayne et al., 2024; Petrou & Connell, 2023), these should not overshadow the positive stories and the genuine aspirations of Pacific peoples to migrate, prioritising their agency, autonomy, and wellbeing. The vulnerability of migrant workers and their sending countries is inherent in any labour migration program, hence the likelihood of persisting maladaptive practices. The power imbalances in the employer-worker relationship, that is widely reported and corroborated by this research (see Chapters 5-7), exacerbate the potential for exploitation. These risks will continue unless sending countries take a more active role engaging in dialogues with counterparts in labour-receiving countries, and increasing awareness and education of workers whose understanding of their rights and employment terms is often inadequate. For instance, empirical findings suggest that longer pre-departure briefings and vernacularized contract information are necessary for enhancing workers' understanding of their work and migrant rights, thereby reducing the risk of exploitation. Failure to do so only exacerbates maladaptation, as migrants continue to find themselves in new environments, not only different from their home, but often lacking tailored support (Barnett et al., 2024).

2.3.10 The Colombian and Canadian labour models—global best practice?

In Colombia, work schemes are meticulously designed to address internal migration and displacement induced by climate change. This is achieved by integrating climate change considerations into the National Development Plan (2018-2022), thereby recognising it as a pivotal adaptation strategy. The Colombian Government prioritises internal displacement through protection assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This assistance encompasses the integration of economic stability and self-sufficiency programs into local labour markets, fostering an environment conducive to sustainable livelihoods and economic growth, which in turn supports adaptation to climate impacts. Acknowledging the complexity of this undertaking, the government collaborates with local authorities to invest in vocational training initiatives that enable IDPs to acquire new skills. Consequently, these programs enhance employability and employment of IDPs in emerging sectors such as renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. Local governments and municipalities play a crucial role in implementing adaptation measures, ensuring context-specific solutions (Depetris-Chauvin, 2017; Ham, 2022).

Canada's labour mobility model, on the other hand, emphasises international migration and labour market adaptation. In terms of international migration, Canada facilitates an International Mobility Program that supports the temporary migration of foreign workers to address labour shortages in key

sectors, including agriculture and healthcare. Renowned for its Express Entry System, an online platform that manages permanent residence applications, the Canadian Government prioritises skilled workers in fields such as technology and engineering. Additionally, Canada's Provincial Nominee Programs allow provincial governments to nominate candidates based on local labour market needs, thereby supporting regional development and diversification. Canada also invests in vocational training, with a particular focus on language initiatives such as language instruction for newcomers to facilitate their efficient integration into Canadian society. Job training programs are provided to aid newcomers' integration into specific labour market needs, particularly in the agricultural and agri-food sectors (Hennebry, 2012; Morton, 1999). The two programs exemplify effective labour mobility models that demonstrate successful adaptation to climate change, offering lessons for nations such as Kiribati to learn from and offer guidance in planning, managing, and strengthening labour migration as a climate change mechanism (Kupferberg, 2021; McClain & Bruch, 2021; Tong, 2014).

Comparable lessons can be drawn from Nepal and Bangladesh. In Nepal, migration, also referred to as planned relocation and displacement, is becoming increasingly common, with the country heavily reliant on remittances from labour migration. Given the prevalence of migration as a climate strategy in Nepal, Upreti and Shrestha (2017) conceptualise an orderly migration system as essential for communities most vulnerable to climate impacts and possible threats of displacement. The authors argue that labour migration from vulnerable countries should be circular and voluntary, facilitating the flow of Nepalese to developed countries. In Bangladesh, migration has emerged as a prevalent adaptation strategy. As the seventh most vulnerable country in the world to climate change, Bangladesh experiences a significant number of climate migrants, both internally and internationally. The country is highly susceptible to climate and disaster events, including floods, tropical cyclones, and droughts, which, like Nepal and other coastal communities, impair livelihoods and the ability of communities to remain in situ.

Given these unique circumstances, Bangladeshi communities are increasingly encouraged to relocate to regions offering better employment, health, education, and living conditions. Labour migration pathways are therefore expected to grow in significance, providing a safer and more sustainable mobility option for both Nepalese and Bangladeshi populations (ILO, 2023; Islam, 2012; Upreti & Shrestha, 2017). These experiences offer important lessons for the Pacific as it confronts its own patterns of outmigration and climate-induced mobility. Yet, recognising that no single model can be universally applied, it remains essential that adaptation responses are tailored to local contexts

(Bardsley & Hugo, 2010; Barnett & McMichael, 2018; Bedford & Bedford, 2010; Black et al., 2011). The scale of climate-driven mobility affecting entire villages, economies, and livelihoods—and in some cases resulting in displacement—is unprecedented. As adaptation and response measures are still emerging across the Pacific, these international experiences provide valuable insights from which the region can shape its own planned approach.

An IOM report (2017) projected that climate change will play an increasingly significant role in shaping mobility across the Pacific Region, with important implications for Canada as an emerging destination for labour migration and climate-related displacement. Canada's prominent role in humanitarian and refugee protection underscores its commitment to supporting vulnerable populations and positions it as a potential leader in receiving climate-affected migrants, supported by its modern and adaptive immigration system. As a close ally of Australia and New Zealand—both central actors in the Pacific's economic and political landscape—and home to a small but established Pacific diaspora, Canada's progressive labour market and migration frameworks (Hennebry, 2012) further enhance its potential as a destination for both labour mobility and permanent migration from the Pacific (IOM, 2017).

2.4 Migration with Dignity: A National Climate Adaptation Strategy

2.4.1 Overview

The Migration with Dignity policy, introduced under President Tong's administration in 2003 and recognised formally in 2014 by the United Nations (Tong, 2014), represents a strategic development agenda designed to address emerging climate threats through planned migration (Maclellan, 2011; McClain & Bruch, 2021; McNamara, 2015). It generates benefits not only for migrants themselves, but importantly for the families and communities who remain at home (Borovnik, 2003; Underhill-Sem & Marsters, 2017; World Bank, 2017a). The policy generated immediate economic benefits and long-term skills development, positively impacting local communities' ways of life, wellbeing, and security. By empowering individuals through education, training, and skills development, which have significantly expanded to date, the policy fosters economic empowerment and reduces vulnerability, making it a comprehensive strategy for climate adaptation and sustainable economic and human capital development.

The role of migration in alleviating poverty and enhancing livelihoods for Pacific Island Countries is well established (Barnett & Webber, 2010). For instance, in 2021, 35 and 20 percent of the population in Vanuatu and Kiribati, respectively, fell below the poverty line of USD 3.65 a day (World Bank, 2022). Existing challenges compound this, notably the lack of access to resources and essential services such

as healthcare. For instance, in Kiribati, limited access to land, poor soil, and water and resource scarcity is a day-to-day reality given the petite geography of the country. These challenges are compounded population pressures and cascading climate impacts (Hermann & Kempf, 2017). In disaster-prone countries such as Vanuatu and Fiji, not only does climate change exacerbate impacts, but its impacts also fall most heavily on economically vulnerable populations (Ballard et al., 2020; Kuruppu & Willie, 2015; UNHCR, 2022).

2.4.2 Establishing a dignity framework

Despite the concept's pursuit of a 'dignity' agenda (McClain et al., 2022), there is no comprehensive legal framework to fully support it (Kupferberg, 2021; McAdam, 2018). This gap underscores the Kiribati government's initial motivation to strategically utilise the policy as a pathway of its own, integrating it with existing labour migration programs. The absence of international law specifically designed to protect climate refugees or climate-driven migrants, coupled with the complexity and protracted nature of establishing such a framework from scratch, presents significant challenges. Consequently, I-Kiribati people face the risk of enduring the adverse impacts of climate change while awaiting the international system to agree on the establishment of necessary global legal provisions (Kalin, 2010; Kamruzzaman et al., 2022; Klein et al., 1999; Kolmannskog, 2012).

By leveraging existing bilateral and regional labour migration arrangements, the Kiribati Migration with Dignity policy addresses this legal void. It enables I-Kiribati to migrate through established labour channels, thereby accessing opportunities to live safe, prosperous, and dignified lives without succumbing to a second-class or inferior existence undermined by climate impacts. Although migration is fraught with significant risks, the policy was intentionally designed to create a safe, structured, and proactive channel through formal labour migration arrangements—distinct from the ad hoc, crisis-driven, and often involuntary movements experienced by refugees. As its name implies, the Migration with Dignity policy is grounded in the protection of human dignity, enabling individuals to migrate proactively and with agency, in the face of potential displacement.

In addition, the Migration with Dignity policy was conceived as a strategic approach to diversify Kiribati's economy (Maclellan, 2011; McClain & Bruch, 2021; McNamara, 2015), addressing the imperative of fostering growth through job creation, remittances, and the transfer of knowledge and skills (ILO, 2016; IOM, 2024). This policy aims to transform challenges into opportunities and enhance the nation's adaptive capacity to climate impacts (Tong, 2014). Despite the inherent challenges of labour migration, such as brain drain and depopulation, the policy emerged in the context of

persistent structural constraints that continue to limit Kiribati's access to broader migration opportunities. These constraints include, but are not limited to, Kiribati's geographic isolation—both internally and from major international labour markets—and its limited access to air services. With only two operating carriers, Fiji Airways and Our Airlines, the aviation sector functions as a de facto monopoly in which Kiribati remains the price taker. This makes recruiting I-Kiribati workers comparatively costly for overseas employers. These factors, alongside additional structural barriers discussed in Chapter 4, continue to impede Kiribati's labour migration economy despite its long and reputable history of participation in international mobility.

Kiribati has more than a century-long history of international mobility shaped by economic opportunity, environmental pressures, and colonial labour systems (Bedford et al, 2016). Early movements began in the 1900s, when I-Kiribati workers were recruited into the phosphate industries on Banaba and Nauru, schemes which were formative to Kiribati's distinctive island quota system that is maintained today for overseas recruitment in New Zealand's RSE and Australia's PALM program (Bedford et al, 2016; Connell, 2021, Teaiwa, 2014). The flows later led to the relocation of Banaban communities to Rabi Island in Fiji. Between the 1930s-40s, the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme relocated families from southern Gilbert Islands to ease resource pressures, followed by further organised transfers in the 1950s and 1960s to British-run copra plantations in the Solomon Islands (Tabe, 2011). By the late 1960s, Kiribati had become a significant participant in the global seafaring industry, which became a cornerstone of I-Kiribati labour mobility for decades (Borovnik, 2007). From the 1980s onward, opportunities expanded through labour schemes in New Zealand beginning with the Kiribati and Tuvalu Work Permit Schemes, later feeding into New Zealand's Pacific Access Category (PAC) and the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme from 2007 (Beford et al, 2016; Cornish et al, 2022). The 2010s brought large scale participation in Australia's Seasonal Worker Program, culminating in the PALM scheme in 2022 (Doan et al, 2023) and the Pacific Engagement Visa in 2025. Together, these movements, discussed extensively in Chapter 4, demonstrate a long trajectory of I-Kiribati adaptability and mobility to climate and economic stressors.

At the inception of the Migration with Dignity policy, there were no significant instances of family separation as the programs were primarily designed for young, single I-Kiribati individuals. These programs were meticulously tailored to address Kiribati's specific needs, including the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative, which targeted unemployed youth; the Pacific Access Category, which facilitated family migration; and the Northern Australia Workers Pilot Program, which was seasonal, unlike today's long-term PALM scheme. At that time, New Zealand was the sole provider of seasonal

and labour mobility employment, while Australia was in the early stages of developing its Pacific labour programs.

Today, despite the Maamau government's lack of formal recognition of the Migration with Dignity policy, the nation reaps substantial benefits from the policy. The number of I-Kiribati workers has expanded exponentially in recent years, yielding far-reaching social, economic, and community-level impacts, as outlined in Chapter 5. Australia's expansion of its labour migration pathways—including the introduction of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), which Kiribati joined in its second year of implementation in 2025—represents one of several shaped by the broader Migration with Dignity policy framework (see Chapter 6). The scheme attracted 10,145 I-Kiribati registrants for only 100 available quotas, illustrating the scale of mobility aspirations (Rimon, 2026). This stark imbalance between demand and opportunity not only underscores the intensity of migration pressures but importantly reveals a great deal about contemporary I-Kiribati attitudes toward mobility and the value placed on overseas pathways.

In essence, while the Migration with Dignity policy should not be construed as elevating migration over remaining in place—in the face of climate adversity, it underscores the need for a carefully calibrated approach to the policy—one that strengthens support for I-Kiribati to make informed migration choices and ensures that governments remain vigilant in mitigating the social, economic, and governance risks associated with such movement. This forms a central argument of this research, given the dual realities at play: on one hand, the tangible economic benefits generated through labour mobility, and on the other, the persistent risks of worker exploitation and broader challenges associated with migration. It seems plausible that embedding the Migration with Dignity framework within national climate adaptation and policy structures, would significantly strengthen the governance of labour mobility. There is also a strong rationale for ensuring that the expansion of labour schemes across the Pacific Rim is approached with sustained care, regular review, and principled leadership. Such an approach is essential not only to avoid exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, but importantly in ensuring that mobility remains a dignified, safe, and development-enhancing pathway for I-Kiribati.

Furthermore, the policy plays a critical role in fostering the growth of essential diaspora and community support networks, which in turn facilitate the establishment of safe and well-supported migration hubs that could serve as informal governance structures (Lee, 2009; Taylor & Lee, 2017). This is particularly important given the relatively small size of the existing Kiribati diaspora and the

pressing need to expand the country's migration networks (Firth, 2018; NSO, 2020; Rimon, 2024). The significance of the policy is further underscored by the high cost of inaction and inadequate adaptation planning, both of which risk leaving I-Kiribati increasingly vulnerable to the intensifying impacts of climate change at home. While debates around mobility, nationalism, and staying in place remain highly contested across the Pacific, this research argues that these positions need to be mutually exclusive. contends that nationalism and staying in place are primary priorities. Two points are fundamental: (i) the policy provides a structured pathway for those who may ultimately need to migrate as a last resort, and (ii) it incorporates measures to maximise domestic employment opportunities, thereby delivering benefits to the wider population—not just to those who engage in labour migration (Peddle & McKay, 2015).

The Sopoaga-led Tuvalu government had raised critical concerns with what it terms, the prioritisation of migration over emissions reduction, arguing that such an approach risk signalling a retreat from the global fight against climate change. Former Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga captured this tension when he asked, *"Where would Tuvaluans go and what would happen to their sovereignty?"* (Carroll, 2021, p. 2), highlighting the profound political, cultural, existential dilemmas embedded in migration as an adaptation strategy. This sentiment resonates widely across the Pacific, where leaders, scholars, and climate advocates consistently challenge narratives that portray the region as passive, doomed, or defined by inevitable displacement.

The now iconic assertion: 'We are not drowning, we are fighting, has become a powerful expression of Pacific agency and resistance. Yet, when this phrase is interpreted solely as a commitment to staying in place—and as a rejection of migration as a legitimate adaptive choice—it risks narrowing the very concept of resilience it seeks to defend. Such a reading reinforces a one-dimensional view of adaptation, overlooking the reality that resilience in the Pacific has always encompassed mobility, flexibility, and the capacity to navigate multiple pathways to survival. Recognising this complexity is essential: affirming the right to remain does not preclude the right to move. A holistic understanding of resilience must therefore embrace both in-situ adaptation and mobility as complementary strategies, rather than treating them as mutually exclusive or ideologically opposed.

The framing of migration as a climate adaptation strategy remains contentious among Pacific leaders, scholars, and communities—many of whom perceive it as a defeatist response that undermines the region's agency and resilience. While dismantling externally imposed and often reductive portrayals of the Pacific is essential, there is also pragmatic need to confront the real and immediate threats

posed by climate-induced displacement. Central to this discourse is the Kiribati philosophy of *'aba'*—a spiritual and cultural connection to land—which reflects a holistic Pacific worldview grounded in relational epistemologies and ontologies (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2022). This worldview emphasises the intricate ties between people, land, and kinship, forming the foundation of Pacific identity and belonging (Vaai & Casimira, 2024; Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2022).

Yet, this emphasis on rootedness often becomes the dominant lens through which resilience is interpreted, reinforcing a staying-in-place rhetoric that obscures the region's long history of mobility and interconnectedness. As a result, migration is frequently framed through notions of rupture and disconnection, overlooking the enduring ties migrants maintain with their *kainga* (extended family), *utu* (nuclear family), and wider community networks. Success stories and adaptive capacities within Pacific diasporas are similarly marginalised, with mobility frequently cast as a loss—of connection to land, culture, or identity, rather than also recognising the resilience embodied by those who choose to move. Tuvalu's former Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga reminds us: *"Our geography is not just physical. It is cultural and spiritual"* (see The Saturday Paper, May 2024). This insight underscores the need to approach climate mobility not merely as a logical response, but as a deeply relational and culturally embedded phenomenon—one that recognises mobility and staying in place, as complementary expressions of Pacific agency rather than opposing choices.

This research argues that migration embodies collective growth, learning, and community, transcending physical borders through shared experiences and storytelling (karaki). The rhetoric of 'staying in place' holds profound significance across the Pacific—particularly in Kiribati, where cultural identity, ancestral ties, and spiritual connection to land and ocean are deeply rooted. While this narrative represents a powerful expression of resilience, its overemphasis risks obscuring the urgent need to prepare for potential displacement and the necessity of creating viable mobility pathways, especially in contexts where choices remain limited or absent. Remaining in place should indeed be recognised as a legitimate and resilient choice, reflecting the strength and continuity of Pacific communities in the face of adversity. Yet equally important is the recognition of the right to move, especially when climate-induced threats compromise livelihoods, safety, and wellbeing. Viewed through this lens, migration is not a failure of resilience but an extension of it: a proactive approach that empowers individuals and communities to adapt with dignity and agency. This dual recognition—the right to stay and the right to move—must inform both policy and public discourse. A balanced approach is essential, one that honours cultural preferences and deep connections to place while acknowledging the realities of climate vulnerability.

The striking irony in the climate discourse surrounding the Pacific and climate change, is that while Pacific scholars and bureaucrats rightly challenge migration, they often do so from positions of relative privilege and geographic distance. Many lack direct lived experiences of the socio-economic and environmental pressures borne by those at the frontline of the climate crisis. This disconnect risks reinforcing subaltern narratives, where the voices, agency, and lived realities of those most affected are marginalised or overshadowed by externally constructed interpretations of resilience—often articulated by individuals who remain largely insulated from the daily impacts of climate change. Such dynamics raise critical questions about representation and authenticity in climate advocacy.

When resilience is preached by those distant from the crisis, there is a risk of inadvertently silencing or diluting the perspectives of communities who live with its consequences. It is therefore essential to centre the voices of those most affected, ensuring that their experiences, aspirations, and choices inform both the discourse and the policy responses. Migration, when planned and supported appropriately, must be recognised as a legitimate and empowering adaptation strategy. It reflects not only the lived realities of Pacific communities but crucially their agencies in navigating complex and evolving challenges. In this context, government policies must move beyond reactive approaches and instead adopt proactive, sustainable, and community-centred adaptation frameworks. This includes raising public awareness, implementing comprehensive pre-departure briefings for workers, establishing coordinated national support programs, and developing robust labour market information systems to effectively manage the flow of human capital. Such measures are vital to ensure that migration is not only safe and informed, but that it aligns also with the development goals and resilience strategies of Pacific nations.

Under the Maamau administration, the government's politicisation of migration schemes and the restriction of citizens' access to these opportunities, such as the Pacific Engagement Visa (see Chapters 6-7), undermine the right of choice for citizens to pursue improved living conditions abroad. These restrictions also deny PALM workers the potential benefits of a permanent migration pathway that enables them to bring their families to Australia and pursue long-term settlement under the visa. Such limitations not only curtail individual agency but also weaken the broader developmental potential of labour mobility as a climate-responsive strategy.

Kiribati's protracted deliberation over participation in the new visa scheme, has prompted interpretations that this hesitation reflects a broader political orientation shaped by the government's

longstanding scepticism toward migration as an adaptation pathway and influenced by wider geopolitical considerations. This indecision reflects a policy mandate rooted in positions of power and privilege—often removed from the realities of ordinary citizens who grapple daily with limited access to essential services, economic opportunities, and climate-related vulnerabilities. See Chapter 6 on the impact of such decisions on I-Kiribati people's conception of sovereignty.

Largely, the Migration with Dignity policy has gained substantial international recognition- a visibility has shaped global and regional migration discourse, informing developments such as the Falepili Union Treaty between Tuvalu and Australia, and the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility which reinforced the very principles that the policy promulgated. These contemporary frameworks have gained traction in part because of the conceptual groundwork laid by the Migration with Dignity policy. Yet, the benefits of this momentum have largely bypassed Kiribati, as the current administration has not consistently leveraged on the policy's momentum or pursued an equivalent arrangement –such as a Kiribati-specific preferential access pathway grounded in principles of climate justice. Such an opportunity could have strengthened long-term mobility options for I-Kiribati aligned with the region's evolving climate mobility architecture.

That said, significant challenges remain regarding the policy's implementation and outcomes—particularly in relation to labour mobility schemes and the responsibility to translate their stated values into practice. Ensuring that these schemes genuinely support the most vulnerable and marginalised communities in the face of escalating climate impacts, requires sustained political commitment, policy consistency, robust oversight, and meaningful safeguards and governance structures. Equally important is the need to integrate migration into climate financing mechanisms and adaptation frameworks, including for discussions on loss and damage. Embedding the Migration with Dignity policy within Pacific scholarship and the broader climate negotiation architecture (COP) is fundamental for developing streamlined, protective, and inclusive measures to guide safe mobility pathways and strengthen long term resilience (IOM, 2022).

2.5 Theoretical Underpinnings: Te Waa of Mobility Framework and Black et al.'s (2011) Drivers of Migrations

2.5.1 Overview

This research is informed by an indigenous Kiribati framework called Te Waa of Mobility (The Canoe of Mobility). Te waa, or 'the canoe' in the Kiribati language, is a significant cultural apparatus embodying the millennia-old canoe-building traditions of Pacific ancestors, which connected families

and islands across vast oceanscapes (Hauofa, 2008; Mwemwenikarawa, 2022; A. Talu, S et al., 1979). The engineering of te waa is exemplary, inspired by the collective efforts of families, villages, and islands. This craftsmanship is guided by the wisdom, knowledge, and skills passed down through generations of canoe builders, elders, and deities (Manaima, 1988; Rimon, 1985; Uriam, 1995). The communal collaboration and meticulous process of canoe-building and navigation are analogous to the preparation and undertaking of migration. A detailed analysis of Te Waa is provided in the next chapter, highlighting its critical role in understanding perspectives of communities at the forefront of climate change, and how I-Kiribati view labour migration in the face of potential displacement. This section, connects Te Waa framework with migration theory, contributing a Kiribati insight.

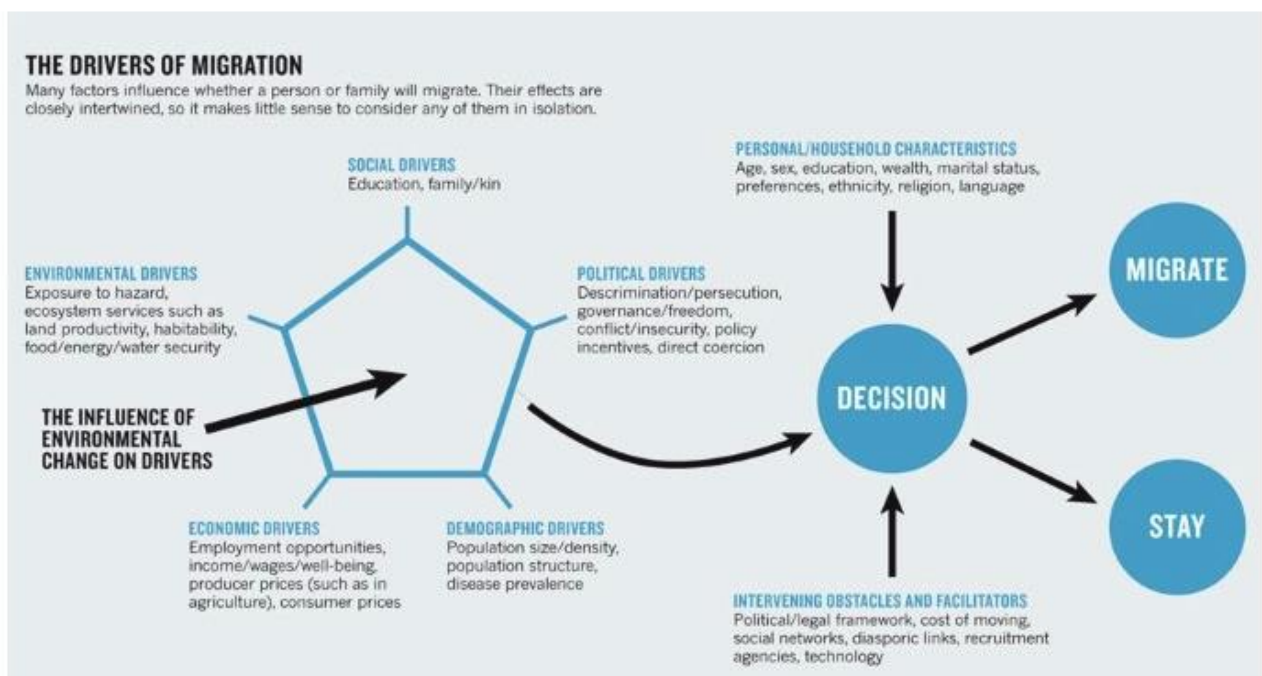


Figure 2.1: The Drivers of Migration

Source: Black et al. (2011).

Te Waa framework is adapted from Black et al.'s (2011) 'Drivers of Migration' framework (see Figure 2.1 above). Te Waa framework is grounded in the historical and cultural significance of te waa, which holds the fabric of life and dignity for Pacific Islanders, charting their course as they navigate the Blue Pacific Continent. The canoe, situated at the heart of the framework, underscores the imperative for the values, perspectives, and experiences of frontline communities to remain central in migration discourse and theory. While migration discourse often centres on theoretical constructs, this framework posits that understanding migration requires an equal focus on the people involved and the empirical evidence of their behaviours, mobility patterns, and perceptions of migration as a climate adaptation strategy, alongside the theories formulated to explain them.

As such, Te Waa framework (see Figure 2.2 below) foregrounds three critical elements: people, mobilities of return, and spirituality, arguing that these aspects of Pacific Migration are often overlooked in the discourse. The framework centres the voices of people, particularly frontline communities, whose stories and experiences have generated decades of research with a limited understanding of nuanced lived realities and perspectives of those at the climate peripheries. Such insights hold values that could significantly enhance understanding of vulnerable communities and migration theories. Therefore, their perspectives must be placed at the heart of migration studies (McNamara et al., 2024).

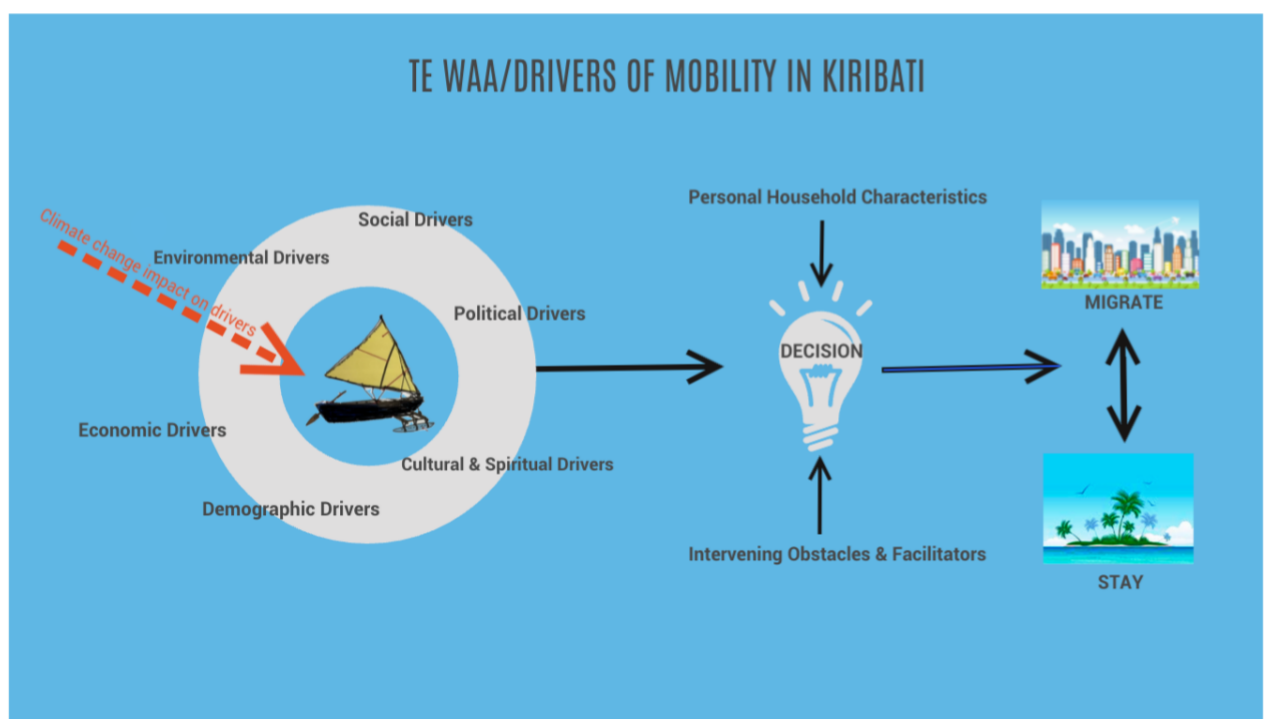


Figure 2.2: Te Waa of Mobilities in Kiribati

Source: Adapted from Black et al. (2011).

Black et al.'s (2011) Drivers of Mobility framework comprehensively explains the dynamic interplay of social, economic, cultural, political, and environmental factors influencing migration decisions, underscoring the significant impact of climate change on these complex drivers. As an adaptation of this model, Te Waa framework incorporates empirical evidence of the lived experiences of Pacific peoples, notably I-Kiribati, and how their values and future aspirations profoundly shape their migration decisions. By foregrounding the core elements listed earlier and unpacked below, Te Waa framework explains migration from a Kiribati perspective. It asserts that these elements are akin to

canoe building and navigation, which require alignment with all other components to support its sail, just as migration is contingent on many factors for success. Section 2.5.2 describes the first element, namely people; Section 2.5.3 explores the second element, mobilities; and Section 2.5.4 presents the third element, spirituality. Finally, Section 2.5.5 provides a summary of Te Waa framework.

2.5.2 People—families, communities, churches, and islands

The first element is ‘people,’ which includes individuals making decisions to migrate, their families who brainstorm and support these decisions, and the community and island that provides a support mechanism through shared migration experiences or lessons. These networks benefit from migrants working or living abroad, and vice versa, as evidenced by maintained links through various networks (Connell, 1990; Cornish et al, 2022; Doan et al, 2023). While migration decisions are ultimately made within families, they are deeply shaped by wider community and island networks. This is especially evident in labour mobility, where the success of individual migrants is closely tied to the support, expectations, and collective values of their home communities. Any worker who fails to perform on a labour scheme brings risks and reputational consequences not only upon themselves but critically upon their family, village, and island community. This underscores why, in migration studies, it is imperative to place people at the centre of research and theory. Understanding how frontline individuals and communities perceive migration and imagine their futures is essential for capturing the nuances of lived experience—dimensions that are often inadequately represented in the economic metrics of remittances and the wider migration literature. Such insights are critical for developing climate-migration perspectives grounded in the voices of those most affected, rather than in interpretations offered on their behalf. Moreover, these perspectives are vital for informing context-specific adaptation programs and migration policies that genuinely reflect local priorities, values, and aspirations.

2.5.3 Mobilities of return

The second thematic element centres on mobility, drawing from the cultural and technical intricacies of canoe-building in Kiribati. Central to this tradition is the principle of te waa—the canoe, not merely a vessel of transport, but a symbol of safety, reliability, and return (Figure 2.3). Embedded within the construction process is a profound emphasis on ensuring that te waa is built to withstand the uncertainties of the sea and to guarantee its eventual return to land. This is achieved through the meticulous selection of durable, locally sourced materials, combined with the blessings of the deity or divine being, known as anti, or worshipped

ancestral gods, and the application of highly refined craftsmanship, passed down through generations. The builder, supported by his team, works unwaveringly to construct a vessel capable of navigating turbulent waters while maintaining an unbreakable connection to its point of origin, as knowledge holder, canoe builder Kanono explains:

> "In Kiribati, a sacred ritual in the canoe-building process involves levelling the newly constructed canoe—half on land, half on the shoreline. This act is more than practical; it is spiritual. It bestows te waa with a blessing for smooth sailing and safe return from every journey. The canoe is not just a vessel—it is life itself. It is like a human being, carrying spirit, purpose, and connection" (Ioane Kanono, Interview, 30 January 2024).

Figure 2.3: A family waa on Marakei Island

This notion of movement with assured return encapsulates a deeper philosophical and cultural understanding of mobility in Kiribati—one that is dynamic yet rooted. It reflects a worldview in which movement is not aimless or detached, but purposeful and anchored in land, identity, and community. Whether individuals choose to migrate permanently or live transnational lives across dual or multiple spaces, this mobility is rarely detached from cultural logics. Instead, it reflects a purposeful engagement with movement that remains grounded in kinship, identity, and a sustained connection to land and community—wherever that may be geographically situated (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009).

This culturally embedded approach to mobility challenges dominant narratives of displacement by foregrounding Pacific agency and the strategic, relational nature of migration. This act of mobility can be conceptualised in what Tong, in Fry (2019) describes as a "*region-wide assertion of a right [for Pacific peoples] to chart their own course*"— underscoring the agency, intentionality, and strategic navigation embedded in Pacific mobility. Far from being passive subjects of external forces, Pacific communities actively shape their trajectories in response to environmental, economic, and geopolitical pressures. This framing resonates deeply with the idea of *regionalising community*; wherein Pacific peoples construct and imagine collective identities and solidarities that transcend national borders. Their movements within and beyond the region reflect mutual ties, shared histories, and enduring communal interests.

Peebles (2005) contributes significantly to this discourse by conceptualising the *Oceania Community*—a symbolic and political space that foregrounds Pacific resilience through regional solidarity and collective agency. This framing stands in contrast to dominant portrayals of the Pacific as a region shaped by colonial and neocolonial political structures, which, as Ratuva (2022) argues, are increasingly intensified by contemporary geopolitical tensions. The emphasis on regional, cultural, and kinship ties aligns closely with scholarship on Pacific migration, particularly the role of diaspora networks in sustaining transnational connections (Lee, 2009; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). These networks not only facilitate mobility but also reinforce a deep sense of belonging and continuity—an especially critical counter-narrative in climate change contexts, where the Pacific is often reductively depicted as a region facing inevitable displacement or submersion.

In this light, the concept of mobility within climate discourse offers a transformative lens that challenges conventional definitions of migration, which typically imply linear, permanent relocation. Such a definition often fails to acknowledge the agency of Pacific peoples who migrate through established kinship and cultural networks. Instead, it risks categorising them as climate refugees—an identity that obscures their resilience and capacity to thrive. As Moore & McNeill (2025) contend, dominant migration paradigms are constrained by inadequate legal frameworks that do not account for the complex realities of climate-induced movement. Mobility, therefore, should be understood not merely as a response to socio-economic or environmental pressures, but as a multifaceted expression of freedom, innovation, and cultural continuity. It encompasses the pursuit of sustainable futures while preserving dignity and relational ties, positioning migration not as a rupture from tradition or place—as is often assumed—but as a culturally embedded practice rooted in Pacific epistemologies (Lee, 2009; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009).

This argument is particularly salient in the context of this research, given the geopolitical framing of the Pacific Region. Strategic interests of external powers often impose narratives that map the region through Western-centric, neocolonial, and capitalist lenses—prioritising competition and control over indigenous agency and regional cohesion (Ratuva, 2022). In response, Pacific scholarship and praxis must continue to assert alternative conceptualities that centre local epistemologies, relational mobility, and community-led resilience. Such approaches are essential to resisting reductive portrayals and affirming the Pacific as a region of strength, adaptability, and enduring cultural sovereignty. By foregrounding Pacific-led interpretations of movement and community, this research seeks to challenge dominant geopolitical paradigms and affirm migration as a legitimate and culturally coherent strategy of adaptation and survival. It is not merely a response to a crisis, but a continuation of long-standing traditions of navigation, connection, and collective strength. This centring of people's voices and experiences aligns with the broader patterns of circular and network-based migration observed across the Pacific, where mobility is often facilitated and sustained through familial and communal ties (Connell, 2015; Voigt-Graf & Kagan, 2017; IOM, 2019). As Voigt-Graf and Kagan (2017) note, migration decisions in Kiribati are frequently shaped by kinship ties and social networks.

The ethos of mobility—anchored in the elements of safety, return, and relationality—continues to shape contemporary understandings of migration among I-Kiribati communities, whether individuals choose permanent relocation or maintain fluid lives across dual spaces. This conceptualisation reflects a form of movement that prioritises collective wellbeing and cultural continuity, even across national borders. The enduring connection to home, expressed through circular or temporary mobility, underscores the pursuit of safety—whether *te waa* (the canoe) finds anchorage on familiar shores or on foreign lands that offer refuge. This metaphor encapsulates the purposeful nature of migration within this research: not as an abandonment of homeland, but as a strategic and informed journey toward alternative sites of safety and belonging, particularly when the homeland can no longer guarantee the conditions for a secure and dignified life. This philosophy remains applicable across diverse contexts, whether it is employed as an adaptive measure to climate change, economic hardship or political instability. It underscores a broader framework of mobility that prioritises safety, agency, and continuity, regardless of the specific drivers of movement. For Kiribati, the theory of mobility as a migration strategy holds relevance in the context of climate adaptation. Migration decisions among I-Kiribati communities are often shaped by pre-existing family, religious, and social networks, with individuals frequently following the paths of relatives or friends who have previously migrated—whether temporarily or permanently. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of I-

Kiribati migrants in New Zealand, where established diasporic communities have served as vital anchors for incoming families, church groups, and cultural links. These networks not only facilitate the expansion of familial and communal ties but also strengthen cultural and spiritual connections in the host country. A notable example is the role of the Kiribati Uniting Church, which has sent missionaries to New Zealand to provide pastoral care and spiritual leadership—often at the request of the diaspora community. This has become an integral aspect of diaspora life, reinforcing transnational religious and cultural continuity. Similarly, the Catholic Church in Kiribati, also dispatches local priests to serve Kiribati Catholic communities in New Zealand, further sustaining these cross-border spiritual and cultural connections.

Furthermore, reciprocal exchanges between Kiribati and its diaspora in New Zealand, such as recent tours by Kiribati local artists and visits by New Zealand-based artists to Kiribati, exemplify the vibrant and ongoing relational ties that transcend geographic boundaries. These interactions highlight the significance of mobility as a response to environmental pressures, and a culturally embedded practice that sustains identity, community, and resilience across borders (Lee, 2009; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; Tabe, 2011). Empirical evidence from this research further substantiates this dynamic, revealing that individuals tend to relocate to destinations where established I-Kiribati or broader Pacific Islander communities already exist. These transnational social networks not only facilitate smoother transitions but also reinforce a sense of cultural continuity and belonging, thereby positioning migration as a relational and community-anchored process rather than an isolated or disruptive event. In labour migration, significant data reveals the mobile nature of Pacific islanders seeking work and education or visiting families or friends outside their national boundaries. In Kiribati, migration is predominantly circular, with most I-Kiribati preferring return mobility over permanent migration, as reflected in the country's low migration rates (Cornish et al., 2022). Other factors, including the country's isolation from labour markets and lack of skills, contribute to this phenomenon (Rimon, 2024).

Today, permanent migration is gaining prominence as a response to climate change (ILO, 2019; IOM, 2024). However, the Te Waa of Mobility framework posits that migration decisions are not solely about permanent or long-term relocation; they are equally about mobility—short-term, circular, and return mobility that have long characterised Pacific life. Return mobility, is common among I-Kiribati seafarers who spent decades abroad and later return home, bringing tangible contributions such as financing new homes, establishing new stores or business initiatives, or supporting community efforts like church construction or the building of a family, village, or church maneaba (Borovnik, 2003).

Migration from a Kiribati perspective is not seen solely in terms of permanency or the severing of ties to home or place. And the same applies to formal education trainings like scholarships, where I-Kiribati have long travelled overseas for scholarships—as both individual and family students. These forms of movement, established well before contemporary labour schemes and migration programs, carry many of the same challenges and benefits: navigating unfamiliar environments, maintaining obligations to family and community, and returning home with new skills, resources, and perspectives. Although the nature of the programs contrasts sharply between scholarships and labour schemes, both reflect a broader mobility tradition in which I-Kiribati sustain deep connections to their land, kinship networks, and cultural responsibilities regardless of the duration or purpose of their time abroad.

Moreover, mobility trends often cultivate interest for others to follow, driven by the assurance that established Kiribati networks provide support, familiarity, and a sense of safety. This communal dimension is critical for I-Kiribati and Pacific islanders more broadly, fostering confidence and creating social safety nets that ultimately shape migration decisions and experiences. Mobility is frequently conceptualised in linear terms—as in the Black et al. (2011) model, which frames migration as a one-way, outward movement. In contrast, the Te Waa of Mobility framework emphasises that even as permanent migration gains traction, these movements continue to reflect a return element: a constant orientation toward 'landfall' whether through physical return, temporary visits, or the exchange of goods and resources. Te Waa contends that migration is inherently a two-way process. I-Kiribati who have moved permanently continue to participate in mobility circuits, not always through physically movement but through remittances, advice and services, skills and knowledge transfer, influence with community networks (see Chapters 5-7). More recently, this ongoing engagement is also reflected in the growing trend of returning home to run for political leadership.

2.5.4 Spirituality and connectivity

The third component of the Te Waa framework is its 'spirituality' element, which is particularly evident among Pacific migrants, including I-Kiribati as discussed previously. Even after relocating, migrants place significant importance on maintaining close connections with their families and home communities, who are often kept informed about their experiences and life developments abroad (see Chapters 5-7). For those who do not return physically, these ties are sustained through storytelling, the sharing of experiences, the sharing of experiences, remittances, and participation in various support initiatives. Such ongoing connectivity can strongly influence the migration decisions of

families at home, as suggested by anecdotal evidence from Pacific and I-Kiribati communities (IOM, 2017). Migrants also continue to follow economic and political developments at home, demonstrating that their sense of belonging and responsibility extends beyond physical presence. This spiritual and relational continuity underscores the multidirectional nature of mobility within the Te Waa framework.

Spirituality is often undermined or misunderstood in migration and adaptation studies (Scheyvens et al., 2024). The predominant discourse tends to focus on the economic and climate-related impacts of migration, often overlooking the cultural and spiritual dimensions. This research argues that Pacific spirituality moves with migrants and plays a crucial role in maintaining community ties and shaping wellbeing during migration. The Te Waa framework attests that the broader nature of Pacific spirituality is not adequately reflected in current migration studies. It foregrounds that spirituality plays an influencing role in migration decisions and serves as a catalyst for maintaining vital links between communities across the Pacific—whether virtually or physically. Studies reveal that this spiritual connection significantly underpins the wellbeing of Pacific Islanders during migration, particularly in adapting to new environments and during crises (Farbotko, 2019; Gagaeolo, 2020; Havea et al., 2017; Yates et al., 2023).

As such, spirituality is a critical yet often overlooked element in migration theory—not only in the Pacific but across global migration contexts. The experiences of Pacific rugby players, offer a compelling illustration. While their mobility is frequently celebrated as a form of cultural diplomacy between the Pacific and Western countries, their wellbeing abroad is deeply shaped by spiritual and communal support systems. Rugby has become a major sport in the Pacific region, creating expanded migration pathways for elite players; yet many face significant welfare and wellbeing challenges overseas, exacerbated by limited formal support structures. In this context, spirituality provides an essential foundation for diaspora support through worship, fellowship, and moral support and guidance. This underscores its vital role in the lives of Pacific migrants—whether workers, sports, or cultural ambassadors—highlighting how spiritual connection remains central to resilience and belonging across borders (Lakisa et al., 2020).

In interviews with long-term PALM workers in Australia, spirituality consistently emerged as a crucial coping mechanism for managing prolonged separation from home and family, though the specific expressions of spirituality varied across ethnic groups. Fijian workers, for instance, emphasised the importance of weekly devotions and prayer meetings as vital sources of emotional and moral support.

Similarly, I-Kiribati workers highlighted the significance of Sunday church services and cultural gatherings for renewing strength and maintaining morale. Among the larger Polynesian diaspora, daily sporting activities after work, also played an important role in fostering social networks and promoting wellbeing. Within New Zealand and Australia, the Kiribati diaspora—like other Pacific communities—actively integrates Christianity and cultural values into the spiritual upbringing of their children. This integration has significantly shaped migration patterns over time, as the growing Pacific population in New Zealand has contributed to increased recognition and celebration of Pacific cultures through initiatives such as Pacific Language and Awareness Week. Such inclusive cultural environments attract further Pacific migrants by promising a new home that reassures them their cultural rights, identities, and heritage will be respected and sustained—an aspect deeply embedded in the Te Waa framework.

Spirituality constitutes a vital dimension of Pacific migrants' lives, serving as a foundational platform for community building, mutual support, and cultural continuity—particularly in contexts where formal spiritual and pastoral care mechanisms are absent. Gatherings such as prayer fellowships, cultural festivals, and sporting events not only foster social cohesion but also provide spaces for dialogue, the sharing of success stories, and collective problem-solving. These communal practices significantly enrich the migrant experience and extend their positive impact to families and dependents in home countries through sustained transnational ties. The absence of spiritual support in institutional settings, particularly the workplace, has proven detrimental, as evidenced by the experiences of I-Kiribati seafarers. Borovnik (2003) highlights that high incidences of alcohol and substance abuse among this group were closely linked to psychosocial stressors, including prolonged isolation from family, physical exhaustion from demanding labour, confinement to limited living spaces, and restricted access to culturally familiar social networks. These challenges were compounded by the lack of formal mechanisms to address emotional and psychological wellbeing during extended periods at sea. The failure to recognise and respond to these stressors has led to serious consequences, including diminished work performance, increased vulnerability to substance abuse, and, in some cases, tragic outcomes such as suicide (Agterberg & Passchier, 1998). Such findings underscore the urgent need for culturally responsive pastoral care and counselling services tailored to the specific needs of Pacific seafarers and migrant workers. Unfortunately, prevailing narratives often pathologise behavioural issues such as alcohol abuse without acknowledging the structural and emotional conditions that give rise to them. A more nuanced understanding is required—one that recognises the absence of care and value-based mechanisms and affirms the importance of culturally grounded wellbeing support systems.

As the seafaring industry in Kiribati undergoes a gradual decline, the lessons drawn from seafarer experiences offer valuable insights for I-Kiribati workers participating in labour mobility schemes in Australia. While the nature of work differs significantly from maritime employment, many of the psychosocial challenges remain comparable. These include isolation from family, cultural dislocation, and the absence of structured spiritual and wellbeing support systems. Such parallels underscore the urgent need to embed culturally responsive pastoral care and emotional support mechanisms within all forms of labour mobility programs. Beyond mere inclusion, these systems must be strengthened through a deeper understanding of worker experiences and the institutionalisation of culturally specific wellbeing provisions, including vernacularised support, within employment contracts.

Spirituality, in this context, extends beyond religious practice—it encompasses the maintenance of relational ties to home while living abroad. This includes forms of soft reverse migration, whereby cultural goods, services, and practices are transferred from the homeland to the host country. Although often overlooked in mainstream migration theory, these practices are central to understanding the lived realities of Pacific mobility. In cases where direct transfer of goods is not feasible, migrants actively recreate home environments through the adaptation of local materials, continued observance of traditional rituals, and the substitution of familiar foods. These acts of cultural reproduction serve not only as coping mechanisms but also as expressions of identity, belonging, and resilience in diasporic settings. Moreover, the rise of digital technology and social media has significantly transformed traditional practices of connection and support among Pacific migrants. Activities such as sending remittances and video calling family members have become increasingly seamless, reshaping migration decisions and enhancing adaptation strategies in host countries. These technological tools facilitate the maintenance of transnational ties and contribute to emotional resilience, particularly in contexts of displacement and labour mobility.

Te Waa framework offers critical value by foregrounding empirical evidence that adds nuance to migration theory (Kalin, 2010; Kolmannskog & Trebbi, 2010; Naser, 2012). Rather than viewing labour migration through simplistic push-pull paradigms, the framework recognises it as a multidimensional and complex field of inquiry shaped by intersecting social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors (de Haas, 2011; IOM, 2023; Vinke & Hoffman, 2020). It reflects the intricate interplay of drivers and processes that inform I-Kiribati migration decisions, emphasising how the availability, accessibility, and relational nature of migration opportunities now play a more prominent role than in previous times—particularly in relation to increased mobility to destinations such as New Zealand and Australia, which were historically less accessible to Kiribati and other Pacific nations.

Recent policy developments—such as Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024) and New Zealand's immigration reforms enabling multi-entry stays for Pacific visitors and visa-free travel for Pacific passport holders residing in Australia (New Zealand Immigration, 2025)—are poised to significantly increase Pacific migration to both countries. These initiatives not only expand legal pathways for mobility but also support ex-situ adaptation strategies by enabling Pacific peoples to access new opportunities abroad. In turn, they enhance in-situ adaptation through the transnational transfer of remittances, skills, cultural knowledge, and strengthened socio-political ties between sending and receiving states. Such policies reflect a growing recognition of the interconnectedness between mobility and resilience, positioning migration not merely as a response to crisis, but as a proactive and strategic component of climate and development planning in the Pacific.

2.5.5 Summary of Te Waa framework: a cultural analogy of migration

Te waa (the canoe) provides a culturally rich analogy for understanding migration and mobility, especially within Pacific communities. Canoes symbolise exploration, survival, and community, intrinsic values of Pacific peoples' way of life. Historical narratives of Pacific voyages remind us that migration is an intrinsic part of Pacific heritage and will continue to be a key factor for adaptation in an increasingly warming world. As traditional skills vanish due to globalisation and climate change, the concept of Te Waa evolves to embody decisions, policies, and adaptive strategies for future generations facing climate adversity.

2.5.5.1 Migration as adaptation

Te Waa enhances the understanding of migration as an adaptive response to climate change by providing empirical evidence from those at the climate periphery. Documenting the lives and experiences of I-Kiribati people and examining how communities use migration to cope with environmental changes adds value to migration theory and the climate-migration nexus. The framework underscores migration's dual nature as both a resilience strategy and a potential source of vulnerability, much like te waa, which can either sail smoothly if meticulously crafted and maintained or capsize when lacking proper preparation and due diligence.

2.5.5.2 *Socio-economic impacts*

Just as a canoe must navigate storms and rough seas, Te Waa must contend with shifting political currents. Evolving policies and changing political stances continually reshape migration opportunities,

creating periods of uncertainty as well as new openings. These fluctuations underscore the framework's central insight: mobility is never static but is constantly negotiated within broader political, social, and environmental conditions, including climate change. Using te waa helps visualise these interacting factors and their impacts on migration trends and growth, underscoring the framework's relevance to people's livelihoods and economic stability. It also deepens understanding of policy implications—such as those embedded in Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy—by illustrating how mobility can be managed in ways that uphold human dignity, security and resilience. In this sense, Te Waa aligns closely with the principles underpinning Migration with Dignity, offering a culturally grounded lens for designing effective, people-centred migration strategies.

2.5.5.3 *Identity and sovereignty*

A central debate in migration discourse concerns cultural identity and the ways it is reshaped through movement. As migration increases—particularly under the pressures of climate change—Te Waa provides a lens for assessing how migration affects cultural identity, continuity, and the preservation of tradition. The canoe symbolises the ongoing journey of carrying cultural heritage forward while adapting to new environments, highlighting that identity is both anchored and dynamic. The framework also brings questions of sovereignty to the forefront. It illuminates the tension between the sovereign right to remain in one's homeland and the sovereign right to migrate in search of safety, opportunity, or dignity. Through the metaphor of the canoe navigating between shores, Te Waa captures the dual spaces that I-Kiribati and other Pacific peoples must negotiate—maintaining ties to ancestral land and identity while exercising agency in mobility. This duality underscores that migration is not a loss of sovereignty but a rearticulation of it, as discussed in Chapter 6.

2.5.5.4 *Future mobilities*

Finally, projecting future mobility trends is critical, given the cascading impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities. Te Waa framework can project future migration trends in the Pacific, considering scientific projections and the increasing role of migration as an adaptive strategy. Canoes embody innovative solutions for sustainable migration pathways, reflecting Pacific populations' historical adaptation through migration to conducive environments. Te Waa upholds the dignity and rights of Pacific Islanders to work, migrate, and have a future that is prosperous and secure for generations to come.

By integrating these elements, Te Waa framework honours the cultural, spiritual, and relational worldviews of Pacific peoples, recognising their deep genealogical ties to ancestors, land, and ocean.

As a holistic philosophical framework grounded in a Pacific whole-of-life epistemology, Te Waa captures the interconnected cultural, spiritual, environmental, political, social, and economic dimensions through which climate change is experienced. This breadth makes it particularly well suited for analysing contemporary migration and mobility issues, where decisions are shaped not only by material conditions but by identity, belonging, and collective wellbeing.

Within this study, Te Waa provides an interpretive lens for analysing the research findings as the empirical chapters 5-7 show. By adopting the various dimensions of Te Waa, as outlined previously, the research draws a parallel between traditional dialogic exchanges and practices, and the research process. Just as maroros or dialogues between elders, leaders, and knowledge holders transmit cultural knowledge to younger generations, the empirical chapters unpack the maroros-interviews- under each theme addressing the research inquiry, with community knowledge holders. Through these dialogic encounters, the research co-constructs narratives that deepen understanding of migration experiences from a Kiribati perspective.

2.6 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter acknowledges the intricate factors driving labour mobility and migration decisions in the Pacific. Humans have always been a mobile species, adapting to environmental changes and seeking better social and economic conditions. Today, migration patterns are significantly shaped by the escalating impacts of climate change, emerging prominently as a form of adaptation.

Migration serves as a critical adaptive strategy for many communities. It enables individuals and families to seek better living conditions, access resources, and improve livelihoods, thereby enhancing resilience and adaptive capacity. However, migration can also be maladaptive, potentially leading to detrimental outcomes such as social disintegration, cultural erosion, and increased vulnerability in host countries. This dichotomy makes the climate change-migration nexus a controversial topic in the Pacific. There is a delicate balance between asserting the sovereign rights of Pacific peoples to remain in their homeland and their right to migrate for secure and dignified lives. It is imperative to navigate these dual spaces harmoniously, without compromising the national, cultural, and economic rights and identities of Pacific nationals. I-Kiribati, like all Pacific Islands people, should have the choice to remain, migrate, or maintain mobility between dual or multiple homes (Taylor & Lee, 2017).

Migration is an intrinsic and enduring feature of life in the Pacific, where it has long shaped social, economic, and cultural systems across island communities. The region is widely recognised as one of

the most mobile populations globally, with movement embedded in ancestral traditions, kinship networks, and contemporary labour pathways. With intensification of climate change and its disproportionate impacts on low-lying atoll nations, migration is increasingly being reframed not merely as a reactive necessity but as a proactive and strategic form of climate adaptation (Black et al., 2011; Hugo, 1996). Scientific projections and policy analyses underscore the likelihood of significant growth in climate-related migration trends in the coming decades (UNFCCC, 2010; Warner, 2012), reinforcing the urgency of integrating mobility into national and regional adaptation frameworks.

The dual nature of migration—as both a potential risk and an opportunity—necessitates well-managed, rights-based policy responses. Kiribati’s Migration with Dignity policy exemplifies such an approach, offering a forward-looking model that seeks to optimise the developmental benefits of migration while mitigating its social and economic risks. By equipping citizens with the skills, education, and agency to migrate voluntarily, and with dignity, the policy reframes mobility as a pathway to resilience rather than displacement. Embedding Migration with Dignity within broader climate and development policies and grounding the Te Waa framework in Pacific scholarship and lived realities, enables atoll nations such as Kiribati to pursue safe, orderly, and regular migration pathways that reflect their cultural values and strategic priorities. Together, these approaches ensure that mobility initiatives uphold the rights, agency, and dignity of migrants while contributing to sustainable development outcomes, strengthened regional cooperation, and climate-resilient futures. As global challenges such as climate change, demographic shifts, and technological transformation continue to reshape labour markets and mobility patterns, migration must be recognised as a legitimate and strategic tool for adaptation. It reflects the enduring human aspiration for safety, opportunity, and improved living conditions—values deeply embedded in Pacific cultures of movement and resilience. In this light, migration is not a departure from tradition, but a continuation of Pacific epistemologies of adaptation, agency, and survival.

Chapter 3 : Te Waa Methodology—Conducting Fieldwork in Kiribati and Australia

"It is always in our nature to go out at sea for a purpose, and the canoe fulfils that purpose. As I-Kiribati we take pride in our canoe. If you have no canoe, you feel helpless because you cannot go out to the sea" (Mwemwenikarawa, 2022).

3.1 Introduction

The canoe, or *te waa*, occupies a central role within Kiribati society, serving as a source of transportation and a means to procure food and engage in trade. Situated on low-lying atolls characterised by sandy, infertile soils, the islands of Kiribati offer limited agricultural potential. Aside from coconuts, *bwabwai* (a species of taro), and breadfruit, few crops can be cultivated on the island. Consequently, I-Kiribati men have historically relied on the ocean as a primary source of sustenance, spending significant time fishing to secure a nutritious and sustainable diet for their families and communities scattered over the vast ocean region (Talu, 1979; Rimon, 1985; Uriam, 1995). As such, te waa's role as a sustainer of life, is a century-long tradition, enabling families to access marine resources, facilitating inter-island trade and mobility, and, in some instances, serving as a tradable asset—sometimes even exchanged for land (Manaima, 1988). The canoe is therefore a highly valued possession for every family, deeply embedded in the cultural and economic fabric of Kiribati society.

The associated practices of *te kaba waa* (the canoe building) and *te borau* (the navigation) are revered traditions and indigenous knowledge, historically transmitted through generations of I-Kiribati. These practices reflect the product of communal effort, with each community member contributing a task or skill—from the very leadership of the elders guiding the building process, to the men whose arduous labour goes into the canoe building, and the women who weave te i.e. (the sail) and te kora (coconut sinnet), binding the components together. Each part is uniquely designed, reflecting I-Kiribati people's deep and intimate relationship with the ocean that surrounds them.

The construction of te waa is a meticulous process requiring precision, patience, and deep expertise. Each stage—from the gathering of materials to the assemblage of all pieces—demands careful attention to detail to ensure seaworthiness and the fisherman's safe return (Kanono Interview, 29 January 2024). The canoe thus becomes a vessel of both physical and cultural survival, enabling navigation through uncertain waters in search of new fishing grounds or opportunities. This traditional knowledge system offers a compelling metaphor for academic research and migration. Like canoe

building, research involves rigorous preparation, methodological precision, and a clear sense of direction. Researchers, akin to navigators, embark on intellectual voyages to explore new territories of knowledge. As Goddard and Melville (2004) argue, research is a systematic process of inquiry aimed at generating new knowledge to address enduring questions within a scholarly debate.
The data collected through research functions as evidence, either to support or refute the researcher's claims, thus contributing to the broader academic discourse. Becker (2017) emphasises that such evidence is crucial because it allows researchers to construct arguments that are consequential within their respective fields: "It helps researchers make an argument about something in a world that the data would be consequential for" (p. 5).

Similarly, migration—whether for economic, educational, or existential reasons—requires careful planning and adaptability. Migrants, like researchers and navigators, must prepare for the unknown, assess risks, and chart paths toward new possibilities. As such, te waa serves as a powerful metaphor for both intellectual and physical journeys, embodying the resilience, foresight, and ingenuity required to navigate complex and shifting environments. This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this qualitative study. It explains why such an approach is crucial for addressing the research question about labour mobility facilitating climate adaptation in Kiribati, and importantly, why the methodological choices are the best suited for attaining I-Kiribati perspectives on the complex topics of climate change and migration.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 3.2 provides the research background and what the project means for me as an I-Kiribati. Section 3.3 describes the philosophical underpinnings of this research, Section 3.4 discusses the research design, and Section 3.5 outlines the research methodology. Section 3.6 describes the research sample, and Section 3.7 details the analysis procedures. Section 3.8 discusses ethics and fieldwork realities, and Section 3.9 explores the research limitations and how I mitigated these issues to maximise the value of the research contribution. Finally, Section 3.10 concludes the chapter with a summary of the key design decisions and underpinning motivations.

3.2 Research Background and Positionality

Being an I-Kiribati scholar provided significant advantages for this research. Raised on the islands and having lived and worked there for over 20 years, I was recognised as an insider with a deep understanding of the country and its people. This insider status facilitated easy access to fieldwork sites and was crucial for building trust with gatekeepers and participants (Helu, 2003; Tuhiwai, 2021). Conducting the project as an I-Kiribati national enhanced the research credibility, as I had a deep

understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. It ensured trust, which Guillemin et al. (2016) emphasise is fundamental to research success. The shared epistemological and cultural foundations between the researcher and participants bolster this trust. Ahmed et al. (2019) corroborate this perspective, asserting that research led by an insider mitigates feelings of differentiation and 'otherness.' These insights, though drawn from health research, are equally pertinent to migration research in the Pacific, underscoring the necessity of navigating power dynamics, maintaining reciprocal and respectful relationships, and achieving relational authenticity.

Trust is key to ensuring researchers demonstrate legitimacy, care, and understanding of participants' experiences, and handle participant information confidentially and diligently. Even if little is expected from researchers to change participants' circumstances, there is an expectation that the engagement provides good listenership, sympathy, and discernment (Flavell & Cunningham, 2022). Guillemin et al. (2016) highlight that trust is often misunderstood and dependent on the integrity and trustworthiness of those conducting the research. This conundrum is well articulated in Australia's National Statement of Ethical Conduct of Human Research: "*research participants may enter into a relationship with researchers whom they may not know but need to trust*" (Australian Government, p. 4). Thus, the insider perspective is paramount to understanding the cultural nuances and dimensions that shape any research context. Putt (2013) emphasises that trust and confidence are pivotal in research, achievable through the engagement of community-based researchers. Jackson and Piggott-McKellar (2021) attribute the failure of climate adaptation projects in Kiribati and Papua New Guinea to the absence of epistemological and ontological background in research, or the 'commonly overlooked aspects' of spirituality—religion, culture, and traditional knowledge, which were discussed extensively in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5).

Maximising existing relations, networks, and trust systems, while forging new ones, was another advantage. Relations are essential for a conducive researcher-researched nexus that facilitates open and productive dialogue. Being I-Kiribati provided a useful country context, helping navigate conversations and foregrounding values important to I-Kiribati participants. This created a platform for meaningful and culturally appropriate engagements, effective for navigating difficult discussions on migration. Conversely, researchers without prior understanding or connection to the project might face different relationship dynamics and often find it harder to connect with their participants (McGill & Lewis, 2023).

While the insider perspective is not the sole pathway to research success, thorough preparation is essential for any researcher lacking prior knowledge of the research context. Strengthened

collaborations are crucial for achieving successful outcomes (Flavell & Cunningham, 2022). McGill and Lewis (2023) underscore the benefits of research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, highlighting experiences of racism, exploitation, and disrespect (AIATSIS, 2020). My prior experience as a former civil servant in the Government of Kiribati provided a sound context of development programs, policies, local behaviours, and perceptions of the topic under investigation. This familiarity brought value to the research by enhancing understanding of the contexts that shape it (Edvardsson & Gustavsson, 2003). As a result, the participants engaged not only with trust that they are speaking with one of their own, but meaningfully, using the safe space as an avenue to share thoughts and feelings on a topic.

My first fieldwork experience in Kiribati between 2010 and 2012 involved overseeing the inaugural participation of I-Kiribati workers in seasonal labour schemes in New Zealand and Australia, and an independent review of the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI). These experiences provided invaluable research insights and understanding of mobility programs and policies, the rationale at the time of inception, and intended outputs for broader economic growth and wellbeing. This emic perspective shaped the research experience by comprehending nuances of real-life climate change experiences, as an insider myself. Being a member of the community—a mother, family member, previous government servant, and development partner representative—furnished the research with comprehensive understanding of issues under investigation (Dorkenoo et al., 2022; Maor, 2017). This lived experience reinforces my position within the research, amplifying insider perspectives and voices in the study and contributing to the migration theory debate. My familiarity with policies and government processes facilitated the smooth progression of fieldwork in South Tarawa, Betio, and Marakei, with minimal obstacles.

3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings

3.3.1 Ontology—the study of reality or being

At the start of this chapter, reference was made to the significance of te waa, a metaphorical canoe undertaken to seek new fishing grounds, new horizons, and new knowledge. The way te waa achieves these goals depends on the methodological choices and processes that shape its construction. These choices, which also guide the direction of this research, are influenced by what Wayessa (2013) describes as ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the study of knowledge and how it is generated). Ontology, the philosophical study of the nature of existence or "what is" (Hiller, 2016; Crotty, 1998), underpins all research by shaping how a subject is understood and approached (Killam, 2013). Philosophers across disciplines have long examined ontological assumptions, recognising their

foundational role in inquiry. In this study, the focus is on labour mobility and its role in facilitating climate adaptation. Addressing this question requires first establishing an ontological understanding of labour mobility—its nature and existence—before exploring how participants interpret and experience it. Clarifying this ontological foundation enables a deeper insight into the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Stainton, 2022).

3.3.2 Epistemology—what is knowledge, and how is new knowledge created?

Another fundamental branch of philosophy essential to research is epistemology. Crotty (1998) defines epistemology as a way of understanding and making sense of the world, while Bryman (2008) frames it as the process of determining what constitutes valid and acceptable knowledge within a given discipline. Grasping the epistemological stance of a study is critical, as it informs the philosophical foundation upon which theoretical assumptions, research questions, methodology, and interpretation of findings are built (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As Moon and Blackman (2017) assert, "*social science research can only be meaningfully interpreted when there is clarity about the decisions taken that affected the research outcome*."

Epistemology concerns itself with the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge—what we know, how we come to know it, and how we validate it (Bryman, 2008; Crotty, 1998; Wayessa, 2013). It also addresses the relationship between the knower and the known, or between the subject and the object of inquiry. This relational dimension is particularly relevant to this study on climate mobility, where knowledge is not simply discovered but co-constructed through the interpretations and lived experiences of participants. Understanding the epistemological positioning of this research enables a nuanced comprehension of how knowledge about labour mobility and climate adaptation is generated, interpreted, and legitimised—from a Kiribati perspective.

3.3.3 Realism versus relativism

In philosophy, two dominant and contrasting ontological positions—realism and relativism—significantly shape research and the nature of truth and reality. Philosophical realism asserts that reality exists independently of human perception or interpretation. According to Maxwell (2012), entities possess an objective existence regardless of the theories conceived of them, while Bailey et al. (2009) emphasise that material objects exist in the external world, unaffected by human beliefs, behaviours, or consciousness. From this perspective, truth is singular, stable, and discoverable through objective methods such as empirical observation and scientific experimentation. In contrast, relativism posits that knowledge, truth, and morality are not universal but are instead

contingent upon cultural, social, and historical contexts. Relativism suggests that these constructs are inherently contextual and therefore not absolute (Putnam, 2016). This ontological stance underpins a more interpretive research approach, where multiple realities are acknowledged, each shaped by individual experiences and socio-cultural environments (Killam, 2013).

Given the complex, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of climate change and its impacts on I-Kiribati communities, this study adopts a relativist ontological position. Labour mobility, as an adaptive response to climate change, is not viewed as a fixed or universally defined phenomenon. Instead, its meaning and significance are understood as emerging from the lived experiences, cultural narratives, and historical realities of the participants. By privileging these diverse perspectives, the research embraces the view that knowledge is co-constructed and situated, rather than discovered as a singular truth.

3.3.4 Interpretivism

Inspired by a methodology that uses the analogy of te waa, a canoe that seeks new horizons of reality and knowledge, this qualitative study adopts an interpretivist epistemology for several important reasons. Firstly, as discussed previously, climate mobility is a complex phenomenon that cannot be investigated using a positivist approach driven by one truth or the laws of nature alone (Stainton, 2022). Secondly, as this study is about society and the behaviour of people in the face of climate change, interpretivism serves as an epistemology given the nature of the research to rely on community-led consultations from which participant perspectives are drawn to interpret knowledge and truth (Hiller, 2016). Thirdly, this truth is embodied in te waa and its representation of values and beliefs that hold cultural prominence but also meaning in the lives of I-Kiribati people and their ways of being and knowing, especially concerning climate change and labour migration, which is the central inquiry of this study (Davies, 2017; Grimble, 1952; Hau'ofa, 1994; Hauofa, 2008; Whincup, 2007).

3.3.5 Abductive reasoning

This research uses abductive reasoning, which offers a valuable argument for understanding the complex and dynamic relationships between climate change, human mobility, and cultural resilience. Abductive reasoning, coined by pragmatist philosopher Charles Peirce, is a form of logical inference that involves making an educated guess or hypothesis through further investigation (Fann, 1970; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In his own words, Peirce (1955, p. 517) defines abduction as:

"The process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis."

Drawing from Peirce's theory of inference, meaning, and action, (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) offer an adapted definition that encapsulates abduction as a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. This offers a practical approach for this research, given the utility of both inductive and deductive arguments in the study, and the aim to find new and surprising evidence from interviews that could shed light on a new understanding of the inquiry. Building on Goodhart's law, which asserts that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure (Mattson et al., 2021; Stumborg et al., 2022), this research did not focus solely on the interview sample size or data saturation to guide it (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Instead, it undertook countless interviews in anticipation of new information or surprising evidence that might alter the study's direction and the hypothesis. Essentially, any mode of reasoning or argument used in research, whether abductive, inductive, or deductive, is a cognitive activity that helps to determine how humans respond to situations in every aspect of life. Each has its own merits and demerits for interpreting existing knowledge to draw conclusions, make predictions, or construct new knowledge or explanation (Johnson-Laird, 2008).

There are important reasons for the decision to use abductive reasoning in this research. Firstly, it is similar to deductive and inductive approaches in that it is applied to make logical inferences and construct theories (Johnson-Laird, 2008). Abduction is most suited to this research, given the complexity of the study of migration, where hypotheses are difficult to reach due to the interplay of multiple dimensions involved. Climate change is widely accepted as one of the drivers of migration worldwide, with no absolute hypothesis that it is a singular or deterministic cause or driver for migration (Carling, 2002; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Sherbinin et al., 2022; Donner & Webber, 2014). Because of this complexity, migration remains a challenging field to research, especially when attempting to determine causality or assess the specific extent to which climate influences mobility decisions. One major limitation is the absence of direct, systematic data that can isolate climate impacts from other drivers. Moreover, migration is shaped by a constellation of interlinked factors, making it inherently multi-causal.

Secondly, abduction is known as inference to the best explanation, promoting the most likely hypothesis to explain a theory. Therefore, it serves as a useful guiding tool for this research. It does so by evaluating all possible scenarios and constructing a theory based on the best explanation available.

By employing abductive reasoning, the research can make informed guesses about the potential climate-related stressors driving migration in Kiribati, such as sea level rise, drought, food and water security, or loss of homes. Through iterative cycles of data collection, analysis, and hypothesis testing, the research can refine its understanding of how these stressors intersect with socio-economic and cultural factors to shape migration decisions.

Thirdly, abductive reasoning allows researchers to accommodate the uncertainty and unpredictability of climate-related events, in particular the diverse perspectives and experiences of participants. The downside for such an approach, however, is the limitations of data availability and the researcher's positionality and potential biases, which must be considered and handled carefully. By acknowledging these challenges and embracing the iterative nature of abductive reasoning, this research can uncover nuanced insights into the complex dynamics of climate mobility in Kiribati and ultimately inform more effective adaptation and resilience measures for I-Kiribati communities.

3.4 Research Design: Participatory Action Research

Throughout this chapter, te waa is foregrounded as a culturally grounded metaphor and a critical tool of positionality, citing its symbolism of life, dignity, mobility, and evolving cultures and identities, while embodying the epistemological and ontological dimensions of this research. Te waa transcends its nature as a vessel, representing the pursuit of new horizons, opportunities, and knowledge—paralleling the lived experiences of migration and adaptation. This section further conceptualises te waa as a tool of relationality, emphasising its existence not in isolation, but through its interdependence with the environment, its components, and the people who give it meaning and function.

In alignment with this metaphor, the study adopts a participatory action research (PAR) approach, which similarly values collaboration, contextual knowledge, and collective agency (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014). Just as te waa cannot be constructed by a sole individual or from one component or single material alone, knowledge in this research emerges through the contributions of diverse actors. The building of te waa depends on natural resources, the wisdom and leadership of elders, the craftsmanship of master builders, and the essential roles of all members of society, including women and youth. Once constructed, te waa requires the cooperation of natural forces—wind and waves—to navigate its path. Its direction alone is insufficient; its value lies in its relational coherence—how it interacts with and responds to its environment and the collective effort that sustains it. As such, te

waa becomes a living metaphor for the research process itself: dynamic, interdependent, and deeply rooted in cultural and ecological systems.

The same elements are reflected in participatory action research, which emphasises the truth that research cannot be undertaken in solitude but is contingent on collaborative engagement with stakeholders as experts in their own experiences, or as Coyne and Carter (2024) put it: "*experts in their own lives".* A researcher, to successfully achieve outcomes, requires engagement with participants and understanding of their circumstances, and needs methods tailored to individual strengths with care accorded to 'particular' situations, contexts, cultures, and diversity (Coyne & Carter, 2024). This resonates with this study's objective to use Kiribati concepts familiar to or comprehensible for I-Kiribati participants, but ideally because of the broader sense of relationality that the study wishes to establish or maintain with the participants. This is foregrounded by (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), who assert that the key elements of participatory research lie not in the methods but in the attitude of the researcher and their ability to explore knowledge through perception.

Moreover, participatory research is reinfored through traditional systems of leadership and communal life, as outlined in the next section on research methods. It embodies the very act of inclusion of the voices of all members of society as embedded in the maneaba system, which enacts a century-old form of diplomacy. This traditional participatory diplomacy has shaped national approaches to matters of collective importance to I-Kiribati and continues to guide and underpin contemporary climate change and migration diplomacy today. In the Pacific, this notion and evolving form of diplomacy is well documented in the literature. Pacific-led scholarship on climate change and migration has underscored participatory research by amplifying voices of Pacific people, or communities at the forefront of climate change—an approach that has been a defining feature of Pacific diplomacy. Carter, (2015) asserts that community voices are not merely desirable but foundational, arguing that Pacific negotiators, derive authority from the lived experiences of their communities, while acting as conduits for local realities when engaging in global climate conferences. This resonates strongly with this research and its intention to centralise and amplify community narratives within what remains a predominantly technocratic, top-down policy system.

This grounding in Pacific participatory research and diplomacy is echoed in Ratuva et al's (2024) *Voices of the Pacific: Climate Crisis, Adaptation and Resilience,* which foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems and community-anchored adaptation strategies as central to research such as this one, and more broadly to effective climate governance. These views align closely with a growing discourse on

Pacific diplomacy (Carter et al., 2025; Carter, Fry, & Nanau, 2021; Fry & Tarte, 2015, 2025), that, much like Te Waa, contextualises the relational values of communities rather than state-centric models. These works capture how Pacific diplomacy is enacted through kinship, reciprocity, and collective stewardship—principles that scale from village to region and shape how Pacific states articulate climate priorities, among other concerns. This capacity to influence the Pacific's place in international affairs and global politics has enabled Pacific states to re-assert their voices and agency, by reinforcing and mobilising traditional practices and community-led diplomatic leadership (Naupa, 2017). Hence, participatory research reinforces this consciousness and entitlement for Pacific peoples to remain the authors of their own climate futures.

There are key limitations of this research design. For instance, participatory action research could generate power imbalances between the researcher and the stakeholders, and difficulty in navigating complex community dynamics. Balancing academic rigour with community needs and expectations is also challenging; however, this research contends that by acknowledging these challenges, and maximising the research design's strength to elevate and empower community voices and perspectives, the study can co-create context-specific adaptation recommendations to foster community-led initiatives (Naepi, 2019; Tomlinson & Tengan, 2016; Tuhiwai, 2021).

3.5 Research Methods

The research employs qualitative semi-structured interviews (Section 3.5.1), multi-sited ethnography (Section 3.5.2), and a review of existing labour mobility and permanent migration policies (Section 3.5.3). These methods are grounded in three culturally embedded I-Kiribati data collection systems: *te maneaba* (the town hall system), *te maroro* (the dialogue), and *te karaki* (the storytelling). As a multi-sited study, the research spans five locations—three island councils in Kiribati and two states in Australia—reflecting the trans local nature of labour mobility and climate adaptation. A summary of these research methods is provided in Section 3.5.4.

3.5.1 Qualitative research (semi-structured interviews)

3.5.1.1 Te maneaba system (town hall meeting)

The first method of data collection is *te maneaba* system, a traditional town hall meeting structure central to I-Kiribati governance and social organisation. Te maneaba—literally meaning 'the meeting house' or the house of the people—is a communal space where decisions are made, disputes are resolved, and relationships are forged or renewed (Davies, 2017; Macdonald, 2001; Sabatier, 1977; Talu, 1979; Uriam, 1995; Whincup, 2007). Constructed through collective community effort and

guided by elders and knowledge-holders, te maneaba embodies both architectural and cultural significance.

In this research, te maneaba serves as a culturally appropriate and effective platform for initiating dialogue, engaging participants, and conducting interviews. Its etymology—*manea* (to embrace) and *aba* (land/people)—underscores its role as a space of inclusion, safety, and communal identity (Rimon, 1992; Uriam, 1995). Fieldwork was intentionally scheduled during the Christmas and New Year period to coincide with village gatherings in te maneaba, facilitating participant access and engagement through networks provided by the Ministry of Employment.

3.5.1.2 Te maroro and te karaki (dialogue and storytelling)

Within *te maneaba*, two culturally embedded communicative practices—*te maroro* (dialogue) and *te karaki* (storytelling)—were employed to conduct semi-structured interviews. These practices are integral to I-Kiribati social interaction and knowledge transmission and were used both formally (inside te maneaba) and informally (outside te maneaba) during the research process.

Te maroro, as a dialogic method, fosters mutuality and reciprocity between participants and researchers. It creates a conversational space where participants are not merely respondents but co-constructors of knowledge. This method allows for an organic flow of discussion, beginning with general questions to gauge interest and build rapport, and progressing to more focused one-on-one interviews. Because te maroro is a culturally familiar practice, it required minimal explanation and encouraged voluntary and respectful participation. It aligns with interpretivist epistemologies that view knowledge as socially constructed through interaction (Bryman, 2016; Bryman & Cassell, 2006).
Te karaki, or storytelling, complements te maroro by offering participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences in their own terms, grounded in culturally meaningful forms of expression. In this research context, storytelling begins with the traditional greeting 'mauri', which conveys peace and goodwill. This greeting is not merely a formality—it initiates a reciprocal exchange of respect and acknowledgment, whether between strangers or familiar individuals. A response to mauri signals a willingness to engage; silence, by contrast, respectfully indicates a desire not to participate.

Following this culturally embedded opening, the researcher then offered gentle prompts such as "Where are you from?" or "How long have you lived here?"—questions that serve as gateways into deeper, meaningful narratives. These inquiries are not merely demographic; they are intimately tied to expressions of identity, belonging, and mobility. In the Kiribati context, such questions reflect a

shared understanding of the fluidity of movement—whether for work, family, cultural obligations, or personal aspirations. Importantly, these questions signal a desire to understand the participant's migratory history and cultural identity, both of which are central to the broader themes of this research. As participants responded, stories often unfold organically, revealing rich personal histories, intergenerational experiences, and the epistemological frameworks through which individuals make sense of place, displacement, and adaptation. Intrinsically, te karaki functions not only as a method of data collection but also as a culturally congruent practice that honours the agency, voice, and lived realities of participants. It enables knowledge to emerge relationally—through dialogue, observation, and shared presence—rather than through extraction or interrogation.

Unlike structured interviews, te karaki enables the researcher to engage with participants in their natural environments, allowing stories to emerge organically through everyday interactions. This method offers a culturally resonant and context-sensitive approach to data collection, providing deep insights into the lived realities of labour migration and climate change. Through te karaki, the research captures the nuanced interplay between identity, place, and adaptation—elements that are often embedded in personal narratives and shared histories. Moreover, the relational nature of te karaki fosters a unique connection between the researcher and participants, particularly when familial or communal ties are identified during the process. These connections not only enhance trust and openness but also reflect the collective and intergenerational dimensions of knowledge-sharing in Kiribati society. In this way, te karaki transcends conventional interview techniques by embedding the research process within the rhythms of daily life and the relational fabric of the community.

Both te maroro and te karaki, like te waa, function as dynamic vessels of knowledge, cultural tradition, and intergenerational continuity (Grimble, 1952; Itaia, 1979; Macdonald, 2001). Their integration into the research design not only strengthens methodological rigour by aligning data collection with culturally embedded practices but also ensures cultural congruence and ethical integrity in engaging with I-Kiribati participants. These methods honour indigenous ways of knowing and being, fostering a research process that is both respectful and responsive to the lived realities and epistemologies of the community.

3.5.2 Multi-sited fieldwork

This study employs a multi-sited fieldwork approach to examine the intersections of labour mobility, climate change, and permanent migration across multiple locations in Kiribati and Australia. Mazzucato and Wagner (2018) define multi-sited research as "*designing research which incorporates*

different places and times into a single researchable question." This approach aligns with the study's objective to explore a central phenomenon—climate-induced labour mobility—across diverse sociocultural and geographic contexts.

Multi-sited fieldwork enables comparative analysis by situating the research question within five distinct locations: three island councils in Kiribati and two states in Australia. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2014) argue, this method is particularly robust for understanding localised cultural dynamics, making it well-suited to a study that investigates a phenomenon occurring across and shaped by multiple sites. By incorporating different places and temporalities into a unified inquiry, the research examines how context-specific factors—such as employment opportunities, cultural values, and environmental pressures—influence migration decisions and experiences (Bailey, 2014; Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995). This approach also enriches the study by drawing on a breadth of perspectives. For example, it captures the views of communities in Kiribati alongside those of I-Kiribati migrants and diaspora communities in Australia. It includes the voices of workers awaiting recruitment in Kiribati and complements these with the lived experiences of those already employed in Australia. Multi-sited fieldwork, often associated with participant observation, is praised for its ability to contextualise and adapt interviews to suit specific environments (Gamlen, 2012). This is particularly relevant to the study's aim of understanding how participants' views vary across contexts, especially in understanding migration motivations.

The fieldwork was conducted in two components. The first took place in Australia, focusing on I-Kiribati workers employed in the meat processing industry in New South Wales and nursing and aged care sectors across Queensland and NSW. The second component was carried out in Kiribati across three islands, namely South Tarawa (TUC), Betio (BTC), and Marakei, described in the following subsections. South Tarawa (TUC) and Betio (BTC) were selected for their high population density and youth unemployment, making them key urban sites to examine labour mobility under climate stress. In contrast, Marakei represents a rural, isolated context with low population density and limited job opportunities, offering a counterpoint to urban dynamics. These sites were also chosen for logistical feasibility, considering Kiribati's dispersed geography. Together, these sites offer a strategically diverse sample that elucidates understanding of the various complex mobility factors at play, such as urban vs. rural dynamics, formal vs. informal labour markets, high vs. low mobility potential, and climate stress vs. geographic isolation and population pressure. This diversity enables a comparative analysis of how different communities in Kiribati conceptualise and enact

labour mobility as a form of climate adaptation—whether through internal migration, overseas work, or local resilience strategies.

3.5.2.1 South Tarawa (TUC – Teinainano Urban Council)

South Tarawa, the administrative and economic hub of Kiribati, presents a critical case for studying labour mobility under climate stress due to its extremely high population density, limited land availability, and vulnerability to sea level rise (Figure 3.1). The area is home to a large proportion of the national population—over 50% of Kiribati's residents of nearly 120,000—concentrated on a narrow strip of land (Kiribati National Statistics Office, 2022). This intensifies exposure to climate hazards such as coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, and flooding. The urban infrastructure is strained, and climate impacts exacerbate housing, sanitation, and employment challenges. Youth unemployment is notably high, creating pressure for migration as a livelihood strategy. As such, labour mobility here may be driven by both economic necessity and environmental displacement, offering insights into how urban populations adapt through internal or international migration.

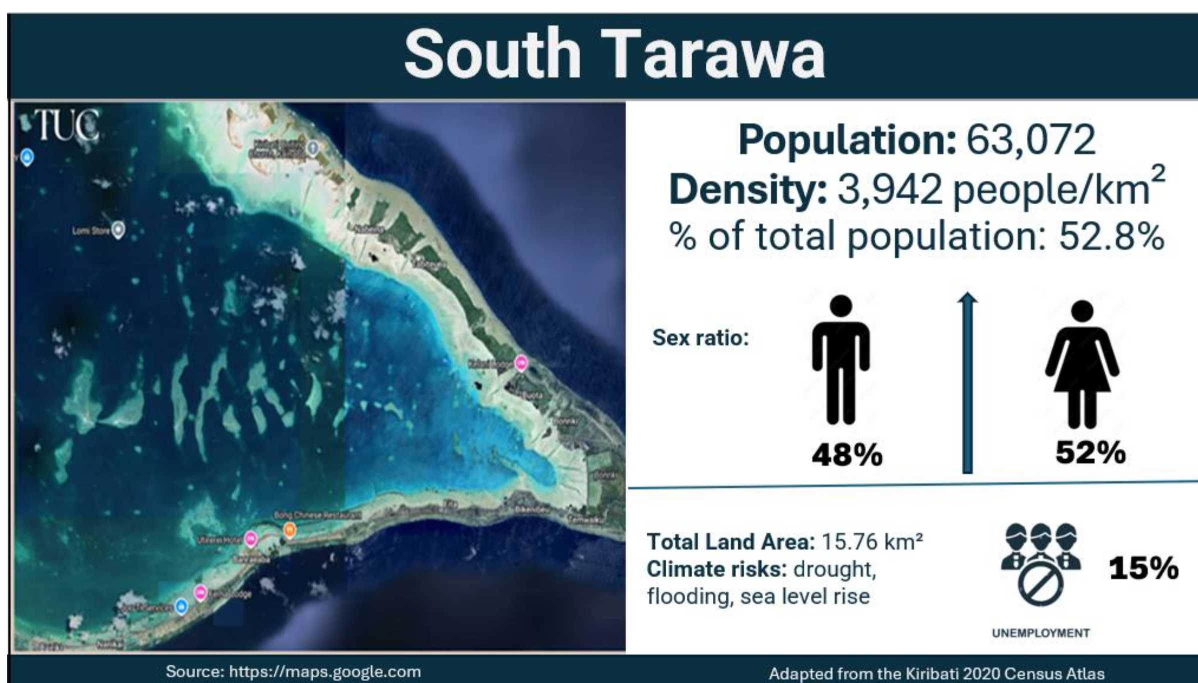


Figure 3.1: Profile of South Tarawa (TUC)

3.5.2.2 Betio (Betio Town Council)

Betio, part of South Tarawa but administratively distinct, is Kiribati's main industrial port and commercial centre (Figure 3.2). It has a unique labour profile due to its role in trade, shipping, and informal economies. Like TUC, Betio faces acute climate risks; however, its economic functions make

it a focal point for transitional labour pathways—from informal to formal sectors, and from local to overseas employment. Betio's port-based economy provides a lens into how climate change affects labour tied to infrastructure and trade. Further, the town's youth population is highly mobile, often seeking work abroad through schemes like the PALM and RSE. As such, Betio offers a case to explore how climate adaptation intersects with economic opportunity, especially in semi-formal labour markets.

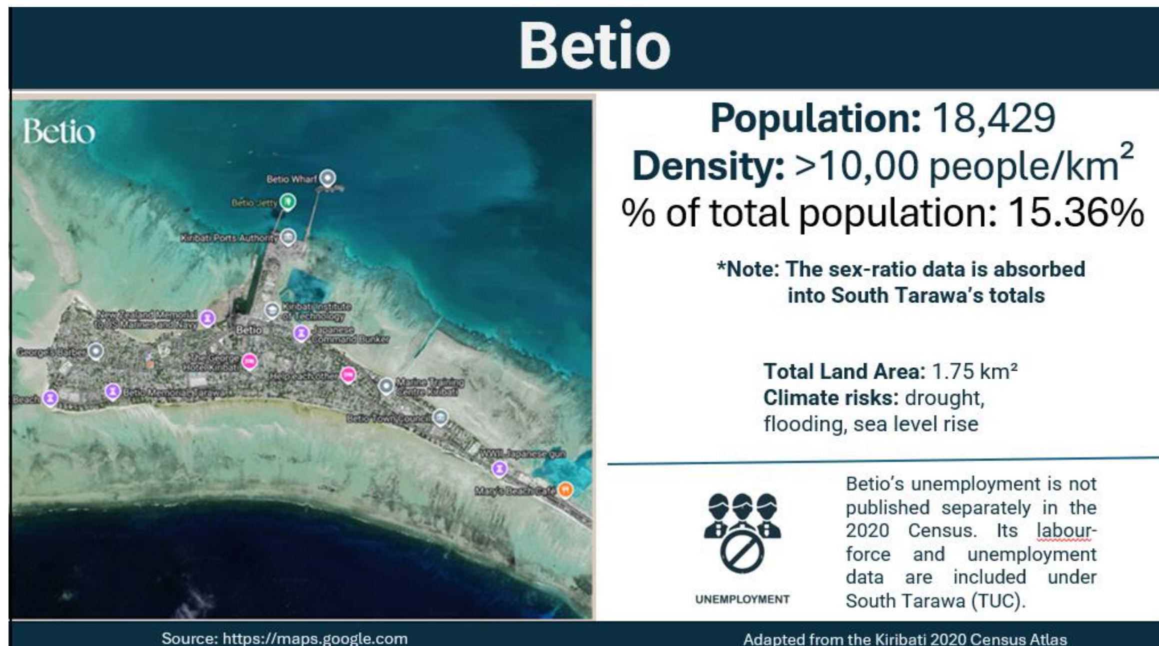


Figure 3.2: Profile of Betio (BTC)

3.5.2.3 Marakei

As a site of rural isolation and limited economic options**,** Marakei, a remote outer island, contrasts sharply with the urban centres (Figure 3.3). It has low population density, limited formal employment, and geographic isolation, making it a vital counterpoint in understanding how rural communities experience and respond to climate change. The island's circular shape and cultural significance also influence mobility decisions, including reluctance to migrate. Marakei exemplifies place-based constraints on labour mobility—where geographic isolation and cultural ties may inhibit migration. Climate impacts here are less about urban overcrowding and more about subsistence disruption, such as declining agricultural productivity and freshwater scarcity, including spring tide events in the past. As such, studying Marakei helps reveal how non-economic factors (e.g., kinship, land tenure, and cultural identity) shape adaptation strategies and mobility decisions.

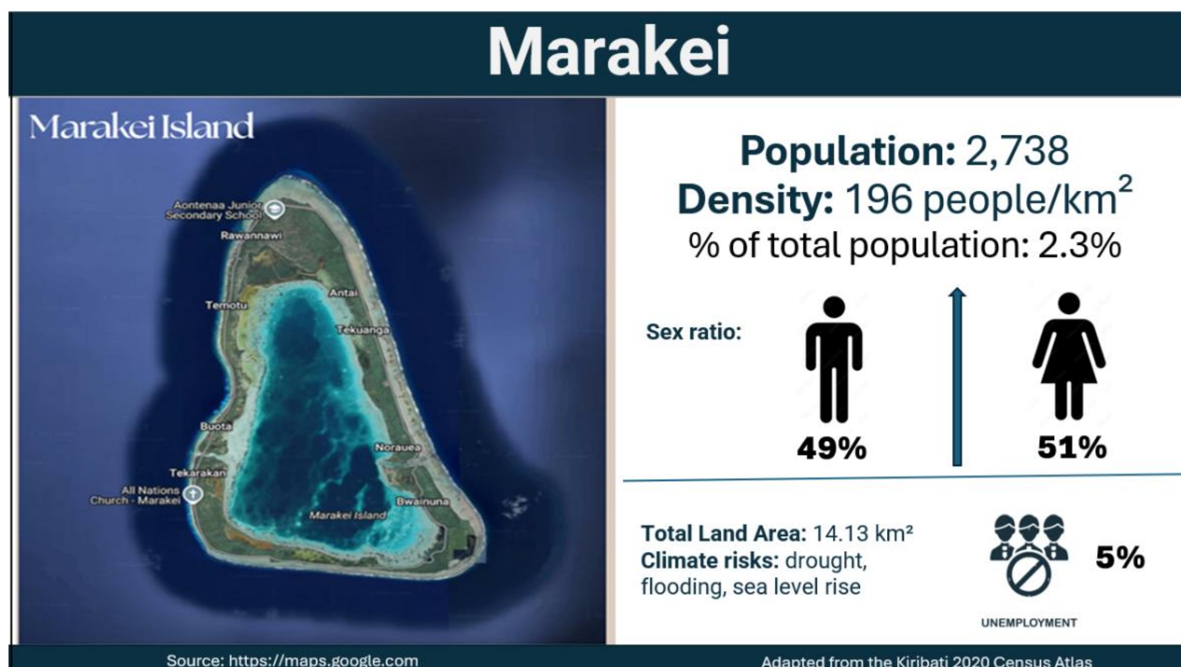


Figure 3.3: Profile of Marakei

3.5.3 Review of existing policies

The third research method employed in this study is a review of existing labour mobility and permanent migration policies relevant to I-Kiribati migration to Australia. This includes an in-depth examination of bilateral programs, policy frameworks, and institutional mechanisms that have shaped migration pathways, with particular attention to their implications for climate adaptation and long-term settlement.

3.5.3.1 *Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI)*

A key component of this policy review is the inclusion of five Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI) graduates—a one-off scholarship for migration program launched in 2006 as a joint employment and climate adaptation initiative between the Government of Australia and the Government of Kiribati. The KANI program enabled approximately 90 I-Kiribati youth to migrate to Australia in 2006 to undertake Bachelor of Nursing degrees at Griffith University, with the intention of transitioning into the Australian workforce and securing permanent residency upon graduation (O'Brien, 2013).

Involving KANI migrants in the study was designed to assess the long-term impacts of this initiative on participants' migration experiences, professional development, and adaptive capacity. Specifically, it explores how the program facilitated resilience-building and climate adaptation through education, employment, and integration into Australian society. By tracing the trajectories of KANI graduates—

where they are now, how their careers have progressed, and how they perceive their migration journey—the study generates valuable insights into the effectiveness of structured migration pathways. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how targeted migration programs can serve as adaptive strategies for climate-vulnerable populations. Given the growing prominence of migration in the Pacific today, coupled with Australia's Pacific Diplomacy priority on migration and climate change (Carter, 2015; Fry & Tarte, 2025), the lessons learnt from the KANI experience offer critical guidance for the design and refinement of current and future labour mobility and permanent migration schemes involving I-Kiribati citizens in Australia.

3.5.3.2 Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM)

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) program represents the consolidation of Australia's short-term (up to 9 months) and long-term (1 to 4 years) labour mobility schemes, enabling I-Kiribati citizens to engage in unskilled, low-skilled, and semi-skilled employment across a range of industries—including but not exclusive to agriculture, hospitality, aged care, and meat processing (abattoirs). The program is designed to address labour shortages in regional Australia while providing economic opportunities for Pacific and Timor-Leste nationals. Currently, over 1,500 I-Kiribati are participating in the PALM scheme, a modest figure compared to over 30,000 total workers from across the Pacific and Timor-Leste (Australia, 2024; Doan et al., 2023). Despite being a pilot country for the program, Kiribati remains one of the lowest participating nations, raising important questions about the accessibility, scalability, and long-term impact of the scheme for I-Kiribati communities.

Although Kiribati's participation may seem small in numbers, the economic win from the program is substantial for the country and especially for I-Kiribati. Compared to other PICs, remittances from Kiribati workers overseas account for nearly 10% of the country's GDP (ILO, 2019; Voigt, 2012). However, if labour mobility is to effectively serve as a measure for facilitating climate adaptation, the participation level beyond economic metrics seems negligible. Given this reasoning, it is imperative for this research to critically examine the extent to which the PALM program contributes to climate adaptation and resilience-building for I-Kiribati workers/migrants and their families. This includes assessing not only the economic benefits of participation but also the social, cultural, environmental, and material impacts of labour mobility as a strategic response to climate vulnerability. Comprehending the program's output is essential for informing future policy development and ensuring that labour mobility pathways are both equitable and adaptive for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Kiribati.

3.5.3.3 Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV)

The Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) represents Australia's first dedicated permanent migration pathway for citizens of Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste. Introduced by the Albanese-led Labour government upon taking office in 2022 and legislated in late 2023, the PEV—formally designated as Subclass 192—marks a significant shift in Australia's migration policy toward the region. The visa operates on an annual electronic ballot system, modelled on the U.S. Green Card lottery and New Zealand's Pacific Access Category scheme. The inaugural ballot opened in June and closed in August 2024 (Howes, 2022; Howes & Sharman, 2023; Turia & Rimon, 2024).

In the initial 2024 round of this visa scheme, Kiribati did not join, and its participation was only confirmed in the second round, in 2025. At first, with uncertain prospects for the country's participation, the potential implications of future involvement were substantial, and the interest of the research was in I-Kiribati losing out on an opportunity that provided economic benefits, as well as options for a climate-proof future. The research was premised on the PEV offering a structured and secure pathway to permanent residency, thereby informing I-Kiribati migration aspirations and decision-making as a climate adaptive strategy. In the context of climate change, where environmental pressures increasingly shape mobility, the PEV presents a strategic opportunity for Kiribati to diversify its migration options beyond temporary labour schemes. It also holds promise for enhancing long-term resilience by enabling planned, dignified, and rights-based migration for I-Kiribati citizens. Importantly, the PEV provides a safe, orderly mechanism for protecting climate-displaced communities in the absence of international law or protection structures, as discussed previously. Moreover, the scheme advances the wellbeing and dignity of its PALM workers who can utilise the pathway to bring their families, and access permanent residency benefits that include access to better services such as Medicare, study, and the freedom to change employers.

3.5.4 Summary of research methods

As te kaba waa (the canoe-building process) requires rikoan bwain te waa (collection of materials), the first point in the research process is the collection of data. Te Waa methodology utilises three key methods, as illustrated in Figure 3.4.

1. Te maroro (dialogue)

Te maroro plays a vital role in te kaba waa (the canoe-building process) because it is used to summon the village to te maneaba to discuss tasks for building te waa, where to collect the materials, and to decide the varying roles needed in the building process. Te maroro is a central tool for cultural

diplomacy in Kiribati. It is used in both formal and informal meetings by villagers to communicate with each other (normal day-to-day dialogues) or when leaders have special announcements to make to the village, such as during the occasion of building te waa. Te maroro is dynamic; its context is interchangeable to suit the occasion. For example, to announce a wedding or village feast, te maroro conveys good or happy news. In contrast, news of a family member lost at sea or a funeral evokes a sad and solemn maroro. In the same manner, this research utilises te maroro to navigate dialogues with participants and key informants based on respect, trust, and understanding. In this research, qualitative semi-structured interviews utilise te maroro, enabling the researcher to collect qualitative, open-ended data that explores participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the topic, and to delve deeper into personal and sometimes sensitive themes. I have chosen this method because I believe in the value of relationships and creating rapport and trust in the process so that the participant does not feel interrogated. The other benefit is the flexibility to pursue new areas outside of primary questions to gain deeper insights. Finally, this method also allows the researcher to compare candidates in terms of responses to help assess patterns or trends. The data collected from a semi-structured interview (maroro) is crucial for establishing facts and opinions from participants and can always be checked for validity and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

2. Te karaki (storytelling)

Te karaki embodies Kiribati's oral tradition of storytelling that is passed down through generations. This enables the study to observe canoe-building in process, or village activities which illuminate understanding of how communities thrive each day amid economic, social, cultural, environmental pressures. In doing so, the research was able to engage in these stories as they are shared by communities whether in the village maneaba or throughout the kainga (family) settings. This allows the research to witness how communities organise themselves and the values the place on everyday practices and routines which resonate with *Taraan raoi karaoan te mwakuri* – or the review and monitoring of ongoing work, materials, and labour to ensure daily work progresses as expected. This process allows leaders (unimwane) who guide the work to navigate te kaba waa process routinely and efficiently. In this research, I chose to spend time with workers and participants to observe their surroundings and behaviour at work or in the village. The use of participant observations is key to enhancing understanding of the dynamics surrounding participants (from the village) as well as labour migrants. This yields greater insights into migration theories at play and the behaviours of respondents. Participants consenting to interviews or te maroro, particularly workers in Australia, were contacted in advance to check whether they would be happy to be observed at work. This method acknowledges that while interviews say one thing, behaviour at work, at home, or elsewhere

may portray a different image altogether, and this method helps to garner a comprehensive understanding where workers do not articulate or provide honest responses (Rossi et al., 2013).

3. Multi-sited fieldwork (voyage)

This can be seen as the maiden voyage the canoe embarks on at the end of the building process. During this voyage, the leader asks the following important questions: Who will captain te waa? Who will get on board? How far can te waa go? What are the signs saying (weather, clouds, tides, etc)? Can te waa make it safely to the other side? In this research, multi-sited fieldwork is used to analyse three sites in Kiribati and 2-3 locations in Australia (PALM). The questions asked in te kaba waa process can be linked to the same questions a researcher asks when they embark on multi-sited fieldwork. It also relates to the interview proper and the signs that the researcher must learn to monitor. For instance, the participant may not be willing to proceed with the journey (interview), etc., and this must be adhered to fully. This method is particularly useful in this project, given the geographically dispersed phenomena being measured (labour mobility flow). Although multi-sited fieldwork is perceived to cover several physical locations that contribute to a single project, I have selected this method to conduct an in-depth investigation of a single study focused on Kiribati (Bailey, 2014; Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995).

Overall, Te Waa methodology enabled a comprehensive analysis of two key dimensions:

i. Perceptions of labour mobility and climate resilience: The study captured the perspectives of a diverse range of I-Kiribati stakeholders—including PALM workers, KANI migrants, government officials, community members, employers, and other relevant actors, such as churches or NGOs—on the role of labour mobility and migration as climate-adaptive tools. These insights illuminate how migration is understood not only as an economic strategy but also as a potential pathway for enhancing resilience and securing long-term wellbeing.

ii. Lessons learned, opportunities, and challenges: The research also examined the operational dynamics of key migration programs such as the PALM and KANI initiatives. By identifying their strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how such programs can inform future migration trends from Kiribati. Importantly, these schemes are not only temporary labour pathways but also hold potential as stepping stones toward more permanent and adaptive migration solutions in response to environmental and socio-economic pressures.

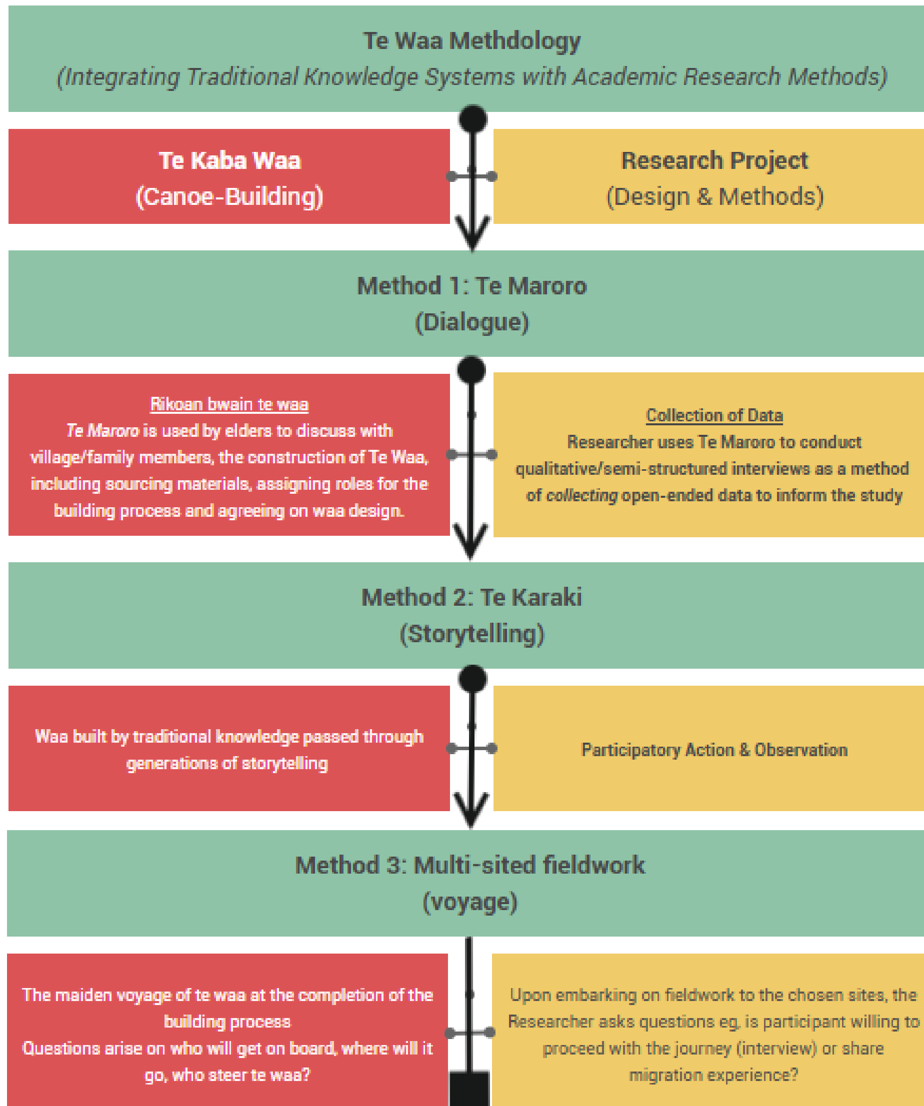


Figure 3.4: Te Waa methodology

Source: Author (2025).

3.6 Research Sample

The research conducted a total of 90 interviews, 87 of which were I-Kiribati community members (Table 3.1). Figure 3.5 presents the age distribution of the participants. Most participants were within the 21–40 age range, with a notably smaller representation from the older demographic aged 51–90.

This distribution mirrors the demographic profile of Kiribati, which is characterised by a predominantly youthful population and a relatively low life expectancy, which typically does not exceed 70 years. These demographic trends are significant, as they underscore the structural challenges facing the country—particularly the high rate of youth unemployment, which is both a symptom and a driver of broader socio-economic vulnerabilities. The age composition of the sample thus reflects not only the population structure but also the labour market pressures that shape migration motivations and adaptive strategies among young I-Kiribati.

Table 3.1 Distribution of participants across the four sites

Country	Location	Sample size
Kiribati	TUC	30
	BTC	20
	MARAKEI	20
Australia	NSW	15
	QLD	5
Total		90

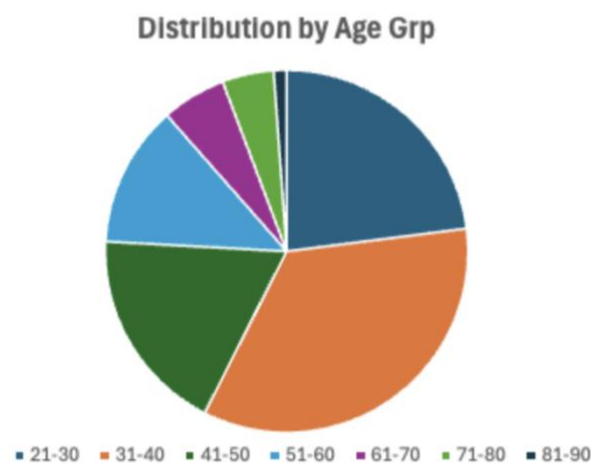


Figure 3.5: Age distribution of participants

Sample Summaries:

The respondents in South Tarawa, TUC are predominantly young, with most aged between 21 and 35 years, and the oldest participant aged 72. The sample is relatively gender-balanced, comprising 53 % women and 47% men. All 30 participants are internal migrants originating from other islands, either born in South Tarawa to migrant parents and now living permanently there or having relocated to the capital themselves for education or employment opportunities. Over 46% of respondents reported migration experience through education scholarships and in full time work placements, while more

than 33% were unemployed at the time of the study. Approximately 10% had participated in labour mobility schemes, indicating modest but notable engagement with formal migration pathways.

In Betio, respondents were also predominantly young with most aged between 21 and 35 years, and the oldest participant aged 67. The gender distribution was more uneven thank in South Tarawa, comprising 35% women and 65% men. All 20 participants were internal migrants originating from other islands—including South Tarawa—either born in Betio or South Tarawa to migrant parents and now residing permanently in Betio or having relocated there themselves for education or employment opportunities. Approximately 35% of respondents reported migration experience through education scholarships and were currently engaged in full-time work, while around 55% were unemployed at the time of the study, reflecting the limited labour market opportunities available in the area. Notably, roughly 35% had participated in labour mobility schemes, indicating a moderate but significant level of engagement with formal migration pathways, and around 15% were family members of migrant workers currently employed in Australia or New Zealand.

Similarly, the sample from Marakei Island revealed a predominantly young cohort, with most respondents aged between 21 and 35 years and the oldest participant aged 83. The gender distribution was evenly balanced, with an equal representation of women and men. Around 15% of respondents were employed in formal roles within the local government council, schools, or church institutions. Approximately 20% were unemployed and awaiting recruitment at the time of the study, while a further 10% were not in paid employment due to studying or childcare responsibilities. Notably, about 25% were family members of current migrant workers, while only 5% were former labour mobility participants themselves, and an additional 5% were relatives of former workers in Australia and New Zealand. This profile highlights the limited direct engagement with labour schemes on Marakei, but also the presence of transnational family connections that shape local perceptions of migration and mobility.

The sample of migrant workers stationed in Australia at the time of the study also reflected a predominantly youthful cohort, with ages ranging from 28 to 44 years. The gender distribution was notably uneven, with women comprising 65% of the group and men 35%, indicating a growing feminisation of participation in the aged care and meat sectors. Around 55% of workers reported being unemployed prior to recruitment, highlighting the role of labour schemes as a key employment pathway for many I-Kiribati. A further 10% had been engaged in informal economic activities—such as small-scale trade or shopkeeping—while another 10% had held full-time and senior positions in

government. Over 85% of respondents were residents of South Tarawa before departure, reflecting the capital's centrality as a recruitment hub, while only 15% originated from outer island, including participant who was the primary provider for a family in Marakei. This profile underscores both the concentration of recruitment in urban centres and the continued importance of labour mobility as a livelihood strategy for households across Kiribati.

When compared against the population sizes of their respective communities, South Tarawa TUC at (63,439) people, Betio (18,429), and Marakei (2738)—the samples represent small but analytically meaningful cross sections that illuminate broader demographic and socio-economic patterns shaping mobility in Kiribati. Across all three sites in Kiribati, including Australia for current workers, respondents were predominantly young, reflecting the youthful age structure characteristic of Kiribati's population (NSO, 2020) and the concentration of working-age individuals in urban centres. The universal presence of internal migrants in TUC and Betio underscores the central role of internal mobility in driving urbanisation, overcrowding, and labour market pressures in the capital.

In contrast, Marakei's much smaller population reveals a different dynamic: despite its rural context, the island shows very high participation in labour mobility schemes, alongside high unemployment, indicating that overseas labour programs have become a critical economic strategy in places where local employment opportunities are extremely limited. Betio similarly demonstrates strong engagement with labour mobility, though shaped by its large population and more urbanised environment. Meanwhile TUC's high unemployment compared to its modest participation in labour schemes, reflect both the intense competition for limited jobs in the capital and the uneven access to recruitment pathways. Ultimately, the findings highlight how demographic pressures, internal migration, limited domestic employment, and expanding labour mobility opportunities intersect differently across urban and rural contexts, shaping the economic, aspirations and mobility decisions of I-Kiribati households.

The decision to adopt a large and varied sample size is grounded in several methodological and contextual considerations. First, the study employs purposive sampling, which allows for the intentional selection of participants based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives. As Guest et al. (2006) note, purposive samples can vary in size and are often determined inductively until theoretical or data saturation is achieved (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Saunders et al., 2018). However, this study extends beyond the point of saturation, continuing interviews to capture emergent and potentially transformative insights—a strategy supported by abductive

reasoning (Fann, 1970; Peirce, 1955; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The sample includes, as outlined earlier, participants from three distinct sites in Kiribati—two urban centres (Teinainano Urban Council and Betio Town Council) and one outer island (Marakei). The urban sites were selected due to their high youth populations and high unemployment rates, while Marakei represents a contrasting context with limited access to economic infrastructure. In Australia, the sample includes both short-term labour migrants (PALM workers) and permanent migrants (KANI participants), enabling a comparative analysis of migration experiences across different temporal and policy contexts.

This intentional diversity in sampling was designed to explore key variables influencing migration decisions, including geographic location, access to labour mobility schemes, duration of migration experience, and perceptions of climate change impacts in both origin and destination contexts. Logistical considerations also influenced site selection, as some remote islands lacked regular transport access. While the concept of data saturation is often upheld as a benchmark in qualitative research, its application remains contested. Guest et al. (2006) acknowledge the lack of empirical evidence supporting a universal threshold for saturation, particularly in health and social sciences. Similarly, Saunders et al. (2018) and O'Reilly and Parker (2013) highlight the conceptual ambiguity and methodological inconsistency surrounding saturation, noting that its relevance varies depending on the theoretical framework and research design. Bryman (2016) further critiques the rigid application of saturation, arguing that it can obscure the iterative and interconnected nature of sampling, data collection, and analysis.

This study also draws on Goodhart's Law (Mattson et al., 2021; Stumborg et al., 2022), which cautions that when a measure becomes a target, it risks losing its value as a measure. Applied here, an overemphasis on achieving a specific sample size may detract from the discovery of novel or unexpected insights. For instance, the emergence of spirituality as a recurring theme in participant narratives—though not initially anticipated—proved critical for understanding resilience and migration in the Pacific context (McDonnell, 2020). This theme is explored further in the empirical chapters (Chapters 5-7). Additionally, the study is grounded in an indigenous methodological framework, appropriate for a predominantly oral culture. The use of culturally embedded methods such as *te maroro* (dialogue) and *te karaki* (storytelling) fosters relational engagement, trust-building, and the co-construction of knowledge (McNamara et al., 2024). In this context, a larger sample size is not merely a quantitative measure but a catalyst for deeper, more meaningful interactions. It enhances the breadth, richness, and reliability of the data, supporting a nuanced and culturally congruent understanding of labour mobility and climate adaptation in Kiribati.

Moreover, while both qualitative and quantitative research share the overarching goal of knowledge generation, they diverge significantly in their epistemological assumptions and methodological approaches—particularly in relation to the concept of data saturation. Quantitative research prioritises validity and generalisability, whereas qualitative research is concerned with subjective meaning-making and contextual depth (Bryman, 2016; Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). Within this context, the present study foregrounds the use of an indigenous methodology, which privileges the value of dialogue, relational engagement, and cultural knowledge systems over rigid adherence to sample size thresholds (McNamara et al., 2024). Rather than treating data saturation as a definitive endpoint, this research adopts a more flexible and iterative approach, consistent with the epistemological stance underpinning the study. As Baker and Edwards (2012) argue, saturation is not a universally applicable standard but is instead contingent upon the methodological and theoretical orientation of the research. In this Kiribati-led study, the decision to pursue a larger sample size is both strategic and symbolic: it challenges the perception of research as a "fly-in, fly-out" exercise and instead promotes a model of inquiry grounded in trust, reciprocity, and sustained engagement with communities. The use of participatory action research further supports this approach, enabling rich, in-depth dialogues and the emergence of unexpected insights that might otherwise be overlooked under a strict saturation research format.

3.7 Analysis

Data collected during fieldwork were transcribed, translated, coded, and analysed using Microsoft Excel and Google Docs. Excel was chosen for its accessibility and efficiency in managing large datasets (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Its strength lies in its versatility as a tool for social research, in particular its ability to analyse and represent data with little effort, reducing the learning curve required for familiarising oneself with a new and sophisticated data software. As a cost and time-efficient software, Excel also integrates easily with other Microsoft tools, making it easy to support data entry, transfer, and presentation of findings using its tables, graphs, and infographics functions, which in turn enhance data transparency, traceability, and analytical depth—qualities essential for rigorous qualitative research. This ensured that the data management process was both methodologically sound and practically efficient, supporting the study's broader aim of producing culturally grounded and analytically robust findings.

In this study, a single Excel workbook was developed, comprising multiple spreadsheets to organise and differentiate the datasets. The first spreadsheet contains the complete set of raw data collected

from participants, while subsequent sheets disaggregate this data based on key variables such as site, age, and gender. Once the data was entered, colour coding was employed to visually distinguish between variables and to highlight emerging themes. This visual differentiation facilitated more straightforward navigation and thematic analysis. Additionally, contextual notes were added in adjacent columns to enrich the interpretation of the data and support analytical insights. Participants were listed automatically in chronological order in the raw data set. After analysing the feedback based on the interviews, the results were then presented in a summarised format (see Figure 3.6). This approach eliminated the need for additional coding to track interview sequences, as the data was already structured to reflect the temporal flow of the research process. Each participant's responses were aligned with specific themes, allowing for straightforward cross-referencing and thematic comparison.

In this study, interviews were not assigned specific codes. Instead, each interview was identified by the date on which it was conducted. This chronological organisation allowed for a streamlined referencing system and reduced the need for additional coding layers. Accordingly, two citation formats were used in the analysis:

1. Interviewee Name, Date of Interview – for participants who consented to be identified
2. Anonymous, Date of Interview – for participants who requested anonymity

		Labour Mobility			Cultural Views			Political Views	
Region	Age	Eco Only	CC only	Both	Evolving	Static	Both	Yes	No
TUC	21-30	43		57	14	86		14	86
Marakei	21-30	67		33	33	67		17	83
BTC	21-30			100	75	25		75	25
Australia	21-30	33		67	67	33		67	33
TUC	31-40	50		50	50	50		50	50
Marakei	31-40	17		83	33	67		17	83
BTC	31-40	33		67	50	50		50	50
Australia	31-40	7		93	93	7		57	43
TUC	41-50			100	83		17	83	17
Marakei	41-50	100			100			100	
BTC	41-50	50		50	50	50		50	50
Australia	41-50	33		67	67	33		67	33
TUC	51-60	83		17	83		17	33	67
Marakei	51-60	50		50	100				100
BTC	51-60	67		33	100			100	
Australia	51-60								
TUC	61-70			100	100			100	
Marakei	61-70			100	100				100
BTC	61-70			100	100			100	
Australia	61-70								
TUC	71-80			100	100			100	
Marakei	71-80	67		33	33	67			100
BTC	71-80								
Australia	71-80								
TUC	81-90								
Marakei	81-90	100			100				100
BTC	81-90								
Australia	81-90								

Figure 3.5: Coding sample

All interviews were listed in the order they were conducted, ensuring consistency and ease of reference throughout the analysis. The data was further organised across key demographic and contextual variables, including region, age, gender, employment status, and so forth. Thematic categorisation was applied to reflect the core areas of inquiry, such as:

- Climate change perspectives
- Labour mobility perspectives
- Cultural interpretations of migration
- Political interpretations of migration

For each theme, participant responses were presented in a structured format, allowing for comparative analysis across variables. This approach supports both depth and clarity in the interpretation of qualitative findings. For specific themes, the respondents' feedback is presented as outlined in Figure 3.7.

Participant	Interview Date	Region	Response	Theme
1	23/02/2024	TUC	Climate change is real and so is une	Climate change
2	25/02/2024	Marakei	Te waa has lost its significance'	Traditional knowledge
3	27/02/2024	Australia	Work is value for money	Migration

Figure 3.6: Sample of interview transcription summary

3.8 Navigating Ethical Preparedness and Fieldwork Realities

The expanding world of academia and research and development has seen the burgeoning of ethical principles as a vital skill and prerequisite for any research undertaking (Farrimond, 2013). Numerous ethical standards measure the conduct of research and its success, notably the researcher's integrity, moral character, and their exhibition of good traits and professional conduct (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). In other scenarios, expectations of ethical behaviour are linked to demonstrations of ethics of care, relational ethics, or emotional relationship, which Held (2005) argues should constitute the basis of research ethics. In preparation for fieldwork, I undertook several university training courses, culminating in the ANU Ethics application process. While comprehensive and rigorous, aspects of this process at times appeared impractical—particularly the stringent checks relating to Pacific cultural or linguistic matters in which, as an I-Kiribati researcher, I am already deeply grounded. These cultural checks should have posed minimal difficulty, given the researcher's cultural fluency, linguistic proficiency, and positionality as a native I-Kiribati conducting research within their own country.

The ethics training I received, though at times stressful, proved to be instrumental as I returned to Kiribati to commence fieldwork. What initially seemed like a return to familiar territory quickly revealed itself to be a far more complex undertaking—one that positioned me simultaneously as an insider and an outsider. While the familiarity of home offered a degree of comfort, the research environment presented new uncertainties. I was unsure how the research would be received and what challenges might emerge. This uncertainty materialised almost immediately when the government imposed unexpected and stringent conditions on my fieldwork permit. As a national, I had assumed that my work would be welcomed and supported, particularly given its potential to contribute to national development. I operated under the premise that local researchers bring intrinsic value to the research and development landscape and should be afforded the autonomy to investigate issues of national relevance and interest, especially given the soaring popularity of labour mobility and growing realities of climate change impacts. However, this assumption was challenged when my ability to conduct interviews independently was restricted—an action that, as discussed earlier, constituted a breach of core ethical principles, particularly those related to autonomy and informed consent.

The rigorous ethics training I had undertaken as part of the Australian National University's research ethics briefing was crucial in navigating this situation. It enabled me to respond with professionalism and resolve the issue through diplomatic negotiation. More broadly, the ethics process instilled a heightened sense of responsibility and ethical awareness, fostering what I can best describe as a 'sixth sense' for safeguarding the research process with diligence and care. This ethical grounding not only shaped a methodologically sound and conscientious research approach but also equipped the project to anticipate and mitigate potential risks. It helped manage expectations, address biases, and critically engage with the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-researched relationship. Ultimately, the training enhanced my capacity to navigate the field with sensitivity, reflexivity, and ethical integrity.

3.9 Limitations

3.9.1 Navigating familiarity in small island research contexts

It must be acknowledged that the research, despite being led by an I-Kiribati or insider, was not without challenges. The first challenge is related to the dispersed geography of the country. It is important to appreciate the vast ocean territory that comprises the scattered islands of Kiribati, and the choice of islands was influenced largely by decisions relating to ease of access, communications, and transportation. This element posed a limitation on the scope of the research and, as such, constrained focus on a select few over other remote islands. Secondly, the small island context of Kiribati presented a unique challenge, as the likelihood of personally knowing participants—or even

being related to some—was considerably high. While such relational proximity is not uncommon in Kiribati, it is important to acknowledge this dynamic as a distinctive feature of the research setting. The potential for familiarity to influence the research process was carefully considered, and appropriate measures were taken to ensure that it did not compromise the integrity of the study. Due diligence was consistently exercised to uphold ethical standards, maintain objectivity, and ensure that all participants were treated with equal respect and confidentiality, regardless of any prior personal or professional connections.

3.9.2 Ethical complexities and power dynamics in a small island research context

By the time fieldwork commenced, the principles and protocols internalised through ethics training had become integral to my research practice, guiding my responses to ethically sensitive situations. when the government initially required that a staff member accompany me throughout the research. This directive immediately stood out as ethically significant, prompting careful reflection and consultation with my academic supervisor. Rather than responding reactively, the training enabled me to pause, assess the implications, and devise a thoughtful plan to raise my concerns through the appropriate institutional channels. This measured approach ensured that the issue was addressed respectfully and in accordance with both ethical standards and local protocols.

Despite a high level of ethical preparedness, conducting research in a small island context such as Kiribati presents distinct challenges that warrant critical reflection. Given the country's limited representation in Australia's labour mobility schemes, there was a significant likelihood that the Ministry of Employment and Human Resources' shared contact list included individuals with whom I had personal, familial or previous professional ties. As previously discussed, this is a common feature of research in closely-knit communities, where social networks are deeply interwoven and labour mobility programs remain in their early stages of development. Acknowledging this dynamic is essential for ensuring transparency and for contextualising the sampling process within the broader socio-cultural fabric of the research setting. Nevertheless, all interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, with participants providing informed consent. They were given ample opportunity to seek clarification, pause, or withdraw at any point, thereby ensuring that participation remained entirely voluntary and ethically sound. A further challenge involved navigating the inherent power dynamics embedded in community-engaged research. While such partnerships aim to foster inclusive and participatory approaches, they also bring to the fore asymmetries in power, privilege, and authority. As Andress et al. (2020) observe, these dynamics often manifest in

relationships between academic researchers—who represent institutions of power and status—and communities shaped by histories of colonialism, economic marginalisation, and cultural inequities.

Recognising and accepting these imbalances was critical to fostering authentic dialogue and participatory engagement. One interview underscored this dynamic, when a participant referred to me as a 'job-giver'—a misconception I made a point of addressing at the outset of every interview. Despite clear explanations that the research aimed to explore the impacts of labour mobility on livelihoods, some participants continued to associate my role with influence over employment opportunities. Several expressed hope that the research would advocate for the expansion of overseas work placements for I-Kiribati citizens. As one participant remarked, *"It's encouraging you're researching in labour mobility as there is so much we want to say about the program. We hope your report will advocate to government the increase of overseas work opportunities in a timely manner" (Anonymous, 28 January 2024).* Such responses highlight the complex interplay between research, expectation, and advocacy in contexts where development programs are highly anticipated and deeply personal. They also reinforce the importance of maintaining ethical clarity and reflexivity throughout the research process.

3.9.3 Managing expectations, language, and positionality in fieldwork

Given the complex dynamics of conducting research in Kiribati, it was essential to remain acutely aware of the expectations the research might generate. Managing these expectations—without discouraging participants from engaging in meaningful dialogue—was a delicate but necessary task. It became clear that while participants were eager to share their experiences, it was equally important to clarify the scope and limitations of the research. This required offering guidance and support where appropriate, without presenting definitive answers or making commitments beyond the research mandate. A further challenge involved facilitating conversations on sensitive topics—particularly labour mobility as a climate adaptation strategy—without instilling fear or anxiety. These discussions necessitated unpacking the existential threats posed by climate change, including displacement, relocation, and forced migration. However, the Kiribati language lacks direct translations for many of these concepts, making it difficult to communicate them without risking misinterpretation or emotional distress. This linguistic and cultural gap raised critical questions: How can such urgent conversations proceed without inciting fear? Conversely, how can they not proceed when silence perpetuates ignorance? These questions weighed heavily on the research throughout the fieldwork, as I was constantly aware that a single misstep in language could heighten participants' fears. To navigate this, I drew on the ethical guidance provided through the ANU Ethics and Integrity training,

which proved invaluable in shaping a careful, respectful, and culturally sensitive research approach. The fieldwork required a form of ethical leadership—one that avoided over-promising or overstepping the boundaries of what the research could realistically deliver.

Another significant difficulty was managing the expectations of both government officials and community members, many of whom viewed research activities as little more than extractive 'data collection' exercises. As a developing country, Kiribati has long been the subject of intensive research and development interventions. Unfortunately, these efforts have often yielded limited tangible benefits for local communities, many of whom continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and systemic underdevelopment (Meki & Tarai, 2023; Taylor & Middleby, 2023). As one of the most climate-impacted nations globally, Kiribati has also become one of the most heavily researched—particularly in relation to climate change—yet with little visible impact on emissions reduction or structural adaptation. Against this backdrop, the research was initially met with scepticism and resistance. It was perceived yet another externally driven initiative with no clear benefit to the community. This prompted a critical reassessment of my research approach and, more importantly, my own positionality. I was compelled to reflect on the following questions:

1. What is the influence of my positionality as a Kiribati woman in this research?
2. How do I navigate my positionality in different contexts—when engaging with government, communities, workers, and families?
3. In what ways does my positionality influence the research process and outcomes?

Engaging with these questions allowed me to confront my own motivations for conducting the research and collecting data. This reflexive process proved transformative. It fostered open dialogue with both government officials and participants, enhancing transparency, trust, and mutual understanding. I found that being honest and upfront about the purpose and potential benefits of the research reassured stakeholders of my intentions and helped to rebuild confidence in the project. The situation underscored the importance of trust-building and the ethical responsibility to communicate research goals. It also highlighted the blurred lines between research and advocacy in contexts where communities are deeply invested in the outcomes. Fortunately, this process led to renewed relationships with both government and community stakeholders. Following a clarifying meeting with government officials, my research permit was approved, and I promptly paid the required fee of AUD 1,250. This resolution marked a turning point in the fieldwork, reinforcing the value of reflexivity, transparency, and ethical engagement in research conducted within one's own community.

3.9.4 Am I really an insider? Reflections on positionality and identity

While the earlier challenges may have tested the extent of my I-Kiribati identity, they also prompted a deeper, more personal question: *Am I truly an insider?* For any I-Kiribati researcher, having the legitimacy of their work questioned can be a disorienting experience—particularly given the widely held view that research should foster dialogue, embrace diverse perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to the welfare and development of I-Kiribati communities. Initially, I perceived the resistance I encountered as a form of unfair treatment, possibly linked to my prior affiliation with a former administration. However, this experience offered valuable insight into the evolving political landscape. While the previous government had actively supported migration as a climate adaptation strategy, the current administration adopts a more cautious, if not oppositional, stance on climate-induced mobility. This divergence underscored the political dynamism that shapes national responses to climate adaptation and served as a critical learning moment for both me and the research.

My sense of insider status was further complicated by my own fluid and multifaceted identity. As a Kiribati-Banaban, born and partially raised in Fiji, I straddle two cultural worlds. I identify as I-Kiribati, with deep familial and cultural roots in Southern and Northern Kiribati, but I also identify as Banaban-Rabian, with ancestral ties to Rabi Island in Fiji. My Banaban heritage is shaped by a legacy of forced displacement, when my ancestors were relocated from Banaba (Ocean Island) to Rabi Island during the colonial phosphate mining era (Teaiwa, 2014, 2017). While this history is marked by dispossession and displacement, it has also afforded me the privilege of dual belonging—access to an alternative home in Fiji and the ability to live and work there.

In addition to this cultural duality, I also carry the privileges of education and international exposure. As a woman who has benefited from educational migration—first through my parents' scholarship to Fiji and Australia, and later through my own academic journey (also in Fiji and Australia)—I possess experiences and perspectives that many of my participants may not share. This positionality, shaped by mobility and access, means I cannot fully claim to understand the lived realities of all I-Kiribati people, particularly concerning decisions about climate migration, nor do I seek to speak for these communities. It became clear that I could not assume that my views on labour mobility as a form of climate adaptation would be universally shared, hence this research to garner a better understanding of community perspectives on this crucial topic of migration as climate adaptation. This realisation served as a powerful reminder to approach the field with humility, reflexivity, and openness. It reinforced the importance of not projecting my own assumptions onto participants but instead

listening carefully to their diverse perspectives. Entering the field with both eyes open—cognisant of my privileges, biases, and limitations—was not only ethically necessary but methodologically essential for producing grounded, respectful, and inclusive research.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the foundational elements that enable te waa—as both a metaphor and a methodological framework—to navigate toward new epistemological horizons. Central to this journey is the research question: *How does labour mobility facilitate adaptation?* For te waa to remain a safe and effective vessel for knowledge-making and livelihood, it must be reflexively maintained. In the same way, researchers must remain critically self-aware, attuned to the social, political, and cultural currents that shape their positionality and influence the research process. As Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) argue, such reflexivity enhances the researcher's capacity to interrogate their own biases and the ways in which knowledge is constructed and interpreted.

Te waa, as a methodological compass, does not sail in isolation—it is guided by the winds of socio-economic, political, demographic, environmental, and climate change forces. These must be acknowledged, negotiated, and integrated into the research journey. As Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022) remind us, research and development cannot be meaningfully undertaken without a deep understanding of how people think, feel, and behave within their own cultural contexts.

To ensure the reliability and validity of research outcomes, the researcher must, like a skilled navigator, test the waters and assess the climate—both literal and metaphorical—before setting sail. This includes reading the subtle signs that emerge during interviews and interactions: the emotions, silences, and hesitations that signal when to speak, when to listen, and when to step back and allow others to steer. Through Te Waa methodology, this study is equipped not only to explore whether labour mobility serves as a viable climate adaptation strategy for I-Kiribati but also to do so in a manner that is ethically grounded, culturally respectful, and methodologically sound. It enables the construction of new knowledge that is both contextually relevant and navigated with care—ensuring that the voyage is not only purposeful, but also safe, inclusive, and transformative.

Chapter 4 : Understanding the History and Shifting Landscape of Labour Mobility in Kiribati

"The government of Kiribati recognises the important role of international labour migration in addressing the lack of employment opportunities, promoting economic and social development, alleviating poverty, and adapting to climate change" (Kiribati National Labour Migration Policy, 2012).

4.1 Introduction

This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the labour landscape in Kiribati by providing a contextual overview of labour migration within the broader regional, socio-economic, and institutional settings that shape mobility across the Pacific. It critically explores how structural constraints—such as geographic isolation, limited economic diversification, and climate vulnerability—intersect with national education and training systems to influence the employment pathways available to I-Kiribati, both domestically and abroad. By establishing this context, the chapter sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows (Chapters 5-7), offering essential background to interpret the labour mobility patterns and climate adaptation strategies discussed in Chapter 8.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 4.2 situates Kiribati within the wider Pacific Region, or Oceania, highlighting how the region's vastness, diversity, and interconnectedness shape labour migration dynamics. Section 4.3 explores the country's internal constraints, including its dispersed geography, small economy, and demographic pressures, which collectively limit access to international labour markets. Section 4.4 provides an overview of the education landscape in Kiribati, analysing the role of the formal education system in preparing youth for employment, with a particular focus on the challenges of aligning training with job opportunities. Section 4.5 examines two flagship vocational institutions—the Marine Training Centre (MTC) and the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT)—assessing their contributions to workforce development and their role in facilitating labour mobility. Finally, Section 4.6 concludes the chapter with a critical reflection on the strategic importance of labour migration as both an economic and climate adaptation strategy for Kiribati.

To frame this discussion, the chapter draws on the influential work of Pacific scholar and cultural critic Epeli Hau'ofa, particularly his seminal 1993 essay *Our Sea of Islands*. Hau'ofa's reimagining of the Pacific as 'Oceania'—a vast, interconnected Blue Continent—challenges dominant narratives that

portray the region as isolated, fragmented, and vulnerable. Instead, he foregrounds the Pacific's richness, resilience, and navigational heritage, positioning its peoples as skilled, adaptive, and mobile. This conceptual shift is particularly relevant to Kiribati, where the legacy of seafaring continues to inform both cultural identity and contemporary labour migration practices.

In this context, labour mobility is not merely a response to economic hardship or climate displacement; it is an expression of agency and adaptability. I-Kiribati are not passive victims of geography or climate change, but active participants in shaping their futures—whether through temporary labour schemes, permanent migration, or transnational livelihoods. This chapter, therefore, explores how Kiribati can strategically harness labour migration to overcome structural constraints, build resilience, and assert its place within a dynamic and interconnected Pacific Region.

4.2 Oceania: A Regional Context

Understanding the labour mobility landscape in Kiribati requires situating the country within the broader regional context of Oceania. Also known as the Pacific Region, Oceania encompasses the largest and deepest ocean basin on Earth (Hauʻofa, 2008; Medina, 2022; Morgan, 2022), which covers over 155 million square kilometres—more than 30 percent of the Earth's surface—making it larger than the combined landmass of all continents (NOAA, 2024). The Pacific Islands Region is marked by profound geographical, social, economic, and political diversity. It comprises a wide range of island types, from low-lying atolls and reef islands with limited landmass and resources, to larger volcanic and land-locked islands with mountainous terrain, fertile soils, and mineral wealth. While some islands face challenges such as poor soil fertility, limited freshwater, and low rainfall, others possess extensive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) rich in tuna stocks and other marine resources. This diversity shapes not only the development trajectories of individual states but also their labour migration dynamics.

Demographically, the region is experiencing significant population growth. The population of the Pacific Islands is projected to exceed 20 million by 2050, with much of this growth concentrated in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Kiribati (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022c). This demographic trend presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it offers a growing labour force and human capital; on the other, it exacerbates prevailing pressures on limited resources, infrastructure, and employment opportunities—particularly in smaller, climate-vulnerable states like Kiribati (Government of Kiribati, 2016, 2020; Rimon, 2022; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022b). The region is also highly exposed to environmental risks. Known as the 'Ring of Fire', the Pacific is prone to frequent seismic and volcanic activity. It is also one of the most disaster-

prone regions globally, facing both rapid-onset events such as cyclones—especially in countries like Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands—and slow-onset climate impacts, including sea level rise and the degradation of ecosystems in atoll nations such as Tuvalu, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands.

These intersecting challenges—geographic isolation, environmental vulnerability, and demographic pressures—pose significant barriers to sustainable development and regional resilience. As Firth (2018) notes, these structural constraints undermine internal stability and adaptive capacity across the Pacific. In response, regionalism has emerged as a strategic framework for collective action. The 'Blue Pacific' narrative, championed by the Pacific Islands Forum (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018, 2019), underscores the importance of regional cooperation in achieving a secure, resilient, and prosperous Oceania.

4.3 Kiribati: Constraints for Labour Migration

4.3.1 Overview

It is important to note at the outset, that Kiribati's experience in international mobility has evolved over more than a century, forming one of the most enduring migration histories in the Pacific, as discussed in Chapter 2. Such a history provides essential context for understanding present-day climate-related movement and this research inquiry on the role of migration in climate adaption. Early patterns of mobility began in the 1900s when I-Kiribati were recruited into the Banaba and Nauru phosphate industries (Bedford et al, 2016; Connell, 2021)—labour flows that later led to the relocation of Banaban communities in the 1940s to Rabi Island in Fiji (Teaiwa, 2014). The Nauru and Banaba schemes are formative to Kiribati's distinctive island quota system that is maintained today for overseas recruitment to both New Zealand's RSE, and Australia's PALM.

This was followed by subsequent state-led movements in the 1940s-1950s, chiefly the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme that facilitated the internal relocation of substantial population groups from southern Gilbert Islands to the Phoenix Islands, to ease pressure on resources, land shortages, and exposure to prolonged drought (Van Trease, 1993). The scheme was short-lived when the new settlements in Phoenix Islands confronted further environmental issues including drought and water insecurity. Consequently, further organised movement occurred in the 1950s-60s when communities from the Phoenix Islands were relocated to British-run copra plantations in the Solomon Islands where a significant diaspora resides today (Tabe, 2011). These early government-initiated schemes employed mobility as a strategy for adapting to the challenges of climate variability and population growth in

central Pacific atoll ecosystems, while affirming that climate-driven relocation is not new to Kiribati, rather, it is a long existing phenomenon.

By the late 1960s, Kiribati had become a significant participant in the global seafaring industry, which emerged as a major pillar of I-Kiribati labour mobility—an industry that remained a major source of employment for I-Kiribati men for decades (Borovnik, 2007). From the 1980s through the early 2000s, new opportunities emerged through the Kiribati and Tuvalu Work Permit Schemes, later feeding into New Zealand's Pacific Access Category, and the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program from 2007. These long-standing labour pathways laid the foundation for expanded participation in structured migration schemes in Australia, as this chapter will discuss, culminating in engagement with Australia's PALM scheme in 2022 (Doan et al, 2023) and the introduction of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) in 2025 (Howes and Sharman, 2023). Together, these patterns of labour mobility and internal movement, demonstrate a long-standing trajectory of I-Kiribati adaptability, resilience, and contribution across the region and beyond. They also reaffirm that population movement in response to environmental stressors is not a new phenomenon; rather, it is embedded in Kiribati's labour mobility legacy, navigating climate variability, resource scarcity, and shifting ecological conditions. Contemporary labour mobility schemes therefore represent an extension of these long-standing mobility traditions—now shaped by modern economic structures, global labour markets, and the intensifying impacts of climate change. Figure 4.1 illustrates this extensive labour migration history.

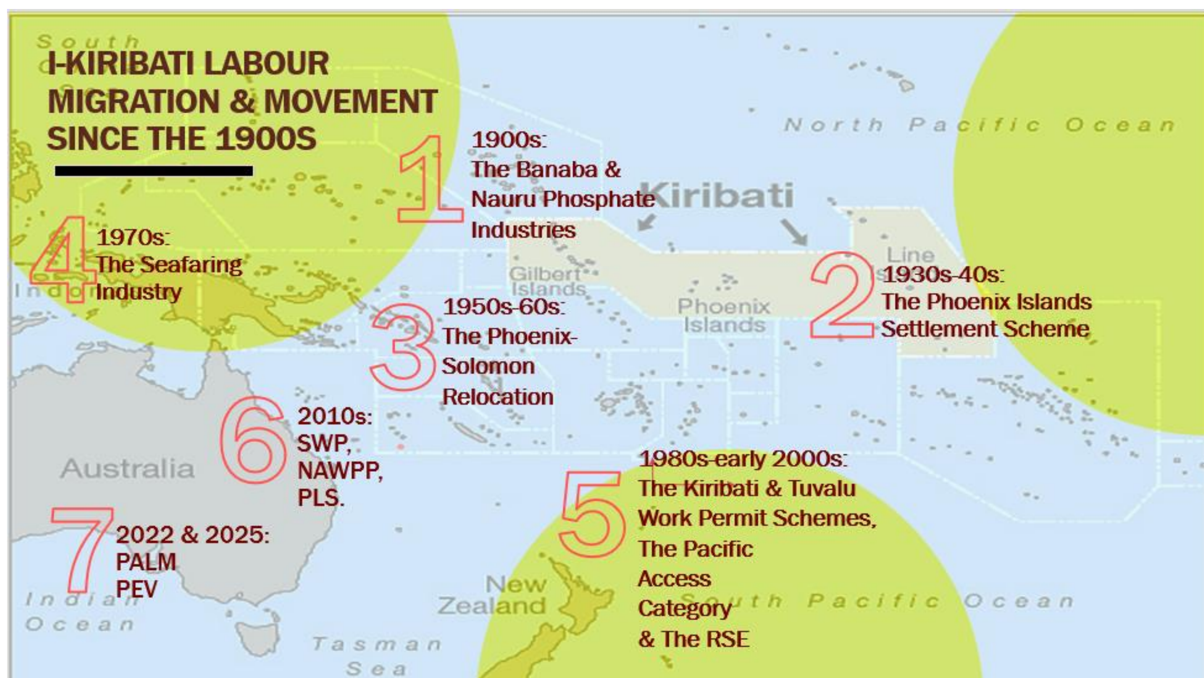


Figure 4.1 Labour Migration and Internal Movement Map since the 1900s| Source: Author (2025).

Kiribati's expansive maritime geography presents significant constraints for development and labour mobility, as explored in the subsequent sections. The country's low-lying atolls as covered at the introduction of this thesis, rise no more than three metres above sea level, rendering it acutely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, particularly sea level rise and coastal erosion. These environmental vulnerabilities are compounded by geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and high communications and transportation costs, all of which hinder access to international labour markets and constrain economic diversification. Moreover, the spatial dispersion of islands poses logistical challenges for national governance, service delivery, and workforce development. These structural limitations underscore the importance of targeted labour mobility strategies that can leverage Kiribati's human capital while mitigating the risks posed by its environmental and geographic constraints.

4.3.2 The tyranny of distance

Kiribati's prospects for labour migration and economic development are significantly constrained by what is often referred to as the 'tyranny of distance'. As a geographically dispersed atoll nation, Kiribati is among the most isolated countries in the world, both from major global markets and within its own borders. This isolation imposes substantial logistical and economic burdens that shape the country's development trajectory, shaped by distant trading routes, high transportation costs, limited market access, and dependency on imports for approximately 80% of its goods (Asian Development Bank, 2024). These factors contribute to a high cost of living and a widening income gap, both domestically and in comparison, to other countries. As a result, Kiribati functions mainly as a price taker in the global economy, absorbing the costs of inflation and supply chain disruptions without the leverage to influence them. A recent economic report highlights the disproportionate burden of basic food commodity prices on ordinary I-Kiribati households, underscoring the vulnerability of the population to external shocks (ADB, 2024; IMF, 2025).

Internally, the spatial fragmentation of the country presents equally formidable challenges. Kiribati is spread across three major island groupings—the Gilbert Islands in the north-west (to the north of Tuvalu and Fiji), the Phoenix Islands in the south-east, and the Line Islands in the easternmost side of the country—spanning a maritime area of 3.5 million square kilometres. This vast dispersion makes national development a costly and complex undertaking. The provision of essential services—such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure—requires substantial investment in transportation and communication systems, which in Kiribati are often unreliable, infrequent, or prohibitively expensive (Thomas & Tonganibeia, 2006). The logistical challenges posed by the country's vast maritime

geography significantly hinder equitable service delivery across its 33 islands. For instance, travel between the capital, South Tarawa, and Kiritimati Island in the Eastern Line Group frequently necessitates international transit due to the absence of consistent domestic flight routes. Although the recent introduction of flights by Nauru Airlines (Our Airlines) has improved connectivity, the high cost of air travel continues to limit accessibility for much of the population.

This logistical fragmentation complicates the management of even basic services. Coordinating tourism operations or administrative oversight in remote islands such as Teraina or Kanton from the capital is not only resource-intensive but often impractical. The resulting delays in service provision and policy implementation undermine national development efforts and exacerbate regional disparities. As Hezel (2012) aptly observes, development in Kiribati is shaped as much by geography as by policy. The persistent challenge of overcoming physical distance—both within the country and in relation to the global economy—continues to constrain Kiribati's capacity to fully harness its development potential. Addressing these constraints necessitates innovative, regionally integrated approaches that are tailored to the spatial realities of Kiribati as a large ocean state, including for migration as an economic and climate change option.

4.3.3 Population and unemployment dynamics: underlying pressures on labour migration

Kiribati's demographic and employment dynamics significantly intensify the underlying conditions that make labour mobility an essential development strategy. With a rapidly growing population exceeding 120,000 and one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the Pacific, Kiribati faces mounting socio-economic pressures. Over half of the population is concentrated in the capital, South Tarawa, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the region (Kiribati National Statistics Office, 2020; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022b).

The working-age population stands at 72,300, yet labour force participation remains low at 48.1%—with a notable gender disparity (40.6% for women and 56.3% for men). The national unemployment rate is around 11.3 %, but youth unemployment is significantly higher at 27%. Alarmingly, nearly 50% of young people are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), placing Kiribati among the countries with the highest youth disengagement in the Pacific (ILO, 2024). This demographic pressure is compounded by a steady population growth rate of more than 2% annually, with projections estimating a population of nearly 189,000 by 2050 (Kiribati National Statistics Office, 2020; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022). As the population grows, so too does the strain on already limited natural resources. Combined with the impacts of climate change, this demographic growth

undermines the resilience of the atoll nation's fragile ecosystems and their capacity to sustain human habitation. Increasing competition for food, water, and land intensifies the risk of social tension and internal displacement (Storey & Hunter, 2010; UNEP, n.d). The Kiribati Vision 20 highlights this as a security threat:

> *"In most islands, coastal erosion and inundation is becoming the new norm and which has led to loss of precious and already limited land space and resources, such as water. If left unabated, it has the potential to create future tensions and insecurity among I-Kiribati, who will have to compete for these limited resources." (Government of Kiribati, 2016a, p. 39)*

Although these dynamics do not directly inhibit labour migration, they create the socio-economic conditions that make migration a necessary outlet. Internal migration from South Tarawa back to the outer islands has long been a coping mechanism, but it has failed to alleviate urban overcrowding or reduce pressure on limited land and public services (Rallu, 2009; Thomas & Tonganibeia, 2006). The Copra Subsidy Scheme is a long-standing government initiative aimed at curbing urban migration to South Tarawa by incentivising economic activity in the outer islands. While the scheme has succeeded in transferring income to rural communities and providing a vital social safety net—particularly for those without formal employment—it has not achieved its overall objective of reducing migration to the capital and alternative employment, vital to those without jobs. Despite the subsidy, urban migration continues as outer island residents are better equipped to access better education, healthcare, and employment opportunities in the capital. Despite its intentions, the scheme is fraught with inefficiencies that place a significant burden on government resources. Operational challenges—such as inadequate copra storage facilities, irregular inter-island shipping services, and the practice of paying producers upon weighing rather than upon delivery—undermine the scheme's effectiveness. These issues often result in copra failing to reach processing facilities in the capital, further diminishing the scheme's economic and logistical viability (IMF, 2024).

Efforts have also been made to diversify the delivery of social services, including health, education and vocational training, across Kiribati's outer islands. However, these initiatives are frequently constrained by the high costs associated with distance, logistics, and operations in remote and geographically dispersed communities. Within this context, international labour mobility emerges as a critical development strategy. It not only helps alleviate demographic and environmental pressures on densely populated areas like South Tarawa but also offers I-Kiribati citizens access to employment, income, and improved livelihoods abroad. While population growth and unemployment are not direct barriers to migration, they serve as powerful drivers of well-managed, equitable, and sustainable

labour mobility pathways. Addressing these dynamics through strategic migration programs can enhance resilience, reduce urban strain, and foster inclusive development across the nation.

4.3.4 Small economy and few prospects for growth: the case for labour mobility

Kiribati's economy is among the smallest and most structurally constrained in the Pacific, with limited prospects for sustained growth due to its extreme geographic isolation and internal dispersion. These spatial and demographic realities present enduring challenges for policymakers and development planners (Government of Kiribati, 2020). Classified by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country (LDC), Kiribati's economic structure is shaped by a narrow resource base, a dominant public sector, and a high dependency on external aid and development assistance (Kuruppu & Willie, 2015; Webb, 2019). The public sector remains the largest employer, yet it is unable to absorb the growing number of school leavers entering the labour market each year. With limited private sector development and few opportunities for formal employment, many young I-Kiribati face long-term unemployment or underemployment. This is compounded by gaps in education, training, and work experience, which further limit their employability in both domestic and international labour markets. In 2023, Kiribati's GDP stood at approximately USD 279 million, with a GDP per capita of less than USD 2,000 (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022a; World Bank, 2023). The economy is highly vulnerable to environmental shocks and slow-onset climate impacts, including prolonged droughts, sea level rise, and coastal erosion. These challenges place additional strain on infrastructure and divert government resources away from long-term development priorities and immediate social needs (Hermann & Kempf, 2017; Kuruppu, 2009).

Given these constraints, the imperative for economic diversification and access to international labour markets is even more urgent today (Government of Kiribati, 2016, 2020; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2022b). While successive governments have pursued reforms in key sectors such as fisheries and copra production, these efforts face persistent challenges related to scale, market access, and sustainability. Notable initiatives include the expansion of the fisheries sector through joint ventures and regional mechanisms, such as the Vessel Day Scheme and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, which have helped maximise returns from marine resources while promoting conservation (Hanich et al., 2010). However, these sectors alone are insufficient to meet the employment demands of Kiribati's rapidly growing and youthful population, whose socio-economic challenges have intensified in recent years. This growing pressure heightens the risks of inequitable access to essential resources such as food, water, and livelihoods—particularly in vulnerable communities.

The limitations of traditional industries and service sectors underscore the urgent need for more inclusive and sustainable development strategies (Connell, 2013; Connell, 2014). Since independence in 1979, Kiribati has increasingly adopted a MIRAB (Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy) economic model. Migration and remittances—particularly from seafarers, have long played a vital role in supporting household incomes and national revenue. More recently, Kiribati's participation in labour mobility schemes such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) has expanded, engaging substantial numbers of I-Kiribati. While these numbers are significant, further expansion is necessary if the schemes are to serve as sustainable pathways for population relief and climate adaptation. Labour migration plays a significant role in Kiribati's economy, contributing not only to household incomes through remittances but also to national development. Although Kiribati is sometimes classified among the high participating countries in regional labour mobility schemes (Curtain & Howes, 2024), a trend reinforced by the significant growth in I-Kiribati women's participation (Bedford, 2025), this elevated level of engagement is driven primarily by the repeated participation of returning workers, rather than by a steady influx of new recruits.

It is important to clarify here the distinction between Kiribati's small absolute worker numbers in the PALM/RSE and its comparatively high participation rate relative to population size. This distinction is important: high participation rates do not necessarily indicate broad-based population uptake or widespread support for labour mobility as a climate adaptation strategy. Instead, they point to a concentrated pattern in which a relatively small cohort of experienced workers cycle through multiple contracts. This point is well supported by Gibson and Bailey (2021) and Cornish et al, (2022) who describe Pacific labour mobility, including I-Kiribati participation, as a form of circular migration, where workers repeatedly return for multiple seasons rather than being replaced by new entrants. Bedford et al, (2017) affirms this also by noting that employers prefer re-engaging employees who had previously completed a season, as this reduces training costs and increases reliability. Doan et al (2020) and Curtain et al (2018) also alluded to majority of seasonal and long-term labour mobility workers as returnees. Therefore, although regional trends portray Kiribati as a high participating country, this pattern can mask uneven access, especially where participation is concentrated among returning workers rather than new recruits. Consequently, the prominence of returning workers suggests that labour mobility opportunities if they were to function as an important adaptation strategy in Kiribati, remain unevenly distributed, and not expanding proportionately across the wider population, as illustrated in the research samples in Chapter 3.

Remittances in Kiribati accounted for nearly 10% of GDP in 2020 (ILO, 2024), providing critical income support to families, enhancing skills development, and building resilience in the face of climate change. Labour mobility thus serves not only as a coping mechanism but as a strategic pillar of economic development—offering pathways for employment, poverty alleviation, and long-term adaptation. In this context, labour migration is not merely a response to economic stagnation; it is a proactive strategy for expanding opportunity, redistributing population pressures, and integrating Kiribati more effectively into the global economy.

4.3.5 Climate change: a catalyst for migration as adaptation

Kiribati is among the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world, with its low-lying geography rendering it acutely susceptible to the impacts of sea level rise, extreme weather events, and other slow-onset climate-related hazards. The country faces existential threats that undermine not only its development prospects but also its long-term habitability and sovereignty (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018, 2019). Climate change is already infringing on the daily lives and livelihoods of I-Kiribati. It compromises food security through saltwater intrusion into agricultural land, reduces access to clean drinking water, and accelerates coastal erosion that threatens homes and infrastructure. These cascading impacts divert government attention and resources away from long-term development planning toward immediate disaster response and adaptation needs (Government of Kiribati, 2012, 2016, 2020). Prolonged droughts, frequent spring tides, and the increasing intensity of climate extremes further strain the country's limited capacity to meet the social and economic needs of its population.

The Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting in Tonga (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2024) reaffirmed the severity of climate change, particularly sea level rise, as a defining threat to the security and future of low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati. In this context, climate change is not merely an environmental issue—it is a development crisis that intersects with population pressures, economic fragility, and mobility. While migration is not a solution to climate change, it is increasingly recognised as a legitimate and necessary adaptation strategy in the absence of robust international protection frameworks for climate-displaced communities (McAdam, 2010, 2018).

This research situates labour migration within the broader climate adaptation discourse, arguing that migration—particularly through well-managed labour mobility schemes—can serve as a vital tool for enhancing adaptive capacity. As the certainty of climate impacts on development and mobility increases, it becomes imperative to understand how climate change is reshaping the drivers of

migration in Kiribati and why facilitating safe, dignified, and strategic migration is essential for the country's future.

4.3.6 Few migration options: the need for scalable and strategic mobility pathways

Despite Kiribati's long-standing tradition of mobility—ranging from the phosphate industry of Banaba and Nauru to decades of seafaring, and more recently participation in labour mobility schemes such as Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme—the country still has comparatively limited migration prospects. Unlike other Pacific states with dedicated migration pathways, such as the Compact of Free Association arrangements between the United States and the Northern Micronesian countries, or the free movement treaties linking the Cook Islands and Niue with New Zealand, Kiribati lacks equivalent avenues for permanent or semi-permanent mobility. As such, labour schemes like the PALM and the RSE, and permanent pathways like the Pacific Access Category and the Pacific Engagement Visa, enacted through bilateral and regional agreements—provide rare opportunities for work abroad that would otherwise be inaccessible without these arrangements (Curtain & Howes, 2024). These schemes therefore play a critical role in reducing the structural barriers that have historically constrained Kiribati's participation in international labour markets (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Howes & Liu, 2022).

As part of its broader economic reform and diversification agenda, the Maamau-Government has identified labour mobility as a key strategy to enhance employment, skills development, and income generation, with an ambitious goal of achieving 100% employment by 2030 (KV20, 2020). However, with limited domestic job creation and low participation rates in international labour schemes, this target remains aspirational. The tyranny of distance continues to impose high logistical and financial barriers to migration, making it more difficult for I-Kiribati to access overseas employment opportunities compared to other Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Moreover, the absence of a significant I-Kiribati diaspora overseas limits the country's ability to build strong employer networks and labour hire relationships, which are critical for scaling up participation in temporary and permanent migration programs. Internally, the growing trend of rural-to-urban migration has intensified overcrowding in South Tarawa, further underscoring the need for external migration pathways to alleviate demographic and environmental pressures (Duncan, 2014, 2014; Geddes et al., 1979).

Permanent migration schemes such as New Zealand's Pacific Access Category (PAC) and Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) offer promising alternatives. The PAC has facilitated the growth of a

small but steadily expanding I-Kiribati diaspora in New Zealand, now estimated at nearly 5,000 people (Burnett & Bond, 2020; Korauaba, 2011; Thompson, 2016). While these numbers are modest in absolute terms, they reflect a strong and growing interest among I-Kiribati in pursuing migration as a long-term livelihood and adaptation strategy. In 2023, 58 I-Kiribati applied for the PAC's 75 annual slots—now expanded to 150—demonstrating increasing demand for permanent migration opportunities. The growing popularity of both permanent and temporary migration schemes is critical not just for economic development but also for climate resilience. Labour mobility enables households to diversify income sources, build transnational networks, and reduce pressure on fragile ecosystems at home. As the impacts of climate change intensify, migration—particularly through well-managed and rights-based programs—offers a viable adaptation strategy for Kiribati. It provides a pathway for individuals and families to proactively respond to environmental stressors, while contributing remittances that support household resilience and national development.

Although permanent migration remains limited in scale, its strategic importance for Kiribati cannot be overstated. Expanding access to safe, orderly, and inclusive migration pathways will be essential for addressing the country's intertwined challenges of economic vulnerability, demographic pressure, and climate risk (Voigt-Graf, 2016; Voigt-Graf & Kagan, 2017; Yates et al., 2023). As this research explores in subsequent chapters, migration must be understood not as a last resort, but as a forward-looking adaptation strategy, empowering I-Kiribati to make informed choices as they navigate an uncertain future.

4.3.7 Non-alignment of migration and development policies: a missed opportunity for climate adaptation

Despite the growing urgency of climate and economic pressures, Kiribati's migration policies remain insufficiently aligned with its broader development and resilience-building goals. This misalignment undermines the potential of labour migration to serve as a strategic adaptation mechanism—one that could alleviate poverty, reduce demographic pressure, and enhance national resilience in the face of climate change. Kiribati's social protection programs—such as the Social Protection Fund or *te mwane n aki mwakuri* (the Unemployment Allowance), and the Copra Subsidy—are designed to support vulnerable populations. However, these schemes have become increasingly fiscally unsustainable and risk entrenching patterns of dependency and vulnerability. The copra subsidy which has ranged from AUD 1 to AUD 4 per kilogram in recent years, persists despite logistical constraints in coconut production and exposure to volatile international markets. Similarly, the unemployment fund of AUD

50 per month for nationals aged between 18-59, has expanded rapidly, costing the government around AUD20-40million annually, largely financed through excess fishing revenues.

While the intention is to equitably distribute national wealth, these programs raise important questions—whether they genuinely build resilience or inadvertently deepen cycles of vulnerability—and whether these funds could be more effectively channelled into job-creation and productive investments. Together, the programs are estimated to consume nearly one-third of GDP, with gross government debt reaching 17.6%—a trajectory that prompted concerns about long-term debt distress (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022; Rimon, 2022, 2024; Webb, 2020).

The inconsistency in migration policy across successive administrations further complicates this landscape. The previous government's Migration with Dignity policy framed migration as a proactive adaptation strategy in response to climate change, while the current Maamau administration has prioritised in-situ resilience-building. Although both approaches are valid, the lack of continuity has led to missed opportunities and policy fragmentation. The abrupt discontinuation of migration-focused reforms before their full implementation reflects the political volatility that often surrounds migration discourse in Kiribati, as is normally the case elsewhere. The Trump, populist and anti-migration policies are a case in point. This prolonged inconsistency of policies in Kiribati is particularly problematic given the government's stated goal of increasing overseas employment by 100% by 2036 (Government of Kiribati, 2016). Achieving this target requires expanding access to labour mobility schemes and integrating migration into national development blueprints as a core pillar of economic and climate resilience. It should be noted that migration is not a panacea, but when strategically aligned with development policy, it can serve as a powerful tool for adaptation. It enables households to diversify income, reduces pressure on fragile ecosystems, and builds transnational networks that can support long-term resilience. In the context of Kiribati's limited domestic economic base and escalating climate threats, the case for embedding migration into national development planning is not just compelling—it is imperative.

4.4 Education, Labour Mobility, and Climate Adaptation: A Foundational Nexus

4.4.1 Overview

This section provides an overview of the education landscape in Kiribati and the challenges the country faces in ensuring that education meaningfully transforms the lives of its citizens. The origins of formal education in Kiribati are deeply rooted in missionary activity, introduced through three successive waves of evangelical missions prior to colonial rule. The first wave began with the arrival of the

American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) on Abaiang Island in 1857, led by Reverend Hiram Bingham and Hawaiian pastors. These missionaries evangelised the northern and central islands. The second wave, also led by the LMS, extended Protestantism to the southern islands in the 1870s. The third wave brought Catholicism to Nonouti in 1881, introduced by two I-Kiribati men—Betero Terawati and Tiroi—who had returned from working on a coconut plantation in Tahiti. With support from Rome, missionaries from the Congregation of the Sacred Heart arrived in 1888 and 1895, establishing churches and early schooling systems (KPC, 1960; Talu, 1979, 2008).

While the precise reasons for the missionaries' unopposed settlement remain unclear, their early success in converting local populations enabled them to establish schools that taught literacy through translated Bibles and hymnals. These efforts laid the foundation for formal education in Kiribati. Under the British colonial rule, education became institutionalised with the establishment of King George V School in 1922—an elite government school for boys, later merged with Elaine Bernacchi School for girls—to train I-Kiribati for roles in the colonial administration (CWM, 2012; Grimble, 1952; Macdonald, 2001; Sabatier, 1977). Initially, education served the dual purposes of religious conversion and colonial governance (Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984). However, in the post-independence era, its role evolved significantly. Upon gaining self-rule in 1979, Kiribati's first Beretitenti (President), Sir Ieremia Tabai, declared that the true meaning of independence was self-reliance: "*It is better to subsist on your own than to rely on someone*" (Scott, 1989). This vision remains profoundly relevant today, particularly as Kiribati navigates the intersecting challenges of climate change, economic vulnerability, and youth unemployment.

Education is central to this vision of self-reliance. It is the foundation upon which the country can build a skilled, adaptable, and mobile workforce capable of engaging in global labour markets. However, for education to meet the needs of contemporary Kiribati, it must be decolonised and reoriented toward local realities and future challenges (Burnett & Suluma, 2004; Teaero, 2001). This includes integrating climate literacy, vocational training, and transnational competencies that prepare young I-Kiribati for domestic employment and strategic migration opportunities abroad. In this context, education is not only a development tool but also a climate adaptation strategy. The alignment of education with labour mobility and climate adaptation is therefore essential for building a future in which I-Kiribati can thrive, whether at home or abroad, as discussed in the following subsections.

4.4.2 Education reform: for labour mobility and climate resilience

In Kiribati, education is compulsory for children aged 6 to 15. It follows a bottom-up structure beginning with basic education (pre-school and primary), progressing through junior secondary school (JSS), and culminating in senior secondary school. The national education system comprises 227 pre-schools, 97 primary schools (Years 1–6), 25 junior secondary schools (Years 7–9), and 20 senior secondary schools (Years 10–13), distributed across the country's widely dispersed islands. While all islands have access to pre-schools, primary schools, and JSS, not all have senior secondary schools. As a result, students must sit a national examination at the end of Year 9 to qualify for placement in one of the limited senior secondary schools—three of which are government-run and 17 administered by churches (MOE, 2015).

In 2008, I was posted as the Senior Assistant Secretary at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. One of my first tasks as part of the Senior Management Team was to organise the inaugural National Education Summit. This initiative, mandated by Cabinet, was a response to growing concerns over stagnating and declining educational outcomes among school leavers. Recognising the national significance of the issue, the Ministry launched the 'Education for All' campaign. It convened a broad coalition of stakeholders—including traditional leaders, church and school representatives, teachers, parents, youth groups, NGOs, civil society, and development partners. The summit was a landmark event with an inclusive approach deemed successful in generating consensus on the urgent need to reform the education system as a foundation for national development. Outcomes from the Summit underscored the need for a transformative shift in education policy and practice. There was widespread agreement that the existing curriculum was outdated—rooted in colonial-era models that no longer reflected the realities or aspirations of modern-day Kiribati. Participants called for a comprehensive curriculum review to align education with contemporary global challenges, local development needs, and the skills demanded in both domestic and international labour markets. This included integrating vocational training, digital literacy, and climate education to prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

Equally pressing were concerns about the declining appeal of teaching as a profession. Poor remuneration, heavy workloads, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited professional development opportunities had contributed to low morale and declining teacher retention—particularly in outer islands where conditions are most challenging. Many entered the profession not out of passion, but for job security (MOE, 2012, 2015; Teaero, 2001). These systemic issues continue to undermine the quality and equity of education delivery across the country.

Crucially, the summit reaffirmed that education is not merely a tool for personal advancement but a strategic lever for national resilience. In the context of Kiribati's limited economic base and escalating climate threats, education must be reimagined as a platform for optimising human capital production, enabling labour mobility, economic empowerment, and facilitating climate adaptation. By equipping young I-Kiribati with the skills, qualifications, and competencies needed to participate in international labour markets, the education system can serve as a launchpad for migration as a proactive adaptation strategy, not only for permanent migration but for return mobility and its social, economic, and material remittances (Bailey, 2025). This includes preparing students for participation in schemes such as PALM and RSE, as well as for permanent migration pathways that offer long-term opportunity, resilience, and security in the face of climate adversity. As such, education reform is not just about improving academic outcomes—it is importantly about building a resilient, future-ready population capable of navigating the dual challenges of economic vulnerability and climate change.

4.4.3 Post-education summit reforms and the imperative for vocational pathways

The 2008 National Education Summit catalysed a wave of significant reforms in Kiribati's education sector, leading to renewed policy direction, curriculum review, and improved education management. These reforms attracted increased investment from development partners while empowering the government to take greater leadership of its development trajectory by aligning it with its national and development priorities. This strengthened the Ministry of Education's capacity to deliver on its mandate of quality education for all. Central to this effort was the launch of the Kiribati Education Sector Strengthening Project—later renamed the Kiribati Education Improvement Program—which facilitated major infrastructure upgrades across the country, expanded teacher training and scholarship opportunities, and introduced professional development programs that reconfigured the landscape for education development in Kiribati, increasing teachers' and students' morale alike (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024; MOE, 2012, 2015; Smith & McNaughton, 2018).

A critical insight emerging from the summit was the structural imbalance between academic and vocational education. The system heavily favoured academic achievement, with students competing for limited scholarships as the primary route to further education and employment. While this model incentivised academic excellence, it excluded a significant proportion of students whose strengths lay in practical, technical, or trade-based skills. This narrow focus not only limited individual potential but crucially failed to align with the broader national development needs of Kiribati—particularly in a context where domestic job opportunities are scarce and international labour mobility is increasingly vital. This academic bias perpetuates a linear and exclusionary model of success, where university

scholarships are seen as the elite outcome of schooling. At the same time, the reality is ignored, namely, the accumulation of school-leavers each year without jobs or any pathways to employment. This increases pressure on unemployment and the underutilisation of human capital. Thus, the challenge lies in the government's ability to diversify post-school opportunities and create inclusive systems that recognise and nurture a broader range of skills, talents, and aspirations.

Figure 4.2: School Leavers-Employment Pyramid| Source: Author, 2025

UNESCO's education pyramid (Wagner & Castillo, 2014) offers a compelling framework for understanding the structural limitations of Kiribati's education-to-employment pipeline (Figure 4.2). In low-income countries like Kiribati, the base of the pyramid is broad, representing a large and growing youth population, while the apex is narrow, symbolising limited access to higher education and formal employment. The current education system disproportionately channels students toward this narrow academic apex, with few alternative pathways for those who fail in securing scholarships or university placements. As a result, many school-leavers are left unsupported, falling through the cracks of a system that equates success with academic achievement alone. This structural inefficiency undermines national development and severely constrains the country's capacity to adapt to climate and economic shocks. In a context where domestic job creation is limited and environmental pressures

are intensifying, the failure to equip young people with diverse, market-relevant skills represents a missed opportunity for resilience-building. Jobs—particularly those accessed through international labour mobility—are not merely economic outcomes; they are adaptive strategies. Therefore, expanding vocational education and aligning it with labour market demands—both domestic and international—is essential. It transforms education from a narrow academic pursuit into a broader platform for economic empowerment and climate resilience. In doing so, it positions labour mobility not as a last resort, but as a strategic and dignified pathway for I-Kiribati to thrive in an increasingly changing and uncertain world.

Strengthening vocational education is not just a matter of equity—it is a strategic imperative. By expanding vocational pathways, Kiribati can better equip its youth with practical skills that are in demand both locally and internationally. This is particularly relevant in the context of labour mobility schemes such as PALM and RSE, where technical and trade skills are highly valued. This is not to say that the pathways provide a better future or opportunity for Kiribati youths; rather, in the absence of work prospects, the pathways provide alternative employment and economic independence. Moreover, the rationale of vocational training is to empower youths by honing their practical skills to subsist on their own in life after school, while enhancing their capacity for self-reliance and resilience. Thus, the post-summit education reforms must be seen not only as a response to declining academic outcomes but as a foundational step toward building a more inclusive, adaptive, and future-ready education system, as discussed in the next section.

4.5 Labour Mobility Context in Kiribati

4.5.1 Overview

Building on the need to diversify education pathways and strengthen vocational training, the role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions becomes central to Kiribati's development and climate adaptation strategy. As highlighted in the previous section, the narrow academic focus of the education system has historically excluded many school-leavers from viable employment opportunities. In response, institutions like the Marine Training Centre (MTC) have emerged as critical enablers of labour mobility—offering practical, skills-based training that connects education directly to employment outcomes. These institutions not only address the structural gaps in the education system but also serve as strategic platforms for economic adaptation, equipping I-Kiribati with the competencies needed to access international labour markets and generate remittances that support household and national resilience. The following subsections explore the evolution and impact of the MTC (Section 4.5.2) and KIT (Section 4.5.3) as pioneering models of

vocational training and labour migration in Kiribati. Section 4.5.4 assesses the need for a shift in focus from academic to vocational education, and Section 4.5.5 examines the capacity of TVET to bridge the school-leaver gap. Finally, Section 4.5.6 analyses the effects of vocational education reforms.

4.5.2 Marine Training Centre (MTC)

The Marine Training Centre (MTC) stands as one of Kiribati's most significant vocational institutions and a pioneering model of labour mobility in the Pacific. Established in 1966 under British colonial administration, the MTC was originally named *Teraaka*, after a legendary Kiribati navigator and fisherman. Its founding purpose was to train I-Kiribati men for employment in the international maritime industry—a vision that has since evolved into a cornerstone of Kiribati's labour migration strategy. In the early 1970s, the German shipping company Hamburg Süd, along with seven other German shipowners, formed the South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS) consortium to manage the recruitment, training, and deployment of I-Kiribati seafarers. This partnership formalised Kiribati's entry into the global merchant shipping industry and established a reliable pipeline for overseas employment. The consortium also facilitated the payment of seafarer allotments to families and ensured access to entitlements, creating a transnational support system that benefited both workers and their communities.

Over the past few decades, the MTC attracted substantial investment from development partners including New Zealand, Japan, and Australia. These investments supported the expansion of training facilities, the introduction of advanced ship simulators, and the professional development of instructors through international exchange programs. In 2011, the MTC merged with the Fisheries Training Centre, further broadening its scope to include maritime fisheries and hospitality training. The centre also achieved 'whitelist' status under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC, 2006), affirming its compliance with international standards for seafarer training and certification (STCW). Each year, the MTC collaborates with Island Councils to recruit up to 100 young men aged 18–34, based on population quotas and physical fitness assessments. Trainees undergo a rigorous 9-month program to qualify as ratings and ship crew, with many advancing to Master Class IV certification. The MTC has facilitated over 30,000 seafaring jobs through SPMS, averaging 936 placements annually until its temporary closure in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic impact of the MTC has been profound. Seafarer remittances have long served as a vital source of foreign exchange for Kiribati, supporting extended families and contributing to national income. Beyond economic benefits, the MTC has played a critical role in building technical capacity,

fostering international mobility, and offering a dignified pathway for young I-Kiribati to engage with the global economy. Importantly, it exemplifies how vocational training offers economic adaptation.

4.5.3 Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT): advancing skills for economic adaptation

Since its establishment in 1970 as the Tarawa Technical Institute (TTI), the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) has served as the country's principal provider of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Initially focused on delivering full-time and part-time trade courses for domestic employment, KIT primarily catered to school-leavers and those who dropped out of school early. However, a major turning point came in 2010 when a fire severely damaged the Institute's infrastructure. While devastating, the incident became a catalyst for comprehensive reform—prompting a strategic overhaul of KIT's policy, infrastructure, and training delivery systems (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024; Peddle & McKay, 2015).

The reform, known as the Australia–Kiribati Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP), was embedded within the government's broader workforce development agenda (Bryant, et al, 2012). Its core objective was to increase the employability of graduates and equip them with skills aligned to both domestic and international labour market needs. The program was multidimensional, encompassing TVET policy reform, infrastructure investment, staff capacity building, and the introduction of inclusive, demand-driven training programs. These programs were designed to meet international standards, with Certificate I and II qualifications benchmarked against Australian Registered Training Organisation (RTO) frameworks to ensure quality assurance and global recognition (Government of Kiribati, 2020; KIT, 2024; SPC, 2018).

KIT's transformation was further validated in 2018 when it received regional accreditation from the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). This accreditation, renewed in 2023, affirmed KIT's compliance with the Pacific Quality Assurance Framework and positioned it as a regional leader in vocational education. The merger with the Kiribati School of Nursing further expanded KIT's training portfolio, increasing student intake and diversifying employment pathways in both national and international contexts.

KIT has since emerged as a prestigious institution offering inclusive, high-quality training to a wide demographic—including school-leavers, early-career professionals, young mothers, persons with disabilities, and disadvantaged youth. Delivered in two phases (2010–2012 and 2012–2016), the TVETSSP laid the foundation for a robust skills development ecosystem. It focused on two key

components: (i) strengthening the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development's capacity to oversee the TVET sector, and (ii) enhancing the quality, scope, and equity of training delivery at KIT. The program was valued at AUD 20 million investment by the Australian government. This phase introduced the Skills for Employment Program (SfEP) and the Flexible Support Facility (FSF), both of which aimed to consolidate KIT's institutional development and ensure that its graduates were qualified as well as job ready. By equipping I-Kiribati with internationally recognised skills, the institute supports pathways to employment that extend beyond national borders. This is particularly critical in a country where remittances and overseas employment are important means of alternative economic livelihoods and strategic tools for resilience. As such, KIT's reputation garnered popularity among young people and parents encouraging children to pursue vocational training.

4.5.4 Shifting focus from academic to vocational education: a strategic imperative

The TVET reform marked a transformative shift in Kiribati's national education strategy. It addressed a long-standing structural gap in the system—one that had historically prioritised academic achievement as the sole pathway to success—by introducing alternative, skills-based routes to employment. This shift was not merely a policy adjustment; it was a strategic intervention aimed at aligning education with the realities of Kiribati's labour market and the broader development context. By expanding vocational training opportunities, the reform created new avenues for school-leavers to become work-ready, both within Kiribati and through international labour mobility pathways.

This diversification of post-school pathways is a critical step toward building a more inclusive and adaptive education system. However, despite its progress, the reform has not yet resolved the scale of youth unemployment. Each year, approximately 3,000 students complete secondary education (Year 13 and below), yet only a small fraction transition into further education or employment. Around 200 students receive scholarships, another 200 or fewer secure jobs in the public sector—the country's largest employer—and approximately 100 enrol in vocational training institutions. An estimated 40 are absorbed into the private sector, churches, or NGOs. This leaves roughly 2,460 school-leavers each year without a clear pathway forward, an alarming figure that compounds annually and reflects the system's inability to absorb or redirect its own output.

This bottleneck not only represents a loss of human potential but also a missed opportunity for economic growth. In a country facing acute climate vulnerability and limited domestic job creation, the failure to equip youth with employable skills undermines national resilience. Vocational education, when aligned with labour market demand—particularly in sectors linked to regional labour mobility—

can serve as a powerful tool for economic empowerment and climate adaptation. It enables young I-Kiribati to access income-generating opportunities abroad, contribute remittances to their families, and reduce pressure on fragile local ecosystems and infrastructure. Therefore, the shift from an academic-dominated model to a more balanced, vocationally inclusive system must be deepened and accelerated. It is not simply a matter of educational equity—it is a national development and adaptation imperative. The following tables illustrate the current distribution of post-secondary outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for expanded and diversified pathways beyond the narrow academic track.

Table 4.1 provides a snapshot of Year 13/Form 7 enrolments and scholarships awarded in 2019 and 2020 by the government. In 2019, 758 students enrolled in Year 13, and only 171, or 23%, progressed to tertiary level scholarships in 2020. In 2020, 871 students enrolled in Year 13, and only 172 were awarded scholarships in 2021. The remaining 77% and 80% of students for both years did not receive scholarships. It is possible some of these students did not complete Year 13 and likely did not sit the end-of-year exams to be eligible for a scholarship. However, the data help shed light on the number of school leavers who exit the formal education system every year, and the proportion of unemployed youths that accumulates each year.

Table 4.1: Form 7 (Year 13) scholarship quotas, 2019-2021

Year	Year 13 Enrolment	Students awarded university scholarships	Students not awarded scholarships
2019/2020	758	171 (23%)	587 (77%)
2020/2021	871	172 (20%)	699 (80%)

Source: Ministry of Education (2021).

From the New Zealand scholarship data in Table 4.2, a total of 98 scholarships were offered between 2010 and 2020. This ranged from 4 to 12 scholarships per year for Year 13, reaffirming concern that the academic pathway is a competitive process, with a limited number of awards compared to the number of school leavers in the country in any one year.

Table 4.2: New Zealand tertiary scholarship quota for school leavers, 2010-2020

		Gender	
Year	**Scholarships awarded**	**Female**	**Male**
2010	6	4	2

2011	10	6	4
2012	12	8	4
2013	10	7	3
2014	11	9	2
2015	6	2	4
2016	5	4	1
2017	9	6	3
2018	13	9	4
2019	12	10	2
2020	4	4	0
Total	98	69	29

Source: New Zealand High Commission, Tarawa (2021).

For Australia, a total of 106 scholarships for Year 13 students were awarded between 2010 and 2020 (Table 4.3). Similarly, there is a limited number of scholarships in any one year in comparison to the total number of school leavers in those years.

Table 4.3: Australia tertiary scholarship quota for school leavers, 2010-2020

		Gender	
Year	**Scholarships awarded**	**Female**	**Male**
2010-2020	106	Not provided	Not provided

Source: Australian High Commission, Tarawa (2021).

4.5.5 Expanding TVET capacity to bridge the school-leaver gap

The expansion and institutional strengthening of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is critical for addressing the high number of school-leavers each year who are left without viable employment or further education opportunities. Institutions such as the Marine Training Centre (MTC) and the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) play a pivotal bridging role—equipping young I-Kiribati with practical, industry-relevant skills that enhance their employability both domestically and abroad. These institutions are central to Kiribati's strategy for workforce development and economic adaptation, particularly in the context of limited job creation and increasing participation in international labour mobility programs.

Beyond the MTC and KIT, several other national institutions contribute to vocational and professional training. These include the Kiribati Teachers College, various church headquarters and administrative offices, and faith-based training institutions such as the Kiribati Uniting Church's Tangintebu Theological College, the Catholic Church's Pastoral Institute and the office for the Diocese of Tarawa

and Nauru. While these institutions serve important national functions, this research focuses on the major youth training outlets of MTC and KIT which for decades have delivered structured, skills-based training for domestic and international employment.

Table 4.4 presents a snapshot of KIT graduate data from 2012 to 2020, corresponding with the launch of the TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP). This timeframe is of particular interest for assessing the outcomes of the reform and tracking the progression of graduates into employment or further training. Although comprehensive data remains limited and difficult to access, the figures presented here were made available through collaboration with KIT and the Australia Pacific Technical Coalition (APTC). This highlights the urgent need for the Ministry of Employment and KIT to establish a robust information management system capable of tracking enrolments, completions, and employment outcomes. Such a system would not only support evidence-based policy and planning but also strengthen accountability and enable more targeted interventions to improve graduate employability and labour market alignment.

Table 4.4: KIT graduates in trade/non-trade courses, 2012-2020

	Females (%)	Males (%)	Total (%)
Trade courses	46%	18%	65%
Non. Trades	7%	28%	35%
Total			100%

Source: KIT (2021).

Table 4.5 highlights the total number of KIT students who have progressed to the APTC (in the various campuses in the region: Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, PNG, Fiji, and Samoa) to further skills training. It is important to note that students graduate from KIT with a Certificate I and II but need a Certificate III and IV to meet the entry requirements for work in Australia, hence the value of the APTC.

Table 4.5: APTC graduates since 2010

Course	Persons with disabilities	F	M	Total
Certificate III in Air-conditioning and Refrigeration	No	0	9	9
Certificate III in Applied Fashion Design and Technology	No	1	0	1
Certificate III in Carpentry	No	8	101	109
Certificate III in Commercial Cookery	No	13	7	20
Certificate III in Disability	No	1	0	1
Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care	No	14	2	16
Certificate III in Education Support	No	2	1	3
Certificate III in Electrotechnology Electrician	No	3	18	21
Certificate III in Engineering – Fabrication Trade	No	1	6	7

Course	Persons with disabilities	F	M	Total
Certificate III in Engineering – Fitting & Machining	No	0	7	7
Certificate III in Engineering – Mechanical Trade (Diesel Fitting)	Yes	0	1	1
	No	0	27	27
Certificate III in Hairdressing	No	2	0	2
Certificate III in Hospitality	No	36	1	37
Certificate III in Individual Support	No	40	10	50
Certificate III in Light Vehicle Mechanical Technology	No	9	54	63
Certificate III in Painting and Decorating	No	8	11	19
Certificate III in Plumbing	No	5	10	15
Certificate III in Tourism	No	2	1	3
Certificate III in Wall and Floor Tiling	No	15	7	22
Certificate IV in Community Development	No	2	1	3
Certificate IV in Hospitality	No	1	0	1
Certificate IV in Training and Assessment	No	8	40	48
Certificate IV in Youth Work	No	14	10	24
Digital Literacy – eCitizen Skill Set	No	11	6	17
Diploma of Children's Services (Early Childhood Education and Care)	No	1	0	1
Diploma of Community Services Work	Yes	1	1	2
	No	8	12	20
International Skills Training	No	1	0	1
Key Management Skill Set	No	1	1	2
Sub Total		208	344	552

Source: APTC website.

From the data presented, it is encouraging to note the upward and inclusive trend in training and graduate numbers both at the KIT and the APTC. The Marine Training Centre is left out of this analysis, given its closure after COVID-19.

4.5.6 Connecting the dots: from training to (un)employment?

While vocational training has been instrumental in equipping I-Kiribati youth with employability skills, the deeper question remains: are these reforms translating into actual employment? The expansion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), particularly through the TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP), has undoubtedly improved enrolment and graduation rates. However, these surface-level indicators mask a more complex reality—one in which the link between training and employment remains tenuous. This subsection critically examines the challenges that continue to hinder the translation of skills into jobs, and by extension, the realisation of labour mobility as a viable economic adaptation strategy.

4.5.6.1 The training–employment nexus, a disconnect

Since the inception of the TVETSSP in 2012, the number of KIT graduates has tripled, reflecting a significant upskilling of the youth population. This is a positive development, demonstrating that

institutions like KIT are delivering on their mandate to prepare students for the workforce. However, increased marketability does not automatically equate to employment—particularly in Kiribati's constrained economic environment. While some graduates may secure jobs shortly after completing their training, many remain unemployed or underemployed, especially in the absence of a robust domestic labour market. The real issue lies in the lack of systematic tracking of graduate outcomes, making it difficult to assess the long-term impact of training programs on employment (Curtain & Howes, 2021a, 2021b). A significant barrier to effective policy and planning is the absence of a comprehensive information management system that tracks school-leavers from training through to employment. Without such data, the government cannot accurately assess whether vocational institutions are delivering the right skills for the right jobs. This limits the ability to align training programs with labour market demand—both domestically and internationally—and undermines efforts to build a responsive, evidence-based education-to-employment pipeline.

4.5.6.2 Infrastructure and industry misalignment

Another challenge lies in the mismatch between the quality of training and the capacity of the local economy to absorb graduates. KIT's training programs, modelled on Australian TAFE standards, are delivered in state-of-the-art facilities. However, the domestic industry often lacks the infrastructure to match these standards, resulting in graduates who are either overqualified or whose skills are incompatible with the nature of available domestic jobs. This highlights the need for the government to diversify the national job market by creating more opportunities in trades such as plumbing, carpentry, and construction—particularly in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects. These projects, which often import foreign labour, should prioritise local employment to build national capacity and reduce dependency on external contractors.

Due to limited domestic opportunities, many KIT graduates are forced to seek employment in unrelated fields through international labour mobility schemes. For example, graduates trained in plumbing or carpentry often end up working in aged care or abattoirs under Australia's PALM scheme. This mismatch underscores the need for alignment between training and actual job opportunities, while diversifying these opportunities to overseas employment pathways. While the TVETSSP has laid a strong foundation, its full potential will only be realised when skills development is directly linked to job creation—both at home and abroad.

4.5.6.3 Qualification gaps and regional inequities

A further constraint is the limited qualification levels offered at KIT, which currently caps training at Certificate I and II. While these are suitable for local employment, they fall short of the entry requirements for many overseas jobs, particularly in Australia, where Certificates III and IV are often the minimum standard. With only around 10 I-Kiribati students receiving Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) scholarships annually, most graduates are unable to upgrade their qualifications. This creates a structural disadvantage for Kiribati, especially when compared to other Pacific Island Countries with easier access to APTC campuses. This disparity reflects broader regional development challenges. While APTC is a commendable initiative, its uneven accessibility raises questions about the equity of regional development efforts. For remote and low-mobility countries like Kiribati, geography should not be destiny. A strategic solution would be to establish a subregional APTC hub in Micronesia, potentially hosted at KIT, which has already benefited from significant Australian investment. This enhances access to higher-level qualifications but also strengthen Kiribati's capacity to diversify employment opportunities for its citizens nationally, within Micronesia and the region broadly contributing to regionalism, while addressing structural employment and mobility constraints.

The TVETSSP has been a gamechanger in reforming vocational education in Kiribati. However, its success must ultimately be measured by its ability to generate employment and in bridging the gap between training and jobs. This requires a strategic alignment of training with job creation, both domestically, regionally, and through international labour mobility. It also demands equitable access to regional training opportunities and a robust data system to track outcomes. Only then can vocational training serve its full purpose as a tool for education and as a cornerstone of economic adaptation and resilience in the face of intensifying climate and development challenges.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the multifaceted dynamics shaping labour mobility in Kiribati, highlighting how geographic isolation, limited economic diversification, and climate vulnerability intersect to constrain domestic development opportunities. These structural realities—deeply embedded in Kiribati's spatial and environmental context—are not easily altered. However, they do not preclude progress. Rather, they demand strategic leadership, policy innovation, and the effective mobilisation of human capital as key levers for national resilience.

Labour migration, both temporary and permanent, emerges as a critical adaptive strategy in this context. As discussed in the introduction, Australia's evolving labour market—particularly through

schemes such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) program—offers Kiribati a vital opportunity to integrate into regional economic systems. These schemes not only provide employment and income for I-Kiribati workers but also serve as a mechanism for climate adaptation, enabling households to diversify livelihoods and reduce pressure on fragile domestic ecosystems.

Yet, the success of labour migration as an adaptive strategy hinges on one essential condition: the alignment of training with employment outcomes. While reforms such as the TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP) have significantly improved access to vocational education, the persistent disconnect between skills acquisition and job placement—both domestically and abroad—limits the full realisation of migration's potential. As this chapter has shown, the absence of robust data systems, mismatches between training and local industry needs, and barriers to accessing higher-level qualifications abroad all contribute to this gap.

To overcome these challenges, Kiribati must continue to invest in a coordinated, whole-of-government approach that links education, employment, and migration policy. This includes strengthening institutional capacity, expanding access to international qualifications, and advocating for equitable participation in regional training initiatives such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC). Moreover, it requires a deliberate effort to position labour migration not as a stopgap, but as a long-term development strategy—one that supports economic self-reliance, enhances adaptive capacity, and affirms the agency of I-Kiribati in navigating an uncertain future.

In sum, labour migration offers Kiribati a pathway to transcend the limitations of geography and climate vulnerability. By aligning training with job creation and embedding migration within national development planning, the country can unlock the full economic potential of its people—transforming mobility into a tool for resilience, prosperity, and sustainable growth.

Chapter 5 : Does Labour Migration Facilitate Adaptation, and if so, how?

"With proper governance, labour migration and mobility in the context of climate change also presents opportunities and can serve as an important adaptive mechanism" (International Labour Organisation, 2023).

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the central question of this research, investigating whether labour migration provides an adaptive pathway for climate change in Kiribati, and if so, how. Drawing on empirical evidence and fieldwork conducted in both Kiribati and Australia, this chapter examines the lived experiences and perspectives of I-Kiribati individuals using Te Waa to navigate the challenges of climate-induced displacement, adaptation and resilience, and collective endeavour among the participants—to inform the analysis. Te Waa provides an interpretive lens for analysing the research findings by adopting te maroro dimension or the dialogue aspect of the Te Waa framework. It uses this to draw a parallel between traditional dialogic exchanges and practices—and the research process. Just as maroros or dialogues between elders, leaders, and knowledge holders transmit cultural knowledge to younger generations, this empirical chapter unpacks the maroros and the themes that emerged from community knowledge holders under the theme of the inquiry. Through these dialogic encounters, the research co-constructs narratives that deepen understanding of migration experiences from a Kiribati perspective. These insights reveal how the migration of families contributes to broader adaptation strategies, offering a more grounded understanding of resilience that is often absent from mainstream migration literature.

For I-Kiribati, adaptation is not a new concept. For generations, communities have relied on indigenous knowledge systems to manage environmental change—adjusting planting cycles, conserving marine resources, and navigating seasonal extremes (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2008; Nunn, 2024). These practices reflect a deep ecological literacy and a symbiotic relationship that I-Kiribati held with their land and ocean. However, as climate impacts escalate and traditional coping mechanisms are stretched, mobility—both internal and cross-border—has re-emerged as a prominent strategy for adaptation (Smithers & Smit, 1997; McNeill, 1984). Today, Kiribati receives substantial development assistance that contribute significantly to coordinating adaptation efforts and addressing economic challenges. Traditional partners such as Australia and New Zealand have played long-standing roles in Kiribati's development since its independence in 1979, while China has become an increasingly

influential actor following the diplomatic shift from Taiwan in 2019 (Donner & Webber, 2014). While these partnerships are crucial in shaping the evolving landscape of adaptation in Kiribati, this chapter focuses on community insights on how migration is emerging as both a coping strategy and a pathway for long-term resilience.

The chapter presents the empirical findings of the research and is organised into four key interrelated sections, each offering a distinct lens on the intersection of climate change, human mobility, and community agency. Section 5.2 examines labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy, beginning with community perspectives on climate change and how these shape local understandings of mobility. Section 5.3 investigates how communities perceive both labour mobility and permanent migration, and analyses how these perceptions are linked to climate-related pressures and aspirations. Section 5.4 deepens this inquiry by exploring community understandings of migration—both temporary and permanent—as lived experiences and adaptive responses. Section 5.5 engages with broader theoretical themes in the adaptation–maladaptation debate, assessing how labour migration facilitates climate resilience while also navigating risks. Section 5.6 concludes the chapter with a critical discussion of the Migration with Dignity policy, evaluating its role in laying the groundwork for future labour mobility, permanent migration, and the development of a climate-adaptive framework. Collectively, this chapter foregrounds the voices of one of the world's most climate-vulnerable populations, offering nuanced insights that are often overlooked in the international climate-mobility discourse.

5.2 Labour Migration as Climate Adaptation

5.2.1 Overview

The relationship between climate change and human mobility has deep historical roots, yet the recognition of migration as a climate adaptation strategy is relatively recent. While communities have long moved in response to environmental pressures, it is only in the past few decades that climate-induced mobility has gained visibility within migration policy, legal frameworks, and global discourse. The 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, the 2010 Cancun Adaptation Framework, and the 2015 Paris Agreement acknowledged the role of climate change in shaping migration. Most notably, the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration defined labour migration as a form of adaptive mobility (IOM, 2022). The recently launched Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility presents a landmark regional commitment to addressing the complex challenges of climate-induced mobility in the Pacific. Grounded in principles of human rights, cultural integrity, and regional solidarity**,** the framework offers a proactive and people-centred approach to managing displacement, migration, and

planned relocation. It provides a valuable policy foundation for safeguarding human security, statehood, and livelihoods in the face of escalating climate threats. However, while the framework sets a visionary direction, its implementation faces significant hurdles—including resource constraints, legal gaps, and the urgency of on-the-ground realities. These limitations underscore the need for deeper analysis, which will be explored in the following sections, particularly in relation to ways in which labour mobility can be leveraged as a climate adaptation strategy in contexts like Kiribati.

For low-lying nations like Kiribati, climate change is not a distant threat—it is a lived and escalating reality. The I-Kiribati expression *bibitakin kanoan boong*—literally 'the changing daily climate'—reflects the absence of a traditional term for climate change yet captures its tangible effects with precision and has now become the established vernacular for describing climate change itself. Rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather events are already disrupting livelihoods, infrastructure, and cultural continuity. As the Pacific Security Outlook (2024) notes, the region remains at the forefront of climate-induced risks, with Kiribati among the world's most exposed to climate change. In this context, labour migration promises a pathway for adaptation in the absence of proper protection mechanisms. Yet, despite its potential, labour migration remains underutilised and under-theorised as a climate adaptation strategy in Kiribati. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining how migration—particularly through formal schemes like PALM—can be leveraged not just for economic development but essentially for climate resilience.

The fieldwork, as explained in Chapter 3, comprised 90 *maroros* or dialogues (87 I-Kiribati, three development partner representatives) in four primary locations—namely South Tarawa (TUC), Betio (BTC), Marakei Island, and two states in Australia, namely New South Wales and Queensland. The inclusion of the three development partners aimed to deepen understanding of their contributions to Kiribati through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). However, they were intentionally excluded from the analysis of community perspectives, given the focus on capturing locally grounded experiences and avoiding the conflation of institutional narratives with grassroots realities. The data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews to gain community insights into climate change, labour mobility, and adaptation. This section unpacks the climate-migration nexus, exploring how labour migration was perceived as an adaptive measure through the lens of I-Kiribati people. As a country substantially threatened by climate change, Kiribati is not alien to the migration phenomenon, which has been in existence for many centuries. What is new and drawing extensive interest to the study of migration, including in Kiribati, is the rapidly evolving landscape of human

mobility. Various reasons underpin this phenomenon, but a prominent factor that is shaping the migration dynamics and decisions of the present era is climate change.

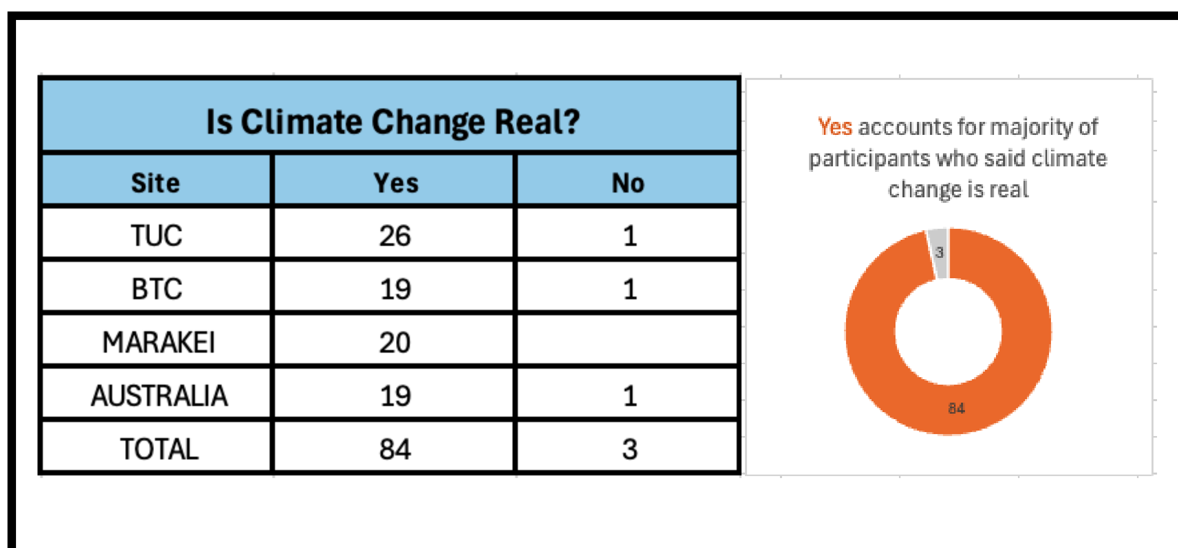
Deeply rooted in the consciousness that labour migration is an intricate subject defined by its binary nature and all other complex dynamics that underpin it, this research traversed the realms of te maroro to carefully navigate the paradoxical reality of the beneficial and detrimental impacts of labour migration, notably in climate adaptation. Each maroro begins with the question of climate change, the I-Kiribati individual's understanding of it, and whether it is real or not, before transitioning into deeper conversations about labour mobility and migration. This structure was intentionally designed to first gauge participants' perspectives on climate change, setting the stage for a more comprehensive exploration of its intersections with labour mobility and migration.

Given that Kiribati is a predominantly Christian nation, the research acknowledges the strong influence of religious beliefs on participants' worldviews. Many I-Kiribati hold the conviction that fate, safety, and the future of all living beings lie in the hands of a divine power. While increasing levels of education have introduced more secular perspectives, this spiritual outlook continues to shape the everyday lives and decisions of many individuals. It remains a subject of active and passionate debate among I-Kiribati today. For this reason, the research approaches these conversations with cultural sensitivity, beginning each maroro by exploring participants' views on climate change. This initial step not only acknowledges their foundational beliefs but also provides a respectful threshold from which to build the relationship and to transcend the deeper discussions.

Establishing this common ground is important to this research, enabling it to navigate subsequent conversations, particularly on labour migration, with greater care and contextual awareness. While this may appear to be a conventional research strategy, in the context of this study, it represents something far more significant. At its core, the research seeks to illuminate the nuanced and often overlooked impacts of climate change on communities situated at the heart of the global climate discourse. These frontline communities experience the effects of climate change most acutely, yet their voices remain underrepresented in the literature. Embedding their lived experiences into the broader climate narrative is not only essential for deepening understanding of adaptation and how labour mobility is perceived, but also for informing policies and interventions that are grounded in the realities of those most affected. Without these perspectives, efforts to address climate challenges risk being incomplete, ineffective, or misaligned with the needs on the ground.

Personally, the fieldwork was a humbling journey of learning. Gaining access to the private realms of village maneabas and the intimate spaces of people's homes brought a deep sense of connection—and responsibility—to the study. The research was not just about observation, it was about listening, seeking justice, and amplifying the voices of communities whose stories were being shared, and which have long been told by outsiders, or insiders who speak on behalf of the communities from positions of relevant privilege and power. Having direct access to listen directly from the communities was crucial in addressing this gap and the narratives that often overstate, misrepresent, or dismiss community perspectives.

Across all four research sites, there was a striking awareness of climate change. In the urban centres of Betio and South Tarawa, and the outer island region of Marakei, every participant acknowledged the reality of the phenomena. Even those participants who were sceptical of climate change related to lived experiences that unequivocally pointed to impacts of a changing climate. Of the 87 participants, 84 responded yes to the question: *Is climate change real?* leaving only three who did not believe the phenomenon existed (Figure 5.1).



Is Climate Change Real?		
Site	Yes	No
TUC	26	1
BTC	19	1
MARAKEI	20	
AUSTRALIA	19	1
TOTAL	84	3

Figure 5.1: Participants' perception of climate change reality by fieldwork site

Source: Author (2024).

This overwhelming assertion of the reality of climate change as a subject of grave concern was prevalent in all the sites, especially in Marakei Island, where all participants registered their affirmation of climate change being a lived reality. In South Tarawa, Betio, and Australia, there was also formidable evidence of climate change posing an existential threat. However, one person in each of these sites disagreed that the phenomenon existed (Figure 5.1). This carries insignificant bearing as most of the participants cited climate change as a challenge that they are grappling with, identifying

it as an existential threat to their fragile ecosystems, livelihoods, and overall security (Bailes et al., 2014; Bank, 2017; Barbosa, 2020a; Bedford & Bedford, 2010). The research further investigated participants' responses to gather more information on how climate change impacts were affecting communities. This was important for enhancing understanding of the extent of climate change's effect on communities. The in-depth maroro highlighted several key themes, listed below:

i) Sea level rise or coastal erosion
ii) Food and water security concerns
iii) Displacement
iv) Changing weather patterns or extreme climate events
v) All the factors mentioned above

The preceding themes are presented in Figure 5.2 as factors of climate impacts reported by the communities.

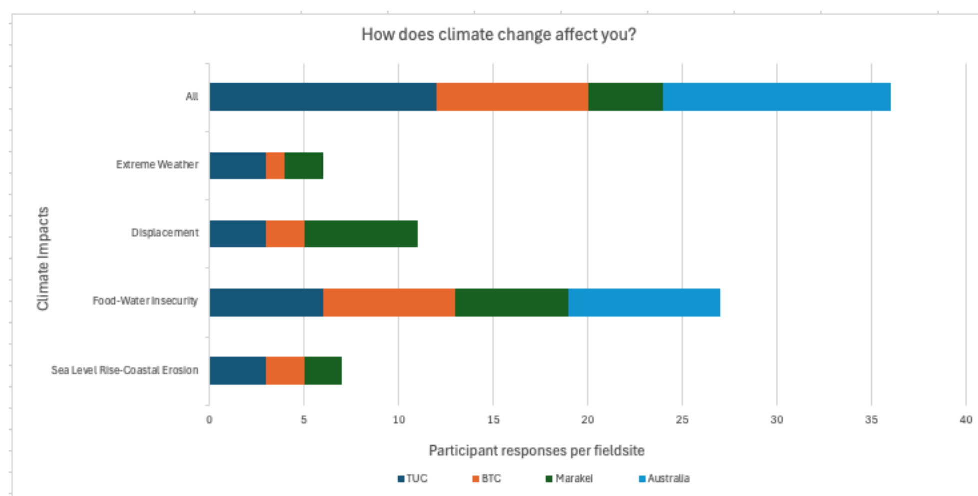


Figure 5.2: How does climate change affect you?

Source: Author (2024).

As shown in Figure 5.2, most participants selected 'All' when asked about the impacts of climate change, indicating a recognition of its pervasive and interconnected nature. Ranking second to that is 'Food-Water insecurity', followed by 'Sea level rise', 'Displacement', and 'Extreme Weather''. While some respondents emphasised discrete issues such as coastal erosion or erratic rainfall, the dominant narrative was one of convergence: climate impacts are not isolated phenomena but interwoven threats that shape lived realities in Kiribati. This collective recognition underscores the multidimensional nature of climate vulnerability, where environmental degradation, socio-economic stressors, and cultural disruptions intersect (Finau et al., 2024; McNamara et al., 2021).

A particularly salient insight emerging from this data is the prominence of slow-onset climate impacts on low-lying atoll communities. Contrary to dominant narratives that associate climate risk primarily with acute disasters in more cyclone-prone nations, such as Vanuatu or Fiji, and which perceive climate change as a future event, the Kiribati experience reveals a more insidious trajectory of vulnerability. Gradual sea level rise, salinisation of freshwater lenses, and shifting weather patterns are eroding land, livelihoods, and food systems—not in sudden bursts, but through incremental attrition (ESCAP, 2015; Pierrehumbert, 2005). These slow-onset changes, often overlooked in global adaptation discourse, are no less devastating in their cumulative effect. As recent assessments by the World Health Organization and the Kiribati Climate Change Policy emphasise, prolonged droughts and declining agricultural viability are exacerbating health risks and food insecurity (WHO, 2024a). While these transformations may lack the spectacle of disaster, they demand urgent recognition and response, particularly in policy frameworks that aim to support dignified and culturally grounded adaptation (Bailes et al., 2014; Barbosa, 2020a; Barnett & McMichael, 2018; Council, 2023). Another key empirical insight emerging from the data is the direct linkage participants made between food and water insecurity and displacement**,** both of which were attributed to rising seas and increasingly erratic climate conditions. A community member from Marakei effectively articulates this relationship:

> *"The recent spring tide was aggressive; it happened just before Christmas. You see the waves there…they climbed over this seawall (pointed to the sea 5 metres away), right up to where our house stands. Fortunately, our buia (bungalow) was high, but sadly our water well was inundated—we couldn't drink from it. We moved inland where there was fresh water and returned few days later when the flood subsided."* (Matarena Katoaia, 2 February 2024).

This attestation offers the lived realities of slow-onset climate impacts as experienced by low-lying coastal communities. As conveyed in the interview, the encroachment of sea level rise and saltwater intrusion does not merely disrupt the physical landscape—it infringes upon the very foundations of daily life and cultural continuity. These environmental shifts compromise essential resources, including freshwater access (see Figure 5.3)., subsistence food gardens, housing stability, and coastal infrastructure The cumulative effect is a gradual erosion of place-based security, often precipitating population displacement.

Figure 5.3: A water well offers a vital source of clean drinking water on Marakei.

Importantly, such displacement is not always linear or permanent. Rather, it frequently manifests as cyclical movement—an adaptive response or coping mechanism shaped by environmental variability and changes in the climate system. Communities may relocate temporarily, returning when conditions stabilise, only to be displaced again as impacts intensify. Over time, however, the repetition of these events can lead to permanent relocation, particularly when lands and ecosystems lose their capacity to sustain life (See Figure 5.4), due to the compounding nature of climate stressors (Oakes, 2019; Oakes et al., 2016).

Moreover, displacement in this context is a deeply multidimensional phenomenon**.** It is shaped not only by environmental degradation but also by socio-economic constraints, such as limited access to land, inadequate infrastructure, and fragile support systems. In Kiribati, where land is scarce and cultural ties to place are profound, even temporary relocation can disrupt social cohesion, spiritual practices, and economic livelihoods. The displacement described by Matarena is far more than a logistical response to flooding—it is a disruption of familial wellbeing, a rupture in day-to-day routine,

and a forced pause in subsistence activities. Her account underscores how environmental stressors, even when temporary, reverberate through the intimate spaces of home, caregiving, and livelihood.

Figure 5.4: An inundated *bwabwai* pit, a giant swamp taro (Cyrtosperma chamissonis).

This lived experience directly challenges the dominant narrative that displacement is not yet occurring in the Pacific—a narrative often rooted in narrow definitions that equate displacement solely with permanent, large-scale relocation. Such framings risk overlooking the psychosocial toll of movement in all its forms: short-term or long-term, near or far, minor or profound (IDMC, 2023; UNESCAP, 2024). Any movement—regardless of its spatial or temporal scale—can carry significant consequences for families, particularly in contexts where land, water, and kinship are deeply interwoven. The Te Waa framework captures these lived realities and nuances often overlooked in global migration theories—but which are central to sustaining informed and effective adaptation and climate response measures. The complexity of mobility decisions, shaped by intersecting environmental, socio-economic, and cultural factors, requires more than technical solutions; it calls for empathetic, context-sensitive approaches that honour lived experiences and community agency. Recognising the layered

dimensions of climate mobility is essential for designing policies that are not only responsive but also just, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of those most affected (Bardsley, 2010; McNamara et al., 2024; Piggott-McKellar et al., 2020). To dismiss these experiences is to ignore the substantial disruption to the way of life for children, caregivers, and elders alike. It is to overlook the emotional labour of leaving, the uncertainty of return, and the quiet losses that accumulate when routines are fractured and cultural practices interrupted. Displacement in the Pacific must therefore be understood not only through metrics of distance or duration, but also through the lens of relational impact—on wellbeing, continuity, and the dignity of everyday life. Furthermore, any climate-induced movement constitutes a microcosm of existential precarity. Such mobility reflects not only the erosion of physical safety but also the destabilisation of cultural continuity, social cohesion, and lived dignity (Kamruzzaman et al., 2022; Perrin, 2025). The evidence of internal displacement due to climate impact was also compelling in the urban centres. A participant from Betio recounted her family's forced relocation from the village of Ambo:

> *"We didn't think it would get worse [inundation]. Unfortunately, the last king tide left us in ruins. Part of our home, including our power and water connections, was severely damaged. Relocation was unavoidable." (Participant 26, 27 February 2024)*

Even among those not directly affected, the visibility of climate impacts across the islands was undeniable. A senior government official remarked:

> *"Climate change remains our issue; even though it's not affecting me directly, I see its impact on other people as reported widely [in the news]. These are real." (Participant 63, 19 February 2024)*

Another participant emphasised the increasing intensity of weather extremes, never experienced before: "*These changes [climate change] are new, and intense. We're experiencing more flooding and drought like never seen before."* (Erim Nikotemo, 13 February 2024). Members of the diaspora, including migrants returning home after extended periods abroad, identified stark transformations, as an I-Kiribati migrant in Australia reflected:

> *"Returning to Kiribati after being away for four years, I was really shocked to see the changes—I couldn't believe my eyes. There are so many people. They seem to reside immediately on the shoreline. I'm not sure if it's the impact of population density or climate change. I think it's both"* (Participant 18, 3 November 2023). *She added: "Coastal erosion is a threat, regions that were once land have receded and now overtaken by the sea"* (Participant 18, 3 November 2023).

Despite the overwhelming evidence of growing awareness and acknowledgment of climate change, some members of the community remain unconvinced that climate change is a real phenomenon. Only three of the participants, each from Betio, South Tarawa and a migrant worker in Australia, said they did not believe in climate change and referred to environmental changes as a normal occurrence within the climate system. One community participant elaborated on this:

> *"I don't see any change in climate. They tell us the changes we see today are caused by climate change; this is false. Yes, our [water] wells become brackish as we have seen in the past, but usually, they recharge naturally after. Even for coastal erosion, this is a thing of the past too as submerged areas usually regain land"* (Participant 17, 25 January 2024).

Interestingly, while expressing scepticism about climate change, the participants unconsciously cited the same environmental and climate change factors captured previously in Figure 5.2 as challenges affecting him today—revealing a paradox in which climate-related challenges are deeply embedded in everyday life, regardless of personal belief systems. Another participant who also rejected climate change alluded to human activities as a leading factor contributing to the problem:

> *"Climate change is not real. It's true coastal erosion is a problem, but that's because people build seawalls where they're not supposed to. If you look at the rate of settlements on the island, you will notice new houses emerging rapidly on the coastlines, even near the causeways. Whether building codes need to be stricter, or squatters are becoming an issue, the bottom line is these activities disrupt the land structure which exacerbate the climate problem"* (Participant 24, 27 February 2024).

A participant who resides in Australia said he found it difficult to believe in climate change and denied speculations that Kiribati will submerge in the future:

> *"I don't believe Kiribati will be under water one day. If climate science predicts this, how come our country is still here today,"* (Participant 85, 5 November 2023).

There is a growing recognition among I-Kiribati that migration constitutes a vital strategy for climate adaptation, even if it is not always explicitly acknowledged in everyday discourse. This tacit understanding reflects the embeddedness of climate-related stressors in the lived experiences of communities across Kiribati, although it is not seen as transcending beyond borders. While migration may not be framed directly as a climate response by all individuals, its role in subsidising livelihoods, diversifying income, and enhancing household resilience is increasingly evident.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Te Waa of Mobility framework offers a culturally grounded lens through which to understand climate-induced migration. It identifies spirituality and culture as central

to the lives of I-Kiribati, like other Pacific people, and argues that these dimensions significantly influence migration decisions. However, such values are often overlooked in the mainstream migration and adaptation discourse, which tends to prioritise economic and logistical considerations. The framework calls for a shift toward culturally sensitive, people-centred approaches that honour Indigenous knowledge systems and community-defined priorities in climate adaptation planning. This argument is further substantiated by McNamara et al. (2024), who advocate for greater care and reflexivity in the design of climate adaptation measures, particularly those addressing loss and damage. While acknowledging the increasing relevance of migration as a climate response strategy, the authors emphasise the imperative to prioritise personal, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Their study, conducted across Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Cook Islands, revealed that spirituality was consistently ranked as the most significant value, highlighting the centrality of place-based identity, ancestral ties, and cultural continuity in shaping community responses to climate-induced displacement.

While these finding resonate with insights from Kiribati participants, who similarly underscored the importance of cultural and spiritual values, this research diverges from McNamara et al.'s (2024) framing of belonging and identity as being exclusively tethered to the homeland. It critiques the dominant place-based narrative, which can inadvertently constrain dignity and agency by equating adaptation solely with in-situ strategies. Such a perspective risks overlooking the potential for communities to reimagine belonging and identity in new environments, and calls for a more nuanced, flexible understanding of mobility that embraces both continuity and transformation in cultural and spiritual life. While the value and place-based narratives remain vital for asserting climate leadership and adaptation from the countries most affected by climate change, and for articulating cultural and national sovereignty, it also presents limitations. Specifically, it risks essentialising values and identity as being exclusively tied to the country of origin. This concern is particularly salient in the context of Kiribati, where the likelihood of climate-induced relocation is high and the scope for in-situ adaptation is increasingly constrained. Cultural values are central to community resilience and adaptation, though their conflation with fixed geographic locations—namely the homeland—can inadvertently restrict Pacific communities to a singular spatial identity. Such a framing may limit the exploration of alternative adaptive pathways, including migration, by reinforcing the notion that dignity and continuity are only achievable through remaining in place. These risks marginalise other expressions of identity and resilience that transcend national borders in a world where mobility has become a defining feature of social and economic life.

While the primacy of place-based adaptation should not be dismissed, the growing recognition of migration as a legitimate strategy, calls for a more expansive and flexible framework. As scholars such as Lee (2009) and Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009) have argued, mobility can serve not only as a strategy for survival but also as a mode of cultural continuity and resilience, challenging the binary between rootedness and displacement As the impacts of climate change on livelihoods, security, and mobility become increasingly pronounced, there is an urgent need to redirect attention and resources toward the immediate and context-specific challenges confronting communities at the grassroots level (Brown et al., 2025; Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2025b).

A salient example is the failure of a food security project on Abaiang Island in Kiribati, which collapsed due to multiple factors, most notably the absence of genuine community ownership and engagement (Piggott-McKellar et al., 2020). This case highlights the limitations of top-down adaptation initiatives that fail to adequately reflect or respond to local needs, values, and capacities. As the severity of climate impacts escalates, so too does the imperative to design adaptation strategies that are inclusive, participatory, rights-based, and tailored to Kiribati's needs. As Barnett (2008) aptly asserts, "*adaptation is not something that can be done to a community. It is something that needs to be done by a community, determined by its own needs and values*" (p. 45).

5.3 Understanding Labour Mobility in the Context of Kiribati

5.3.1 Overview

Labour mobility, much like climate change, is a critical area of inquiry in this research. The study explores how I-Kiribati conceptualise labour migration and the value they attribute to it, both individually and collectively. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019), labour migration refers to the movement of individuals from one country to another—or within their own country—for the purpose of employment. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016) further defines a migrant worker as a person who migrates with the intention of being employed by another party, encompassing both temporary and permanent forms of labour mobility.

While these definitions are internationally recognised, their meanings are often shaped by local contexts. In Kiribati, labour migration is commonly referred to as *kammwakuri i tinaniku*, which translates as 'employment overseas'. This concept is deeply embedded in the national identity, reflecting Kiribati's long-standing tradition of maritime labour and overseas employment (Bedford et al., 2016; Borovnik, 2003; Government of Kiribati, 2012).

To investigate local understandings of labour mobility, participants were asked: *'What do you understand is the definition of labour mobility or migration?'* This line of inquiry is critical, given the limited scholarship on how remittances are reshaping livelihoods and wellbeing in Kiribati. While remittances are widely acknowledged for their role in employment generation and poverty alleviation, there remains a significant gap in understanding their contribution to disaster preparedness and climate adaptation. This research addresses that gap by examining not only the economic implications of labour mobility for Kiribati's small economy, but also how it serves as a socio-economic and environmental buffer—enhancing resilience in the face of climate change. Very limited research exists to explain how remittances are helping with disaster and climate adaptation. Respondents revealed a nuanced and culturally grounded appreciation of overseas employment, framed through six socio-economic themes. These themes are explored in Sections 5.3.2 to 5.3.7, summarised in Section 5.3.8, and discussed in Section 5.3.9.

Labour mobility was predominantly defined by participants in terms of its income-generating potential as a critical source of livelihood and employment. This framing was particularly evident among younger respondents, many of whom expressed concern over the limited domestic employment opportunities**.** Labour mobility was frequently described as a vital economic intervention—one that not only creates jobs but also helps subsidise costs of living and enables families to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life (ILO, 2019, 2022). Most participants interviewed in this research framed labour mobility in terms of its growing popularity and the heightened expectations it has generated within villages and island communities. One participant underscored its growing significance for individuals with limited formal education and constrained access to local employment opportunities, describing it as a critical mechanism for enabling economic participation towards improved livelihoods, self-reliance, and social advancement: *"It's* [labour mobility] *fast becoming a way of life here, especially for those with limited education and restricted access to domestic jobs"* (Makitebwa Reue, 1 February 2024).

Others defined labour mobility as 'employment abroad', citing it as a legitimate and desirable livelihood strategy in the absence of opportunities at home. As one participant observed, the labour mobility schemes have become a transformative force within island communities:

> *"There are limited job offers here on the island. Most of our youth go to Tarawa [the capital] and end up idle there. With the schemes, young people are productively engaged in jobs overseas that pay well. The support is profound—you can see families able to afford their needs*

amidst rising costs of living. The demand for the schemes has risen exponentially" (Participant 41, 28 January 2024).

This reflection highlights the growing reliance on labour migration as a viable economic strategy, particularly in contexts where domestic employment opportunities are scarce and the cost of living is high. The appeal of labour mobility as a source of income extended beyond the unemployed. Several respondents shared experiences in which family members voluntarily resigned from their local employment due to the inadequacy of their earnings. As one participant explained:

> *"Our earnings are no longer adequate to meet our basic needs and commitments never seem to end. There are always cultural gatherings, church events, and children's needs to attend to—on top of primary subsistence needs. It's impossible to get by, that's how we decided as a family that my husband quits his job and works overseas while I continue to work here"* (Participant 81, 27 February 2024).

This account illustrates a compelling paradox at the heart of Pacific labour mobility: while remittances offer a vital lifeline for families, they can also entrench vulnerability through the enduring weight of cultural and communal expectations. On one hand, remittances enable households to meet essential needs such as food, education, and healthcare. On the other hand, they are often diverted to fulfil escalating social and cultural obligations, particularly during times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed this tension, as Pacific workers abroad faced the dual burden of sustaining family livelihoods while working towards fulfilling community and cultural responsibilities (Doan & Petrou, 2022). Such a tension reflects more than just economic strain—it typifies the paramount importance of value systems in Pacific societies and the complexity that it imposes on the relationship between family and communal responsibilities.

As Bailey (2025) asserts, these values are so central that they actively shape migration decisions and remittance behaviours. Migrants often feel compelled to send not only money but also material goods—such as household appliances, food, and ceremonial items—as expressions of solidarity and status (Bailey, 2025; Connell & Brown, 2005). While these practices reinforce social cohesion and affirm cultural identity, they can also place significant financial and emotional pressure on migrants, particularly when expectations exceed their earning capacity. This paradox—where remittances simultaneously empower and burden—highlights the need for labour mobility policies that are culturally informed and socially protective, while illuminating the culturally grounded motivations and social dynamics that uniquely shape Pacific migration decisions and trajectories.

Labour mobility was also attributed to the Kiribati concept of *toronibwai*, which embodies the principle of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. Several respondents reflected on this, articulating the socio-economic transformation of Kiribati, noting a shift from its pre-colonial subsistence-based economy characterised by a traditional barter system and communal living where sharing, reciprocity, and collective growth are key—to today's capitalist economy where monetary income has overtaken traditional livelihoods (Sabatier, 1977; Scott, 1989; A. Talu, S. et al., 1979). Monetary income has increasingly supplanted traditional livelihoods, creating new pressures on households to secure cash-based resources to meet daily needs. While land and natural resources remain culturally and economically significant, participants emphasised that these alone are no longer sufficient to meet daily needs or ensure household food security. As one participant noted: "You may have land and resources, but these are not enough to put food on the table." (Teituu Teoteai, 13 February 2024).

This shift was closely linked with the I-Kiribati concept of *oi n aomata*, which emerged quite frequently throughout the maroro. Oi n aomata translates to 'real person,' although its deeper cultural meaning is that of personhood and having social and economic value. As Itaia, posits: *"There is a word which describes a person with a strong character or sense of identity—te aomata,"* (1979: 122). In contemporary Kiribati, this notion is increasingly measured by one's skills, education, and earning capacity. Thus, labour mobility and the ability to generate income abroad are not only economic necessities but also markers of individual worth and social recognition. Another prominent theme was the framing of labour mobility as a pathway to prosperity. In the Kiribati context, this notion is often encapsulated in the concept of *kabwaia*—an abstract yet deeply meaningful term that conveys a sense of success, fulfilment, and aspirational achievement. Although kabwaia cannot be physically measured or precisely defined, it holds significant cultural weight, representing the attainment of personal or collective goals, and may also differ in meaning from one family to another. The meaning of kabwaia is fluid and subjective. Generally, it is understood to encompass principles of success and prosperity. For some, it may manifest as familial harmony and shared values; for others, it may be the completion of formal education, a promotion at work, or the acquisition of material assets. Its interpretation varies across individuals, families, and social groups, and is often kept within the private sphere of the household or close kin networks.

Notably, even participants who were not directly involved in labour mobility schemes expressed a strong awareness of kabwaia as achieved by others. They articulated aspirations to emulate those who had attained visible markers of success—such as a new house, a vehicle, or an improved standard

of living—through overseas employment. As such, labour mobility becomes not only an economic strategy but also a symbolic vehicle for achieving culturally defined prosperity.

A recurring concept observed across te maroro is *te ewenako*, which encapsulates the agency, resilience, and determination of the I-Kiribati people in the face of adversity. Linguistically, the term is composed of two elements: *ewe*, meaning 'to transcend,' and *nako*, meaning 'to go'. Together, *ewenako* conveys a powerful cultural ethos of perseverance—articulating a 'can-do' spirit reflecting the capacity to move beyond one's comfort zone or the limitations imposed by social, economic, and structural constraints. Participants frequently invoked ewenako when discussing labour mobility, framing it as a domain that is both foreign and challenging for many I-Kiribati who nonetheless courageously pursue it as an act of resilience and aspiration. Engaging in overseas employment was seen not merely as an economic decision but as an act of courage and determination. This is particularly significant given the emotional and psychological challenges associated with migration, including culture shock, adaptation to unfamiliar environments, and prolonged separation from family. Despite these hardships, respondents viewed labour mobility as a testament to one's strength and commitment to achieving long-term goals—an embodiment of ewenako in action. These perspectives (Figure 5.5) underscore the centrality of labour mobility not only as an economic mechanism but as a strategy for household resilience, social progress, and national development.

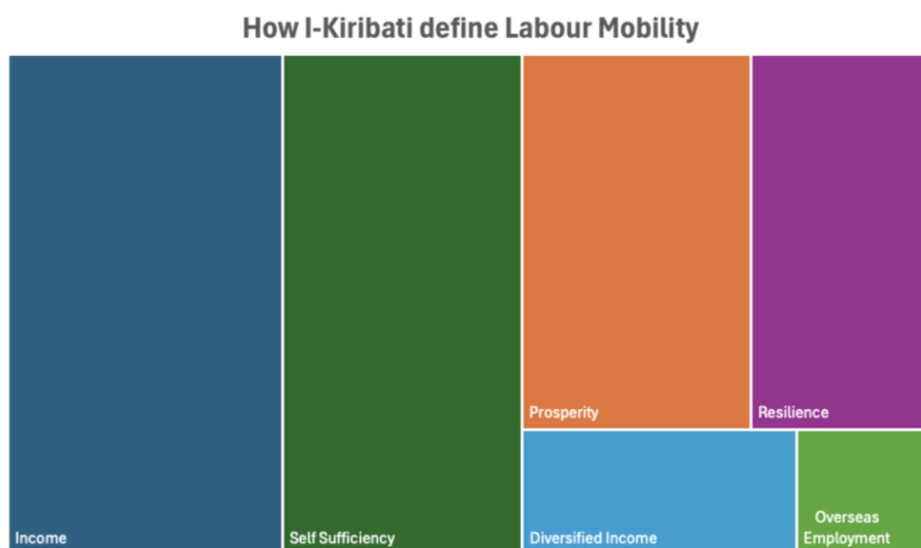


Figure 5.5: Participants' definitions of labour mobility

The growing awareness of labour migration schemes in Kiribati was overwhelming, with 99 percent of participants stating knowledge of labour and migration schemes, specifically the RSE and the PALM. The research examined the relationship that existed between the schemes and the participants. A woman shared her insights:

> *"Ever since my husband got on that scheme, our economic wellbeing improved significantly. When my son received news of successful recruitment, we were elated, it's such a blessing both my husband and son could go"* (Tariraoi Etoo, February 2024).

When asked why the scheme had such a profound impact, the woman explained: *"Because life is hard here. Despite the challenge of remote relationships, my family is economically stable now."* (Tariraoi Etoo, February 2024). Another participant, a grandmother, was frustrated that it had taken a while for her grandsons to return to work overseas: *"There is no work for them here and they refuse to go fishing or do subsistence work. How can they support the family?"* (Tekerau, 29 January 2024). A community member who was waitlisted for an upcoming recruitment shared this sentiment about the prolonged wait: "It's almost two years since our names were sent, there's been no news from the Council nor the Ministry [Employment]" (Participant 60, 29 January 2024).

In Kiribati, the recruitment of workers for the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) schemes is coordinated by the Ministry of Employment and Human Resources (MEHR). The MEHR collaborates with all 23 Island Councils across the country—including Marakei, South Tarawa, and Betio—to regularly share lists of prospective workers. These submissions are consolidated into a national work-ready pool, which the Ministry aligns with employer offers. Delays in deployment typically arise during the employer selection phase, as employers apply specific criteria to identify suitable candidates. For instance, one employer may prioritise tall, male workers, while another may seek individuals with contrasting attributes. Applicants who do not meet the specified criteria are excluded from consideration and must remain in the pool until a compatible employer expresses interest. Consequently, many candidates experience prolonged waiting periods before securing placement, and allude reliance on the social protection scheme that is gaining popularity (Doyle & Knox-Vydmanov, 2024): "*If it was not for the allowance, I don't know how we would survive"* (Participant 60, 28 January 2024).

The research compared the sentiments of I-Kiribati still waiting for recruitment with those already engaged in the schemes overseas to understand whether expectations were met. A worker in meat processing shared her experience: "Work is tough, but the pay is really good." (Participant 6, 2 August 2023). After inquiring further, the participant elaborated on the response, saying work was tough

because she is not used to it, although over time she had gotten used to it. The other issue the participant highlighted was the concept of time: “Our concept of time in Kiribati doesn’t exist here. Over here, if you come late without permission, you get blacklisted” (Participant 6, 2 August 2023).

A couple who works in the same industry reflected on their experience:

> *“My wife and I took a leap of faith when we left our children and come and work here [Australia]. We really like it [work], it’s very good money. Every fortnight we send money to our children and support their need”* (Francis Kirite, 4 August 2023).
>
> *“I was unemployed before coming here, this is my first formal job. It’s an exciting phase of my life to make my own earnings. In Kiribati, I depended on my husband who ran a little carpentry business, although most times, the cost of living exceed our earnings. With us both working here, we have enough to send our children and still make savings.” (Miiri Korina, August 2023).*

According to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), remittances from migrant workers contribute significantly to national GDPs, with ten Pacific countries—including Kiribati—receiving a combined total of USD 689 million in remittances in 2018 (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2023). Between 2020 and 2023, remittances accounted for approximately 10-15% of GDP (Government of Kiribati, 2020) from workers who remit nearly 60% of their earnings back home. According to studies, remittances financed children’s needs (and education), housing renovations, cost of transportation (vehicles), and small businesses (Doan et al, 2023). Furthermore, the Kiribati National Labour Migration Policy explicitly recognises international labour migration as essential for addressing employment deficits and promoting sustainable development (Voigt-Graf & Kagan, 2017), while the recent Household Income Survey depicts the significant role that remittances play in advancing household capacity and economic wellbeing (Buffièr, 2025).

From the research findings, two themes emerged prominently across responses from individuals, families, and community participants: the concepts of *toronibwai* and *kabwaia* were central to how labour mobility was understood and articulated. These Kiribati cultural philosophies offer more than descriptive frameworks—they carry profound spiritual and ethical significance that shapes how I-Kiribati people experience and respond to migration. In this discussion, I delve deeper into these concepts to explore their cultural and theological weight and why they matter in the context of mobility. Three I-Kiribati scholars—Dr. Rose Namoori-Sinclair, Maroti Rimon, and Dr. Kambati Uriam—have meaningfully engaged with the concept of kabwaia, offering distinct yet complementary insights

into its relevance for migration discourse. Their work collectively affirms kabwaia as a cultural philosophy rooted in values of family, respect, spiritual communion, and relational wellbeing. This study draws on their contributions to propose more culturally grounded approaches to mobility and resettlement—approaches that honour ancestral knowledge, communal ethics, and the spiritual dimensions of movement.

Dr. Rose Namoori-Sinclair's development of the *Boutokaan te Mweeraoi* framework in Aotearoa New Zealand offers a culturally grounded model of wellbeing rooted in kabwaia values—family, respect, and spiritual communion**.** Her work bridges policy and tradition, challenging the individualistic assumptions of New Zealand's migration and health systems. In her critique of the Pacific Access Category (PAC) scheme, she highlights its adverse effects on I-Kiribati women's wellbeing, arguing that Western models of self-responsibility marginalise Pacific cultural values (Namoori-Sinclair, 2020). To counter this, she proposes a *neo-maneaba* model—an extension of traditional Kiribati principles such as *te maneaba* (communal governance), *te karinerine* (respect), and *te utuu* (family)—as a culturally resonant alternative to neoliberal frameworks. Through this lens, kabwaia becomes a counter-narrative that advocates for collective wellbeing and culturally competent services. Her contributions align closely with this study's focus on climate-induced migration, offering critical insights into how mobility and resettlement can be ethically and culturally navigated.

Building on Namoori-Sinclair's (2020) policy-focused articulation of kabwaia as a framework for collective wellbeing and ethical migration, Reverend Maroti Rimon offers a complementary theological perspective that deepens its spiritual and ecological dimensions. His work interprets kabwaia not only as a cultural philosophy but as a spiritual ecology—one that emphasises interconnectedness, resilience, and ancestral rootedness. In *Pandanus theology*, Rimon uses the pandanus tree as a metaphor for Kiribati adaptability and continuity (Rimon, 1985), drawing attention to the tree's many uses—food, shelter, weaving—as symbols of survival and what this study interprets as the weaving of new stories. The author's theology, while not directly focused on migration, is deeply diasporic in spirit. It challenges both kabwaia and toronibwai to embrace the spiritual re-rooting required of migrants, without severing ties to ancestral knowledge. Rimon critiques Western theological abstraction, advocating instead for a theology embodied in lived experience—much like the *neo-maneaba* model Namoori-Sinclair proposes. His reflections resonate with this study's assertion that *te waa* (the canoe) and *te maneaba* (the communal hall) are not just cultural symbols, but bridges between multiple homes and frameworks for belonging.

Extending Rimon's (1985) theological reflections on kabwaia and toronibwai, Dr. Kambati Uriam offers a historical and philosophical foundation for these concepts through his work on Kiribati oral tradition and cultural identity. In *In Their Own Words: History and Society in Gilbertese Oral Tradition*, Dr. Uriam documents ancestral narratives, chants, genealogies, and rituals that preserve values such as *te katei* (custom), *te maneaba* (communal governance), and *te kabane* (kinship)—all central to kabwaia. While not focused on contemporary migration, Uriam's scholarship is vital for understanding how cultural continuity and identity formation occur across generations and geographies. His work affirms that kabwaia is sustained through storytelling and ritual, offering migrants a way to anchor themselves in ancestral knowledge. Though toronibwai is not explicitly defined, its principles—spiritual communion with nature, subsistence knowledge, and ethical resilience—are deeply embedded in the oral traditions he preserves. Uriam's contributions challenge this study to view migration not merely as movement, but as a process of cultural transmission and spiritual survival. His work positions kabwaia and toronibwai as enduring ethical frameworks for navigating displacement, continuity, and belonging.

The data reveal unequivocal evidence that climate change is not only reshaping the physical landscape of Kiribati but also transforming the social and cultural dimensions of labour migration. Rising sea levels, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation are driving mobility decisions. Yet, the frameworks guiding these movements often overlook the deeply embedded cultural and spiritual values that shape I-Kiribati understandings of wellbeing and belonging. In this context, toronibwai and kabwaia emerge as essential cultural benchmarks. They offer more than symbolic meaning—they provide ethical and practical guidance for navigating displacement, adaptation, and continuity. Toronibwai, with its emphasis on self-reliance and spiritual communion with nature, equips migrants with the resilience to re-root themselves in unfamiliar environments while maintaining ancestral ties—just as Te Waa seeks safe sailing and landing. Kabwaia, as a philosophy of collective wellbeing, ensures that migration is not reduced to economic necessity but is framed as a relational and culturally accountable journey. Together, these concepts challenge dominant migration narratives and development models, urging policymakers and practitioners to adopt culturally informed strategies that honour Kiribati ways of knowing. As climate-induced migration becomes an increasingly urgent reality, toronibwai and kabwaia offer a pathway toward sustainable, inclusive, and spiritually grounded resettlement—one that centres identity, reciprocity, and intergenerational continuity.

5.4 Exploring Kiribati Narratives: Migration as Adaptation

5.4.1 Overview

As climate change increasingly influences human mobility, labour migration has emerged as a critical, though underutilised, adaptation strategy. It enables individuals and communities to diversify income, acquire skills, and build transnational networks that can buffer against environmental and economic shocks. However, the framing of migration as adaptation remains contested. Scholars such as Black et al. (2011) argue that migration decisions are shaped by intersecting drivers—environmental, economic, social, demographic, and political. While climate change may act as a catalyst, it is rarely the sole determinant.

As labour mobility schemes expand across the Pacific, it becomes prudent for researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners to advance research and assessments evaluating their impacts, particularly their adaptation benefits. The following sections critically examine labour migration as a mechanism for climate adaptation in Kiribati. Building on earlier discussions of climate change and labour mobility, this section on the adaptation component of the research inquiry adopted a consistent methodological approach when engaging with communities on the intersection of migration and climate resilience. Each maroro began with a central inquiry: Does labour mobility facilitate climate adaptation—and if so, how?

5.4.2 Social and economic adaptation

Amidst a near-unanimous recognition of climate change as a real threat, the study uncovered a nuanced and somewhat ambivalent perspective regarding the role of migration. As illustrated in Figure 5.6, most respondents identified migration as a response to both climate change and economic imperatives. In contrast, no participant viewed migration solely through the lens of climate change. This divergence suggests that while there is widespread acknowledgment of climate change as a tangible threat to livelihoods, economic considerations exert a more dominant influence on migration decisions. Thus, climate is recognised as an influencing factor on all drivers, albeit economic adaptation emerges as the more salient and immediate rationale for migratory behaviour. This exemplifies the complexity of migration decisions, particularly when assessing the influence of climate change on movement, while alluding to debates that climate change alone does not drive migration but rather acts as a threat multiplier that interacts with existing socio-economic imperatives that exacerbate vulnerabilities and hence aspirations for migration (Black et al., 2011).

Responses to motivators for migration in Kiribati			
Site	Climate Change	Economic Factors	Both CC/Ec Factors
TUC		10	17
BTC		7	13
MARAKEI		10	10
AUSTRALIA		3	17
TOTAL	0	30	57

Figure 5.6: Responses to motivators for migration in Kiribati

As portrayed in Figure 5.6, none of the respondents listed climate change as a driver for migration on its own. Only 30 people selected 'Economic Factors' as the sole driver for migration; however, when asked how climate change impacts their overall migration decisions, the responses indicated most participants associating migration with both climate change and economic imperatives. Under the column 'Both Climate Change and Economic Factors', many participants indicated that climate change is a threat multiplier - it exacerbates vulnerability and carries significant influence on the overall decision to migrate. Respondents indicated that the decision to migrate was predominantly based on four key socio-economic dimensions: new and better-paying jobs (i.e., the threat of unemployment), livelihoods (mainly food and water), social and economic wellbeing (toronibwai), and dignity/prosperity and resilience (kabwaia). Participants noted that as climate impacts escalate, these factors are compounded further.

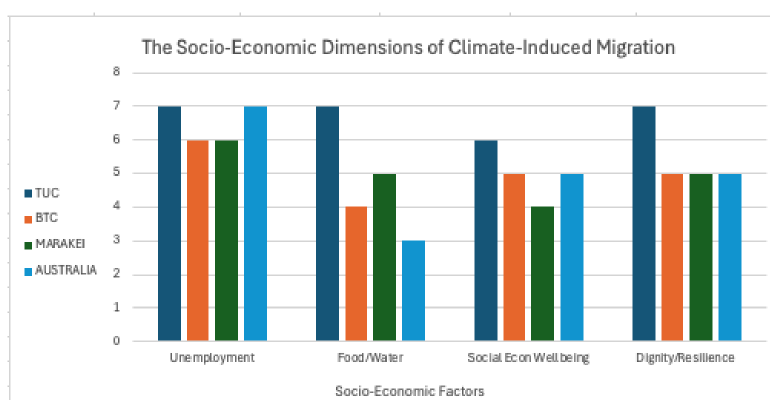


Figure 5.7: Socio-economic drivers of migration

As illustrated in Figure 5.7, unemployment ranks as the most prominent factor, directly impacting participants' sense of dignity, agency, and resilience. While climate change was widely acknowledged as a pressing threat, participants consistently emphasised that employment and income-generating opportunities were perceived as more immediate and actionable solutions to their migration challenges. This aligns with findings from Oakes et al. (2016), who note that migration in Kiribati is

positively associated with both household income and adaptive capacity, suggesting that economic mobility can serve as a pathway to climate resilience.

While climate change is increasingly recognised as a real and pressing threat, participants emphasised that economic opportunity remains a dominant driver of migration decisions. This dual reality reflects findings from Black et al. (2011) and Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer (2020), who posit that migration is shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, economic, and social factors. Respondents underscored migration as a vital enabling mechanism for jobs and diversified livelihoods. As outlined t the start of this chapter, I-Kiribati perceived migration (temporary and permanent) predominantly in terms of its income and job-generating potential, which participants highlighted as a crucial platform through which families and communities can enhance living standards and social and economic skills to adapt to climate change and other challenges. While the benefits of remittances in small island economies are well documented in migration scholarship (Brown et al., 2014; Muliaina, 2003), there is a dearth of understanding how remittances support adaptive capacities, particularly in climate-affected communities (Pairama & Le Dé, 2018). For instance, while climate adaptive initiatives are apparent in some parts of the Pacific such as Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji (Petrou & Connell, 2023), where earnings from workers are channelled to families and communities for financing climate resilience or supporting disaster recovery, there is a lacking evidence of its impact in addressing climate risks in small states, such as Kiribati.

In the Pacific, where labour mobility is emerging as a prominent adaptation strategy, questions surrounding labour migration's broader developmental value remain central to scholarly and policy debates, particularly concerning Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy (MIRAB) economies like Kiribati (Fraenkel, 2006; Tisdell, 2014). Given this dearth of understanding, remittances are sometimes reduced to their face value or dismissed as mere 'dollar signs' with little acknowledgment of the complex social, cultural, and emotional realities embedded in migration decisions in the first place. These debates motivated this research to examine the value of remittances through both their successes and their challenges—acknowledging the dual impacts of migration on households and communities. In this regard, the perspectives of Kiribati communities offered valuable insights.

Participants consistently identified remittances as the principal benefit of labour mobility. Financial transfers generated through labour schemes constitute a critical source of household income in Kiribati, contributing approximately 10% to the national GDP in 2020 (Curtain & Dornan, 2019; ILO, 2024). While monetary remittances serve as essential coping mechanisms—particularly during

periods of economic hardship and poverty—their significance extends beyond financial support. A major finding of the research was respondents' emphasis on the importance of social and material remittances. Social remittances refer to social capital, such as skills, knowledge, values, identities, and practices exchanged between migrants and their families. These intangible assets play a vital role in shaping adaptive capacities and fostering resilience within migrant-sending communities. Material remittances include the sending of equipment such as work tools for gardening or construction, and other household goods like vehicles.

5.4.3 Social impacts as a platform for learning and transformation

A recurring theme in participant narratives was the role of labour mobility as a catalyst for social learning and behavioural transformation. Respondents emphasised the value of new skills, ideas, and practices acquired abroad, which are often transmitted back to families and communities in Kiribati. These social remittances, which are non-material transfers, were seen as instrumental in shaping mindsets and fostering adaptive behaviours (Levitt, 1998) that supported growth and change in Kiribati. For instance, exposure to structured work environments and higher living standards overseas enabled workers to develop practical life skills such as time management, budgeting skills, financial literacy, and prioritisation of needs (ILO, 2019). One participant described how, after acquiring these skills in Australia, they regularly advised their family back home to manage remittances effectively. This included guidance on spending wisely, saving for future needs, and avoiding unnecessary expenses. In doing so, the migrant not only provided financial support but also enhanced the household's capacity to make informed economic decisions.

While concepts like budgeting and prioritisation may appear foreign or Western-centric, they resonate with traditional I-Kiribati values rooted in subsistence living and ecological awareness. Historically, I-Kiribati communities have practised forms of resource management that required living within one's means, saving for future seasons, and sharing within extended kin networks. By reintroducing these principles—through labour mobility financial literacy, workers capitalise on these skills which offer utility in economically turbulent times, including inter alia, climate change. Several participants shared insight about the importance of soft skills. Despite not completing high school, the returning PALM workers cited the interpersonal skills they acquired as one of their greatest assets. According to the workers, these skills not only helped them unlock their full potential but also ignited a strong desire to improve their lives, a goal that aligns closely with the Migration with Dignity policy of empowering I-Kiribati individuals as well as Te Waa's people and spiritual elements.

This demonstrates the power of meaningful work abroad in transforming the lives of young people from remote villages in Kiribati who may have missed their opportunity to pursue higher education. By embracing this positive outlook on life, some of these workers—who are parents—said they were motivated to do better for their children while consistently encouraging them to work hard and pursue their dreams. In this context, even the smallest skills gained have a profound ripple effect, not only shaping the workers' own journey but also that of their family (Brown et al., 2014; Muliaina, 2003).

During a maroro with the Island Clerk in Marakei, I observed a small gathering near the village's EFTPOS terminal, located within the council office. Upon closer inspection, there was a woman withdrawing cash and subsequently distributing it to several others waiting in line. Initially, this scene appeared to reflect an informal lending arrangement, as the recipients carefully counted the cash they received. However, after engaging with the group and receiving their warm responses, I discovered a more nuanced reality. The woman distributing cash, was the sole individual in the village with access to a bank card and was facilitating the payment of remittances sent by spouses employed overseas – to their spouses and families on the island (Figure 5.8). This informal yet highly effective system of financial distribution underscores the critical role of soft skills—such as trust, communication, and basic financial literacy—in enabling community-based solutions to structural limitations in financial access, similar to initiatives of the Fiji iTaukei concept of Solesolevaki (Vunibola & Scheyvens, 2019).

Figure 5.8: Remittances paid via Eftpos ATM on Marakei Island

In geographically isolated locations such as Marakei, where formal banking infrastructure is absent and the only financial services are limited to council-operated ATMs, accessing funds poses significant logistical challenges. Without such grassroots mechanisms, residents would be forced to rely on postal services or undertake costly and time-consuming travel to the central bank in South Tarawa. Moreover, the woman facilitating these transactions had established a modest income stream by charging a small service fee of AUD 2 to AUD 5 per withdrawal, depending on the amount. Although it is unclear what regulations apply in such a business operation, this practice not only reflects entrepreneurial initiative but also highlights the practical application of budgeting and financial management skills. The woman's role exemplifies how soft skills can translate into tangible economic benefits, both for individual households and the broader community.

Moreover, the act of sharing knowledge and values with family members reflects the communal ethos embedded in I-Kiribati society. It echoes the well-known adage *'it takes a village to raise a child'*, though in this context, the dynamic is reversed: the child who has migrated for work now contributes back to the village that once nurtured them. This reciprocity reinforces the intergenerational and communal dimensions of social remittances, where leadership and responsibility are shifted from the elders to the child who has now grown. The benefits of labour migration, though directly felt by the migrant overseas, are not confined to the individual but diffused through familial and social networks. Ultimately, social remittances expand on aspects of relational and collective growth embedded in I-Kiribati society and demonstrate how migration is not just an economic strategy; it is a social process of knowledge exchange, identity and cultural resilience (Levitt, 1998).

5.4.4 Material impacts: an overlooked vital dimension of growth

In much the same way that social remittances have generated communal benefits for the families of migrants, another critical yet often underexplored dimension of remittances is the material or in-kind transfer of goods. These material remittances, which include tools and household items, play a significant role in enhancing the adaptive capacities of I-Kiribati communities, particularly in the context of climate adaptation. This is especially pertinent to this research, which seeks to understand how migration contributes to resilience-building and sustainable livelihoods in the face of socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities. While the phenomenon of material remittances has been more extensively documented in other Pacific Island Countries (PICs), particularly in Polynesia and Melanesia, where migrants frequently send home tractors, construction equipment, and vehicles (Bailey, 2025), similar practices are also evident in Kiribati, although at a relatively smaller scale. Part

of the reason stories of other Pacific nations are more prominent is that these states often receive global attention during disaster events, when diaspora communities fundraise and send home containers of goods, to help villagers recover from the disaster. In this context, material remittances have not traditionally been a common practice in Kiribati for two reasons. First, the country experiences relatively few large-scale disasters, reducing the impetus to send goods in support of recovery efforts or village needs. Second, the tyranny of distance and geographic isolation makes the shipment of goods prohibitively costly and time-consuming. That said, as circumstances have evolved, the practice is now gaining renewed significance in Kiribati.

Specifically, container transfers tend to occur at the household level rather than through large-scale, village-wide initiatives. Historically, I-Kiribati seafarers have been known to remit a wide range of goods, including electronics, vehicles, and household materials to support their families and improve household living standards. With the expansion of regional labour mobility schemes, particularly in the Pacific Rim, the prevalence of material remittances has grown significantly, reaching both urban centres and remote outer islands. In Betio and South Tarawa, for instance, the visible proliferation of informal market business vendors reflects the growing influence of material remittances. In one notable example, a village had established a small amusement park featuring a jumping castle, which, upon inquiry, was revealed to be owned by a meat worker employed overseas. Such entrepreneurial ventures, while previously uncommon in Tarawa, are becoming more visible as families seek to capitalise on the economic opportunities afforded by overseas employment.

During a group discussion with returning workers in Betio, participants identified the shipment of a container filled with goods from Australia as one of their most significant achievements. The shipment included motorbikes, diesel generators, gardening and fishing tools, and various household products. These material contributions not only enhance the quality of life for recipient families but also reflect the communal ethos of I-Kiribati society, where resources are shared and redistributed to support collective wellbeing (Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9: Remittances are often spent on motorbikes, an essential transport in Kiribati

A comparable case was observed in Marakei, where the parent of a labour migrant has successfully established a small-scale fishing enterprise. The father attributed the development of this livelihood initiative to the remittances received from his two sons, who are currently employed in Australia. While he acknowledged the immediate financial relief that remittances provide, he emphasised the greater significance of deploying these funds toward sustainable, income-generating ventures. His reflections underscore the importance of capital investment as a foundational element in achieving long-term economic resilience. Specifically, the remittances enabled the purchase of a fishing boat, which now serves as the primary asset for his business. The income generated from the sale of fresh fish not only supplements the household's earnings but also contributes to improved food security within the village. By offering a healthier alternative to the canned goods commonly available in local stores, the initiative also promotes better nutritional outcomes for the community. This reflects a broader shift in remittance usage—from consumption-based spending to capital investments—empowering families and villages to capitalise on growth while achieving broader goals, including those captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

5.4.5 Adverse socio-economic impacts

While the positive socio-economic impacts of labour mobility are well-documented—particularly in terms of income generation, skills acquisition, and transnational support—there are also notable adverse effects that warrant critical examination. One such area of concern involves the transmission of social behaviours, values, and habits from migrants to their families and communities, which can sometimes disrupt established cultural norms and traditional practices. A salient example of this disruption is the shifting of gender roles and the increasing incidence of family fragmentation. While the increased participation of Kiribati women in economic opportunities overseas has been pivotal to development, their prolonged absence from home, coupled with exposure to new social environments and modern lifestyles, has led to complex social outcomes. Reports of increased alcohol consumption, unplanned pregnancies, and changes in familial responsibilities have emerged, reflecting the tensions between traditional expectations and contemporary experiences. Concomitantly, psychological impacts on individuals and their families are grave, yet inadequately supported. Similarly, male migrants have also been implicated in the breakdown of family units, often forming new relationships abroad that result in estrangement from their spouses and children. These dynamics highlight the unintended social costs of migration, particularly in contexts where familial cohesion and gendered responsibilities are disrupted.

By and large, material remittances—while beneficial in many respects, can also contribute to structural dependencies and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. For instance, the importation of diesel generators, though vital in addressing chronic power shortages in Kiribati, fosters reliance on fossil fuels. This not only raises environmental concerns but also displaces more sustainable, locally adapted practices. The increasing preference for engine-powered boats over traditional canoes exemplifies this shift. While motorised vessels offer efficiency and convenience, they simultaneously undermine indigenous maritime knowledge and reduce intergenerational transmission of skills that are central to I-Kiribati cultural heritage. These developments point to a broader paradox within labour mobility: while it offers pathways to economic empowerment and resilience, it also introduces new vulnerabilities—social, cultural, and environmental. It is vital to thoroughly assess all aspects of labour migration as a climate adaptive strategy, ensuring that while it offers benefits, the associated risks are also carefully managed. This critical investigation point is explored in the next section.

5.4.6 Cultural and spiritual adaptation

Through deeper inquiry, two additional dimensions of adaptation emerged: cultural and spiritual adaptation. Beyond economic drivers, the study reveals that migration is increasingly understood as a form of adaptation—not only to economic and environmental stressors but also to evolving cultural and spiritual landscapes. Through in-depth interviews, participants articulated that migration facilitates cultural and spiritual adaptation, allowing individuals to maintain identity and community values in new settings. This process of cultural and spiritual adaptation was particularly evident in South Tarawa and Betio, where most participants had resided for many years following internal migration from other parts of the country. While not originally from these urban centres, many respondents were born and raised there, tracing their presence to the migration of their elders for employment, marriage, or other culturally significant reasons, including land acquisition (Grimble, 1952; Schutz & Tenten, 1979; Talu et al, 1979). Notably, the younger generations resulting from these internal migrations constituted a substantial proportion of the participant group. For many of them, South Tarawa and Betio are considered home, despite having never visited their ancestral islands of origin.

Similar dynamics were observed in Marakei, where many participants had settled because of ancestral migration, facilitated through land acquisition, marriage, employment, missionary activity, or other culturally significant ties (Figure 5.10). The continuity of such relationships through migration is supported by various cultural practices embedded within the Kiribati society. These include *te tobwa* (adoption), *te boo* or *te kokoraki* (the forging of new familial bonds), *te ingoa* or *katoka ara* (the naming of a child within a family other than one's own), and *te itaritari* (a symbolic brotherhood or sisterhood tie established between individuals seeking to transform friendship into kinship). This tradition is deeply embedded across Kiribati and is widely revered as a mechanism of social cohesion and cultural continuity, remaining actively practised today (Lawrence, 1992). The relationships established through these customary practices are often regarded with greater significance than biological kinship. Many participants identified themselves as descendants of such culturally constructed ties, viewing their identities as products of spiritual and cultural affiliations in which migration has played a pivotal role.

Other relationships are forged through internal migration of government workers such as police officers, health practitioners, and teachers. Every island hosts key governing institutions and service suppliers such as health, education, and as shown in Figure 5.10, law and order services through police

branches, where workers are periodically rotated across the islands, creating sustained patterns of mobility that maintain social and cultural connections.

Figure 5.10: An important governing structure on the island—a police post

In the context of international migration, cultural and spiritual adaptation remains a deeply valued aspect of I-Kiribati life. Wherever they settle, I-Kiribati migrants actively cultivate cultural networks within the diaspora and among friends of Kiribati, establishing vital support systems. These networks often emerge through shared spaces such as churches, sports associations, and other culturally significant platforms at the individual, familial, and community levels, both in Kiribati and abroad. Such platforms then serve not only to support newly arrived migrants but importantly to preserve and transmit cultural practices, values, and belief systems to younger and future generations of I-Kiribati moving within the country or living abroad. Through these interactions, new connections are forged within the diaspora, while existing ties to the homeland are reinforced via cultural and familial networks.

These relationships facilitate the exchange of cultural knowledge, spiritual practices, and material goods, and have become essential conduits through which cultural histories are carried throughout generations, especially within diasporic communities. In doing so, these links foster sustained interest in the transnational movement of family and friends, thereby reinforcing the dynamic and enduring nature of I-Kiribati cultural identity across borders (Lee, 2009; Taylor & Lee, 2017). Figure 5.11 depicts a shrine that every I-Marakei person recognises as part of their ancestral history even if they have never set foot in Marakei. Migration, therefore, is not merely a movement of people but a vital mechanism for legitimising and sustaining these cultural bonds. In formal gatherings—such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals—migration facilitates the physical presence of kin and affinal relations, enabling expressions of solidarity and support. For instance, when a child who is an *ingoa* (namesake) of another elder celebrates a significant milestone, the elder is expected to assume a prominent role in the ceremony, often through sponsorship or the provision of traditional gifts such as *bwabwai* (a Kiribati taro), pig, or fish. Such practices underscore the enduring significance of migration in reinforcing familial and communal obligations within I-Kiribati society, in the same manner that migrant workers are obligated to fulfil cultural and communal contributions, as discussed previously.

Figure 5.11: The shrine of Nei Naantekimam, one of Marakei's four female guardian spirits

While there is a plethora of literature examining diasporic movements and cultural dynamics (Beine et al., 2011; Mishra, 2007; Vivekananthan & Connors, 2019), specific studies have focused on the

migration of I-Kiribati communities to the Solomon Islands (Tabe, 2011), the displacement of Banabans to Fiji (Teaiwa, 2014), and the emergence of Kiribati diasporas in New Zealand (Burnett & Bond, 2020; Korauaba, 2011; Namoori-Sinclair, 2020) as outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. However, a notable gap remains in scholarship concerning the role of culture and spirituality in shaping adaptive capacities and facilitating successful migration experiences. Recent contributions begin to address this intersection, yet further inquiry is needed to understand how cultural logics, spiritual resilience, and indigenous worldviews inform migration pathways and settlement outcomes, particularly in the context of labour migration and climate mobility (Lakisa et al., 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2024).

At the outset of this thesis, it was emphasised that mobility has long constituted a way of life in the Pacific. It is not a recent phenomenon, but a deeply embedded cultural practice. For I-Kiribati people, mobility is integral to identity and survival, rooted in ancestral traditions of seafaring, navigation, and inter-island exchange. These practices have historically facilitated not only physical movement but also the transmission of cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge across generations and geographies. Historical accounts, such as those by Schutz and Tenten (1979), affirm this enduring relationship between mobility and adaptation, particularly in the context of Kiribati's transition from colonial rule and its responses to demographic pressures and resource constraints. Their analysis underscores how migration has in the past functioned as both a strategy of resilience and a reflection of evolving socio-political realities.

As alluded to in the previous chapters, three major settlement schemes undertaken during the mid-20th century illustrate this dynamic: the Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme, the Phoenix to Solomon Islands Resettlement Scheme, and the relocation of Banabans to Fiji following the colonial administration's exploitation of phosphate resources on Banaba. While these schemes left indelible marks on families and communities—many of which persist to this day—they also exemplify the themes of transnationalism, mobile identities, and cultural adaptation that underpin this study.

As Schutz and Tenten (1979) observe, the ethos of mobility remains central to I-Kiribati worldviews: *"Now our values have changed. Settling overseas, beyond the ocean of our islands, is something to be*

sought after. Why? Because our population is still growing…so today, we find the Gilbertese[2] *and part Gilbertese people spread throughout almost every major island in the Pacific"* (p. 127). This is echoed by Tabe (2011), who said the "*movement of people from the Gilbert Islands to the Phoenix Islands and later to the Solomon Islands was not only a response to population pressure and resource scarcity, but also a continuation of traditional practices of relocation and adaptation."* This historical framing reinforces the argument that mobility has always been integral to I-Kiribati life—not as displacement, but as a means of resilience. Migration, in this context, is not a passive consequence of crisis but an active strategy of survival, adaptation, and cultural continuity. This perspective aligns with Hau'ofa (1994) seminal argument that Pacific Islanders are "*not passive victims of geography, but people whose cultures have always been shaped by movement and exchange*" (p. 152). Teresia Teaiwa's (2017) evocative posthumous book—"*We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood"*—further captures this profound oceanic identity, underscoring how Pacific mobility has long been grounded in agency, connection, and an embodied relationship with the sea.

In the context of climate change, mobility must be understood not as a panacea, but as a strategic and culturally grounded response to environmental disruption. It offers a pathway for adaptation that is consistent with historical patterns of movement, while also challenging dominant narratives that frame relocation in terms of cultural loss. Scholars such as Farbotko and Lazrus (2012) and McNamara and Gibson (2009) have critiqued the tendency to portray Pacific Islanders as climate refugees, which resonates powerfully with this research aim to foreground community agency against framings that obscure agency and reinforce colonial othering. However, the study cautions that the overemphasis on place-based identity and immobility in climate discourse risks essentialising Pacific cultures as static and land-bound. While concerns about cultural erosion and disconnection from ancestral land are valid, they must not override the right of individuals and communities to choose mobility as a pathway to wellbeing, and not necessarily as driven by climate change. As Mortreux and Barnett (2009) note in a study on Tuvaluans' attitudes toward migration, many viewed relocation not as cultural abandonment, but as a means of securing better opportunities and futures for their families. This so-

[2] Gilbertese refers to the name historically used for the I-Kiribati people during the period when their islands formed part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony under British colonial administration. Following independence movements in the 1970s, the Gilbert Islands became the sovereign nation of Kiribati in 1979, while the Ellice Islands became Tuvalu in 1978. The term "Gilbertese" is now largely historical, though it continues to carry cultural and diasporic significance in certain contexts. Kiribati's traditional name is Tungaru.

called climate-driven threat to cultural loss and identity is eloquently addressed by Itaia (1979), who offers a powerful reflection on the evolving nature of Kiribati identity. He writes:

> *"In spite of the fact that many things Gilbertese eighty years ago seemed to have changed today, and what is Gilbertese today may not look Gilbertese in fifty years' time, we are still Gilbertese. In many ways we may appear to have changed outwardly in such things as clothes we wear and the food we eat, but the sharp teeth of change have not gone far enough into our flesh to crack our bones, to make us really changed from within. For most Gilbertese the things we value and our attitude toward life are still very Gilbertese"* (Itaia, 1979, p. 183).

This reflection challenges the assumption that identity is inextricably tied to land. Instead, it affirms that I-Kiribati identity is carried within—through values, relationships, and ways of being that persist across borders and generations. This understanding counters the dominant narrative of climate mobility, which equates movement with cultural displacement. It asserts, instead, that identity is mobile, resilient, and sovereign—capable of adapting without losing its essence.

Although contemporary migration differs from mobilities of the past, this study draws upon established routes and enduring historical connections, thereby fostering transnationalism and the development of mobile cultural identities. I-Kiribati migrants carry with them their values, traditions, and *katei* (way of life), enabling them to adapt to new environments while maintaining cultural continuity. Migration in Kiribati functions as a mechanism for enhancing adaptive capacity, allowing people to navigate climate uncertainty while upholding cultural integrity.

In this context, the concepts of toronibwai and kabwaia become central. Toronibwai, with its emphasis on self-reliance and spiritual communion with nature, equips migrants with the ethical and ecological grounding needed to adapt meaningfully. Kabwaia, as a philosophy of collective wellbeing, ensures that migration remains relational, culturally accountable, and spiritually anchored, as discussed in previous sections. Together, these concepts offer a culturally resonant framework embodied in Te Waa framework—for understanding migration not as displacement, but as continuity and transnationalism (Lee, 2009; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009).

5.5 How Migration with Dignity Laid the Groundwork for Future Labour Mobility, Permanent Migration, and a Climate-Adaptive Framework

5.5.1 Overview

As this chapter draws to a close, it is essential to restate the central question: how does labour migration facilitate climate adaptation? This inquiry is not only foundational to the research, but also

increasingly urgent in the context of Kiribati, where physical resilience is constrained by geography. For low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati, where land elevation rarely exceeds a few metres, the limits of in-situ adaptation are not just visible—they are existential. In such settings, migration emerges not merely as a contingency, but as a transformative strategy within a global system that lacks robust protection mechanisms for those displaced by climate change.

The Migration with Dignity policy, exemplifies this strategic shift, reframing migration as a dignified response to climate vulnerability—investing in human capital, aligning vocational training with international labour market needs, and positioning mobility as a form of resilience rather than displacement. While the policy opened new pathways for empowerment and adaptation, it also encountered structural challenges and sustained critique—offering valuable lessons for the labour mobility programs that have since evolved from its foundations. At its core, the policy recognised that climate-induced displacement was not a distant possibility but an unfolding reality. Its emphasis on cross-border mobility as an adaptation mechanism was both visionary and pragmatic. It acknowledged that in-situ resilience (e.g., seawalls and land reclamation) may delay but not prevent the long-term impacts of climate change. Thus, migration was positioned not as a failure of adaptation, but as a proactive extension of it.

Moreover, the policy addressed intersecting socio-economic challenges, including youth unemployment, limited domestic job creation, and economic dependency. By aligning TVET curricula with international labour market demands—particularly in sectors like aged care, nursing, agriculture, fisheries, and tourism—the policy created tangible pathways for I-Kiribati to contribute to foreign economies while sending remittances home (Maclellan, 2012; McNamara, 2015). This dual benefit—economic empowerment and climate resilience—underscored the policy's holistic approach.

The policy's benefits:

1. Empowerment through education and skills: The policy invested in human capital, enabling citizens to migrate not as unskilled labourers but as trained professionals. This enhanced their bargaining power and reduced vulnerability to exploitation.
2. Narrative shift in global discourse: By rejecting the label of 'climate refugees', the policy challenged disempowering narratives and asserted the dignity and agency of Pacific islanders (Kupferberg, 2021; McAdam, 2010).

3. International solidarity and visibility: Tong's leadership brought global attention to the plight of small island states, framing migration as a moral and legal imperative for the international community.
4. Continuity across political administrations: Despite ideological shifts under the Maamau government, labour mobility initiatives were retained and expanded, indicating broad consensus on their developmental value (Bailes et al., 2014; de Castro Barbosa, 2020).

The policy's limitations include:

1. Limited absorptive capacity in host countries: While the policy envisioned large-scale migration, actual opportunities were constrained by structural constraints including immigration quotas and visa restrictions, among other factors, in destination countries.
2. Risk of brain drain: The emphasis on skilled migration raised concerns about the depletion of domestic talent, particularly in critical sectors like healthcare and education.
3. Uneven access and equity: Not all I-Kiribati had equal access to training or migration pathways, potentially exacerbating social inequalities and leaving behind the most vulnerable.
4. Cultural and identity displacement: Migration, even when dignified, entails profound disruptions to cultural continuity, land-based identity, and community cohesion—elements central to I-Kiribati life.
5. Dependency on external economies: Over-reliance on remittances and foreign labour markets may expose Kiribati to economic shocks beyond its control.

The Migration with Dignity policy also serves as a climate justice framework, asserting the right of vulnerable populations to choose their futures rather than be passively relocated. It foregrounds justice and ethical responsibility, urging high-emitting nations to support adaptive migration not as charity, but as reparation. This ethos remains a powerful counter-narrative in global climate discourse, emphasising empowerment over victimhood and foresight over fatalism.

5.5.2 Environmental and climate change adaptation

To understand the role of labour migration as an adaptive response, this research acknowledges the complexity of the climate–migration nexus. This is essential for several reasons. First, as established throughout this thesis, climate change is not an isolated driver of migration. Rather; climate change intersects with a constellation of social, economic, political, and environmental factors, making the relationship multidimensional. Second, despite growing policy interest, there remains a lack of robust empirical evidence linking climate hazards directly to migration decisions (Huang, 2023). While some

studies have explored this relationship, systematic data on how major climate events shape migration patterns—particularly in the Pacific, is still limited (Almulhim et al., 2024). This is further complicated by the absence of universally accepted methodologies to measure or model this relationship (Parrish et al., 2020). Third, the temporal and spatial dynamics of migration—such as timing, duration, and distance—add further complexity. Migration patterns today differ significantly from historical trends, shaped by the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related and economic shocks (IOM, 2017, 2023). These evolving dynamics demand a nuanced understanding of how mobility functions as both a coping mechanism and a long-term adaptation strategy.

Many participants in this study identified migration as a vital strategy for mitigating climate impacts. This perception aligns with a growing body of literature that recognises the interlinkages between climate vulnerability and human mobility, particularly in low-lying atoll nations (ILO, 2016; IOM, 2017, 2024; Kupferberg, 2021; Maclellan, 2006; McAdam, 2010; McClain et al., 2022; McNamara, 2015). This section foregrounds I-Kiribati perspectives on labour migration as a form of anticipatory adaptation, contributing to the broader discourse on the climate–migration nexus. One participant, a migrant worker in Australia, articulated the critical role of migration in addressing both climate-induced and economic stressors. As the eldest daughter in her family, she described how her remittances directly support her household's access to clean water—an increasingly scarce resource due to prolonged droughts:

> *"Given the irregularity and unreliability of water supply due to drought, I've assisted my family purchase their water tank and a water pump. They're an absolute necessity, but I also remind them to manage water use carefully"* (Iumea Itinraoi, 12 November 2024).

Itinraoi's support extends beyond water security to include nutritional needs:

> *"I send remittances to help my parents buy fruits and vegetables, since food cargoes run out quickly and my mother can no longer grow much in her garden"* (Iumea Itinraoi, 12 November 2024).

Another participant similarly highlighted the role of remittances in addressing health-related vulnerabilities:

> *"My family often tells me the island clinic has run out of medicine, and it breaks my heart knowing my children struggle while I live comfortably here, so I send Panadol, vitamins, and other supplies each month, especially for my diabetic mother"* (Participant 11, 6 November 2024).

These narratives illustrate how labour migration enables migrants to act as agents of adaptation, directly addressing climate-related stressors such as water scarcity, food insecurity, and health system

deficiencies. However, they also raise important questions about the sustainability and equity of such transnational coping mechanisms. While remittances can buffer households against immediate climate impacts, as highlighted throughout this chapter, there is potential such a mechanism generates structural vulnerabilities, for example by shifting the cost or burden of such adaptive strategies from governments or social institutions such as health and education to individuals and families. While this act unequivocally demonstrates resilience and *ewenako* on the part of migrants furnishing these needs, it does not address the inefficiency of public services to upgrade the quality of or access to basic needs and resources.

In Marakei, parents of a migrant worker in Australia reflected on the growing challenges of sustaining traditional livelihoods in the face of environmental change:

> *"We once told our daughter to stop sending money because we could grow our own food, but this has changed as frequent rains and spring tides now disrupt our food cycle, and even our breadfruit tree bears far less than it used to."* (Ataraoti Bwebwenibure, 26 January 2024).

The 74-year-old father, who usually cuts toddy—a nutritious drink derived from coconut—has eschewed this routine due to age and physical limitations, noting that remittances have become increasingly vital for meeting basic needs. While such accounts underscore the adaptive potential of labour migration, they also highlight the risk of dependency as climate impacts intensify and as traditional subsistence practices erode with old age. This aligns with emerging critiques in the literature that caution against overly optimistic portrayals of migration as a panacea for climate vulnerability or development. Barnett et al. (2024) and Remling (2020) argue that migration, whether temporary or permanent, can in some cases constitute maladaptation—particularly when it leads to social fragmentation, loss of cultural knowledge, or increased exposure to new forms of risk.

5.5.3 Adaptation or maladaptation? Perspectives on the limits of labour mobility

This subsection critically interrogates the potential for maladaptive outcomes associated with labour mobility, using the findings, and aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the adaptation–maladaptation nexus in Pacific Island responses to climate change. While labour migration is increasingly promoted as a viable adaptation strategy—especially for low-lying nations like Kiribati, it remains essential to examine the unintended social and cultural consequences that may undermine long-term resilience (Barnett et al., 2024; Farbotko et al., 2016; Vinke et al., 2020).

Participants in this study raised concerns about the social costs of migration, including family separation, abandonment of spouses, children, and elders, and the breakdown of marital relationships

due to extramarital affairs—both among migrants and their families at home. These issues complicate the narrative of migration as a straightforward adaptation strategy and highlight the non-economic losses that often accompany mobility, such as disruptions to kinship networks, cultural identity, and emotional wellbeing. One such perspective was shared by Taoaba Moneti, a young man who expressed both enthusiasm for labour migration and a critical awareness of its limitations. While acknowledging the life-changing potential of overseas employment, he questioned the framing of migration as a climate adaptation strategy:

> *"It's not everyday opportunity to work abroad for ordinary I-Kiribati like me. It used to be just seafaring… now there are many more options—New Zealand, Australia, Canada… I hear Japan and Korea too. This is a plus for job opportunities—if I get recruited, I can go and come back"* (Taoaba Moneti, 13 February 2024).

However, when asked how migration serves as a climate adaptive measure, Taoaba offered a more cautious view: "How does migration offer adaptation to climate change when these climate disasters are happening overseas, not in Kiribati?" (Taoaba Moneti, 13 February 2024). His reflections reveal a complex interplay of motivations and concerns. While economic opportunity is a strong driver, his preference for circular migration—with the intention to return, reflects a deep-rooted attachment to place and a perception of relative safety in remaining in situ. This aligns with Te Waa framework's emphasis on the spiritual, relational, and place-based dimensions of migration decision-making. It also resonates with the theory of staying in place and return migration (Lee, 1966; Taylor & Lee, 2017), which highlights migration as a dynamic process shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors. Recent studies caution that migration, while potentially adaptive, can also deepen vulnerability and maladaptive outcomes—especially when mobility occurs through unregulated or exploitative channels.

As Vinke et al. (2020) state, migration must be understood not only in terms of economic gains but also through its emotional, cultural, and ecological impacts, which may challenge the notion of successful adaptation. This insightfully informs this study by highlighting the need to carefully examine the opportunities that emanate from labour migration schemes and ensure that while optimising returns is utmost, the need for strengthening management, oversight, and consultation throughout all phases of the programs is imperative. Moreover, while substantial evidence indicates the significant economic contributions of labour mobility to development in the Pacific, its benefits are disproportionately distributed, and its long-term sustainability is dependent on supportive mechanisms such as policy design, political commitment, and culturally embedded, rights-based, and fair-work approaches (Doan et al., 2023). Taoaba's case offers a compelling counterpoint to dominant

narratives that frame environmental change as a straightforward push factor in climate-vulnerable contexts. Rather than prompting a desire to migrate, environmental drivers in his experience reinforce a preference to remain in place. His perception that climate risks are more severe abroad, challenges the prevailing assumption that migration is inherently adaptive in the face of climate change. This perspective aligns with the migration decision-making framework proposed by Black et al. (2011), which emphasises the multidimensional nature of migration drivers and the importance of context-specific analysis in understanding mobility and adaptation outcomes.

Moreover, Taoaba's emphasis on circular mobility reflects a growing recognition in the literature that migration should not be equated with permanent relocation. Flexible and reversible forms of movement—such as seasonal, temporary, or circular migration—may offer more culturally appropriate and socially sustainable pathways for adaptation, particularly in Pacific Island contexts where communal links shape mobility decisions (Bardsley & Hugo, 2010; Gamlen et al., 2018; Hugo, 2011). These forms of mobility allow individuals and communities to maintain connections to their land and culture while navigating environmental uncertainty. Taoaba's narrative also underscores the limitations of framing climate-induced migration in binary terms—either as adaptive or maladaptive. Instead, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals and communities negotiate the complex interplay of risks, opportunities, and aspirations associated with mobility. For instance, while his perception that disasters are more frequent and intense overseas may hold some validity, it does not imply that Kiribati is immune to such events. Many I-Kiribati conceptualise disasters primarily as sudden, extreme events occurring abroad like cyclones or tsunamis, often overlooking the slow-onset impacts of climate change—sea level rise, water salinisation, and drought, as equally significant forms of disaster. These gradual processes, though less immediately visible, pose profound and enduring threats to the environmental and socio-economic stability of Kiribati. As Hugo (2011) notes, the vulnerability of low-lying atoll nations in the Pacific to cascading climate impacts entails a more inclusive understanding of both sudden and slow-onset disasters.

Migration decisions among I-Kiribati are deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic contexts, challenging simplistic narratives that frame mobility solely as a climate adaptive strategy. For instance, Kanongnga Tongaa (2024) articulates a profound emotional and cultural resistance to migration, citing her connection to *aba* (land) and *taetae n Kiribati* (language) as central to her identity: "Climate change is real, but what happens if we all leave. Who's going to look after my mother, or our burial sites?" (Tongaa, 17 February 2024). This sentiment reflects Te Waa framework's spiritual and relational dimensions of land in shaping migration decisions. Land is not merely a physical

asset but a repository of ancestral ties and cultural continuity (Grimble, 1952; Sabatier, 1977; Talu, 1979; Uriam, 1995). Similarly, Kinaua, a returning seasonal worker, expressed a preference for temporary labour mobility over permanent relocation, citing the importance of family, food, and community. Her assertion— "*Kiribati cannot sink!"*—underscores a resilient belief in the permanence of place and identity, even amid environmental uncertainty (Kinaua, 18 February 2024). These perspectives illustrate how migration can evoke fears of cultural dislocation and the burden of re-establishing belonging in unfamiliar terrains.

In addition, it is important to note from a cultural lens that, besides socio-economic pressures that influence migration, familial networks have also played an enormous role in motivating participation. Naomi Mwemwenikeaki (2024) noted her cousin's encouragement to apply for the new Pacific Engagement Visa scheme, while others, like Rutiaa (2024), expressed hesitation due to language barriers and financial constraints. Family influence remains a critical factor in migration decisions across the Pacific, and this is particularly true where migration is often pursued not only for individual advancement but as a collective strategy to support extended kinship and cultural links (Enari & Faleolo, 2020).

Finally, historical experiences of Banaban displacement further illuminate the complexities of migration. Uprooted from Banaba due to phosphate mining, Banabans resettled on Rabi Island in Fiji, where they have preserved their cultural identity through daily practices, festivals, storytelling, and community governance. Their resilience offers lessons for contemporary climate mobility, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation and community agency in post-migration contexts. Moreover, the story of the Banabans serves as a historical precedent of colonial extractive displacement. It warns against the reproduction of similar dynamics through climate coloniality, and institutional apathy as discussed in Chapter 1.

In sum, I-Kiribati migration decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural values, historical memory, economic necessity, and environmental change. Recognising this multidimensionality is essential for designing migration policies that are both culturally sensitive and socially sustainable in a climate-threatened world.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the evolving role of labour migration as a multidimensional climate adaptation strategy in Kiribati, revealing how migration is not merely a response to environmental

stress, but a dynamic process shaped by cultural values, social networks, economic imperatives, and spiritual beliefs. While national discourse has historically resisted framing climate change in terms of displacement, the increasing engagement with labour migration programs—particularly the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme—signals a pragmatic shift toward mobility as a proactive and dignified adaptation pathway. Key findings underscore that labour migration facilitates economic adaptation through remittances that support household resilience, infrastructure development, and diversification of income sources. Equally important are social remittances, which include the transfer of knowledge, skills, and values that strengthen community capacity and foster innovation in climate response. These forms of exchange contribute to social adaptation, reinforcing kinship ties and enabling migrants to maintain active roles in their home communities—as well as in their adopted country.

The chapter also highlights the significance of cultural and spiritual adaptation, where migration decisions are deeply informed by connections to aba (land), taetae n Kiribati (language), and kainga (family and clan). Concepts such as toronibwai (self-sufficiency and resilience) and kabwaia (prosperity and dignity) are central to understanding how I-Kiribati navigate the moral and emotional dimensions of migration. These values shape preferences for circular and seasonal migration, allowing individuals to fulfil obligations at home while engaging in economic activities abroad, while also preparing them for permanent migration should this option become a choice or a last resort. Environmentally, labour mobility offers indirect benefits by reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems and enabling migrants to invest in climate-resilient practices upon return. In this context, Te Waa framework's mobility philosophy is at play, promoting mobile identities and cultural coherence while also extending on the principles of the Migration with Dignity policy as a cornerstone of Kiribati's adaptation strategy. While the policy is no longer recognised politically, its outputs—the expanded opportunities from labour mobility schemes—are helping reframe migration as a rights-based and forward-looking choice that empowers citizens to respond to climate uncertainty with agency and cultural integrity while also breaking away from harmful narratives, including the climate refugee label and associated vulnerability. Importantly, migration in Kiribati is rarely driven by a single causal factor. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of environmental vulnerability, economic necessity, and cultural and spiritual identity, all of which are increasingly shaped by the cascading effects of climate change—rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, food and water insecurity, and intensifying extreme weather events. While labour mobility holds significant adaptive potential, it must be carefully managed to ensure that it is safe, inclusive, and sustainable**.** This includes equitable access to migration opportunities, protection for migrants and their families, and support for those who remain. As

climate impacts intensify, labour migration must be integrated into a broader resilience framework—one that honours the lived realities of I-Kiribati communities and promotes adaptation that is not only effective, but also culturally grounded and socially and economically just.

In bringing these insights together, it becomes clear that labour migration is not simply an economic strategy, but a dynamic form of climate adaptation shaped by the lived experiences, aspirations, and constraints of I-Kiribati families. Just as Te Waa has long guided journeys across vast shifting oceans, it also provides a conceptual lens for navigating and making sense of the intertwined realities of climate change, mobility, and adaptation today.

Chapter 6 : To What Extent Has Geopolitics Influenced the Development of Labour Mobility Policies and Conceptions of Sovereignty in Kiribati?

"It is better to subsist on your own than to rely on someone," (Sir Ieremia Tabai, 1979).

6.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines how geopolitics has shaped labour mobility policies in the Pacific, and conversely, how these evolving dynamics are reshaping I-Kiribati conceptions of sovereignty. The current prominence of labour migration programs in the region is not incidental; rather, it reflects a shifting geopolitical landscape marked by heightened international interest and strategic competition in the region (Farbotko et al., 2016; Keen & Tidwell, 2024; Koro et al., 2023; Ratuva, 2022; Saddington, 2021). These macro-level shifts increasingly structure the conditions surrounding mobility in Kiribati as their effects are felt most tangibly through everyday pressures, particularly the rising cost of food and fuel driven by global conflicts, supply chain disruptions, and climate-related shocks (Pacific Islands Forum & Pacific Fusion Centre, 2024; ADB 2024).

As Kiribati navigates these external pressures and recalibrates its own aspirations, the metaphor of Te Waa continues to offer a powerful interpretive lens for analysing the research findings. In this chapter, the navigation dimension of te waa—the capacity to read weather patterns, currents and tides, and to steer with precision—corresponds to the shifting landscapes of leadership, policy, and governance. These factors shape how I-Kiribati conceptualise sovereignty and their place within national, regional, and global dynamics. Just as steadying te waa for a voyage requires careful judgment, responsiveness, and balance, so too does this research steer through evolving socio-economic, and political conditions. Understanding these dynamics and the factors that underpin them strengthens the connection between policy and practice, ultimately benefitting I-Kiribati communities who rely on coherent, culturally grounded decision-making.

This dynamic is particularly acute within the climate–migration nexus, where conventional understandings of sovereignty are increasingly called into question. For communities compelled to relocate due to climate-induced threats, the foundational principles of territorial sovereignty and state permanence become destabilised. These lived realities challenge the traditional state-centric model of sovereignty, prompting a growing body of scholarship to explore how states, especially those on

the frontlines of climate impact, are reconfiguring notions of sovereignty in response to environmental precarity (Moore, 2022; Taylor, 2024). While existing literature has begun to explore how states are reimagining sovereignty in the context of climate change (Moore, 2022; Taylor, 2024), there remains a significant gap in understanding how sovereignty-related concerns—particularly those tied to existential issues such as the right to life, statehood, cultural identity, freedom of movement, migration agency, and human dignity—are being addressed at both state and importantly, community levels.

By critically examining how both the government of Kiribati and I-Kiribati citizens respond to the proposition of labour migration as a viable adaptation strategy to climate change, this chapter explores the broader implications of this adaptive choice—among several possible pathways—on evolving national and cultural perceptions of sovereignty. Section 6.2 analyses the findings on conceptualisations of sovereignty through a Kiribati lens, including the implications of the Falepili Union Treaty between Australia and Tuvalu, for Kiribati—evaluating the potential benefits and limitations of a similar mobility framework if extended to Kiribati. This section also examines the Maamau government's decision to rescind the Pacific Engagement Visa as a climate-responsive measure, as well as recent developments. Section 6.3 explores sovereignty from a climate lens, analysing how the concept is being reimagined in Kiribati amidst intensifying climate pressures and increasing labour mobility. Finally, Section 6.4 concludes the chapter by summarising its main arguments.

6.2 Sovereignty as a Notion of Toronibwai, from a Kiribati Lens

6.2.1 Overview

Amid growing geopolitical tension in the region, it is vital to understand how sovereignty perspectives are upheld or undermined in Kiribati. This section investigates this question. The notion of sovereignty from a Kiribati standpoint can be understood in terms of the concept of *toronibwai* (self-sufficiency), which emerged prominently from the conversations with participants. At the core of Kiribati's development is the I-Kiribati people's deep-seated values of peace, health, and prosperity, which are enshrined in the national slogan and traditional blessing.[3] As a young nation navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world, diplomacy and geopolitical tensions have and will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping development policies and promoting the ideals of toronibwai among

3 The Kiribati National Blessing: Te Mauri Te Raoi ao Te Tabomoa (Health, Peace and Prosperity), have always underpinned Kiribati's development and notion of sovereignty.

I-Kiribati, helping them attain self-determination and autonomy, notably in choosing adaptation options, including migration.

The concept of toronibwai, first introduced in 1979 by Kiribati's founding father, Sir Ieremia Tabai, served as a foundational principle during the first twelve years of his administration (Van Trease 1993; Tabai, 1993), marking a pivotal moment in Kiribati's transition to self-governance following independence from Britain. According to Tabai, self-reliance is essential for Kiribati's long-term ability to sustain its independence and uphold national dignity. While the notion of self-reliance is not unique to Kiribati and has global relevance, it has become a central philosophy guiding both individual aspirations and national development strategies over time.

In Kiribati, toronibwai can be viewed in terms of both collective and individual sovereignty. Collective sovereignty can be best explained through traditional concepts, such as the maneaba system or te kaba waa (canoe building), utilised in this study's methodology (as explained in Chapter 3). Several Kiribati scholars have also written on these concepts. Takuia Uakeia's work promotes the achievement of sovereignty from a governance and leadership viewpoint. He foregrounds the maneaba system and the role of unimwane (male village elders above the age of 50), as custodians of communal decision-making. This thesis utilises the maneaba system as a research method (outlined in Chapter 3), building on its significance as an elite decision-making governing structure designed to address concerns and promote the interests of the community for which it is built (Tabokai, 1993).

Uakeia (2016) foregrounds this maneaba theory by asserting that the maneaba is a culturally legitimate governance system responsible for ensuring a collective goal is achieved for the community, whether it is a village or island, and that order and peace prevail always (p. 119). In the context of this research, notably in this chapter on sovereignty, the maneaba, as an elite form of traditional political leadership, is an important form of a sovereignty system, enacted through everyday practices of consensus, moderation, and collective care. While Uakeia does not explicitly theorise sovereignty, his call for hybrid governance models affirms that institutional effectiveness must be grounded in cultural continuity while embracing new developments: *"Inevitably, mismatches have occurred between traditional and modern ways, arising from the natural environment and from the country's social, economic, and political circumstances. Kiribati can no longer isolate itself but must embrace change and be part of the international community"* (p. 129).

Roniti Teiwaki deepens this view by framing Kiribati as a 'nation of water' where sovereignty flows through maritime identity and ancestral oceanic networks (Chappell, 2016). His work challenges land-based notions of statehood, offering a spatially fluid and spiritually resonant understanding of sovereignty that aligns with Indigenous epistemologies, most notably that of Hau'ofa (1993), which disproves outsider views of Pacific islands as tiny and powerless dots (p. 8). Instead, Teiwaki's *Nation of Water*, like Hau'ofa's seminal work, *Sea of Islands*, asserts the place of the Pacific on a global scale as a vast Ocean continent with maritime wealth. Teiwaki's framing of sovereignty has powerfully captured the territorial integrity of small island states (predominantly ocean), and their plight to defend the rules-based order of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that a state's rights over the ocean are contingent upon its land-based geography—coastlines, islands, and baselines (Maas & Carius, 2012).

This subject has, in particular, shaped international discourse on sovereignty, particularly from the perspective of small island states and in the context of climate change implications on their continued statehood and sovereignty, given projections of submergence due to climate change (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2010). The topic has received international debate and has also been shaped by major Pacific-led negotiations and international movements, including the International Court's legal opinion on climate change (Kama, 2025). Pacific nations like Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands have advocated for a redefinition of sovereignty that includes ocean space as integral to identity, territory, and governance, further critiquing the ambulatory baseline, which requires maritime boundaries to shift with changing coastlines, arguing that this undermines the stability of ocean-based sovereignty (Purcell, 2019).

The principle of toronibwai is embedded in successive government development frameworks. As previously outlined, Ieremia Tabai's post-independence leadership underscores the importance of decentralisation and self-reliance. His resistance to external dependency and advocacy for outer island empowerment offers a grounded vision of sovereignty as local agency and anti-elitism. Tabai (1993) emphasised that genuine independence could only be realised when citizens are empowered to exercise their rights and the nation is no longer dependent on foreign aid. This ideal, however, remains challenging due to Kiribati's structural limitations (Government of Kiribati, 2016b; Kiribati, 2013) and ongoing reliance on external assistance (Fraenkel, 2006; Funaki, 2016). Despite these constraints, toronibwai continues to function as a cultural and developmental cornerstone, symbolising sovereignty, self-worth, and the aspiration for a productive citizenry—embodied in the

local expression *tei iaon waeia*, meaning "to stand on one's own feet" (Namoori-Sinclair, 2020; Rimon, 1992; Schutz, 2022).

Former President Anote Tong asserted sovereignty through a distinct lens—one grounded in education, migration, and global advocacy. His leadership mobilised Kiribati's existential precarity as a diplomatic tool, elevating the nation's voice on the international stage in pursuit of climate justice and recognition of atoll statehood under threat. Central to this effort was his articulation of the Migration with Dignity policy, which reframed displacement not as passive victimhood but as strategic agency. By positioning migration as a sovereign choice rather than a forced retreat, Tong challenged dominant narratives that cast Pacific atoll nations as inevitable climate refugees. His approach was deeply rooted in the Kiribati ethos of toronibwai—a philosophy of strength, dignity, and forward-looking resilience.

The Migration with Dignity policy, launched amid growing scientific consensus on the impacts of climate change, served as both a development strategy and a sovereignty assertion. It anticipated the slow pace of international climate negotiations and recognised the need for proactive national measures. Rather than waiting indefinitely for the international community to come into agreement on an emissions-reduction plan, Tong's administration pursued parallel pathways: investing in education, upskilling citizens for overseas employment, and exploring land acquisition abroad. These efforts were not a retreat from climate diplomacy but a recalibration of sovereignty, asserting Kiribati's right to self-determined adaptation in the face of rising seas and global inertia (Saddington, 2021). At the time, Pacific atoll nations were increasingly portrayed as doomed to climate-induced displacement (Bettini, 2013; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012). President Tong's policy intervention disrupted the prevailing fatalistic narrative surrounding climate-induced displacement, offering instead a visionary framework grounded in strategic mobility, cultural continuity, and enduring sovereignty. By foregrounding the human face of climate change, Tong catalysed national, regional, and global awareness of the urgent need for viable adaptation pathways—particularly in light of the protracted negotiations within the international system and the absence of robust protection mechanisms (Tong, 2014). His leadership on global platforms not only elevated the lived realities of communities on the frontlines of climate vulnerability but also refuted the refugee narrative and challenged dominant narratives of vulnerability. Tong's advocacy thus reframed mobility not as a failure of resilience, but as a dignified and strategic response—one that preserves cultural integrity while asserting agency in the face of global inaction.

In contrast to the migration-centric approach, Beretitenti Taaneti Maamau has reinterpreted toronibwai—through the concept of rootedness and ancestral connection to land—by promoting onshore resilience-building from a domestic development lens. Central to this reorientation is the Kiribati Vision 2030 (KV20) strategy, which emphasises in-place resilience by prioritising economic growth, infrastructure investment, and national self-reliance (Government of Kiribati, 2016). While these objectives are undeniably vital for long-term development, the strategy's limited engagement with migration as a complementary adaptation pathway risks undermining the government's responsibility to sustain and expand policy initiatives that could offer transformative opportunities for its citizens in the face of climate change (Kupferberg, 2021).

Building on reforms initiated under his predecessor, Beretitenti Maamau has overseen a substantial increase in fishing revenue, which has been channelled into major social protection schemes, notably the Support Fund for the Unemployed (SFU)—a flagship scheme credited with contributing to his administration's electoral success over the past eight years (Pala, 2020). While the SFU has been lauded for subsidising living costs and reportedly reducing poverty (Cross-Kwansing, 2025), it has also sparked debate among I-Kiribati citizens regarding its long-term efficacy and sustainability. Concerns centre on the scheme's absorptive and infrastructural capacity, its reliance on handouts rather than capacity-building, and whether it genuinely fosters resilience or inadvertently deepens dependency (Rimon, 2024). A key vulnerability lies in the government's heavy reliance on sustained revenue from the national fisheries sector to finance the program—a sector that is inherently volatile and increasingly threatened by climate change, overexploitation, and shifting oceanic regimes (Campbell & Hanich, 2014; Throsby, 2019; Webb, 2020). This fiscal fragility reinforces calls for a more diversified and forward-looking investment strategy, one that is better aligned with resilience-building objectives, equipping citizens with the skills, resources, and autonomy needed to navigate economic uncertainty and climate disruption.

This research posits that the Support Fund for the Unemployed (SFU) only provides short-term relief and addresses immediate socio-economic needs however, the fisheries revenue that sustains it, could be more effectively channelled into long-term investments that generate employment, foster private sector development, and strengthen citizens' economic agency. Strategic reinvestment in capacity-building initiatives would not only enhance resilience but also cultivate pathways for self-reliance and intergenerational wellbeing. Such an approach would serve as a powerful assertion of Kiribati's self-determination—an intentional departure from dominant narratives that frame the nation as perennially aid-dependent and structurally vulnerable and instead focus on locally-led growth

(Fraenkel, 2006; Funaki, 2016; Meki & Tarai, 2023; Taylor & Middleby, 2023). By investing in its people's capacity to thrive economically and independently, Kiribati could reposition itself as a sovereign actor shaping its own development trajectory, rather than one passively responding to external prescriptions by investing more prudently in national wealth including the excess from fisheries revenue.

Maamau's pivot from global advocacy to localised development reflects a redefinition of sovereignty as economic empowerment and territorial permanence. Anchored in the Kiribati Vision 2030 (KV20), this inward-looking approach prioritises national pride, infrastructure investment, and in-place resilience, asserting that Kiribati will remain inhabitable despite existential climate threats. While this vision rightly centres domestic priorities, its implementation—particularly through social protection schemes such as the Support Fund for the Unemployed—has raised concerns about politicisation, geopolitical influence, and the adequacy of such measures in addressing rising living costs and underperforming social services (Rimon, 2024). These schemes, though symbolically significant, often fall short of delivering transformative outcomes aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (WHO, 2024b). A more holistic resilience framework would reconcile place-based development with mobility-based agency, recognising that resilience is not solely about remaining in place, but about enabling informed choice, self-determination, and dignity—whether at home or abroad.

Despite their divergent approaches, both administrations share a commitment to improving I-Kiribati wellbeing. Whether through strategic migration or domestic resilience, sovereignty is framed not merely as territorial control but as the capacity to safeguard dignity, agency, and future generations in the face of climate uncertainty. From an individual and community standpoint, the concept of sovereignty in Kiribati is far from monolithic; rather, it is deeply contingent upon familial aspirations, socio-economic circumstances, and cultural orientations. This plurality was evident in participants' insights in Chapter 5. Their reflections revealed a spectrum of interpretations—ranging from materialistic notions of toronibwai, shaped by Western paradigms of development and statecraft, to more intimate, relational understandings rooted in subsistence and cultural continuity. Several participants associated toronibwai with individual achievement, often measured through formal education, salaried employment, and upward economic mobility. This framing reflects the influence of external development models that equate sovereignty with institutional success and integration into global systems. Yet, in contrast, other participants articulated toronibwai as the capacity to live with dignity: to contribute meaningfully to one's own family and community while sustaining long-term subsistence and security practices.

Such perspectives underscore the inherently polysemous nature of toronibwai—a concept whose meaning is shaped by multiple complex factors—cultural, economic, and historical in nature. It is not merely a political or territorial claim, as some participants viewed it. In contrast, others believe that the concept embodies a sovereignty of being, rooted in autonomy, dignity, and the freedom to thrive within one's ancestral environment, regardless of external aid or economic imperatives. This form of sovereignty resonates widely across I-Kiribati communities, affirming values of personal agency, cultural resilience, and intergenerational continuity. A notable finding is the influence of climate change in reshaping perceptions of sovereignty. When asked how environmental disruption affects their understanding of sovereignty, most participants acknowledged that worsening climate impacts are steadily undermining their livelihoods, thereby increasing their reliance on government support and adaptive strategies, such as labour migration.

Sovereignty, in this context, is no longer viewed solely through the lens of territorial permanence, but increasingly through the lens of agency, survival, and the capacity to choose dignified futures amid precarity. The polysemy of toronibwai also reflects broader dynamics of power and wealth, revealing how sovereignty is perceived and enacted differently depending on one's positionality—whether shaped by geographic location, access to resources, or embedded cultural logics. There is no singular, universally applicable definition; rather, sovereignty emerges as a relational and situated construct, interpreted through the lens of lived experience, community ties, and historical memory. When viewed alongside state-led policies and scholarly discourses, these grassroots articulations offer a more nuanced understanding of how Kiribati's sovereignty is enacted, contested, and reimagined in the context of climate mobility. They reveal a sovereignty that is not static or singular, but dynamic—capable of encompassing both migration and rootedness, both global diplomacy and local subsistence, and always attuned to the enduring dignity of I-Kiribati life.

Another prominent finding is Kiribati's rapidly changing economy in an increasingly globalised world. Since its independence in 1979, Kiribati has undergone a significant socio-economic transformation (Government of Kiribati, 2016b; World Bank, 2024). Traditional subsistence lifestyles are rapidly giving way to modern economic paradigms, where wealth and self-reliance are increasingly measured through indicators such as education levels, employment security, and sustainable income (Pacific Community, 2021), 2021). As discussed in Chapter 5, this shift reflects a redefinition of toronibwai, now widely interpreted through the lens of economic wellbeing and participation in a global capitalist economy that has shaped traditional life in Kiribati significantly. This evolving understanding was a

recurring theme in participant discussions, particularly in relation to the high value placed on labour mobility and remittances. Education and employment are now seen not only as personal achievements but as essential pathways to economic opportunity and national development. This becomes complicated when employment channels are biased toward academic education output, as discussed in the education–employment nexus in Chapter 4.

In the absence of sufficient domestic employment opportunities, labour mobility and international migration have gained prominence as viable alternatives for income generation. These trends underscore a broader societal shift in which toronibwai is increasingly associated with financial independence, global engagement, and the pursuit of economic security. With climate change significantly impacting subsistence economies and livelihoods, the argument for diversified options for employment and economic growth was highly referenced, as discussed in Chapter 5.

This section proceeds as follows. Section 6.2.2 explores the concept of toronibwai in a shifting geopolitical landscape, Section 6.2.3 discusses sovereignty from a transnational and liminal lens, and Section 6.2.4 assesses sovereignty from a mobility lens, discussing the Pacific Engagement Visa and the Tuvalu and Australia Falepili Union Treaty.

6.2.2 Toronibwai in a shifting geopolitical landscape

In today's increasingly complex geopolitical environment, toronibwai serves as a critical benchmark for assessing how successive Kiribati governments translate this foundational concept into tangible development outcomes. As the nation navigates the competing demands of international geopolitical interests and pressing domestic priorities, toronibwai must remain central to policy formulation and diplomatic engagement. This principle underscores the importance of aligning national development with the lived realities and aspirations of I-Kiribati communities. As articulated in participant interviews, toronibwai is understood to encompass equitable access to essential services such as clean water, quality healthcare, affordable food, and meaningful employment opportunities. These are seen as non-negotiable components of national development. Furthermore, the concept extends to the protection of civil liberties, including the right to fair elections, democratic participation, and freedom of expression. Participants emphasised that these rights are fundamental to ensuring that I-Kiribati voices are heard in decisions that affect their wellbeing—particularly in areas such as work, access to services, cultural preservation, and labour migration.

The failure to uphold these rights, according to participants, risks undermining national development and delaying progress in critical areas such as climate change adaptation. Over time, the relationship

between the government and its citizens has evolved, shaped by changing leadership, shifting policies, and external geopolitical influences (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). As a young nation, Kiribati continues to define its development trajectory, and toronibwai remains a key metric by which citizens assess progress, wealth, and wellbeing. This is also expressed through the synonymous concept of kabwaia—prosperity—which participants describe as the ultimate manifestation of self-reliance and wellbeing, achieved when individuals and communities can sustain themselves independently. In this context, national development efforts are guided by thoughtful planning and a people-centred approach, ensuring that the wellbeing of citizens remains at the heart of progress. As Kiribati navigates an increasingly complex regional landscape, strategic foresight, diplomacy, and leadership are key for balancing development opportunities at one end and preservation of national sovereignty on the other. The Pacific Region is witnessing heightened geopolitical interest from global powers, including China, Australia, and the United States. While such engagement can bring valuable partnerships and resources, it also requires careful consideration to ensure that the country's long-term autonomy and development goals are not compromised.

The study explored participants' understanding of toronibwai—a concept central to their sense of self-reliance, identity and sovereignty. Figure 6.1 highlights the key themes that emerged from these conversations.

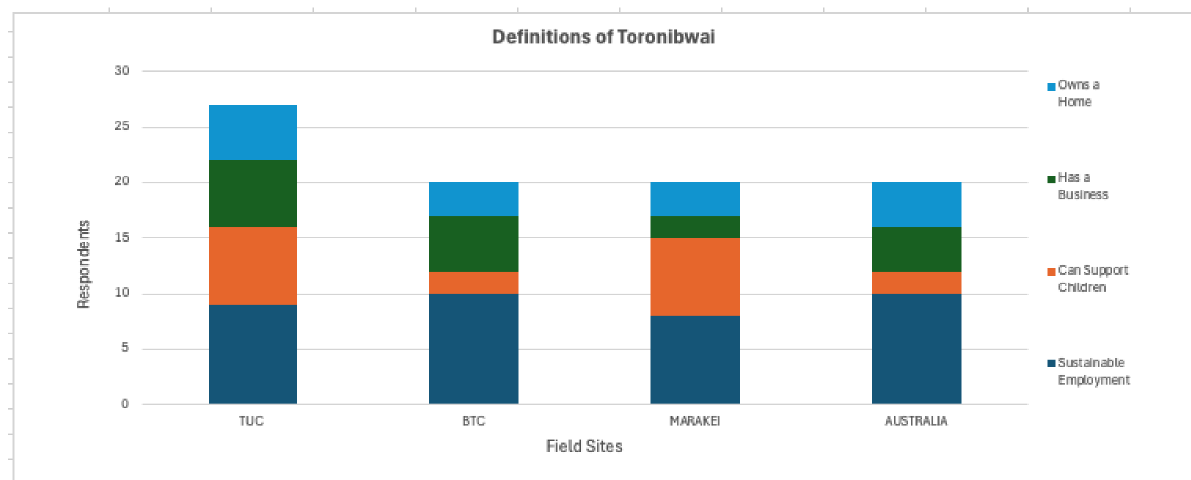


Figure 6.1: Respondents' definitions of toronibwai (self-reliance)

The concept of toronibwai, often translated as individual sovereignty or self-reliance, emerged as a central theme in participant narratives. While definitions varied across individuals, responses converged around four key aspirations, ranked in order of priority: (1) sustainable employment, (2) capacity to support one's family, (3) ownership or operation of a business, and (4) home ownership.

These aspirations reflect not only economic goals but also deeper expressions of autonomy, dignity, and agency—particularly in the context of climate vulnerability.

Firstly, at the heart of these aspirations was sustainable employment—consistently identified as the most critical pathway to achieving self-reliance. Participants associated employment with financial stability, social status, and the ability to plan or mitigate emergencies or crises whether food, water shortages or the need to relocate. This aligns with broader scholarship on migration and adaptation, which emphasises employment as a key enabler of adaptive capacity (Black et al., 2011; Adger et al., 2014). In climate-vulnerable contexts, where traditional livelihoods are increasingly undermined by environmental degradation, labour migration offers a route to reclaim agency and secure a viable future.

The second theme—capacity to support one's family—underscores the relational dimension of sovereignty. Participants described sovereignty not as individualistic independence, but as the ability to fulfil familial and communal obligations. This included providing food, education, and essential goods, particularly for children. The financial burden of schooling, especially in Church-run senior secondary institutions not covered by public subsidies, was frequently cited. These findings resonate with regional studies on remittance use in the Pacific, which highlight education and household expenses as primary remittance destinations (Doan et al., 2023; Doan & Petrou, 2022). Labour migration, therefore, becomes a mechanism not only for personal advancement but for intergenerational investment and social reproduction.

The third theme—entrepreneurship and business ownership—reflects a desire for economic diversification and resilience. Participants identified small-scale enterprises such as fishing, food stalls, and second-hand clothing sales as vital buffers against economic and climate-related shocks. This entrepreneurial impulse aligns with literature on migration and livelihood strategies, which suggests that migrants often leverage remittances and acquired skills to establish businesses upon return or while abroad (Connell & Conway, 2000; Rigg, 2007). In this way, labour migration contributes to both individual sovereignty and community-level resilience.

Finally, home ownership was described as a long-term aspiration and a symbol of security, stability, and success. While often financially out of reach, it remained a powerful motivator for migration and the longer-term goals of toronibwai (Figure 6.2). The desire to own a home reflects cultural values

surrounding family cohesion and rootedness, and mirrors global patterns in which housing is seen as a cornerstone of personal sovereignty (Appadurai, 2013; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019).

Figure 6.2: A mwenga or kainga (a family unit), embodies sovereignty in Kiribati.

Across all themes, labour migration was consistently framed as a strategic pathway to sovereignty—a means of exercising choice, securing livelihoods, and fulfilling familial responsibilities in the face of climate uncertainty. This framing challenges dominant narratives that portray climate-affected populations as passive victims or inevitable 'climate refugees.' Instead, it affirms the agency of individuals who seek to navigate structural constraints through mobility. In the context of Kiribati, where geographic limitations render in situ adaptation increasingly untenable, labour migration offers a form of adaptive sovereignty—a way for individuals to assert control over their futures despite systemic vulnerabilities. As such, migration is not merely a response to climate change; it is a political and existential act of self-determination and expression of sovereignty.

Importantly, the themes underscore the centrality of livelihoods and access to necessities in the lives of I-Kiribati people. Rather than being preoccupied with the geopolitical dynamics unfolding in the

Pacific Region, participants expressed a more immediate concern with day-to-day survival—particularly in relation to food security and the rising cost of living, as discussed in Chapter 5. While awareness of China's strategic presence in the region is increasing, the lived realities of economic hardship continue to dominate the everyday concerns of most citizens. What emerged from the study is particularly revealing: although geopolitics is visible and felt through government initiatives, development, projects, and partnership programs, it remained a distant and overarching backdrop rather than an immediate priority.

For many participants, these geopolitical shifts were acknowledged but did not outweigh what the research identified as far more pressing—ensuring daily sustenance, securing livelihoods, and maintaining sustainable wellbeing. While conscious of the risks associated with questions that might trigger political sensitivities—particularly given the permit complications encountered during the fieldwork phase of the study and the government's initial requirement that a staff member accompany all interviews—the research proceeded with considerable caution. As a result, questions were limited to issues directly related to labour migration and climate change, topics on which participants spoke openly. Many highlighted the perceived lack of government innovation in developing migration pathways or treaties comparable to those pursued by Tuvalu, as discussed in this chapter.

At the same time, there was a clear hesitation to pursue more direct inquiries into geopolitical motivations or state-level alignments, especially where these were seen as misaligned with community needs. Beyond expressing strong dissatisfaction with poor public services, limited employment opportunities, and deteriorating health and living conditions, participants did not prioritise geopolitical concerns. Rather, these broader dynamics remained a distant backdrop to the more immediate pressures shaping everyday life.

6.2.3 Sovereignty from a transnational and liminal lens

Extending on these definitions of sovereignty from communities and seeing the growing popularity of labour mobility as an economic and climate coping mechanism, a thought that appeals to this research is the re-framing of Kiribati's sovereignty through the lens of geopolitical liminality, which offers a compelling perspective on its existence as a climate-exposed state situated at the margins of global spatial and temporal systems. From a climate periphery standpoint, Kiribati occupies a precarious position—where statehood is increasingly contested between land and ocean, particularly under projections of submersion and habitability loss (IPCC, 2022, 2023; Solomon et al., 2007). This liminal condition is not merely geographic; it is existential, legal, and diplomatic, and as such, this study

explores how liminality shapes labour migration decisions in the context of climate adaptation and the conception of sovereignty.

When viewed through a labour mobility lens, Kiribati's liminality becomes a strategic asset, and one that this study believes could offer diplomatic leverage in the formulation of labour mobility pathways, beyond New Zealand and Australia. Kiribati embodies a temporal and spatial threshold. It is the only nation in the world that straddles all four hemispheres and intersects the International Date Line, which was adjusted in 1995. As a result, the entire nation remains within the same time zone, facilitating development logistics and improving the management efficiency of all parts of the country. Kiribati exists between global markers of time and space, asserting autonomy not only as a sovereign state but as a custodian of one of the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zones. This unique positioning enables Kiribati to channel its global leverage through foreign policy diplomacy, particularly in advancing mobility and climate change interests, in ocean and fisheries governance.

This dual ideology of globalism and solidarism was powerfully articulated by President Taneti Maamau during his 2023 address to the United Nations General Debate, where he foregrounded the imperative of contextualised global cooperation: "*The idea of global solidarity underscores the principle that no nation can thrive in isolation and recognises the uniqueness of each country's context and need*" (Maamau, 2023). In invoking solidarism, Maamau positioned Kiribati not as a passive recipient of global aid, but as a sovereign contributor to a shared moral community—one where dignity, cultural specificity, and mutual responsibility are foundational. His framing of globalism resists dependency systems while embracing a pluralistic vision of planetary kinship, where collaboration is not homogenised but shaped by the lived reality and strength of each nation. In doing so, Maamau not only reignited the call for global solidarity but reframed it as a moral imperative—a shared duty for all nations to respond decisively to the interwoven global crises—inter alia, poverty, inequality, climate change, and public health. His appeal underscored that global challenges are not isolated phenomena but entangled realities**,** demanding collective action rooted in mutual respect and contextual understanding. In this same spirit, this study affirms the transformative potential of education and vocational training pathways as integral to a globalist approach that supports employment both within Kiribati and across transnational labour markets.

These pathways are not only designed to improve economic outcomes but also serve as key strategies for tackling high unemployment, building skills and knowledge, and supporting climate adaptation through respectful and planned migration. At the same time, they help strengthen resilience at

home—by supporting those who stay through improved local resources, cultural continuity, and sustainable ways of living. This balanced approach, which values both movement and staying rooted, could thoughtfully be a demonstration of Kiribati's development strategy and response to global challenges. It recognises that people should have the freedom to move if they choose, and the support to remain if they wish. While such a vision may be seen to oppose Pacific-led place-based values, particularly the Maamau government's stay-in-place stance, it is based on the need to recognise I-Kiribati's right to informed choice and self-determination by equally exploring economic opportunities from industrialised countries responsible for climate change but least affected by it.

This globalist approach represents a deliberate rejection of the dominant narratives on climate change and development, which portray affected communities—particularly in the Pacific—as passive victims. Instead, it advances a resilience-based perspective, one led not by external elites or institutions, but by communities themselves who engage proactively and with dignity in global labour markets. Such a notion supports the argument that migration, when planned and supported, can serve as an effective form of climate adaptation. It also challenges narrow definitions of homeland as a fixed geographic territory, proposing instead that homeland can be sustained through transnational cultural ties, relational networks, and shared memory. These connections—whether social, economic, or cultural—offer meaningful opportunities for adaptation, though they are not without risks, so must be carefully managed. McMichael et al (2021) articulates this complexity by noting that *"many of those affected by climate change are already 'translocal': they have numerous connections to distant locations. Being translocal implies both opportunities and risks when it comes to climate change adaptation,"* (p. 1). Roman (2013) similarly introduces the concept of a 'virtual global homeland,' observing that "*under present conditions, I-Kiribati migrants are inextricably tied to I-Kiribati in Kiribati through economy, technology, memory and identity. These connections hold migrants in a constant state of transition between two or more locations"* (p. 42). Together, these perspectives reinforce that climate-induced migration is not a simple rupture from place-based values, but a dynamic and layered process. In today's context of digital connectivity, cultural continuity, and accessible mobility or migration—particularly from Kiribati—it has become a way of maintaining ties to home rather than severing them.

Beichelt and Valentin (2020) grounded this notion of mobile identities and liminal sovereignty through their work titled *Liminality and Transnationalism: Two Forces upon Shifting Borders in Contemporary Europe, which* examines shifting borders and migration practices and challenges the rhetoric of rigid territorial boundaries. While focused on European contexts, their framework is highly applicable to

Kiribati, which is often described as an interstitial and geopolitically liminal state (Borovnik, 2009), straddling hemispheres but currently negotiating climate mobility and asserting sovereignty through labour migration or Migration with Dignity (McClain & Bruch, 2021; McNamara, 2015; Walsh, 2017). Furthermore, the scholars' use of liminality and transnationalism helps the necessary rethinking and reframing of migration, identity, and statehood, especially in the context of climate mobility, by describing border zones and transitional spaces—not as voids, but as productive sites of ambiguity, where identities, sovereignties, and migration practices are negotiated and supportive of maintained ties across borders, creating fluid sovereignties that defy static nation-state models. This framing powerfully captures how mobility and belonging are enacted in-between—offering a lens to understand Kiribati's strategic positioning between land and sea, rootedness and movement, and domestic policy and global diplomacy—without implicating I-Kiribati people's sense of sovereignty.

The concept of liminal sovereignty is compellingly supported by Borovnik (2009), whose ethnographic analysis of Tuvaluan and I-Kiribati merchant seafarers offers critical insights into transnational space and mobility. Her work illustrates how prolonged labour contracts—often lasting up to two years—interspersed with brief home visits, enabled seafarers to navigate multiple social and geographic spaces shaped by both continuity and transformation. These experiences challenge fixed notions of territorial belonging, contributing to an understanding of geographical space as increasingly fluid and relational (Borovnik, 2009, p. 147). In alignment with Kempny (2003), who conceptualises transnationalism as the construction of homelands or localities within a mobile world, Borovnik's study foregrounds the dynamic interplay between movement and rootedness. She highlights how seafarers sustain strong familial ties and uphold high standards of personal obligation—both to their kin and to their professional roles—despite operating across dispersed geographies. These relational dynamics resonate with Te Waa framework, which emphasises interconnectedness, duty, and the navigation of multiple spheres of belonging (Borovnik, 2009, p.153). Although the seafaring industry has ceased operations in Kiribati from 2020 (see Chapter 4), the conceptual relevance of liminality and transnationality endures. These frameworks remain vital for understanding the experiences of I-Kiribati labour migrants in Australia and New Zealand, who similarly traverse physical and emotional borders while maintaining deep connections to home. Their mobility reflects not a rupture from place, but a reconfiguration of sovereignty—one that is lived, negotiated, and relational.

To deepen local understandings of sovereignty through a transnational and liminal lens, this study engaged with a range of respondents, including Iakobwa Ioona, originally from Tamana in Southern Kiribati. Ioona conceptualised sovereignty not in strictly territorial or institutional terms, but through

the lens of capabilities, human capital, and mobility. Now residing in Tarawa and supporting his daughter, a public sector employee, Ioona offered a nuanced interpretation encapsulated in the phrase *kaubwaim ke abam, te mwakuri*—meaning that one's wealth or self-worth lies in one's skill or human capital. This framing reinforces the view that labour migration is not only an economic strategy but also a legitimate form of climate adaptation and personal sovereignty. Ioona elaborated that, in his view, sovereignty is contingent upon an individual's productive capacity, formal education, and ability to meet their own needs (Ioona, 27 February 2024). His reflections resonate with the shifting societal valuation of sovereignty, where education and employment have increasingly supplanted land ownership as the dominant markers of personal and communal worth. In this context, sovereignty is reimagined as relational and mobile, anchored not solely in place but in the capacity to navigate and thrive across multiple spaces of belonging.

Ioona's conception of sovereignty—anchored in human capital, mobility, and self-sufficiency—resonates strongly with both the historical experience of I-Kiribati seafarers and the contemporary realities of labour migrants, in the same way that Ioona personally sacrificed to leave his home island of Tamana to support his daughter, who is a government employee in South Tarawa. Ioona's relocation to Tarawa not only illustrates his liminal sovereignty, navigating the complexities of internal migration, but is also shaped by many reasons, such as uneven access to services, employment, and opportunity for his children and grandchildren. When asked about the value of overseas labour mobility schemes—particularly in Australia—he emphasised the acute shortage of domestic employment, noting that even those who have completed senior secondary education or returned from overseas scholarships often struggle to secure work. This, he argued, contributes to the emergence of an economically vulnerable population that is unable to meet its basic needs or contribute meaningfully to national development. His reflections underscore a critical tension in Kiribati's development trajectory, namely the need to reconcile place-based resilience with mobility-based agency. In this view, sovereignty is not solely about territorial permanence but importantly about enabling individuals to thrive—whether at home or abroad—and these decisions influence conceptions of sovereignty for I-Kiribati. Ioona expressed strong support for the continuation and expansion of labour mobility programs, citing the historical success of I-Kiribati men in the seafaring industry. He advocated for the reopening of the Marine Training Centre, which had been closed since 2020, and the revival of international seafaring schemes as a means of broadening employment opportunities. His perspective was further illustrated through personal anecdotes about two nephews currently employed in Australia and New Zealand. One nephew's exemplary performance in a maritime company led to the recruitment of additional I-Kiribati workers, while the other, working in

fruit picking, secured opportunities for two more individuals outside formal government channels. Ioona framed these achievements not only as personal successes but as contributions to national development, reflecting the Kiribati ethos of *katabangakan te kabwaia*—expanding collective economic growth and mutual upliftment.

This communal ethos is deeply embedded in Kiribati cultural expressions such as *oi n aomata* ("a real or true person") and *ai bon tiaaki te aomata,* a phrase used to describe someone whose actions transcend ordinary expectations, akin to a 'superhuman' or an exemplary figure. These expressions are not merely linguistic flourishes; they encapsulate core values of social recognition, collective responsibility, and moral leadership. In the context of labour migration, such idioms reflect how individual success is often measured not solely by personal gain, but by one's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the wellbeing of family and community. Participants frequently linked these ideals to those who generate productive returns—whether through remittances, business ventures, or educational achievements abroad. This aligns with anthropological literature on Pacific Island societies, where personhood and status are relationally constructed and deeply tied to one's ability to uphold communal obligations (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2022). In this sense, labour migrants who support their families financially or invest in community development are often seen as embodying *oi n aomata*—not just as economic actors, but as moral agents fulfilling culturally embedded expectations of reciprocity and care.

Moreover, these expressions underscore the interdependence between individual agency and collective identity in Kiribati society. Sovereignty, in this context, is not an isolated or atomised concept, but one that is socially validated through acts of responsibility and reciprocity. As such, labour migration becomes a culturally legible pathway to achieving not only economic goals but also social legitimacy and moral personhood. Ioona's narrative thus reflects the evolving nature of traditional Kiribati values, where land and material wealth are increasingly being redefined through the lenses of education, employment, and transnational opportunity. Ultimately, his insights underscore the critical role of labour mobility in addressing Kiribati's development challenges and in shaping a contemporary understanding of sovereignty—one rooted in self-sufficiency, mutual support, and the pursuit of shared socio-economic aspirations. Another participant, Erietera Eram, offered a compelling interpretation of sovereignty, framing it as a multidimensional concept rooted in self-awareness, wellbeing, and cultural tolerance. For Eram, a meaningful understanding of sovereignty begins with the recognition of one's rights, intrinsic value, and capabilities—encompassing not only economic resilience and skillsets but also cultural identity. He critiqued the

dominant narrative that often reduces I-Kiribati labour migrants to the status of mere "workers" or economic units. In contrast, Eram advocated for a broader, more humanistic view of sovereignty—one that affirms the dignity, cultural identity, and contributions of I-Kiribati migrants as individuals deserving of recognition and respect: "*I-Kiribati bon taan mwakuri" (I-Kiribati are diligent workers).* He further elaborated:

> *"Our people are doing the hard work that no Australian want to do. They pick fruit, they work in the meat factory, and they look after the elderly. But it makes me wonder—are they being compensated fairly?" (Erietera Eram, 23 February 2024).*

Eram's reflections call for a reimagining of sovereignty that transcends national borders and embraces the concept of *mobile sovereignty*—a framework that recognises the rights, agency, and value of migrant workers navigating dynamic economic, environmental, and social landscapes. He further argued that sovereignty should not be confined to education and employment alone but must also encompass entrepreneurship. This is particularly salient in the context of rising unemployment in Kiribati, which poses a significant challenge to national development. In this light, labour migration emerges not only as a coping mechanism but as a strategic pathway for cultivating innovation, self-sufficiency, and resilience. Eram's insights align with the theoretical framework of Te Waa's mobilities of return (Chapter 3), which emphasises the reinvestment of skills and knowledge acquired abroad back into the home economy and *kainga* (extended family) or *utu* (nuclear family).

These perspectives resonate with the lived experiences of I-Kiribati workers in Australia, who viewed migration as a deeply personal and sovereign decision, driven by the pursuit of economic wellbeing and toronibwai. Mwemwetaake Taitai, a long-term PALM scheme worker, described how migration transformed her sense of self-worth:

> *"Ti a oi n aomata ngkai ti mwakuri i Aotiteria bwa iai ara mwane ao ngke ti mena i Kiribati ti bakuraewa bwa akea ara mwakuri"—"We are true and worthy people now. We work in Australia and make earnings, whereas in Kiribati we were nobodies. We had no money." (Mwemwetaake Taitai, 4 August 2023).*

Taitai's testimony illustrates the profound impact of employment on personal identity and resilience, enabling her to transition from economic marginalisation to stability and self-determination. Similarly, a couple—Korina and Waqa—shared the emotional toll of separation from their children, which they endured to support their children's migration to Fiji in pursuit of better education, healthcare, and climate security (Korina and Waqa, 5 August 2023). Their aspirations for te toronibwai underscore the centrality of economic wellbeing in shaping sovereign migration decisions, often influenced by intersecting factors such as climate change.

Further insights emerged from te maroro with the first cohort of I-Kiribati aged care workers in Australia, many of whom transitioned from temporary PALM scheme roles to permanent residency. Iumea Itinraoi described this milestone as a 'thrilling experience,' marked by emotional relief and family reunification: "Ea toki kainanora...a roko ara utu irarikira!" — "Our suffering has ended...our family has arrived." (Iumea Itinraoi, 15 January 2025). When reflecting on cultural sovereignty in the context of migration, Itinraoi asserted that physical distance from Kiribati did not diminish her cultural identity. Rather, the experience of separation reinforced her commitment to cultural preservation. She emphasised the importance of speaking Kiribati with her son, teaching traditional values, and participating in cultural events such as national day celebrations. Her narrative illustrates that cultural sovereignty is not tied to place and that it could thrive also as a mobile identity, maintained within the diaspora, as seen in the growing I-Kiribati communities in New Zealand and elsewhere, where cultural pride and continuity remain strong.

While many workers expressed a desire to settle permanently in Australia and New Zealand, one participant firmly articulated a preference for returning home:

> *"I prefer returning home because there's no place like home. My hard work here is meaningless when I'm not with my family, and I can best utilise the fruits of my work by physically supporting their [children's] growth." (Participant 9, 4 August 2023).*

This sentiment reflects the enduring significance of place, family, and cultural rootedness in shaping migration decisions. Although climate change presents a stark and immediate threat, the power of choice—whether to stay, migrate temporarily, or relocate permanently—remains a defining feature of I-Kiribati resilience and sovereignty. In sum, this analysis underscores the importance of centring I-Kiribati voices and priorities within broader geopolitical and environmental discourses. While the resilience of the I-Kiribati people is well-documented, the geographic vulnerability of their islands necessitates proactive and inclusive adaptation strategies, and one such way is embracing their wishes of sovereignty.

Labour migration, when embedded within national adaptation frameworks, offers a viable pathway for enhancing the resilience and sovereignty of populations. However, as Ballard et al. (2020) and McDonnell (2020) caution, resilience must also acknowledge its "darker side"—the necessity of confronting vulnerability. This tension between vulnerability and sovereignty is particularly complex in post-colonial Pacific contexts, where cultural identity, national autonomy, and survival are deeply intertwined. Nevertheless, it is imperative that Kiribati confronts these realities with strategic

foresight, ensuring that migration and other adaptation measures are aligned with the aspirations and agency of its people.

6.2.4 Sovereignty from a mobility lens

China's expanding influence in the Pacific has ushered in a new era of geopolitical competition, particularly with the United States and Australia, reshaping the landscape of development partnerships and regional diplomacy. This intensifying strategic rivalry has contributed to a bifurcation of the Pacific into two loosely defined blocs: one comprising the majority of Pacific Island Countries including Kiribati, that maintain diplomatic ties with China, and another—including Tuvalu, Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI)—that continues to recognise Taiwan. This configuration has significantly influenced the diplomatic posture of the region, not only in terms of the volume and nature of development assistance offered, but also in shaping the political narratives and priorities that underpin regional engagement.

The resulting dynamic is a Pacific Region increasingly becoming a theatre of global power politics, that sees China and Taiwan each seeking to deepen influence in the region through soft power, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic outreach, while the United States and Australia intensify their engagement in ways that counterbalance China's expanding presence (Fry & Tarte, 2025; Pacific Islands Forum, 2022). This tension has produced a form of geopolitical brinkmanship—a 'cat and mouse' race to secure loyalty, visibility, and leverage across Pacific Island Countries. The implications of this competition are evident in key policy domains, including security cooperation, climate change adaptation, and labour mobility. For instance, Australia's efforts to retain regional influence in the face of China's growing popularity have been reflected in a recalibration of its Pacific diplomacy. Notably, the Albanese government's 2022 reinforcement of the Pacific Family diplomacy (first introduced by the Morrison administration) marked a profound shift toward relational engagement, grounded in Pacific values of kinship, reciprocity, and cultural continuity as embodied through migration policies discussed in the next subsections (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2023; Minister for International Development and the Pacific, 2024; Wong, 2023b).

The regional schism between China and key Western global leaders, including Australia, has been further exacerbated by the intensification of the China–Taiwan rivalry. Tensions escalated between 2019 and 2020, beginning with the Solomon Islands' controversial diplomatic shift from Taiwan to China, followed closely by Kiribati's realignment, and later, Nauru's recognition of China in 2024, which ended a decades-long relationship with Taiwan. These shifts have deepened geopolitical fault lines

across the Pacific, culminating in 2025 with a threatened rupture within the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Disagreements surrounding forum participation and speculation over China–Taiwan dynamics became particularly pronounced when the Solomon Islands opted to exclude several major partners—including the United States, China, Taiwan, Canada, and France—from its forum-hosted Leaders Forum. This decision prompted President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands to publicly question the influence of external powers in regional affairs (PINA, 2025), a concern echoed by Tuvalu, which threatened to withdraw from the forum in solidarity with Taiwan.[4] Meanwhile, China denied any involvement in the Solomon Islands' decision-making process (Islands Business, 2025b).

These diplomatic frictions have placed considerable strain on the cohesion of the Pacific's premier political institution—the Pacific Islands Forum—raising concerns about a potential fragmentation of regional unity. This fragility was first brought into sharp focus in 2021, when Micronesian member states expressed deep dissatisfaction over the selection process of the Forum's Secretary General, arguing that their candidate had been overlooked despite prior understandings of rotational leadership (Dobell, 2022; Dziedzic et al., 2022; Sen & Howes, 2023). The resulting grievance triggered threats of withdrawal from several Micronesian countries, exposing underlying tensions in regional governance and highlighting the delicate balance required to maintain consensus and solidarity among diverse Pacific Island Countries (Greg Fry & Sandra Tarte, 2025).

The next emerging threat to the Pacific Islands Forum's stability is the fragmentation triggered by the Solomon Islands' 2025 decision to exclude Taiwan from the Partners Dialogue, which subsequently led to an expanded ban on all other partners (Dziedzic, 2025). The decision carries significant implications for regional development cooperation, which is especially critical given the Pacific Island Countries' complex development challenges, unique geography, remoteness, and climate vulnerability, all of which impede economic growth, making aid play an instrumental role in the region (Lowy, 2024). Yet, the politicisation of forum dynamics, as seen in the two incidents—first with Micronesia and later with the Solomon Islands—risks undermining the very mechanisms designed to advance collective regional priorities. When geopolitical tensions begin to shape participation and agenda-setting within the forum, the potential for coordinated action diminishes, weakening the institutional coherence required to respond effectively to shared vulnerabilities. Such developments not only strain diplomatic relations but also jeopardise the integrity of regional governance frameworks that have

[4] See *Islands Business* (2025) for coverage of Tuvalu's diplomatic stance.

long served as platforms for Pacific-led dialogue, solidarity, and strategic planning (Fry, 2021; Greg Fry & Sandra Tarte, 2025; G. Fry & S. Tarte, 2025).

The intensification of strategic competition in the Pacific—particularly between the United States, Australia, and China, as well as between China and Taiwan—has generated both significant opportunities and complex challenges for the region. This geopolitical contest has not only reshaped diplomatic alignments but also catalysed a recalibration of foreign policy narratives among key actors. China's growing influence, as evidenced by increased aid, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic outreach, has prompted Australia to reposition itself beyond its traditional role as a donor or strategic ally. In recent years, Australia has sought to reframe its engagement by declaring itself a 'member of the Pacific family,' and a genuine neighbour (DFAT, 2022; Wong, 2023b) as manifested in the name of its Tuvalu-Australia Falepili Treaty on climate mobility—where 'falepili' means neighbour and invoking the responsibility of 'looking after one's neighbour' (Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union, 2024). This change in rhetoric thereby invoked a relational ethos grounded in shared responsibility for regional wellbeing, climate resilience, and inclusive development.

This rhetorical shift signals an attempt to move away from transactional diplomacy toward a more culturally attuned and values-based approach. By embedding principles of mutual respect, listening, and cultural sensitivity into its foreign policy posture, Australia has aimed to cultivate relational legitimacy—recognising that Pacific leadership is not merely symbolic but central to shaping regional futures (Wong, 2023a). Within this context, Australia's growing recognition of climate mobility and labour migration is not only foundational to building genuine partnerships with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) but also indicative of shifting migration policy dynamics shaped by evolving geopolitical pressures. As outlined in the Preface, this thesis began with an inquiry into the absence of an Australian equivalent to New Zealand's Pacific Access Category visa—a permanent economic migration pathway established over two decades ago (New Zealand Government, 2001). The election of the Albanese government in 2022 followed a period of declining regional engagement under the Morrison administration (Cameron et al., 2022), particularly in relation to climate change and Pacific affairs (O'Brien, 2022; Tingle, 2022). The shift in leadership was widely interpreted as both necessary and timely, aligning with public sentiment in Australia regarding more substantial climate commitments and deeper regional ties (Albanese, 2022; Cameron et al., 2022; Kurmelovs et al., 2022). The Albanese government's early gestures toward strengthening ties with Pacific Island Countries signalled a recalibration of Australia's foreign policy priorities—one that acknowledged the strategic, moral, and relational imperatives of renewed Pacific diplomacy.

While these migration policy developments (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025; Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2025) have been broadly welcomed, they also carry undertones of strategic recalibration (Rimon et al., 2023; Wallis, 2023). This is particularly evident when such initiatives are introduced under the assumption that the Pacific requires them, without adequate consultation with Pacific Island Countries themselves, for whom the programs are designed, thereby defeating the principles of true Pacific Family diplomacy. Such top-down approaches risk undermining the principles of genuine partnership and regional ownership, especially when policies—however well-intentioned—are perceived as externally driven rather than co-designed with Pacific leadership and communities.

Additionally, Australia's renewed focus on Pacific migration and climate diplomacy emerged amid China's expanding presence in the region, prompting questions about whether such initiatives are driven by genuine partnership goals or shaped by geopolitical imperatives. Wallis (2023) analysed Australia's framing of the Pacific as a 'family', saying it is intended to signal respect, equality, and relational closeness. It has increasingly used Pacific languages—such as *vuvale* or Falepili—to reinforce this metaphor, suggesting that Australia is not merely a neighbour but part of a shared regional home. However, Wallis (2023) cautions that while the rhetoric promotes partnership, it can mask underlying strategic motivations, particularly in response to China's growing influence. She argues that Australia's initiatives often resemble reactive measures—such as infrastructure investments or security partnerships—that aim to counter China rather than respond directly to Pacific priorities. This is particularly true for much of the Pacific, where climate change remains a pressing threat (PIFS, 2018, 2019, 2024), yet considerable attention has been dedicated instead to security and militarisation (Keen & Tidwell, 2024; M. Taylor, 2024; Wallis et al., 2025). Kiribati is no exception. The introduction of new migration pathways, though promising, also carry geopolitical dynamics —where efforts to strengthen ties with PICs may also serve to counterbalance China's influence and increase Australia's strategic foothold in the Pacific. Moreover, the evolving diplomatic landscape has underscored the critical importance of building trust, fostering enduring partnerships, and promoting regional solidarity. As PICs continue to navigate the complex pressures of external influence, the legitimacy of global actors will depend not solely on the scale or visibility of their support, but on the integrity and responsiveness of their engagement—particularly in how they uphold Pacific priorities, respect local governance structures, and contribute meaningfully to climate justice and mobility with dignity. In this context, the nature and quality of development outcomes emerging from such partnerships are not neutral; they actively shape perceptions of sovereignty and agency within Pacific countries, and the

region broadly. One policy domain where these dynamics are especially pronounced is labour migration, which has emerged as a highly contested and politically charged space (Howes, 2025; Wallis, 2023).

6.2.4.1 The Pacific Engagement Visa

The introduction of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) represents a landmark development in Australia's evolving Pacific Family diplomacy, signalling a shift in its regional mobility priorities and a renewed commitment to fostering deeper ties with Pacific Island Countries (Australian Government, 2024). While the scheme has been broadly welcomed, its timing has prompted critical reflection on the authenticity of Australia's motivations, particularly considering China's expanding influence across the region (Rimon et al., 2023; Turia & Rimon, 2024). The question arises: was the PEV a timely intervention aligned with the Albanese government's stated intent to recalibrate Pacific relations, or was it a strategic manoeuvre designed to counterbalance geopolitical pressures and deflect attention from domestic contradictions—such as Australia's continued investment in coal mining despite its climate diplomacy rhetoric?

The PEV's alignment with broader objectives—promoting employment, economic prosperity, and addressing climate-induced mobility—positions it as a potentially transformative instrument of regional engagement (Turnbull, 2022). Yet, the absence of a comparable scheme to New Zealand's long-standing Pacific Access Category visa, which has been in operation for over two decades (New Zealand Government, 2001), raises questions about Australia's engagement with the Pacific, in particular its handling of Pacific priorities, which have historically been sidelined (Lyons., 2019; Turnbull, 2022). The rollout of the scheme also intersects with Australia's longstanding reputation for stringent visa processing systems, which have historically posed significant barriers for ordinary I-Kiribati and other Pacific islanders seeking entry to or transit through Australia on their own accord. Despite Australia's rhetorical commitment to Pacific regionalism and its framing of the region as part of its Pacific family, visa policies remain markedly asymmetrical.

For many Pacific islanders—including ordinary I-Kiribati citizens—gaining access to Australia has historically been fraught with difficulty, whether for educational, tourism, business, or transit purposes. Entry into Australia typically requires navigating a highly restrictive and administratively complex visa regime, characterised by stringent eligibility criteria, burdensome documentation requirements, and protracted processing timelines. These systemic barriers have disproportionately affected Pacific applicants, often deterring individuals from pursuing opportunities abroad and

reinforcing structural inequities in regional mobility. This lack of reciprocity is particularly striking when contrasted with the relative ease with which Australian citizens can travel to most PICs, often benefiting from visa-on-arrival arrangements or minimal entry requirements. Such disparity reinforces structural inequities in regional mobility. It frames the new visa (the Pacific Engagement Visa) as transformative, providing easy access to Australia for Pacific Islanders, thus promoting regional mobility. According to Dingwall et al. (2024) some Pacific countries, such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, the PEV creates a level of access to migration that was previously unavailable to their people.

The PEV thus coincides with the ongoing call for freer and supported cross-border travel (Howes, 2024), making it a welcome shift—an overdue recognition of Pacific mobility aspirations and a tangible gesture toward relational diplomacy. As Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Baron Waqa said: "*We must advocate for freer movement of our people within the islands, including Australia and New Zealand, to facilitate greater regional economic cooperation and integration"* (Waqa, 2024). Ultimately, while the PEV may be interpreted as a form of political statecraft, it also reflects a convergence of strategic and relational imperatives. If implemented with genuine partnership, transparency, and cultural sensitivity, it has the potential to be a win-win for both Australia and the Pacific, supporting economic integration, climate adaptation, regional resilience, and mobility with dignity. The Kiribati government's official stance on the visa—has become a focal point for public debate. This discourse has been particularly pronounced among I-Kiribati workers residing in Australia, many of whom are engaged in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. For these communities, the PEV represented not only a new migration opportunity but a potential turning point in how mobility is framed—as a pathway to long-term security, family reunification, and climate resilience.

The ambiguity surrounding the government's position on the PEV has raised critical questions about individual sovereignty and the democratic right of citizens to make informed decisions about their futures, including the fundamental right to choose migration as a pathway to economic security, climate adaptation, and overall security and wellbeing. Among the diaspora, particularly those with lived experience of labour migration, there is a growing expectation that the government should play an enabling role: not only by facilitating access to such schemes, but by providing transparent information, meaningful consultation, and practical support to empower citizens to exercise free will in their migration choices. In contexts where mobility intersects with climate security and economic aspirations, the lack of transparent governance and public consultation not only constrains agency but also risks undermining the legitimacy of national policy frameworks intended to serve the people.

Importantly, migration is not viewed as a passive response to external pressures, but rather, as outlined in Chapter 5, it is seen more as a proactive strategy for subsidising livelihoods, economic advancement, and climate adaptation—one that requires institutional and state backing, as well as policy coherence.

Despite official justifications for withdrawing from the inaugural PEV ballot—citing the need for domestic consultation and public briefings (Turia & Rimon, 2024)—the government's failure to follow through on these commitments to consult people on the new visa has deepened concerns about participatory governance and accountability. The disconnect between the Kiribati government's stated intentions and its actual engagement with the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) has generated widespread frustration, particularly among diaspora communities who feel excluded from national decision-making processes that directly affect their welfare as overseas workers or families of workers. For I-Kiribati migrants engaged in temporary labour schemes such as the PALM, the PEV represented a long-awaited opportunity to transition toward permanent migration pathways that could offer greater stability, family reunification, and long-term economic security. Yet, the government's ambiguous stance—marked by delayed participation and limited public explanation—has raised serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and the inclusivity of migration governance.

Within Kiribati itself, citizens have increasingly turned to social media platforms to voice inquiries and complaints regarding the noted exclusivity and secrecy surrounding the government's handling of the PEV. Many questioned why the scheme was not openly discussed with the public, and why no clear rationale was provided for the decision to abstain from the inaugural ballot. Others expected the matter to be taken to parliament, but this did not happen. As former Beretitenti and Member of the Opposition, Hon. Ieremia Tabai explains:

> *"The government cited the need for public consultation as the reason for delaying participation in the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) inaugural ballot in 2024. Yet, in practice, not a single, meaningful consultation was conducted to lead the people, offer explanation to them, and invite their views. The only visible evidence of outreach was Australia's information pamphlet on the visa which were posted at the council offices—hardly sufficient for informing citizens about a migration scheme of such significance. How are people supposed to learn about the visa from just that?" (Tabai, 22 March 2025).*

This lack of substantive engagement not only undermines the credibility of the government's stated rationale but also signals a broader failure to uphold participatory governance norms—principles that are explicitly enshrined in Te Waa Framework and foundational to Kiribati's democratic process. These

norms call for inclusive policy-making and meaningful consultation with the population, ensuring that citizens are not merely passive recipients of decisions but active contributors to national development. The absence of transparent dialogue in this instance reflects a troubling departure from these commitments, raising concerns about the integrity and responsiveness of governance structures in matters of public interest. This disconnect was particularly pronounced given the significance of the PEV to Kiribati, as a country constrained by limited international migration pathways (Curtain & Dornan, 2019; Voigt-Graf, 2016). These constraints began to shift with the introduction of the Migration with Dignity policy and the subsequent global advocacy for labour migration as a legitimate climate adaptation strategy. For many I-Kiribati, such initiatives opened avenues to pursue economic opportunities in New Zealand and Australia, reframing mobility not as displacement but as a dignified response to the climate challenge.

In a context where migration decisions bear significant consequences for livelihoods, family futures, and climate resilience, the absence of transparent and inclusive dialogue is both troubling and counterproductive. It exposes a broader asymmetry between the government's stated commitment to citizen wellbeing—particularly through employment and labour mobility—and its reluctance to embrace permanent migration as a legitimate development strategy. This contradiction is especially stark when juxtaposed with the Kiribati Vision 2030 (KV20), which outlines ambitious goals for economic growth, human resource development, and climate resilience (Government of Kiribati, 2016a, 2020). While short-term labour migration has been actively promoted to address youth unemployment and diversify income, the government's resistance to permanent pathways such as the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV)—despite supporting its sister program in New Zealand, the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa—suggests deeper political and geopolitical tensions. There was widespread speculation about the visa's underlying motivations, with geopolitical considerations—particularly the influence of China—emerging as a plausible factor (Voloder, 2024).

While other Pacific nations withdrew from the scheme, citing concerns over high outmigration or the availability of existing migration pathways, Kiribati's rationale remains opaque. The lack of transparency surrounding the decision has raised serious concerns about inclusivity, fairness, and the government's commitment to enhancing the welfare and livelihoods of its people—especially those who view migration not as abandonment, but as a strategic and dignified adaptation pathway (Rovoi, 2024). As such, the policy inconsistency reflects a stay-in-place orientation that prioritises territorial continuity over transnational adaptation, ultimately overlooking the transformative potential of mobility and the aspirations of I-Kiribati citizens seeking agency in shaping their futures.

Moreover, the perceived opaqueness in government policies has eroded public trust and raised questions about the responsiveness of national leadership to both domestic and diaspora concerns. In a context where mobility is increasingly understood as a form of resilience and agency, the failure to engage transparently with citizens about migration opportunities not only limits their ability to make informed decisions but also signals a disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived realities. For many I-Kiribati, particularly those navigating the experiences of labour mobility abroad, the right to migrate is not merely a technical issue—it is a matter of sovereignty, dignity, and self-determination. Therefore, the government's inaction on the scheme may easily be seen as failed leadership, as some participants have stated.

This gap highlights the need to reconcile national sovereignty with individual agency and ensure that policy decisions reflect the aspirations of I-Kiribati citizens—both at home and those working abroad under the PALM scheme. In the absence of transparent dialogue and inclusive consultation, migration policy risks becoming detached from the communities it is meant to serve, undermining trust and limiting the transformative potential of pathways like the PEV. Of particular concern among local communities was the government's framing of resilience in the face of climate change. While national leadership has often championed resilience as a unifying narrative—invoking terms such as "*we are resilient*" and "*we have adaptive capacity*"—grassroots perspectives reveal a more contested and nuanced understanding. During interviews, participants critically reflected on the concept of resilience, questioning whose resilience is being spoken for and how can leaders speak for communities, when they do not live like them? One of the participants emphasised his point: *"Our people are resilient, but our islands are not!"* (Participant 10, 4 August 2023). This statement highlights the tension between the celebrated narrative of I-Kiribati resilience and the islands' stark physical vulnerability. While individuals continue to demonstrate strength and adaptability—or are assumed to, as elite narratives often portray—the ecological fragility of the land may ultimately constrain their ability to remain. The participant expressed a deep commitment to staying in his homeland for as long as it endures, yet acknowledged the necessity of exploring future alternatives, particularly for the next generation. Echoing this sentiment, another participant offered a pointed critique of the government's framing of resilience:

> *"If resilience means we continuously build our seawalls to withstand the tide, when do we stop building them? When can our children stop drinking brackish water?"* (Participant 39, January 29, 2024).

These questions starkly expose the disjuncture between rhetorical invocations of resilience and the lived realities of climate change. It underscores not only the chronic absence of essential services—such as reliable access to clean water—but also the destructive impacts of coastal erosion on critical infrastructure, which threaten the physical integrity of the land and the viability of continued habitation. In this context, the participant's reflection calls for a more nuanced and equitable resilience framework—one that acknowledges the uneven experiences of adaptation across communities. While some may feel empowered by state-led strategies, others remain acutely vulnerable, questioning whether such policies genuinely support their wellbeing or merely perpetuate a narrative of endurance. A balanced approach to resilience must therefore move beyond rhetoric and amplify community voices to inform adaptation and resilience-building programs.

These reflections highlight a profound disconnect between top-down policy narratives and the lived experiences of individuals. Participants emphasised the need for grassroots communities to articulate their own understandings of resilience, rather than having it defined on their behalf by political elites or external actors. The critique challenges the assumption that resilience can be uniformly applied across diverse communities, and instead calls for a pluralistic, community-informed approach that recognises differentiated vulnerabilities and capacities. This aligns well with the critique presented by Sebastian and Jacobs (2022), who argue that there are limits to adaptation and that it cannot be pursued as a monolithic national objective, but rather as a relational and context-sensitive process—one that honours the agency of individuals and communities to define their own futures. In the same lens, migration, when pursued with dignity and informed choice, can be a legitimate and empowering form of climate adaptation. Still, for this potential to be realised, governance must move beyond rhetorical inclusivity and toward genuine participatory practice, where policy is co-designed with, rather than imposed upon, the people that the government seeks to serve. In this context, the PEV has become more than a migration pathway; it has emerged as a focal point for interrogating sovereignty, transparency, and the democratic legitimacy of labour mobility frameworks.

As this thesis neared completion, the Australian Government announced on 28 July 2025 the opening of the second round of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) ballot, notably including Kiribati among the eligible countries (Department of Home Affairs, 2025). The Australian government welcomed this decision as a signal of mutual interest in strengthening bilateral ties and deepening regional cooperation (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2025). The inclusion of Kiribati—absent from the inaugural round—marks a significant shift in migration policy and reflects the volatility of labour mobility within evolving political and leadership landscapes. The delayed participation of Kiribati from the first round

generated widespread public debate and concern among the diaspora, particularly given the high expectations for the country's participation. The subsequent reversal of its position and inclusion in the second round of the ballot is emblematic of how public discourse and regional pressure can strategically recalibrate a nation's migration posture. For many I-Kiribati, especially those working in Australia, this development fostered a renewed sense of regional belonging—an affirmation of their place within the broader Pacific family—and underscored the importance of responsive and participatory governance in shaping migration frameworks. More broadly, the pathway will enable them to articulate their resilience, capitalising on their lived experience in Australia, while others in Kiribati seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to migrate to Australia.

Furthermore, the PEV can now finally be seen as a proactive and dignified strategy with the potential to support both I-Kiribati who wish to remain in place and those who are more inclined to seek dignified opportunities in Australia. Its success, however, hinges on transparent governance to ensure that support is sustained and commitment remains in honouring the aspirations of its citizens to migrate successfully to Australia for many reasons, including climate change adaptation. In the coming months, it will become clearer whether the PEV resonates as a popular pathway in Kiribati—as it has in other Pacific nations—and whether climate adaptation emerges as a central driver of migration decisions.

6.2.4.2 The Tuvalu and Australia Falepili Union Treaty

This subsection builds upon the preceding discussion of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) as a regional mobility pathway. It turns to a more targeted and bilateral arrangement—the Tuvalu–Australia Falepili Union Treaty—which offers a compelling exemplar for examining the intersection of climate diplomacy, labour mobility, and sovereignty in the Pacific. While the PEV reflects a multilateral approach to regional migration, the Falepili Union represents a bespoke and legally binding framework, designated exclusively for Tuvalu, and shaped by its unique geopolitical vulnerabilities and strategic aspirations. Its relevance to this chapter lies in its capacity to illuminate how climate mobility policies—when embedded within diplomatic agreements—can reshape conceptions of sovereignty, particularly for Pacific nations like Kiribati, which are navigating similar existential pressures.

Signed in November 2023 and entering into force in August 2024, the Falepili Union Treaty has been described by both the Australian and Tuvaluan governments as a world-first climate mobility framework and a landmark in adaptation diplomacy (Conroy, 2024; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024). The treaty emerged at the request of Tuvalu's former Prime Minister Kausea

Natano, whose administration sought a pathway that would address three interlinked domains: climate cooperation, mobility with dignity, and shared security and sovereignty. These pillars resonate deeply with this chapter's exploration of how shifting climate policies influence labour migration and, in turn, shape evolving notions of sovereignty (McAdam, 2023).

Australia's response to Tuvalu's formal request for climate cooperation operationalises a two-pronged resilience strategy that reflects both diplomatic responsiveness and a culturally attuned understanding of climate mobility. First, it establishes a special visa pathway for up to 280 Tuvaluan citizens annually to live, work, and study in Australia—offering a dignified and proactive mobility option for those facing climate-induced displacement. Second, it commits substantial resources to in situ adaptation investments, including support for coastal infrastructure, housing, and essential services designed to enhance the habitability and resilience of Tuvalu's islands (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024).

This dual approach reframes resilience not as a singular or static condition, but as the power of choice—the capacity for communities to determine their own pathways in response to environmental disruption. It aligns closely with the principles of Te Waa framework, which emphasises relational movement, intergenerational duty, and the legitimacy of navigating between spaces—whether within national boundaries or across oceans. By supporting both mobility and permanence, the treaty affirms the rights of Tuvaluans to a spectrum of responses, challenging the often linear and reductive narratives that frame migration solely as displacement or failure to adapt. Furthermore, the treaty challenges and transcends the fixed legal boundaries and traditional understandings of sovereignty introduced earlier in this chapter—those tied strictly to land territory. In place of these conventional frameworks, it advances an ingenious and previously unimagined approach: offering a vital pathway for climate adaptation in the absence of established protective governance systems (McAdam, 2010, 2023). Central to this innovation is the legal recognition of Tuvalu's continuing statehood, even in the event of territorial loss due to sea level rise. This provision redefines sovereignty beyond physical geography and affirms Tuvalu's right to exist as a nation, irrespective of whether its land endures or succumbs to the long-predicted impacts of climate change (IPCC, 2023).

While the question of threatened sovereignty has long animated Pacific climate discourse, the Falepili Union Treaty marks a decisive shift. It not only challenges conventional understandings of statehood, but also proactively offers a precedent for other low-lying nations—particularly Kiribati—to reconceptualise sovereignty as relational, mobile, and future-oriented. Like Tuvalu, Kiribati faces acute

vulnerability to climate impacts; yet its diplomatic engagement with climate mobility policies has, to date, appeared misaligned with the lived aspirations of its citizens (Rimon, 2022, 2024). Even where intent may exist, the articulation of such policies has lacked clarity, resonance, and responsiveness. In this light, the Falepili Union serves as a benchmark—a reference point through which I-Kiribati communities and observers can assess differing leadership styles, diplomatic strategies, and, more critically, expressions of sovereignty in the face of climate disruption.

A salient feature of the Falepili Union Treaty, particularly relevant to this research, is the continuity and evolution of Tuvaluan government policy on climate resilience and sovereignty, as founded by its influential climate leader Enele Sopoaga, under whom Tuvalu has long maintained a principled stance on remaining in place, emphasising the cultural and spiritual significance of land and rootedness during his leadership between 2013 to 2019. This foundational position was upheld and nuanced across successive administrations, each contributing distinct policy innovations while preserving a shared commitment to the wellbeing of Tuvaluans. The Natano administration, which came to office from 2019 to 2024, while affirming the importance of in situ resilience, also pursued a more outward-looking strategy—culminating in the negotiation of the Falepili Union Treaty. When Prime Minister Feleti Teo assumed office in 2024, his government embraced the treaty not as a departure from prior policy but as a continuation of the national vision. In a public address at the Australian National University, Teo spoke fervently about the treaty's significance, building upon the work of his predecessor without any trace of political disjuncture or partisan distancing (Dixon, 2025).

Tuvalu's policy coherence across administrations distils an image of moral leadership and civic responsibility, where transitions in government are marked by continuity rather than rupture. It reflects a governance ethos that prioritises citizens over politics, minimising disruption and reinforcing public trust in national institutions. Even Tuvalu's stance on the China–Taiwan rivalry has remained consistent, underscoring a unified diplomatic posture across administrations—unlike the Maamau administration's apparent political divergence (Fogarty & Fox, 2019; Pala, 2020).

The Tuvalu leadership traits stand in contrast to the fragmented and divisive policy shifts observed in Kiribati, where successive governments have adopted markedly different approaches to climate and migration policy (Kupferberg, 2021; Needham, 2022; Radio New Zealand, 2017, 2019). This divergence is further reflected in the administration's intentions to remain in power indefinitely, as manifested in its Kiribati Vision 2030, a twenty-year development plan that extends beyond the constitutional limit of three consecutive three-year terms for any single government (Government of Kiribati, 2016a).

Such moves have raised concerns about the integrity of democracy and long-term policy coherence in the face of escalating climate challenges.

Upon assuming office, the current Kiribati administration made explicit its intention to discontinue key reforms initiated by its predecessor. Notably, it reversed support for the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA)—once a UNESCO World Heritage-listed marine conservation initiative—and refused to recognise the Migration with Dignity policy. These reversals signalled a clear policy rupture, raising concerns about the politicisation of climate governance and the erosion of long-term planning. For many I-Kiribati, such shifts have been interpreted as a divisive posture, undermining collective resilience and casting uncertainty over the nation's commitment to safeguarding its people in the face of escalating climate threats.

In contrast, Tuvalu's approach exemplifies how people-centred policy and policy continuity, even amid leadership change, can reinforce national resilience, uphold sovereignty, and foster public confidence. This is clearly manifested in the Falepili Union Treaty, alongside ongoing climate and development policies that challenge conventional norms and recognise the importance of offering multiple options, rather than imposing a singular, top-down solution. The treaty stands as a compelling model of genuine leadership for the people, where Pacific governance is defined by cultural integrity, strategic foresight, and intergenerational responsibility. As such, the Tuvaluan government's endorsement of multiple pathways—whether through relocation, remaining in place, or reserving the right to return—reflects a nuanced, rights-based, and community-centred approach to climate adaptation. It affirms that resilience is not solely about staying, nor merely about leaving, but about preserving dignity, autonomy, and continuity across shifting geographies. This framing challenges binary narratives of climate mobility and instead embraces a spectrum of responses grounded in cultural integrity and informed choice (Conroy, 2024; Prime Minister of Australia, 2024).

However, the Falepili Union Treaty has not been without controversy. A central point of critique lies in Article 4, which obliges Tuvalu to consult Australia on any future security arrangements with other states (Herr, 2023). This clause has sparked debate over the delicate balance between protection and dependency, raising questions about whether the treaty represents genuine development cooperation or a form of strategic manoeuvring within an increasingly contested regional landscape. The geopolitical dimensions of the treaty are further complicated by the China factor, with analysts speculating that Tuvalu and Nauru—two of the last Pacific nations maintaining diplomatic ties with

Taiwan—are high on Beijing's strategic radar amid its broader expansionist ambitions (Holton, 2024; Schofield & Anggadi, 2024; Wallis et al., 2023).

Beyond geopolitical critique, deeper debates have emerged around the core theme of this research, including labour migration as a climate strategy. While the treaty is framed as a progressive response to climate displacement, some scholars and community voices caution that it may inadvertently deepen Tuvaluan vulnerability. The undertones of mobility and dislocation from ancestral land raise concerns about whether the treaty truly enhances self-determination and resilience, or risks undermining them by normalising departure as the dominant adaptation pathway. These tensions underscore the importance of climate mobility policies being culturally grounded, community-informed, and sensitive to the emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects of place. These concerns underscore the imperative for climate mobility frameworks to be adaptive and inclusive as well as transparent, accountable, and grounded in the preservation of Pacific sovereignty. In this context, the Falepili Union Treaty is viewed by some as a pre-emptive diplomatic safeguard, reinforcing Australia's influence in the region while offering Tuvalu a climate adaptation option.

Cognisant of the growing literature on the Falepili Union Treaty, this subsection does not seek to provide further critique of the treaty but instead underscores its relevance to this chapter's discourse on climate mobility and sovereignty. The following themes, already extensively discussed throughout this chapter, are consolidated to highlight the treaty's significance and timeliness for this research:

1. Mobility with dignity

By framing mobility as a proactive and rights-based adaptation strategy, rather than a last resort, the treaty invites conceptual parallels with Kiribati's Migration with Dignity policy—particularly in its shared emphasis on climate mobility and denunciation of the refugee labelling that often accompanies displacement narratives. This suggests a discernible influence of Kiribati's earlier policy, adapted to suit Tuvalu's specific needs. It also marks a notable achievement for Tuvalu, especially given that both countries are members of the Coalition of Atoll Nations on Climate Change (CANCC)—a grouping initially developed by Kiribati and now led by the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and the Maldives.

The Falepili Treaty reflects a broader paradigm shift in climate adaptation, acknowledging the considerable reluctance of Tuvaluans to leave their homeland and their much-professed determination to remain in place. Yet, the popularity of the treaty's first-year ballot (Edwards, 2025)

suggests a deeper message that Tuvaluans are keen to explore alternative homes while continuing to maintain strong links to their homeland. This duality affirms that mobility and rootedness are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist as complementary expressions of resilience and sovereignty.

2. Climate displacement

Climate change is a global phenomenon, yet its impacts are felt unevenly, affecting countries and communities in disproportionate ways. The Pacific Region is among the most at-risk populations globally, particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of extreme climate events, most notably sea level rise. The scale of these impacts ranges from sudden-onset disasters to slow-onset environmental degradation, both of which contribute to the internal displacement of communities whose livelihoods, sense of belonging, and security are increasingly undermined. Importantly, climate displacement is not a future scenario—it is already unfolding across the region. The relocation of the Carterets Islands to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, and the resettlement of Fijian communities including Vunidogoloa and Togoru, among others, are emblematic of this lived reality (Rakova, 2014; Yee et al., 2022). In Kiribati and Tuvalu, although the extent of internal displacement remains relatively small, both nations are experiencing shifting weather patterns and increasingly frequent and severe climate events, which impact livelihoods and security (Barbosa, 2020a; Bedford et al., 2016; Kuruppu, 2009; Yates et al., 2023).

The Falepili Union Treaty directly addresses the realities of forced movement resulting from environmental degradation and sea level rise. It reframes displacement not as a humanitarian crisis but as a predictable and manageable outcome of climate change, requiring structured policy responses. As a visa pathway, the treaty acknowledges the inevitability of movement while embedding it within a framework of dignity and legal protection, which still supports options for informed and supported mobility or relocation.

3. Navigating vulnerability and resilience

Within this research, the vulnerability–resilience dichotomy has been critically interrogated—particularly the notion that embracing vulnerability is essential to realising meaningful resilience. In parallel, climate adaptation must resist elitist framings of resilience, which often obscure the lived realities of communities and individuals whose experiences vary widely across social, cultural, and geographic contexts (Kelman, 2020; McDonnell, 2020; Nunn, 2024; United Nations, 2025). A rights-

based and context-sensitive approach to adaptation is therefore necessary—one that honours diversity in resilience narratives and avoids imposing homogenised solutions from above.

The treaty exemplifies a strategic balance between existential vulnerability and policy-driven resilience. Tuvalu's recognition of its physical precarity is matched by its diplomatic agency in securing long-term adaptation options. This duality reflects a governance model that neither denies threat nor succumbs to it, but instead mobilises vulnerability as a catalyst for innovation, sovereignty, mobility and self-determination.

4. Liminal and transnational identities

As discussed earlier, the emergence of liminal and transnational identities, as observed among I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan seafarers (Borovnik, 2003, 2009), has significantly reframed perceptions of place, belonging, and cultural connection. These experiences have not only challenged conventional understandings of home and rootedness but have also provoked deeper reflection on the nature of mobility, identity, and future agency. In doing so, they have helped this research reimagine what agency looks like through the lens of migration and movement.

The Falepili framework affirms this fluidity of belonging for Tuvaluans, recognising that identity can be sustained across geographies. It supports the emergence of transnational identities and cultures that are maintained across cultural ties and navigate dual or multiple homes. This challenges static notions of citizenship and anchors mobility within a framework of relational and cultural continuity (Beichelt & Valentin, 2020).

5. Disconnection versus reconnection

A salient finding in this research has been the recognition that disconnection from one's homeland through labour migration can serve as a powerful form of cultural reconnection and continuity in the face of climate displacement. The Falepili Union Treaty embodies the notion of *"disconnect to reconnect"* as a form of cultural agency and climate resilience, promoting labour migration not as a rupture from identity, but as a conduit to preserve, renew, and expand cultural ties.

Furthermore, the treaty complements its vision through the concept of a digital nation, coined to enhance cultural sovereignty in transnational contexts (Rothe et al., 2024). This digital framework provides a platform to support assimilation—not only into the culture of the host environment—but more critically, into the Tuvaluan diaspora in Australia, where cultural continuity can be nurtured

through shared language, tradition, and community networks. The challenge, however, lies in ensuring that such mobility does not result in cultural erosion or alienation. Genuine integration requires sustained and deliberate support for language preservation, traditional practices, and community cohesion—elements that must extend beyond formal migration structures and be embedded in everyday lived experience (Barnett et al., 2024; Farbotko et al., 2016).

6. Statehood versus statelessness

A defining element of the Falepili Union Treaty is its innovative legal approach to preserving Tuvalu's statehood, even in the event of territorial loss. This provision reimagines sovereignty as reterritorialised, ensuring that Tuvalu remains a recognised nation regardless of land submergence. It sets a precedent for other low-lying states, including Kiribati, to explore sovereignty beyond physical borders and assert their rights within the framework of international law.

Given the growing urgency to address questions of statelessness and the retention of statehood, as recently highlighted in the International Court of Justice's legal opinion on climate change, the treaty offers one of many options in a rapidly changing world shaped by climate change. The treaty directly engages with this critical issue. It offers both guidance and precedence for the protection of climate-displaced persons—whether through the mechanisms of international organisations such as the United Nations, or through bilateral arrangements with other countries seeking to emulate the Falepili model as a demonstration of climate leadership (Green & Guilfoyle, 2024; Kama, 2025; Purcell, 2019).

7. Generated controversy

Despite its progressive framing, the treaty has generated debate over its geopolitical implications. Critics question whether the agreement reflects genuine development cooperation or strategic positioning by Australia in the Pacific. Article 4, which requires Tuvalu to consult with Australia on future security arrangements, has been viewed as a potential constraint on autonomy. These tensions highlight the need for climate mobility frameworks to be not only adaptive and inclusive, but also politically transparent and accountable.

In sum, the Falepili Union Treaty offers a transformative model for climate adaptation—one that reimagines sovereignty, embeds mobility within a framework of dignity and choice, and foregrounds the relational ethics of Pacific diplomacy. Its lessons are instructive not only for Tuvalu but for Kiribati

and other Pacific nations seeking to navigate the complex terrain of climate resilience, migration, and self-determination. Moreover, like the PALM, the PEV**,** and other labour migration schemes**,** the Falepili Union Treaty will inevitably carry dual benefits—both for sending and receiving countries. It is imperative to ensure that associated risks are addressed through open debate and the sharing of perspectives that emerge from such controversies. Every new initiative will invite questions, critiques, and interest**,** and it is precisely through these engagements that reforms and ongoing developments are shaped—whether to the treaty itself or to parallel schemes (Edwards, 2025; Schofield & Anggadi, 2024).

6.3 Sovereignty from a Climate Change Lens

When former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd proposed granting Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu Australian citizenship in exchange for their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Hill, 2019), the idea was immediately rejected by former Tuvaluan Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga, who labelled the proposal as neocolonial and imperialistic (Stewart, 2019). The fallout between the two leaders was a powerful illustration of the intricacies of sovereignty as a contentious topic frequently politicised in the climate-migration debate. Despite this incident and the significant growth in knowledge of climate science and the devastating impacts of climate change on low-lying regions, a substantial knowledge gap persists in the response of low-lying states to emerging climate security policies, particularly those with cross-border and sovereignty implications (Moore, 2022; M. Taylor, 2024).

Sovereignty has become a highly volatile issue in the climate–migration discourse, entwining complex concerns about territorial integrity, statehood, autonomy, identity, culture, and human rights. The existential threats posed by climate change to small island nations and low-lying regions have sparked fundamental questions about the future of these states, their territorial and maritime boundaries, and the rights of citizens to statehood, identity, culture, life, and dignity. This section does not engage in a detailed examination of the legal frameworks or the applicability of international laws relevant to these sovereignty concerns. Instead, it addresses these inquiries through the lens of I-Kiribati people and their conception of sovereignty. Considering the abstract and multifaceted nature of sovereignty, it is imperative to situate the concept within the socio-cultural context in which it operates (Tatar & Moisi, 2022). Especially crucial is the consideration of sovereignty from the lens of climate mobility, acknowledging the increasingly transnational and fluid nature of global politics and geopolitics in relation to climate change and heightened discussion of labour migration. This perspective acknowledges that mobility has become a vital adaptation strategy, offering a critical option for individuals and communities to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

This entails examining the concept's evolution over time (Maritain, 1950), while concomitantly assessing the factors that shape it, such as globalisation, foreign aid and development, climate change, and geopolitics. A critical distinction must be made between the traditional, security-focused definition of sovereignty and the more nuanced, culturally grounded interpretations prevalent in the Pacific (Fry & Tarte, 2025). The latter emphasises the intricate relationships between land, culture, identity, and spirituality, as well as the delicate act of balancing these interests against competing geopolitical influences (Fry and Tarte, 2025; Keen & Tidwell, 2024). This is underscored by Wesley-Smith & Smith, (2021) who cautioned that while there is no question of Island leaders' strategic capacity in leveraging competition, there is a risk of great power interests influencing Pacific leaders to take sides. Furthermore, the definition of sovereignty must foreground the true nature of island community experiences of sovereignty from a multi-temporal, multi-spatial, multi-scalar, and relational way— fundamental to Pacific peoples. This is imperative for enhancing understanding of how they perceive, respond to, and influence their behaviour and responses to climate-related sovereignty and migration themes (Farbotko et al., 2016; Koro et al., 2023 & Taylor, 2024). From a Pacific perspective, sovereignty transcends conventional and Western-centric narratives that dominate research today, regarding sovereignty as merely the act of control over a delineated land or maritime boundary. A Pacific conception of state sovereignty encompasses a profound interplay of intricate connections and relationality between peoples, their lands, seas, and environments, underpinned by history, ancestral, and indigenous knowledge systems (Koro et al., 2023).

Among climate change's leading threats in the Pacific Region, and particularly in the low-lying island nation of Kiribati, is the looming threat of displacement due to sea level rise. Scientific estimates predict a catastrophic future, where rising oceans will inundate coastal communities, displace entire populations, and threaten the very existence of nations like Kiribati. This existential threat has far-reaching implications, undermining the security of low-lying regions and necessitating urgent adaptation efforts. As mitigation strategies become increasingly insufficient, Kiribati and other vulnerable nations must prioritise robust adaptation measures, including migration—both temporary and permanent—to protect their people and cultural sovereignty (Hugo, 2011 ; IOM, 2017, 2023; Kolmannskog, 2010; Kolmannskog, 2012; Kolmannskog & Trebbi, 2012; Lee et al., 2023; Morgan, 2022; Pacific Islands Forum & Pacific Fusion Center, 2024; Secretariat, 2018). However, migration has become a highly contentious issue in the Pacific, primarily fueled by pervasive misconceptions about global climate change.

These misconceptions brand the Blue Pacific Continent as small, weak, and vulnerable. In response, a nascent Pasifika development consciousness is prompting policymakers and academics to redefine sovereignty from a climate-resilient standpoint. The Boe Declaration and the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy are emblematic of the Pacific Region's desire to be free from the West's belittling and apocalyptic narrative. This is crucial for doing justice to the Pacific and defining it correctly in terms of its magnitude as a Blue Pacific continent united in its strength as a region of diversity, wealth, and solidarity (Hauofa, 2008). The pivotal shift is also absorbed by Kiribati, whose development agenda on resilience underpins the Kiribati Vision 2030, reconfiguring the Western-centric framing of the Pacific in terms of climate change impact (Government of Kiribati, 2016a; PIFS, 2019).

This shift in climate narratives underscores the agency of Pasifika peoples in safeguarding their national and cultural sovereignty amidst intensifying geopolitical competition and evolving climate diplomacy, as evident in the development of resilience strategies to counter themes of vulnerability (Medina 2022; Pacific Islands Forum & Pacific Fusion Center, 2024). However, the exigency for developing a clear protection policy framework to address displacement and loss of culture (Kalin, 2010) remains critical. Paradoxically, as Kiribati increases efforts to disentangle from notions of climate vulnerability and redefine its narrative, the risks of unpreparedness for climate change's existential threats may inadvertently heighten if it continues to overlook the economic benefits of migration. This is particularly concerning in a region where socio-economic and environmental drivers, including climate impacts, are increasingly driving human mobility (Haas, 2011; Hugo, 1996; Hugo, 2011 ; IOM, 2017; Lee, 2009; McAdam, 2010; Monirul & Mirza, 2011; Naser, 2012; Newland, 2011; Oakes et al., 2016; Parrish et al., 2020).

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the evolving interplay between climate change, labour migration, and sovereignty in Kiribati, revealing how I-Kiribati perceptions of sovereignty are being reshaped in response to environmental stressors and shifting mobility landscapes. Through a nuanced interrogation of migration dynamics, geopolitical positioning, and the re-emergence of sovereignty, the chapter has illuminated the ways in which climate-induced disruption is not only challenging traditional state structures but also catalysing new forms of agency and belonging. The analysis of toronibwai has underscored its enduring cultural value, offering a lens through which I-Kiribati aspirations for dignity, rootedness, and continuity can be understood. The examination of the Pacific Engagement Visa and the Falepili Union Treaty has further demonstrated how sovereignty is increasingly measured against a government's capacity to respond to its citizens' needs—particularly

in the context of climate mobility. These frameworks have prompted deeper reflection on future sovereignty, not as fixed or territorial, but as transnational, liminal, and responsive to the lived realities of Pacific peoples. Findings from this chapter affirm a significant shift: economic wellbeing now constitutes a central pillar of I-Kiribati sovereignty, reinforcing the theory that economic resilience is foundational to climate adaptation.

Ultimately, the redefinition of sovereignty in Kiribati transcends conventional notions of political independence and self-governance. It embraces the complex interdependencies between economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political dimensions of human life. For I-Kiribati, sovereignty now encompasses the ability to thrive economically, access opportunities across borders, and secure a future in which they can assert their sense of *oi n aomata*—personhood and worthiness. Climate change and migration are not merely external pressures; they are active forces shaping the contours of statehood, territorial integrity, and the exercise of choice and political power. These perspectives reveal that sovereignty for I-Kiribati is not a fixed or abstract principle, but a lived and continually negotiated practice—shaped through relationships, obligations, mobility, and the shifting political currents. As labour mobility policies evolve and geopolitical interests intensify, I-Kiribati communities are actively interpreting, contesting, and re-articulating what it means to exercise agency and protect their collective future. These insights underscore how sovereignty is navigated as much as it is asserted. Just as Te Waa requires balance, foresight, and collective effort to steer through uncertain waters, so too do contemporary expressions of I-Kiribati sovereignty as the nation charts its course through intertwined realities of mobility, geopolitics, and climate change.

Chapter 7 : In What Ways has Labour Mobility in Australia Cultivated Resilience for Kiribati and I-Kiribati, and how can this be Further Strengthened for Climate Adaptation?

"The Pacific is not just a region, it's a diaspora...Our people have always moved, we've always been seafarers, we've always been explorers... migration is not just an option, it's a right, it's a part of who we are as Pacific Islanders," (Dame Meg Taylor, 2024).

7.1 Introduction

Drawing on the full dimensions of Te Waa, as discussed towards the end of Chapter 2, this final empirical chapter critically examines how labour mobility in Australia, notably the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, has contributed to cultivating resilience among I-Kiribati. It explores how this pathway might be further strengthened as a strategy for climate adaptation. The chapter interrogates the concept of resilience, which has emerged as a central narrative of climate response across the Pacific, and argues that while resilience discourse is vital in contesting dominant and reductive portrayals of Pacific nations including Kiribati, as passive and vulnerable, a significant risk remains. Specifically, elitist framings of resilience may obscure the lived realities of grassroots communities who are not only the least economically equipped, but importantly at the extreme end of escalating impacts of climate change.

The Te Waa framework offers a powerful lens for understanding how resilience is cultivated through labour migration, and how I-Kiribati families steer through shifting social, economic, and climatic tides. By drawing on all elements of Te Waa that centres—people, crafting, navigation, protection, balance, and collective purpose—the chapter highlights how culturally-attuned labour migration pathways and stronger protection mechanisms, as discussed herein, can better support I-Kiribati wellbeing and resilience building, through leadership, public policy, climate justice, and rights-based practice. This approach deepens the understanding of labour migration as a legitimate form of climate adaptation**,** directly engaging the central inquiry of this research and challenging dominant narratives that overlook grassroots agency. Through maroros (dialogues), the research embeds community perspectives into debates on policy, leadership, and adaptation, showing how resilience is understood and enacted by I-Kiribati themselves. By drawing on all elements of cultivated through labour migration, and how families steer through shifting socio-economic tides. I-Kiribati This chapter examines how I-Kiribati communities perceive labour migration as a strategic response to climate and

economic stressors, and how they actively mitigate risks, optimise transnational opportunities, and strengthen household-level resilience. Through a resilience lens, the chapter explores how labour mobility contributes not only to economic security but specifically to the development of climate-resilient communities grounded in *te maiuraoi* (wellbeing), agency, (ewenako), and prosperity (toronibwai).

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 7.2 interrogates the concept of resilience and its evolution as a dominant narrative within Pacific climate discourse, particularly how it has been mobilised as both a policy slogan and a moral imperative, often framing adaptation in ways that obscure the legitimacy of mobility as a strategic choice. Section 7.3 provides an overview of contemporary labour mobility dynamics, highlighting the increasing outmigration of Pacific workers—particularly through schemes such as PALM—and the diverse motivations driving this transformation. Section 7.4 presents empirical findings from interviews and income data, illustrating how I-Kiribati participants conceptualise labour migration as a resilience-building strategy. Section 7.5 presents worker perspectives on the PALM scheme and labour migration programs, highlighting how labour migration is perceived as both adaptive and maladaptive. Section 7.6 summarises the move towards a resilience agenda, and Section 7.7 discusses the concept of brown saviourism. Section 7.8 concludes the chapter with a synthesis of key insights, arguing for a reframing of resilience that centres community agency and recognises labour mobility as a legitimate adaptation strategy, co-designed with communities, and responsive to the lived realities of those most affected by climate change.

7.2 Te Waa at the Edge: When Resilience is Honoured but Migration Remains a Choice

The emergence of a new development consciousness in the Pacific has profoundly reshaped the trajectories of Pacific Island Countries (PICs), challenging long-standing Global North and derogatory framings that have historically defined the region as small, vulnerable, passive, and isolated. This evolving consciousness is rooted in a collective reclamation of narrative space—where Pacific scholars and thought leaders assert their agency, epistemologies, and strategic vision in the face of intersecting global theories and crises. Seminal works of Pacific thought leaders, such as Epeli Hauʻofa, Konai Helu, Teresia Teaiwa, Sereana Naepi, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others, have been foundational in decolonising mindsets, education systems, and development paradigms. Their scholarship has repositioned the Pacific not as a periphery to global affairs, but as a region of intellectual, cultural, and political significance—one that offers alternative models of resilience, relationality, and justice (Hau'ofa, 1994; (Hau'ofa, 1994; Hauofa, 2008; Helu, 2003; Naepi, 2019; Smith, 2005, 2019; Teaiwa, 2017).

This intellectual shift has been mirrored by the rise of strategic diplomacy and assertive leadership among Pacific governments and regional institutions, which have spearheaded critical policy reforms to articulate regional agency and responsibility. Among the most visible expressions of this agency is the Pacific's climate leadership, foregrounded in this thesis through both former Kiribati Beretitenti Anote Tong and former Prime Minister of Tuvalu Enele Sopoaga's on their unwavering insistence on decisive justice-oriented climate action. While the Pacific's contemporary identity is shaped by the inspiring work of its many remarkable leaders, this research focused specifically on these two figures because their contributions resonate most directly with the themes of this study. Their respective visions on climate mobility have been foundational to contemporary debates, providing the conceptual and political groundwork for regional collaborations and leadership that continue to sustain Pacific diplomacy and global climate leadership. Tong's intervention exposed the inadequacy of international justice mechanisms and rejected reductive refugee framings that failed to capture Pacific lived realities (Rimon & Tong, 2021; Tong, 2014, 2015). In contrast, Sopoaga's steadfast opposition to relocating Pacific peoples for a crisis not of their making, underscored his principle that any response to climate change must address its root causes rather than displace its victims (Dziedzic, 2018; Sopoaga, 2020; Sopoaga, 2015). While distinct in emphasis, both visions illuminate the core dynamics that continue to animate contemporary debates on climate mobility. For small islands that were once a joint colony of Britain to assert themselves so prominently in global politics was remarkable in itself; it signalled a principled and proactive voice in global climate governance—leadership that contributed meaningfully to the diplomatic momentum culminating in the Paris Agreement in 2015.

This leadership is further amplified by the work of Pacific climate warriors, youth advocates (Farbotko & Kitara, 2021; McNamara & Farbotko, 2017), and regional coalitions, whose activism and strategic engagement have culminated in historic milestones—such as Vanuatu Minister for Climate Change Ralph Regenvanu's support for the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) advisory opinion, initiated by Vanuatu law students and civil society. This landmark legal achievement has elevated the Pacific's voice in global climate law and governance, affirming the region's moral authority and its innovative approach to international law and human rights. These developments—and many more—have positioned the Pacific as a region of resilience, opportunity, and leadership. Yet, while this momentum is both relevant and timely, this chapter cautions against the growing overemphasis on climate resilience as a one-sided narrative. Though resilience remains vital, it must not obscure the real-time impacts of climate change on low-lying communities, nor the structural economic and social

constraints (Ballard et al., 2020; McDonnell, 2020)—particularly in Kiribati—that limit the region's capacity to respond to the magnitude of climate challenges ahead.

A nuanced and grounded approach to development that honours resilience yet affirms migration as a choice for adaptation, is needed. Such an approach must also recognise development as a relational and rights-based process. Only through such a lens can the Pacific's evolving development consciousness move beyond strategic rhetoric and rooted deeply in the lived realities, aspirations, and agency of its peoples. Despite the dominant narrative for climate resilience that compels a 'stay-in-place' rhetoric and a 'no retreat' from climate change, the truth about people's choices is increasingly reflected in the shifting labour migration landscapes across the region. Labour migration has emerged as one of the most dynamic and contested arenas of Pacific development, as many Island economies enter a period marked by accelerated outmigration and a substantial flow of low, semi-skilled, and high-skilled workers to the Pacific Rim and beyond. Driven by multiple complex factors, these movements are not merely economic—they are expressions of opportunity-seeking, better living standards, and climate change adaptation (Curtain & Dornan, 2019; Doan et al, 2023; ILO, 2016, 2019, 2022). A particularly prominent trend is the expanding presence of Pacific workers within the Australia–New Zealand corridor, which now constitutes the two leading destinations for both temporary labour mobility and permanent migration among Pacific Island peoples (Connell, 2010; Doan et al., 2023; Hugo, 2005). This corridor reflects not only shifting geopolitical dynamics, but also, more critically, the increasing recognition—by communities themselves—of the opportunities offered through migration and the benefits that can be harnessed from it to strengthen resilience, economic empowerment, and climate adaptation.

This transformation is reflected in significant shifts across the region. Fiji has emerged as the leading sender country under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, with 6,379 workers deployed in its long-term component (Bedford & Bedford, 2024). Meanwhile, low-mobility countries such as Kiribati have also experienced notable growth. From an initial cohort of just 20 workers at the inception of the Seasonal Worker Programme (now the short-term PALM) over a decade ago, Kiribati's labour-sending workforce has grown rapidly, now approaching the 2,000 marks—a remarkable shift for a country constrained by geographic isolation and limited labour market access.

These labour mobility trajectories are not mere evidence of Pacific peoples moving abroad because they can; the reality is far more complex. As discussed throughout this thesis, the trends signal an acute and multifaceted crisis in the Pacific region—characterised by a chronic shortage of employment

opportunities, rising living costs, and a growing disconnect between education and vocational training systems and the actual demands of domestic industries. Most critically, the exponential rise in outmigration reflects a rapidly evolving landscape of labour mobility policy, shaped by geopolitical interests and climate change, but also by a constellation of personal, social, economic, cultural, and political forces. These forces are collectively driving Pacific Islanders, including I-Kiribati, to gravitate toward the perceived stability and opportunity offered by Australia's labour market, often as a strategic response to structural precarity at home.

Interestingly, what this reveals is a growing disjuncture between the dominant resilience narrative, which remains deeply embedded in Pacific development and climate discourse, and the lived realities unfolding across the region. While resilience is often framed as the capacity to remain in place and withstand external shocks, it does not adequately reflect the increasing popularity of labour migration or the growing propensity of Pacific peoples to seek opportunities beyond their national borders. This mobility trend is not incidental; it is symptomatic of deeper structural and developmental challenges that continue to constrain life chances across many Pacific Island Countries. These challenges include, but are not limited to, high youth unemployment, low-wage and precarious employment, rising living costs, limited access to quality healthcare, and persistent gaps in social service delivery—all of which are exacerbated by the escalating impacts of climate change.

In this context, migration emerges not as a reactive measure, but as a strategic and aspirational choice—one that I-Kiribati and Pacific islanders must have both the right to make and the support to pursue. As Epeli Hauʻofa (2008) posits in *Our Sea of Islands*, "*We should not be defined by the smallness of our islands, but by the greatness of our oceans*." This vision is especially fitting in the region today given the aspirations of Pacific peoples as they navigate intensifying economic and environmental stressors. It extends the Pacific Region's development consciousness, challenging externally imposed narratives of vulnerability and passivity. And affirms that that Pacific peoples are not confined by geographic boundaries but are navigators of their own opportunity and destinies – an understanding that resonates with Te Waa's elements of centring resilience and people. Whether Pacific peoples are migrating in direct response to climate change or driven by broader socio-economic pressures, the enduring reality is that they are historically and culturally migrant populations—communities shaped by movement, adaptation, and relational belonging across generations and oceans (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). Migration, in this context, is not a rupture from identity, but a continuation of Pacific ways of being (Lee, 1966; Lee, 2009).

With the burgeoning recognition of climate change's effects on human mobility, there is increasing consensus that movement—whether through planned relocation, displacement, or voluntary labour migration—is not only inevitable but central to contemporary adaptation strategies. At one end of the mobility spectrum lies environmental displacement, often triggered by acute climate events; at the other, more strategic forms of movements—such as planned relocation and labour migration—are emerging as viable pathways for resilience and survival. Within this continuum, labour migration is gaining traction as a climate-adaptive strategy, enabling individuals and households to diversify their income, reduce exposure to environmental risks, and sustain cultural and familial ties across borders (International Organization for Migration, 2017, 2024; Westbury, 2021).

As explored in Chapters 5 and 6, informants consistently acknowledged climate change's influence on decisions for alternative livelihoods to supplement traditional subsistence practices, now increasingly under threat. The impacts are not abstract—they are felt in the diminishing ability to grow food, the scarcity of clean drinking water, and the erosion of everyday routines that once anchored cultural and spiritual life. These escalating climate pressures are not only driving internal movement but also reshaping social and cultural values as communities navigate the tension between staying and moving (Bailes et al., 2014; Inbar and Sheffer, 1997; Oakes, 2019).

Recognising migration as a legitimate form of climate adaptation and development strategy is essential for ensuring that Pacific futures are shaped by lived choices, not imposed narratives. Like many development pathways, labour migration is a double-edged sword—offering both promise and peril. On one hand, it creates opportunities for employment, skills acquisition, and pathways to permanent migration, contributing to household income, national development, and climate strategies for adaptation (ESCAP, 2022; Voigt-Graf & Kagan, 2017). On the other hand, it is often accompanied by significant social and structural challenges: prolonged family separation, exposure to unfamiliar cultural norms, limited support systems, and risks of exploitation and precarity in host countries (Cornish et al., 2022; Curtain et al., 2016).

In modern Kiribati, as across the wider Pacific Region, labour migration has become an increasingly salient feature of everyday life, functioning not only as an economic pillar, but as a proactive strategy to mitigate and adapt to environmental vulnerability and limited domestic labour market capacity (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022). An exponential growth in the popularity of schemes such as the PALM and the RSE, including permanent pathways

such as the Pacific Access Category (PAC), the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), and the Falepili Union Treaty, reflects this shift, positioning migration both as a development and a climate resilience tool. Yet, the challenges embedded within these schemes present fertile ground for ongoing debate, policy reform, and shifting political and diplomatic posturing, amidst a backdrop of increasing strategic competition and efforts toward resilience-building and assertion of sovereignty. As governments, communities, and regional institutions continue to grapple with the complexities of mobility, ensuring that labour migration frameworks remain equitable, rights-based, and culturally responsive, will be essential.

Crucially, resilience narratives must be rooted in community perspectives of those who live with the daily realities of climate disruption, not orchestrated or externally prescribed by distant policy actors or top-down frameworks. The long-term success of labour migration will hinge not solely on economic indicators, but on its capacity to safeguard dignity, social cohesion, economic security, sovereignty, and climate adaptation, while promoting the holistic wellbeing of Pacific peoples, both in the diaspora and at home. In an increasingly dynamic and contested regional landscape, the resilience of communities must not be drowned out by elite narratives or geopolitical agendas—it must remain at the centre of development and adaptation efforts.

7.3 How Labour Mobility in Australia Cultivates Resilience

7.3.1 Overview

Labour mobility is widely recognised in Kiribati as a pathway to resilience. Informants consistently highlighted how participation in overseas work schemes—particularly the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme—enables individuals and families to buffer against the economic and environmental stressors associated with climate change. Informants were asked about their familiarity with labour mobility programs, their perceptions of these schemes, and the benefits and challenges they associate with them.

Informants, unanimously reported familiarity with labour schemes, reflecting Kiribati's long-standing engagement in international labour markets. From seafaring roles on German merchant ships and Japanese fishing vessels to more recent participation in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and the PALM scheme, labour mobility is deeply embedded in the national consciousness. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point, disrupting traditional seafaring pathways and accelerating the uptake of the PALM scheme, which has since become the dominant labour migration pathway. Over the past three years, the PALM scheme has emerged not only among unemployed

youth but also among professionals, including government employees, who view it as a viable economic opportunity. The scheme is colloquially referred to as *te tabo n oro ben*— "the place to cut copra"—a metaphor for its perceived profitability. One informant captured how it is an act of resilience-building:

> " *Life is tough; it's hard to get by, and the cost of living is high. My daughter works in the government and her pay is little. My son didn't go to school but works in Australia under the PALM. He's become the economic backbone of this family; financing most of our needs*" (Participant 65, 31 January 2024).

While the narrative emphasises labour mobility's economic value, it is fast becoming a way of life, a new normal, and is being recognised as a form of resilience to both climate and economic stressors. Labour mobility enables I-Kiribati to transcend the limitations of their fragile environment, generate income, and invest in community development. Support from remittances provide immediate family needs while broadening community resilience through the establishment of small businesses, such as local stores, lending services, and fishing ventures. In this way, labour mobility emerges as a critical adaptation mechanism—one that is shaped by, and responsive to, the socio-environmental realities of Kiribati.

The following subsections further examine the intersections between labour mobility and climate adaptation, exploring how these dynamics are reshaping resilience narratives in the Pacific. The participants were asked to outline ways that the scheme has helped cultivate resilience for them. The approach to the conversations was tailored to seek interconnections between labour mobility and adaptation, using open-ended questions to investigate the motivations underpinning I-Kiribati participants decision to participate in a labour mobility scheme, and how upon securing such an opportunity, the scheme has impacted their sense of resilience. Participants ranked resilience themes on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is critical and 5 is aspirational. When responses were analysed, four distinct yet interconnected branches of resilience were revealed: economic resilience (Section 7.3.2), climate resilience (Section 7.3.3), political resilience (Section 7.3.4), and cultural resilience (Section 7.3.5). To facilitate a nuanced understanding, each conversation began with the question: *How does labour migration cultivate resilience?*

7.3.2 Economic resilience

To interpret the diverse benefits of labour migration through a resilience lens, this study introduces a two-tiered analytical framework. The first scale defines priority levels, ranging from critical to

aspirational, to distinguish between immediate survival needs, strategic enablers, and long-term goals (Table 7.1). These categories reflect both the urgency and functional relevance of migration outcomes, as expressed by participants, and are situated within broader development discourse. By clarifying what constitutes foundational resilience versus supportive or contingent benefits, this scale provides a conceptual scaffold for ranking themes in Table 7.2 and for analysing how I-Kiribati navigate adaptation through mobility.

Table 7.1: Scale 1 (priority levels)

Priority Level	Definition
1-Critical	Foundational for survival, adaptation or immediate wellbeing
2-High	Strong contributor to resilience and long-term stability
3-Moderate	Valuable, though contingent on specific conditions
4-Supportive	Enhances other outcomes but not essential on its own
5-Aspirational	Long-term or contingent benefit, often policy-dependent

Scale 1 (Table 7.1) introduces a hierarchy of relevance and urgency that distinguishes between outcomes for immediate survival and resilience, on one hand, and aspirational, long-term outcomes, on the other hand. This scale helps the study interpret the lived experiences of I-Kiribati and the strategic value of labour migration into five levels of priority:

1 – Critical priority: This level captures themes essential for survival and foundational for building resilience. Tied to this level of priority are employment and remittances, which participants directly identified as crucial for achieving food security, accessing water, obtaining medicine, and securing a basic income. For climate-affected communities in Kiribati, these stood out strongly as the core motivations for migration.

2 – High priority: Themes at this level are those that participants identified as strong contributors to resilience and long-term stability. They may not be foundational in the immediate sense, but they build capacity—such as skills acquisition, coping mechanisms, and stable livelihoods. As enablers of resilience, these themes are underlined as important motivators for migration—for families to adapt and sustain themselves.

3 – Moderate priority: This level includes themes that are valuable for resilience yet indirect in their impact. For example, improved confidence or exposure to work etiquette may not immediately change material conditions, but they contribute to psychosocial wellbeing, social mobility, and

recognition of prior learning. These are often under-acknowledged in policy but deeply felt in lived experience.

4 – Supportive priority: Themes here are complementary—they enhance other outcomes but are not essential on their own. Access to start-up capital, for instance, may empower economic independence, but its impact depends on broader structural support. These are potential multipliers, contingent on enabling environments.

5 – Aspirational priority: This level reflects long-term or contingent goals, such as permanent migration. These outcomes may be deeply desired but are often shaped by policy constraints, visa regimes, or structural inequalities. They are acknowledged as important long-term goals, but there is no certainty that they can be pursued individually. This reflects profoundly the nature of migration as a perceived long-term, distant goal, given the uncertainties that surround it and the recognition among participants of the need for policy intervention and support. Importantly, for this research, aspirational priorities served as horizon markers—they guide direction, even if not immediately reachable.

Table 7.2: Scale 2 (thematic clusters and ranking)

Theme	Functional Category	Assigned Priority
Employment opportunities	Economic resilience	1-Critical
Remittances	Household resilience	1-Critical
Skills acquisition	Human capital	2-High
Coping mechanisms	Adaptive capacity	2-High
Stable livelihoods	Economic Security	2-High
Confidence/self-esteem	Psychosocial wellbeing	3-Moderate
Exposure to work conduct	Prior learning	3-Moderate
Improved communication skills	Prior learning	3-Moderate
Start-up capital	Economic empowerment	4- Supportive
Permanent migration	Long term goal/pathway	5-Aspirational

Scale 2 (Table 7.2) operationalises the priority definitions by applying them to specific themes drawn from participant interviews and policy discourse. It offers a functional typology of resilience benefits associated with labour migration, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how different outcomes contribute to adaptation, wellbeing, and long-term development as presented below:

Economic foundation (Priority 1 – Critical)

- Employment opportunities and remittances are ranked as critical because they directly address essential survival needs, including food, water, medicine, education, and clothing.

These themes were consistently emphasised by participants as the most immediate and tangible benefits of migration.

- They form the core of household resilience, enabling families to buffer against climate shocks and economic precarity.
- For resilience, these themes are a vital climate adaptation; they sustain families when traditional livelihoods falter.

Human capital and adaptive capacity (Priority 2 – High)

- Skills acquisition, coping mechanisms, and stable livelihoods are grouped here. They represent strategic enablers of resilience, allowing migrants and their families to build long-term security and navigate uncertainty.
- These themes reflect resilience in motion, where mobility becomes a pathway to capacity building and future planning.
- For resilience, these themes serve as enablers of survival and adaptation, supporting families' efforts to continue thriving in the long term, with or without labour migration.

Psychosocial and social mobility (Priority 3 – Moderate)

- Confidence and self-esteem, exposure to international work conduct, and improved communication skills are ranked as moderate. While not always visible in policy metrics, these outcomes were deeply felt by participants and contributed to personal growth and social navigation.
- They also support recognition of prior learning, enhancing employability and self-worth.
- For resilience, these are the quiet transformations—those shifts that alter identity, aspiration, and relational power.

Economic empowerment (Priority 4 – Supportive)

- Access to start-up capital is supportive—it enables entrepreneurship or investments, but its impact depends on broader structural support (e.g., financial literacy, market access, and sustainable labour mobility income).
- Economic empowerment is a potential multiplier, contingent on enabling environments.
- For resilience, start-up capital is identified by workers as crucial for reintegration into their economy and country upon completion of the scheme. Workers noted the value of their superannuation, although they expressed concern that this was difficult to process and

receive at the end of their contract. For others, superannuation has been instrumental in offering start-up capital and business ventures, albeit imperative to ensure continuous support for returnees—especially those wishing to utilise their skills in business or existing industries at home.

Migration pathways (Priority 5 – Aspirational)

- Permanent migration is aspirational. It reflects long-term goals and desires for stability, but is often constrained by visa regimes, policy barriers, and structural inequalities.
- While deeply significant, it remains contingent and unevenly accessible.
- For resilience, there was an expressed desire to learn more about ways of pursuing migration channels and how.

Echoing the insights presented in Chapters 5 and 6, these findings underscore labour migration as a key facilitator of diverse economic benefits that, when ranked together, contribute meaningfully to the resilience of both migrant workers and their families. These benefits extend beyond income generation, enhancing overall quality of life through improved access to food, education, healthcare, and social stability. Many respondents identified a combination of factors that have enabled them to navigate economic hardship and cultivate a sense of economic and social security. Labour migration was consistently highlighted as a strategic pathway to employment and a vital source of livelihood—serving not only as a coping mechanism, but also as a proactive measure of resilience in the face of climate and economic adversity (ILO, 2019; IOM, 2024; Mertz et al., 2009; Moor, 2011).

A case in point is Temango, an unemployed resident of Marakei Island, who lives with his wife and five children. To support their household, his wife sells homemade doughnuts, a modest but vital contribution to their daily sustenance. The family subsists on seafood and coconut crabs, the island's bounty, alongside seasonal harvests from the breadfruit tree and bwabwai, giant taro. Their livelihood, like that of many others in outer island communities, is shaped by what the land (and ocean) has to offer, complemented by other small economic activities to help expand their economic livelihood. With financial support from his son and son-in-law—both employed in Australia under the PALM—Temango was able to launch a small fishing enterprise, including the purchase of a boat. This initiative not only improved his family's economic security but also served his wider village, where access to boats and fishing equipment remains limited.

Yet, during periods when fishing is not possible due to weather, equipment limitations, or personal circumstances—his family, like many others, turns to the village shop and its regular supply of canned food. These imported staples have become a dominant source of nutrition across outer islands, often displacing traditional diets and contributing to rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). This shift highlights a crucial aspect of climate vulnerability: the erosion of healthy, locally sourced food options and the compounded health risks that arise when ecological disruption intersects with economic hardship (Barnett, 2019; Campbell, 2015; Tukuitonga & Vivili, 2021).

Unlike state-provided subsidies and welfare transfers, which can foster dependency and are often constrained by fiscal limitations, labour migration schemes offer value-added pathways to empowerment. Migrants can support themselves and their families, invest in education, and in some cases, establish small businesses that contribute to local economic development. This aligns with broader literature on migration and development, which highlights the role of remittances and transnational entrepreneurship in enhancing household resilience and community wellbeing (de Haas, 2011; Connell, 2015). Moreover, labour migration enables individuals to exercise agency in shaping their futures, reducing reliance on external assistance and reinforcing the principle of productive autonomy. In this way, migration is not merely a coping mechanism but a strategic adaptation tool—one that complements national development goals while reinforcing individual and collective resilience.

7.3.3 Climate resilience

Climate change resilience, as articulated by participants, was primarily attributed to the enabling role of remittances in offsetting the costs of environmental and climate-related adaptation. Far from being a passive coping mechanism, remittances were described as a strategic resource—one that allowed families to respond proactively to climate stressors and invest in both immediate survival and long-term stability. Participants elaborated on the multifaceted ways in which remittances were helping to build resilience, revealing a layered and context-sensitive understanding of adaptation.

The following scale (Table 7.3) organises key climate resilience themes into functional categories and assigns priority rankings—mirroring the structure of the economic resilience framework presented in Section 7.3.2. This layered approach enables a comparative analysis of how different dimensions of resilience are experienced, valued, and mobilised by participants in response to climate-related pressures.

Table 7.3: Scale 3 (climate resilience)

Theme	Category	Assigned Priority
Improved access to essential resources (clean water and food)	Survival and basic needs	1-Critical
Resilient Infrastructure (seawalls, water, storage, concrete housing)	Physical adaptation	2- High
Repair and maintenance of deteriorating structures	Infrastructure continuity	2- High
Coping mechanism for purchasing food, water, medicine	Economic adaptation	2- High
Enhanced capability to address climate-related challenges	Institutional and community capacity	3- Moderate
Strengthened circular mobility or mobilities of return	Cultural and spatial resilience	4- Supportive
Permanent relocation via PALM family accompaniment	Long-term migration pathway	5-Aspirational

These findings suggest that climate resilience in Kiribati is closely tied to economic resilience, underscoring remittances as a crucial adaptive strategy. Participants elaborated the multifaceted ways in which remittances were helping to build resilience, revealing a layered and context-sensitive understanding of adaptation. Survival first, was ranked as critical and linked to improved access to essential resources such as clean water. Participants often cited water scarcity and food insecurity as immediate climate stressors, particularly in outer islands where local supplies are increasingly compromised by saltwater intrusion, prolonged drought, and erratic rainfall patterns. These environmental disruptions are further exacerbated by delays in cargo shipments, which many rely on for supplementary food and essential goods. The compounding effects of ecological degradation and logistical constraints reveal the fragility of local food and water systems, highlighting the urgent need for adaptive strategies that restore access to life-sustaining resources. In Marakei, parents of a migrant worker in Australia reflected on the growing challenges of sustaining traditional livelihoods in the face:

> *"We told our daughter, stop sending money, we can grow our own food here. But it's become harder than we thought. We're seeing frequent rains, spring tides, the drought too—all affecting our food cycle. Our breadfruit tree is not bearing as much as it used to"* (Ataraoti Bwebwenibure, 26 January 2024).

The 74-year-old father, who once cut his own toddy (the nutrient-rich sap of the coconut tree), has had to abandon this routine due to age and physical limitations. He notes that remittances have become increasingly vital for meeting basic needs.

Participants emphasised the importance of investing in resilient infrastructure, such as seawalls, water tanks, and concrete housing, as high-priority physical adaptations. These structures act as buffers against climate shocks and reinforce physical security by mitigating direct climate impacts and stabilising harsh living conditions. Coping mechanisms—such as remittance-supported purchases—were highlighted as vital for bridging gaps in local supply chains. These strategies reflect resilience in

motion, where economic adaptation supplements ecological vulnerability to sustain traditional sources that are either depleted or inaccessible. Furthermore, capacity and continuity were underlined as vital for life. Participants cited the repair and maintenance of deteriorating homes and community buildings as crucial for ensuring continuity of shelter and social cohesion in the face of environmental degradation. Also listed were participants' recognition of improved knowledge, planning, and household decision-making, to ensure continued capacity as well as transnational family networks.

Circular mobility and permanent relocation were ranked as supportive to aspirational. While they offer long-term solutions, their success depends on policy frameworks, visa regimes, and cultural acceptance. Participants emphasised in their responses the need for strengthened circular mobility and permanent migration, noting the importance of migrants maintaining ties to their home islands while contributing to local adaptation efforts (Figure 6.3). Permanent relocation opportunities, particularly through the PALM family accompaniment program, were welcomed as a long-term pathway for resettlement when local adaptation is no longer viable. At the time of the fieldwork, Kiribati had not approved the Pacific Engagement Visa, hence the mention only of the PALM family accompaniment.

Figure 6.3: A young female worker (with child in pink shirt) bids her family farewell.

In aggregate, these findings illustrate how remittances operate not only as financial support but as drivers of climate resilience, community agency, and forward-looking adaptation. As a form of ex situ

adaptation, labour migration enables I-Kiribati households to build resilience by accessing economic opportunities abroad, particularly in contexts where domestic livelihoods options remain constrained. Simultaneously, these transnational earnings strengthen in situ adaptation by enhancing the capacity of families remaining in Kiribati to finance climate-related repairs, invest in education and long-term family goals, and meet social and cultural obligations. In doing so, they reinforce community cohesion and reduce household vulnerability to environmental and economic stressors. This dual function of labour mobility highlights the need for policy frameworks that explicitly recognise and support its strategic role in climate adaptation planning, ensuring that such pathways are ethically structured, community-informed, and responsive to the lived realities of the most vulnerable groups.

Furthermore, informants highlighted the impact of climate change on food security, noting that saltwater intrusion into water sources and food crops makes it increasingly difficult to grow food. This, in turn, increases reliance on imported foods, which often promote unhealthy dietary patterns and contribute to the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). According to the World Health Organisation, there is growing evidence of a link between extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, and an increase in illnesses and deaths from non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Unhealthy eating habits and lack of access to healthy food and clean water are also contributing factors (WHO, 2023).

7.3.4 Political resilience

Interestingly, the semi-structured interviews revealed divergent and layered perspectives on resilience, yielding two additional dimensions beyond economic and climate adaptation: political and cultural adaptation. These forms of resilience reflect not only how individuals respond to external pressures, but also how they navigate and contest the structures that shape their mobility choices. Respondents viewed labour migration as a vital conduit for exerting political agency and the right to opinion, enabling them to migrate to countries like Australia or New Zealand, where democratic principles are perceived to be more effectively safeguarded. While acknowledging Kiribati's democratic status, some respondents expressed concerns about the government's policy shifts, citing the stalled progress on the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) as indicative of a broader trend in which policy decisions are formulated without adequate consideration for the affected populations. Respondents emphasised their desire for political rights to access better services, including healthcare, education, clean water, and food, which are often inadequate in Kiribati. As Teren Aata succinctly noted:

"We have a choice between two things: staying at home in Kiribati and enduring hardship [economic shocks and climate change risks] or going overseas to achieve a better life for our family" (Teren Aata, 20 February).

Notably, Aata's reflections emerged within a politically charged context—specifically, the Kiribati government's rejection of the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), introduced in 2024. The PEV quickly became a focal point for political discourse and adaptive imaginaries among I-Kiribati communities. Awareness of the scheme was uneven, with informants primarily learning about it through social media and transnational family networks, particularly relatives residing in Australia. Initially, the PEV elicited limited public engagement. However, when participants were prompted to consider the Falepili Union Treaty—an agreement that facilitated preferential migration pathways for Tuvaluans—many began to question the perceived inequities in regional migration diplomacy. What began as light-hearted commentary soon evolved into a pointed critique. As one participant quipped:

"Iaa, tia nang matai irouia kain Tuvalu, a nang riki ngkanne bwa kain Aotiteria ao ngaira tiaki? – Wow, we're so envious of the Tuvaluans, they get to live in Australia, and we don't?" (Participant 82, February 2024)

This initial humour gave way to more serious inquiries: *"And what is our government doing for us?"* (Participant 57, January 2024). Such questions reflect a broader civic consciousness and underscore the expectation that governments should proactively respond to existential threats—particularly those posed by climate change—through transparent and inclusive policymaking. Participants voiced growing concern over the Kiribati government's opaque handling of the PEV and its failure to engage in meaningful consultation with affected communities.

While attitudes toward migration remained ambivalent—spanning reluctance to relocate, cautious interest, uncertainty, and even a desire to migrate tempered by a lack of access to information and support services—informants were nonetheless unequivocal in their critique of exclusionary, top-down, state-led decision-making processes. Many expressed a desire for enhanced autonomy and participatory governance, especially in relation to mobility and migration. The absence of sustained dialogue was interpreted as symptomatic of a broader disconnect between national policy frameworks and community aspirations, revealing contested understandings of resilience and adaptation.

Within this landscape, labour migration schemes such as Australia's PALM program, New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, and the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa were frequently cited as strategic instruments for asserting political agency. These programs were not

merely viewed as economic lifelines; rather, they were framed as mechanisms through which I-Kiribati individuals could claim their rights to pursue improved livelihoods, access advanced healthcare, and secure futures otherwise unattainable through domestic channels. In this sense, labour mobility was reimagined not only as a response to structural precarity but also as a form of dignified resistance and self-determined adaptation.

The findings suggest that such schemes serve as critical adaptive strategies for mitigating political stressors, including limited freedom of expression and constrained participation in domestic policy processes, particularly in relation to mobility choices and perceptions of resilience. This emergent form of resilience—rooted in mobility, labour rights, and transnational engagement—highlights the political dimensions of adaptation. It also invites a rethinking of migration not only as a response to climate or economic vulnerability, but as a deliberate act of agency, resistance, and redefinition of belonging.

This chapter argues that government policies should not curtail individual autonomy but rather uphold a duty of care and assume primary responsibility for facilitating a range of dignified options, including migration. Such an approach affirms the agency and self-determination of Kiribati individuals to remain rooted in their homeland or to move in pursuit of economic, familial, or aspirational goals. The choice to migrate should be recognised as a fundamental right to choice of work, to move freely, and to adapt on one's own terms (International Organization for Migration, 2022, 2024; Westbury, 2021). It must not be problematised as a defeatist or passive response to climate change but rather understood as a strategic and culturally embedded act of resilience.

However, a significant obstacle to embracing human mobility as a legitimate and inherent dimension of climate adaptation, as discussed throughout this research, lies in the persistent tension surrounding discourses of relocation, displacement, and sovereignty. These tensions are deeply entangled with the Pacific Region's colonial histories and enduring legacies of imperialism (Banivanua Mar 2015; Stead & Altman, 2019; Teaiwa, 2014, 2017a). While contemporary labour migration schemes—such as Australia's PALM program, New Zealand's RSE and PAC pathways, and the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV)—differ structurally from historical systems of indenture and blackbirding, Pacific scholars have increasingly critiqued them as perpetuating cycles of neocolonial dependency.

These dynamics raise critical questions about whose interests are being prioritised, and under what terms. While labour migration programs cited previously are often framed as development

opportunities, they can inadvertently reinforce asymmetrical power relations—where Pacific bodies are mobilised to sustain foreign economies, yet remain constrained in their rights, recognition, and long-term settlement prospects (Bainivanua Mar, 2015; Barnett et al 2024; Namoori-Sinclair 2020; Petrou & Connell, 2023; Stead & Altman, 2019). Such arrangements risk reproducing colonial logics of extraction and control, wherein mobility is governed by external labour demands and geopolitical imperatives rather than Pacific-led priorities. It can be argued that against this backdrop, the resilience narrative emerged to foreground the Pacific's endeavour to decolonise as well as assert its agency.

While the assertion of regional autonomy remains vital—particularly in resisting external impositions and affirming Pacific sovereignty—it must not come at the expense of individual freedom. Pacific individuals should be empowered to explore alternative life pathways and navigate multiple locations, both within and beyond their home countries, without fear of prejudice or marginalisation. The decision to pursue opportunities overseas must be respected as a legitimate expression of agency, especially in an increasingly globalised and climate-threatened environment where governments carry a duty of care to ensure the safe and regulated movement of citizens across borders (International Organization for Migration, 2022). This includes not only facilitating access to migration pathways, but also protecting the rights, wellbeing, and aspirations of those who choose to move.

Unless reimagined through frameworks that foreground Pacific agency, dignity, and self-determination, this research argues that labour migration will remain embedded within asymmetrical power relations—particularly if the region fails to harness its full potential as a Blue Pacific economy. Sectors such as fisheries, maritime services, and regional employment possess significant capacity to generate dignified livelihoods and foster talent retention within Pacific communities. Yet in the absence of robust domestic opportunities, Pacific peoples will continue to migrate in large numbers, resiliently navigating transnational pathways in pursuit of dignity, security, and improved life chances. The persistent and chronic shortages of jobs, poor equitable access to services, and lack of meaningful opportunities at home trigger the pursuit of futures abroad as both rational and necessary (Black & Skeldon, 2009; Castles & Miller, 2009; de Haas, 2021).

For decades, domestic industries have remained underdeveloped, economic diversification is limited and enabling environments for professional growth and business investment remain weak, owing in part to growing population pressures and the extreme isolation of the Pacific Region, among other factors. As Chand (2005) notes, impediments to investments at home include regulatory barriers, the high cost and limited availability of land for long-term investment, and the high cost of trade given

small domestic markets and remoteness from the major industrial country markets (p. 8). This phenomenon is especially acute in Kiribati, as in other Pacific nations, where delayed and insufficient government efforts to generate employment comparable with a rapidly expanding youth population have led to the primacy of labour mobility in Australia and New Zealand as a linear and singular pathway—perceived by many young I-Kiribati as the most reliable route to economic security and personal advancement. Rather than being one option among many, migration has become the default trajectory for those unable to secure meaningful work at home (Connell, 1990; Hugo & Young, 2008).

In the absence of viable local alternatives, mobility becomes not merely a form of employment but a structural response to constrained opportunity. While it is often argued that remittances are only face value, informants emphasise the value-added benefits of remittances in providing a form of security during times when communities are struggling. Doan et al. (2023) reinforce this, noting that remittances serve as an important form of (private) social protection in a context where social insurance and social assistance coverage are limited (p. 12). This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when remittances emerged as a major lifeline for affected households. Moreover, if labour migration schemes continue to be unilaterally designed by larger economies, with minimal consultation or co-design with sending governments, they risk perpetuating historical injustices that overlook the aspirations and priorities of Pacific states and their peoples. A shift from extractive models of labour mobility to collaborative, rights-based frameworks where Pacific leaders are also architects of migration governance is encouraged to complement ongoing trade negotiations (Dornan, 2017; Morgan, 2016; Pacific Islands Forum, 2022; Twyford, 2022). This is vital for the Pacific to shape policies and agreements that determine the mobility, wellbeing, and futures of their citizens.

In response to these concerns, as well as others related to uneven access and escalating competition among Pacific Island Countries for migration pathways to Australia, the proposal for a Pacific Mobility Index (PMI) has emerged as a strategic and diplomatic tool for strengthening regionalism. Designed to guide the allocation of quotas for the Pacific Engagement Visa in the lead-up to the visa's formal launch, the PMI can be broadly applied to any other labour mobility and permanent migration pathway for the Pacific. The index offers a structured allocation system that ranks Pacific countries against a set of multidimensional criteria. These include climate vulnerability, population size, economic wellbeing, existing access to Australia, diaspora size, and shared historical ties and geopolitical contexts with Australia.

For countries such as Kiribati and Nauru—among the most climate-exposed PICs, with limited access to formal migration pathways and comparatively smaller diasporas—the Pacific Mobility Index offers a mechanism to ensure more equitable inclusion. By accounting for structural vulnerabilities and historical marginalisation, the index seeks to rebalance access in favour of those nations whose mobility options have long been constrained. At the same time, the index is designed to mitigate the risks of brain drain in countries such as Fiji and Samoa, where high rates of outmigration contribute to acute labour shortages and undermine domestic economic productivity (Connell & Petrou, 2019; Campbell, 2010; Underhill-Sem & Marsters, 2017).

Importantly, the Pacific Mobility Index not only serves as a strategic guide for the Pacific Engagement Visa, for which it was initially conceptualised—it also holds potential to inform the design and coordination of all existing and future mobility schemes, whether short-term, seasonal, or permanent. In doing so, it becomes a vehicle for decolonising labour mobility, embedding it within a framework of shared responsibility, true regionalism and the Pacific Family approach. By aligning migration governance with the lived realities and aspirations of Pacific peoples, the index affirms a collective commitment to equity, dignity, and regional solidarity (see Appendix E).

7.3.5 Cultural resilience

A striking feature of the data is the nuanced perceptions of I-Kiribati individuals regarding cultural heritage in the context of labour migration. Contrary to expectations, 100% of elderly respondents (aged 61-90 years) across TUC, Betio, and Marakei framed culture as evolving and dynamic, rather than static. This perspective was exemplified by Iakobwa Ioona, a canoe builder and elder from Tamana[5], who resides in the capital. He acknowledged the impact of modernisation and climate change on traditional Kiribati culture.

> *"On Tamana (his Island), we adhere to a sacred tradition: refraining from using modern boats for fishing. We diligently preserve our ancestral canoe-building and fishing skills, but the advent of technology and novel ways of life has rendered it increasingly challenging for us to compete. The superior catch capacity of modern engine-powered boats far surpasses that of our traditional fishing methods with minimal effort. Moreover, the devastating impacts of climate change have drastically depleted our fish stocks, making it even more difficult to sustain our livelihoods through fishing. This paradigm shift drastically alters our harvesting and fishing*

[5] Tamana is the smallest and second southernmost island in the Gilbert group.

practices, profoundly influencing our behavioural patterns and subsistence strategies." (Ioona, 27 February 2024).

Ioona's narrative highlights the tension between preserving traditional practices and adapting to the realities of a rapidly changing world. He noted that the maneaba, a traditional meeting house, no longer holds central importance and alluded to the church and missionisation taking over the maneaba system. Symbolic arts and traditional knowledge, such as te waa, are also losing cultural significance. This sentiment is echoed in the responses of other age groups, which reveal a mixed perception of culture, with a predominant indication that culture is evolving.

Former Beretitenti and unimwane Tong shared sentiments regarding the transformative impact of capitalism on traditional Kiribati values. Tong made an analogy between landownership and education, underscoring the shifting paradigms of value and desirability in contemporary Kiribati society:

"In the past, land was a coveted asset, influencing marriage arrangements and socio-economic status. Today, education has emerged as a similarly valuable commodity, enhancing an individual's attractiveness and prospects." However, Tong's statement also highlights the limitations of education in the absence of economic opportunities. The possession of qualifications alone is insufficient; employment prospects are the ultimate determinant of an individual's value in the contemporary job market. This observation highlights the crucial role of labour mobility schemes in addressing the pressing demand for jobs and providing a vital economic strategy for Kiribati (Tong, 26 February 2024).

A noteworthy aspect of the findings is the consideration of culture in the face of existential threats posed by climate change. I-Kiribati individuals demonstrated a forward-thinking perspective, perceiving labour schemes and migration programs as facilitators of identity and cultural preservation. This perspective resonates with theories of transnationalism, which suggest that diaspora groups can maintain multiple identities and forge a sense of inclusiveness that transcends traditional notions of statehood and cultural rootedness (Lee, 1966; Lee, 2009). This was a surprising element of this research, given the limited opportunities for migration in Kiribati, as well as the conservative nature of I-Kiribati people, who are not quick to adopt change or new policies.

A compelling counter-narrative emerged from a participant who challenged the assumption that migration is the primary driver of cultural change. Instead, she argued that shifts in cultural practices are increasingly shaped by internal lifestyle transformations, particularly among younger generations, even in the absence of migration. This perspective underscores the multi-scalar nature of cultural

change, where global influences permeate local contexts through media, technology, and consumption patterns. The participant—a mother whose family has no direct experience of migration—highlighted the dynamism of cultural practice, noting that traditional ways of being, expressed through dance, are being reshaped by exposure to social media and global pop culture. She expressed concern over her children's engagement with music videos and online platforms that introduce foreign terms, movements, and behaviours, which she felt were incongruent with Kiribati cultural norms. While acknowledging that culture is inherently dynamic and not static, she viewed these transformations as troubling, particularly when they reproduce values and aesthetics that conflict with local traditions.

This observation resonates with broader critiques of cultural globalisation, which caution that digital technologies and transnational media flows can accelerate cultural homogenisation and contribute to the erosion of indigenous practices. While such concerns are valid—particularly in cases where social media has facilitated cultural appropriation or diluted local traditions—the experiences of most I-Kiribati workers in Australia suggest a more nuanced reality. For I-Kiribati workers, social media platforms were not perceived as agents of cultural erosion, but as vital tools for cultural continuity and connection. Social media played a central role in maintaining regular communication with family members across vast geographic distances, enabling migrants to nurture kinship ties and remain embedded in the rhythms of home life despite physical separation.

Moreover, social platforms such as YouTube and TikTok functioned as dynamic cultural repositories, offering access to videos of traditional performances, songs, dances, and rituals. These digital archives enabled migrants to remain attuned to cultural events as they unfolded in real time, while also allowing them to retrieve and engage with cultural knowledge on demand. In this context, social media emerged not as a threat to cultural identity but as a medium through which diasporic communities could actively preserve, perform, and transmit their heritage. This digital immediacy stands in stark contrast to earlier generations of I-Kiribati seafarers, who relied on postal systems and sporadic port calls—often after months at sea—to receive letters from loved ones (Borovnik, 2003; Borovnik, 2009). The temporal lag and spatial dislocation experienced during the seafaring era underscore the evolving nature of labour mobility and the shifting infrastructures of connection that shape migrant experience. The intergenerational shift from delayed correspondence to real-time interaction via mobile phones and social media platforms is a powerful reminder of how technological change reconfigures not only communication but also the emotional geographies of migration.

These findings align with regional scholarship on Pacific diasporic media, which emphasises the role of digital platforms in preserving island identities and resisting cultural erasure. For instance, Papoutsaki and Strickland (2008) document how Pacific Island communities in New Zealand use diasporic media to maintain cultural distinctiveness and foster transnational belonging. Similarly, initiatives like the Learning My Roots campaign by the Fijian diaspora in the UK illustrate how social media can be mobilised to promote indigenous language and heritage. In New Zealand, members of the Kiribati diaspora have pioneered innovative language-based mobile and internet applications that digitise children's stories and traditional art, embedding cultural learning within everyday technologies. These digital tools serve not only as educational resources but also as strategic interventions to counter cultural erosion and promote intergenerational transmission of heritage (Gillard & Dyson, 2012). By translating oral traditions and visual narratives into accessible formats, the Kiribati community demonstrates how digital platforms can be mobilised to sustain cultural identity in diasporic settings.

A more expansive and state-led model of digital cultural preservation is Tuvalu's Digital Nation initiative, which seeks to safeguard Tuvaluan knowledge, language, and cultural expressions, while also archiving visual representations of its islands, maritime territories, and sovereign records (Rothe et al., 2024). This initiative reflects a growing recognition that digital infrastructures can serve as repositories of national memory and tools of geopolitical assertion—particularly for low-lying island states confronting existential threats from climate change. Together, these examples underscore the evolving role of digital media not merely as instruments of communication but as performative spaces through which Pacific peoples actively assert cultural resilience, political agency, and transnational belonging. In doing so, they challenge dominant narratives of technological dependency and instead foreground Indigenous innovation and self-determined adaptation in the digital age.

One informant poignantly lamented the decline of traditional foods once consumed by ancestors (see Figures 7.1–7.3), now increasingly displaced by imported goods—referred to locally as *te amarake n imatang*, or "the White person's food." Items such as rice, flour, sugar, sausage, ham, and soft drinks have become commonplace, symbolising not only dietary change but also the encroachment of foreign consumption patterns on Indigenous foodways. This shift reflects a broader nutritional transition observed across the Pacific, where trade dependency, rapid urbanisation, and climate-induced disruptions to agriculture and fisheries have collectively undermined local food sovereignty (Snowdon et al., 2013).

Figure 7.1: Flour and sugar have rapidly displaced local food.

Figure 7.2: Te Mai or breadfruit faces declining growth due to climate impact.

Figure 7.3: Baa ni mai (fried breadfruit).

Moreover, the responses suggest that I-Kiribati individuals are proactive in preserving their cultural heritage, even in the face of climate change. This is exemplified by the national celebration of Kiribati languages and cultures in foreign countries, such as New Zealand's mainstream events and assimilation programs, which include Kiribati Language Week (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2025). In Australia, similar programs, albeit on a smaller scale, are supported throughout the PALM industries to celebrate the culture and identity of Pacific migrants, especially during national day celebrations (Figures 7.4 and 7.5). The incorporation of Pacific languages and cultures into national events highlights the crucial role of cultural preservation and adaptation in the context of migration, while also facilitating the evolution and dissemination of Kiribati culture in diasporic communities, thereby ensuring its continued growth and vitality beyond Kiribati's borders.

Figure 7.4: I-Kiribati aged carers in Goulburn, NSW celebrate independence.

Figure 7.5: Former Liaison Officer Lolita Gosschalk (3rd from left) and employers at independence.

Overall, climate resilience linked to remittance flows emerged as a socially embedded and relational outcome of adaptation, intricately tied to I-Kiribati participation in labour migration. Across diverse community narratives, climate change and economic security were consistently articulated not as isolated drivers, but as a catalytic force that together shapes mobility decisions within a broader matrix of structural vulnerability. This echoes the findings in Chapter 5, which emphasised informants' clustering of labour mobility motivators as influenced by both climate change impacts and economic factors, such as unemployment. Labour migration was perceived as a strategic pathway for enhancing *te maiuraoi* (wellbeing), particularly through the stabilising effects of financial inflows, incremental housing improvements, and the capacity to respond to environmental and climate challenges in the long term. Crucially, respondents did not frame climate vulnerability as a deterministic motivator. Instead, they situated it within a range of intersecting social and economic pressures—including youth unemployment and aspirations for long-term goals for adaptive agency and migration.

7.4 Empirical Findings: Labour Migration as a Resilience-Building Strategy

A comparative analysis between households engaged in the PALM (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility) scheme and those without formal ties to labour mobility programs revealed significant disparities in adaptive capacity. Families participating in the PALM scheme consistently demonstrated higher levels of self-sufficiency, with remittance income enabling them to independently finance household needs, undertake climate-related repairs, and invest in education—often without recourse to external aid or government assistance. However, they were still eligible for certain support. In contrast, non-participant households exhibited greater vulnerability to climate stressors, constrained by limited financial buffers and heightened reliance on public support mechanisms. These findings underscore the differentiated pathways through which mobility intersects with adaptation, highlighting remittances as a critical enabler of economic security and anticipatory planning. The following tables present a comparative income profile of remittance-receiving and non-receiving families, illustrating the extent to which transnational financial flows contribute to household resilience in the face of both economic and environmental shocks.

Marakei, as an outer island with limited formal employment opportunities, presents a context of structural economic constraint (Table 7.4). Within this setting, income data reveal a striking disparity: remittance-receiving households earn nearly four times more per family than their non-remittance counterparts, who remain largely dependent on social protection mechanisms.[6] This income differential underscores the transformative impact of remittances on enhancing household resilience. For remittance families, access to external income not only mitigates local labour market precarity but also enables greater autonomy in meeting basic needs, investing in housing, and planning for future climate-related contingencies. In contrast, non-remittance households, particularly those without formal employment, are relatively constrained in their ability to adapt to environmental or economic shocks.

Table 7.4: Marakei income comparison

Group	Number of Families	Total Monthly Income (AUD)	Average per person (AUD)
Remittance Families	6	$2,950	$491.67
Non-Remittance Families	14	$1,850	$132.14

6 Social protection in Kiribati consists of the Senior Citizens Allowance (AUD100 per month) for people aged 60 and over, the Support Fund for the Unemployed (AUD50 per month) for nationals aged 18–59 years, and the Disability Allowance ($100 per month).

Situated within an industrial port, BTC offers relatively stable employment opportunities; however, unemployment remains a persistent feature of the local socio-economic landscape. Within this mixed context, income data reveal a notable disparity: the two remittance-receiving households earn nearly twice as much per family as the broader population (Table 7.5). This income differential highlights the capacity of transnational financial flows to enhance household-level resilience, even in areas with established formal employment infrastructure. For these remittance families, external income not only supplements local earnings but also enables greater financial autonomy, buffering against economic volatility and enhancing their ability to plan, invest, and respond to environmental or social stressors.

Table 7.5: BTC income comparison

Group	Number of Families	Total Monthly Income (AUD)	Average per person (AUD)
Remittance Families	2	$1,550	$775.00
Other Families (Govt-Employed and Unemployed	18	$7,400	$411.11

In TUC, employment is relatively stable due to its status as the administrative and political centre of the country (Table 7.6). However, acute unemployment persists, particularly among youth and informal workers. As the seat of government, most informants in this location were government ministers, parliamentarians, senior officials, private sector representatives, and business owners—resulting in a sample skewed toward higher-income earners. Within this context, the five remittance-receiving families earned less on average than the broader group, largely due to the presence of highly paid officials and formal sector elites. Nevertheless, when viewed in comparative perspective—particularly against households in Marakei, where unemployment is widespread and income levels are significantly lower—the remittance families in TUC occupy a relatively stronger economic position. Their earnings, while modest within the urban elite context, surpass those of households in more economically constrained outer islands, underscoring the differentiated geography of resilience and the stabilising role of transnational financial flows across diverse settings.

Table 7.6: TUC income comparison

Group	Number of Families	Total Monthly Income (AUD)	Average per person (AUD)
Remittance Families	5	$3,050	$610.00
Other Families (Govt-Employed and Unemployed	22	$22,220	$1,010

Key observations from the remittance data reveal that the baseline monthly remittance across all occupational categories—namely, abattoir, aged care, and hospital (registered nurse)—falls within the AUD 400–600 range, indicating a shared minimum threshold of financial support sent home by PALM workers (Table 7.7). However, notable variations emerge as remittance values increase. For workers in the abattoir sector, remittance amounts typically range between AUD 400 and AUD 1,000, suggesting a more constrained earning potential or higher local living costs that limit the amount available for transfer. In contrast, aged care and registered nurse workers demonstrate the capacity to remit up to AUD 1,500 per month, reflecting significantly higher wage structures and possibly more stable employment conditions within these sectors.

Table 7.7: Worker remittance levels

Remittance Range (AUD)	Abattoir	Aged Care	Registered Nurse (Hospital)
$400-600	3 workers	3 workers	3 workers
$700-900	3 workers		
$1000-1200	4 workers	4 workers	
$1500-2000		1 worker	2 workers

This disparity in remittance ceilings underscores a broader economic stratification within the PALM workforce. Workers in aged care and nursing roles—often classified as semi-skilled or skilled—appear to benefit from higher remuneration packages, enabling them to contribute more substantially to household resilience in their home countries. These elevated remittance levels may translate into enhanced adaptive capacity for recipient families, supporting investments in housing, education, and climate-related preparedness. By contrast, abattoir workers, while still contributing meaningfully, may face tighter financial margins, limiting their ability to buffer against economic or environmental shocks.

Figure 7.6 provides a detailed breakdown of the monthly remittance levels, offering insight into the earning potential and remittance behaviour across different labour streams, and revealing sectoral disparities that have direct implications for household resilience and transnational support systems.

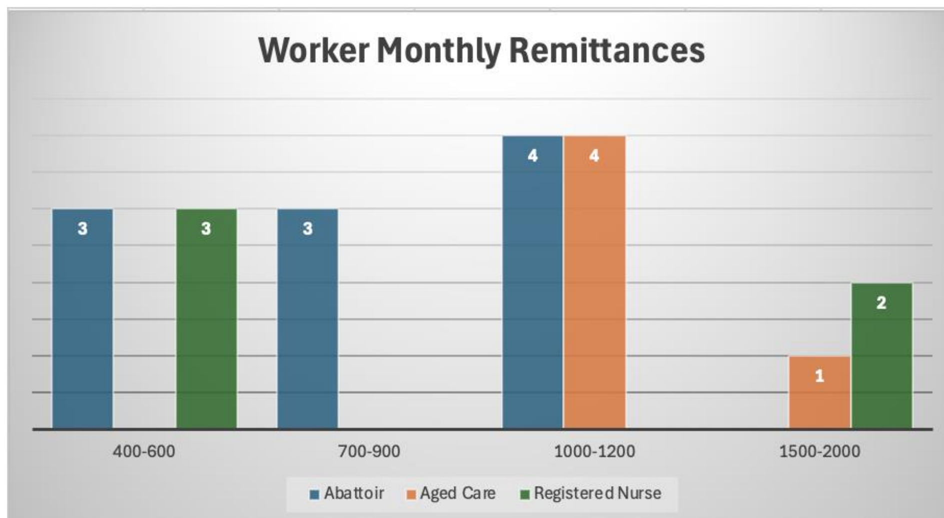


Figure 7.6: Monthly remittance levels by sector

Key observations:

1. Convergence in lower remittance bands

All three occupations show identical distribution in the AUD 400–600 and AUD 700–900 ranges. This suggests a baseline remittance behaviour across sectors, reflecting minimum contractual earnings.

2. Peak remittance activity: AUD 1,000–1,200

The highest concentration of workers (4 per category) remitting within this range indicates a common financial threshold—likely tied to wage levels, cost of living, and family needs back home. This range may represent the optimal remittance zone, balancing savings, expenses, and obligations.

3. Divergence at higher remittance levels

Hospital nurses show greater representation in the AUD 1,500–2,000 range (2 workers), followed by aged care (1 worker), while abattoir workers show no presence in this tier. This could reflect several themes, such as contractual differences (e.g., higher paying jobs, deductions, and housing arrangements), remittance priorities (e.g., registered nurses may retain more for savings or education), and family size or dependency ratios. Workers remitting AUD 1,000 or more per month are likely contributing significantly to household resilience in their home countries—supporting housing upgrades, education, and climate adaptation.

The presence of higher remittance tiers among aged care and abattoir workers suggests variability in remittance potential, even within similar wage brackets. Registered nurses, despite being in a higher-skilled category, may be retaining more income locally, possibly due to longer-term settlement plans or professional development goals. As stated earlier in this chapter, labour migration has dual impacts.

As such it would be remiss to portray just one side of the story. Cognisant of the value of balancing narratives, the research sought I-Kiribati worker experiences from working in Australia.

7.5 Strengthening the PALM Scheme and any Future Labour Mobility Program in Australia for Resilience-Building in Kiribati

7.5.1 Overview

While the PALM scheme has emerged as a vital pathway for economic empowerment and climate adaptation in Kiribati, participants in this research emphasised that its full potential can only be realised through targeted improvements. These enhancements must address both the structural and human dimensions of labour mobility, ensuring that the scheme not only generates income but also safeguards dignity, cultural identity, and long-term resilience. This section proceeds as follows. Section 7.3.2 provides an overview of Kiribati's Labour Sending Unit (LSU), which oversees Kiribati's participation in labour mobility programs. Sections 7.3.3 to 7.3.10 explore ways in which labour mobility can be adapted to build, strengthen, and expand resilience benefits for Kiribati and I-Kiribati.

7.5.2 An efficient and proactive Labour Sending Unit

Behind every Kiribati labour team deployed to Australia stands the Labour Sending Unit (LSU)—a vital yet often under-recognised arm of the country's overseas employment efforts. Housed within the Ministry of Employment and Human Resources (MEHR), the LSU has evolved significantly since the introduction of the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007. With nearly two decades of operational experience, the LSU has matured into a critical institutional pillar, responsible for ensuring that workers are job-ready and that deployment processes run smoothly. Its role is central not only to the success of labour mobility schemes but also to the broader national development agenda.

Despite its demonstrated competence and consistency, the LSU—and the Ministry more broadly—faces chronic structural, institutional, and absorptive capacity constraints. These limitations significantly hinder MEHR's ability to maximise its productivity and meet the growing demands of overseas employment programs. The challenges are compounded by limited financial and human resources, increasing job-seeker demand, and the pressure of competing ministerial priorities.

The LSU's daily operations are dominated by the logistical and administrative demands of labour deployment—processing applications, meeting employer deadlines, and coordinating travel and documentation. These tasks, while essential, are resource-intensive and leave little room for strategic planning or investment in developmental components of the schemes, such as worker reintegration,

skills development, or long-term career pathways. These capacity constraints further hinder MEHR's ability to proactively brief Cabinet on critical developments—such as the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) and the Falepili Union Treaty—limiting its capacity to provide timely, evidence-based advice and strategic recommendations.

To sustain and scale the benefits of labour mobility for Kiribati, it is only fair that, before discussing ways the PALM scheme can be adapted to deliver smoother facilitations, greater benefits, and enhanced resilience for Kiribati, the research provides an overview of the MEHR and the LSU and the discussed imperative to strengthen the institutional capacity of the LSU. This includes investing in staffing, a central labour migration database, digital infrastructure, and long-term planning capabilities, as well as embedding reintegration and worker welfare as core components of the labour mobility agenda. Only then can the LSU fully realise its potential—not just as a facilitator of migration, but as a driver of resilience, empowerment, and national development. The research explored how workers perceive such a process.

7.5.3 Efficient services and provision of jobs

Prevailing feedback from participants on ways they wish to see the PALM adapted to better cater for their needs was the imperative for faster service and provision of jobs. The participants elaborated on their response, citing the following issues:

- Poor customer service
- Lack of responses and advice on pending applications
- Last-minute notifications of approved travels
- Dissemination of private information on public websites

7.5.4 Longer pre-departure briefings

Participants also expressed the need for more comprehensive and extended pre-departure training, highlighting communications barriers and culture shock as major areas necessitating more discussion and preparation support. Longer sessions would allow for:

- Deeper understanding of rights and responsibilities
- Realistic expectations about work and life in Australia
- Practical preparation for cultural adjustment and workplace norms

This, according to participants, would empower workers to navigate challenges more confidently and reduce vulnerability to exploitation.

The research notes that the pre-departure briefings (PDBs) have become significantly more structured and comprehensive compared to previous years. Now delivered in partnership with the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT), these briefings cover a wider range of preparatory topics designed to equip workers with essential skills and knowledge, for example, English for Hospitality, English Communication, Interview Skills, Driver Training, Responsible Service of Alcohol, and several others. This evolution reflects a growing commitment to ensuring that I-Kiribati workers are well-prepared for their overseas employment experiences.

However, despite these improvements, several challenges remain. Due to the time-sensitive nature of employer demands and travel processing, some workers are unable to complete the full course of briefings. This often results in uneven preparation, particularly for those deployed on short notice. Additionally, feedback from participants revealed that even when workers do complete the full training, they tend to approach the sessions with enthusiasm but limited critical engagement. Many are eager to complete the course quickly and may hesitate to ask questions or seek clarification, driven by excitement and anticipation of departure.

These insights suggest that while the content and structure of PDBs have improved, greater emphasis is needed on learner engagement, flexibility in scheduling, and fostering a culture of inquiry. Encouraging active participation and ensuring that all workers receive the full benefit of the training—regardless of deployment timelines—will be essential to maximising the resilience-building potential of labour mobility programs. One way to enhance success and effectiveness of this process is by adopting a model used in other Pacific states including Fiji, by including spouses in the PDB sessions.

7.5.5 Vernacularised worker information and welcome packs

Relating to the foregoing need for tailored pre-departure briefings (PDBs) is the language barrier, identified by participants, mainly returning workers, as a challenge for many I-Kiribati workers. Participants recommended that all key documents—contracts, rights information, and orientation materials—be translated into the Kiribati language or made available through websites or social and digital platforms. Participants highlighted a prevailing cultural tendency to mock or ridicule individuals who make mistakes when speaking English—particularly when mispronunciations occur. This behaviour, though often subtle and framed as humour, creates a discouraging environment that inhibits workers from using English confidently, especially in professional settings, where they are encouraged to speak up in times of discomfort or for clarification. They highlighted proper venularisation of the following information:

- On-arrival welcome and support packs
- Work contracts, protection support, and entitlements (e.g., Ombudsmen services, health care advice and support)
- Transport and housing information
- Induction briefings at work

By implementing more inclusive, culturally tailored support, the workers feel more confident learning at their own pace while reducing their dependency on others for interpretation. Importantly, they believe a sense of inclusion and respect for cultural identity is fostered with the right cultural tools and support systems. Additionally, the research revealed a spectrum of attitudes among I-Kiribati workers regarding their English proficiency. While some participants expressed sensitivity and self-consciousness about their language skills, others approached the challenge with openness and a willingness to laugh and enjoy learning. For these individuals, the experience of working abroad was not only a professional opportunity but also a chance for personal growth and cultural exchange.

One group of participants reflected on their early days in Australia, recalling how their team initially relied heavily on a single member to act as the informal liaison with their employer. They shared a memorable anecdote: whenever this team member attempted to communicate with the Australian employer and was misunderstood, the rest of the group would burst into laughter—not out of malice, but as a shared moment of learning and camaraderie. These light-hearted interactions, though imperfect, became informal learning moments that helped the team improve their English and adapt more confidently to their new environment. This example illustrates the importance of fostering supportive peer dynamics and embracing mistakes as part of the learning process. It also underscores the potential for resilience and adaptability when workers are given the space to grow through experience, even in the face of linguistic and cultural barriers.

7.5.6 Improved housing to address overcrowding

While the economic benefits of the PALM scheme are widely acknowledged, participants in this research raised serious concerns about working and living conditions—particularly among short-term workers. These concerns highlight the need for stronger protections and more robust oversight to ensure that the scheme remains a safe, fair, and sustainable pathway for resilience-building.

Participants noted a stark contrast in accommodation standards between long-term and short-term PALM workers. While long-term workers often enjoy relatively stable and suitable housing, short-term workers frequently face overcrowded and poorly maintained living conditions. One returning worker described shared rooms with double bunks and barely enough space to move around—conditions that compromise comfort, privacy, and wellbeing. The worker, who requested anonymity, expressed reluctance to raise concerns due to fear of being excluded from future job opportunities. When advised discussing with the team leader, the worker explained that team leaders often maintain close relationships with employers and may potentially report complaints rather than advocate for fellow workers.

A specific incident was shared in which a worker who voiced similar concerns was excluded from subsequent deployment rounds, reinforcing a culture of silence and fear. The research acknowledges that suitable accommodations are entrenched in the PALM Deed and that reforms have been undertaken to address these concerns (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023); however, it notes that the implementation of decisions, enforcement, and compliance may take some time and urges that these issues be addressed with urgency.

7.5.7 Employer pressure and sick leave violations

Another group of participants reported troubling experiences related to employer behaviour during periods of illness. Despite having access to medical certificates and formal sick leave entitlements, workers described being pressured to return to work prematurely. In some cases, employers sent transport to collect workers who were on approved sick leave or rest days, undermining their right to recovery and contributing to physical and emotional exhaustion. Participants expressed growing anxiety as these incidents became more frequent, with some fearing retaliation or job loss if they refused to comply. In response, the research team provided guidance on appropriate grievance channels and emphasised the importance of documenting such incidents for formal reporting.

In the health sector, participants generally reported a more positive and respectful relationship between workers and employers. While the nature of the work is demanding—often involving physically and emotionally intensive tasks—many workers described the conditions as more manageable compared to other sectors. This was attributed to clearer communication, better organisation, and a greater sense of mutual respect in the workplace. Although instances of overwork were noted, such as being rostered for overtime or double shifts, workers emphasised that these additional hours were typically well-compensated and voluntary. Employers were reported

to seek prior consent before assigning extra shifts, allowing workers to make informed decisions based on their capacity and personal circumstances. This approach contributed to a more balanced and empowering work environment, where workers felt their time and wellbeing were valued. These insights suggest that the health sector may offer a useful model for improving labour practices across other industries within the PALM scheme—particularly in terms of communication, consent, and fair compensation.

7.5.8 Support for integration into the community

Social integration emerged as a recurring theme in participant feedback, though experiences varied significantly across locations and individuals. While some I-Kiribati workers reported feelings of disorientation and isolation, particularly due to culture shock, language barriers, and unfamiliar social norms, others described more welcoming and inclusive environments. In several communities, workers experienced strong support networks that actively facilitated their integration. For example, in one location, local groups and organisations helped connect workers to church programs, sporting events, and multicultural festivals, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. A particularly positive example came from a worker community that had developed a close relationship with the Salvation Army, which regularly assisted with housing searches, emotional support, and practical needs. In another example, workers spoke of their active relationships with local politicians, who were described as quick to offer support—whether in response to specific needs or simply by showing up and engaging during cultural events and worker community gatherings.

However, in other areas, such inclusive cultural settings were noticeably absent. Workers in these locations often felt disconnected from their host communities, unless they made deliberate efforts to participate in local activities or build friendships. This lack of organic integration left many feeling like outsiders, reinforcing social isolation and limiting their overall wellbeing.

Participants in this research emphasised the need for more active and visible engagement from Country Liaison Officers (CLOs), who are tasked to support workers across Australia. While the recent appointment of five new CLOs was initially welcomed as a positive step, unforeseen challenges have since reduced this number to just two, significantly limiting their reach and effectiveness. Workers reported that the previous CLOs were generally only accessible by phone, with minimal in-person engagement. This lack of visibility has contributed to a perception of limited support, particularly among those in remote or regional placements. Several participants expressed disappointment with the performance of one CLO, citing a lack of initiative and responsiveness. One recurring concern was

that the CLO did not go out of her way to assist workers, even in situations where support was clearly needed.

While the research acknowledges the immense logistical challenges faced by CLOs—who are often the sole representatives responsible for supporting workers dispersed across vast geographic areas—expectations remain high, especially given the lack of consular support as Kiribati does not have a foreign mission in Australia, and the previous consulate office has closed due to lack of financing and staffing support. With the current introduction of additional CLOs, workers anticipated a more robust and responsive support system. However, the gap between expectations and actual service delivery has led to frustration and disillusionment. Moreover, there appears to be widespread confusion about the scope of the CLO role. Many workers assume that CLOs are responsible for providing direct welfare and immediate support, when in fact their mandate is more limited. These misunderstanding underscores the need for clear communication and pre-departure orientation regarding the functions and limitations of CLOs. The participants foregrounded the following themes as critical community-inclusive support programs that would help address the disparities discussed herein and promote consistent, meaningful integration and support:

- Greater integration of workers into community activities, facilitated by CLOs or designated cultural ambassadors.
- Increased access to local events and programs that actively include migrant workers, such as sports leagues, cultural festivals, and volunteer opportunities.
- Provision of mental health and pastoral care services, particularly for workers experiencing homesickness, stress, or emotional fatigue.
- Regular site visits by CLOs, especially to high-density worker locations, to build trust and provide face-to-face support.
- Clear guidelines and orientation materials outlining the roles and responsibilities of CLOs, so that workers know what support they can reasonably expect.

These measures are not only essential for improving the day-to-day experiences of I-Kiribati workers but also reinforce a collegial and culturally inclusive environment that helps workers achieve their broader goals of building resilience and embraces them as members of the new home environment.

7.5.9 Cultural awareness for harmonious employer and community relations

Cultural awareness emerged as a significant theme in the research, particularly in relation to the asymmetry of cultural knowledge between I-Kiribati workers and their Australian employers and host communities. Participants consistently noted that while they are expected to learn extensively about Australian culture, workplace norms, and communication styles before departure, very little is known or understood about communicating and dealing with I-Kiribati people. This imbalance was especially evident when compared to experiences in New Zealand under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa, where Pacific cultures, including Kiribati, are more widely recognised, celebrated, and integrated into community life. Workers expressed a strong desire to see this level of cultural appreciation replicated in Australia, envisioning a more inclusive environment where their identities are acknowledged and respected beyond the workplace.

It must be noted though that these experiences varied among participants. Some described positive and enriching relationships with employers and community members who made genuine efforts to learn about Kiribati culture. In some cases, employers even visited workers' families or homes in Kiribati to better understand the lives and aspirations of those they employ. These gestures, while not formally required, were deeply valued by workers and contributed to a sense of mutual respect and cultural connection. Participants emphasised that cultural understanding is not just a matter of courtesy, it is a powerful tool for fostering stronger ties between I-Kiribati workers, their colleagues, the broader Pacific diaspora, and employers. According to them a relationship built on cultural awareness and respect enhances communication and trust, reduces misunderstandings, and promotes a more inclusive and harmonious work environment.

Despite the broader context of reported exploitation and modern slavery within Australia's labour mobility programs at the time of the fieldwork, the research observed a notably different sentiment among I-Kiribati workers. Many participants expressed a sense of positivity, gratitude, and emotional resilience, even in cases where poor working conditions or strained employer relationships were acknowledged. This contrast raises important questions about perception, expectation, and cultural framing. While it may be premature to draw definitive conclusions, several factors may help explain this outlook. First, for many I-Kiribati workers, participation in the PALM scheme represents a transformative life opportunity. Coming from a context of limited employment prospects in Kiribati, the chance to work in Australia, despite its challenges, is often seen as foundational to financial stability, personal growth, and sustainable family support. The excitement of international travel,

earning a steady income, and contributing to their communities back home often outweighs the discomforts of difficult work environments.

Second, the cultural disposition of I-Kiribati people toward humility, humour, and self-deprecation plays a significant role in shaping how adversity is experienced and expressed. Participants frequently referenced the tendency to laugh at one's own mistakes or hardships—a coping mechanism deeply embedded in Kiribati social norms. This cultural trait, while sometimes misunderstood by outsiders, serves as a powerful tool for emotional resilience, allowing workers to endure challenges without internalising them as personal failures or sources of shame.

Furthermore, embedded within I-Kiribati cultural values is the culture of imposing resilience known through the informal statements of *ka-mmwaneko* (be a man) and *ka-aineko* (be a woman), which emphasise strength, stoicism, and emotional restraint in the face of adversity. These ideals are deeply rooted in communal expectations and are often invoked when individuals encounter hardship. Expressing vulnerability—such as crying, voicing distress, or openly seeking help—is frequently perceived as a sign of weakness or failure and may be met with ridicule or social disapproval. As a result, individuals are often compelled to internalise their struggles, even when facing genuine and overwhelming challenges. The fear of appearing incapable or 'silly' in the eyes of others can discourage workers from speaking up about poor working conditions, emotional distress, or exploitation. This cultural norm, while fostering resilience and perseverance, can also mask the need for support, making it difficult for external actors—such as employers, liaison officers, or support services—to identify and respond to issues in a timely and appropriate manner.

Understanding the cultural nuances of the imposed *kammwaneko* and *kaineko* resilience complex is essential for designing culturally sensitive support systems within labour mobility programs, specifically the pre-departure and employer induction programs. It highlights the importance of creating safe, non-judgmental spaces where I-Kiribati workers feel empowered to express concerns without fear of shame or reprisal. It also underscores the need for proactive outreach, where support is offered without waiting for individuals to self-report, recognising that silence does not always equate to satisfaction or wellbeing. This is where the importance of cultural tolerance and understanding comes in, and the imperative for the PALM scheme to continue to evolve and integrate enhanced understanding of the cultures of its labour-sending partners. Participants highlighted the following areas as central elements of cultural competency:

- Cultural competency training tailored to Pacific Island values and ways of life.
- Guidance on respectful communication, mutual understanding, and reciprocity.
- Greater participation and support of Kiribati cultural events.

While cultural awareness is now embedded in the PALM Deed and Approved Employer Guidelines, participants argue that these commitments must go beyond surface-level gestures. Cultural respect should be reflected in tangible practices—such as welfare support, flexible communication approaches, and culturally sensitive conflict resolution—that affirm workers as valued members of the community, not just as labour units. Ultimately, fostering cultural awareness is not only about improving the worker experience—it is about building a more ethical, resilient, and human-centred labour mobility system. When cultural understanding is mutual and meaningful, it strengthens the social fabric of the PALM scheme and contributes to the broader goal of Pacific-led, dignity-based development.

7.5.10 Support for permanent migration

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of expanding access to permanent migration opportunities such as the PALM family accompaniment and the Pacific Engagement Visa. Specifically, the workers noted that not all employers support such programs and enquired if there is support from the Kiribati Ministry of Employment to forge relations with employers to help support access to such pathways while they are serving their work contracts. Conscious that this is entirely contingent on the government and the employers, participants assert that, given the dire need for jobs and the lack of reintegration opportunities at home, there is a need to enable inclusive and expanded pathways to support permanent migration, in Australia and beyond. As these sentiments were shared before the Kiribati government approved the Pacific Engagement Visa in 2025, the study notes that it would now be an exciting milestone, available for workers to pursue. Greater participation of I-Kiribati workers in Australia would amplify the scheme's developmental impact and distribute benefits more widely across Kiribati, including for climate adaptation. Figure 7.7 illustrates the dual impacts of migration, highlighting the tensions between opportunity and disruption in labour mobility.

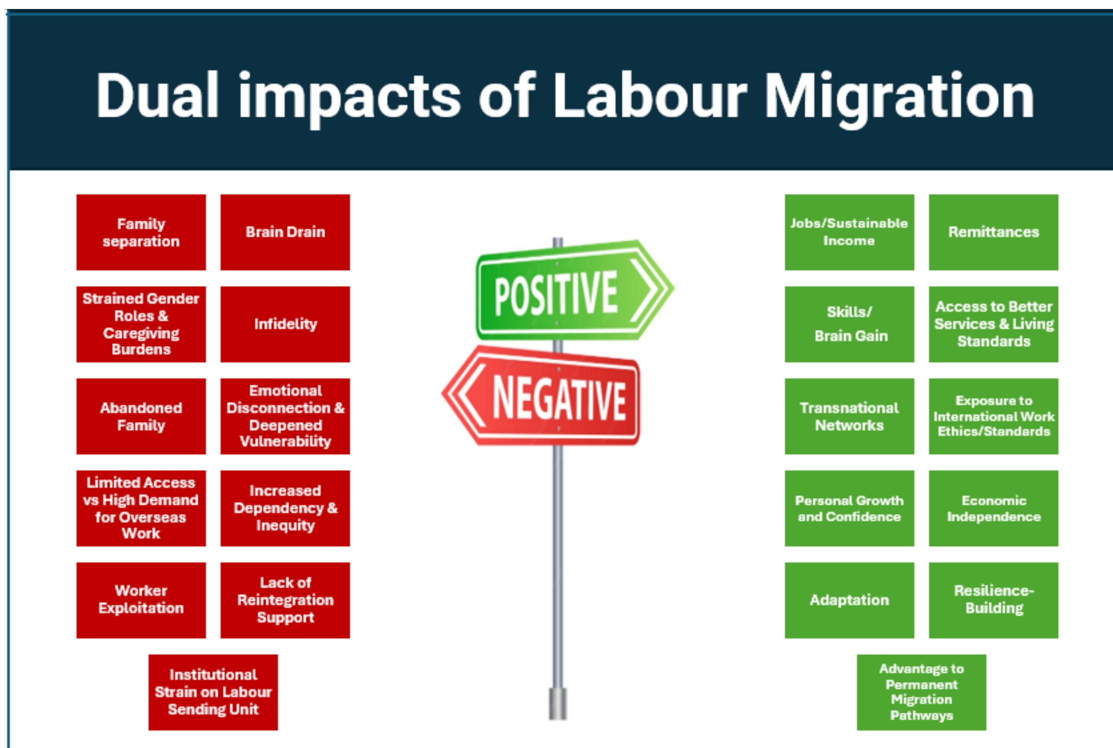


Figure 7.7: Participant perspectives: Dual impacts of labour migration.

7.6 Towards a Resilience Agenda?

The I-Kiribati diaspora, though small, is dispersed across the globe and presents a compelling counter-narrative to the assumption that physical displacement inevitably leads to cultural disconnection. Despite geographical distance, I-Kiribati migrants maintain a profound reverence for their *katei* (way of life and culture) and *aba* (land and ocean), exemplifying the resilience of Pacific diasporic cultures worldwide (Gamlen, 2014). The experiences of I-Kiribati migrants in New Zealand and Australia, who arrived under various labour migration schemes, such as the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa, Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program, Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, and Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative, demonstrate the significance of cultural heritage in shaping diasporic identities.

Notably, I-Kiribati migrants in Australia, many of whom hold citizenship, permanent residency, or temporary work visas, continue to celebrate their mobile cultural identity through independence anniversaries, cultural milestones, multi-festival events, and other community initiatives. While often dismissed as mere social gatherings, these celebrations serve as a powerful demonstration of self-determination and a reinforcement of both the I-Kiribati people's identity away from home and ethnicity in a new homeland. The national and political recognition afforded to I-Kiribati diasporas enables them to assert their I-Kiribati-ness, despite their physical distance from the homeland. This

phenomenon is also reflected in the experiences of Kiribati diasporas in other global communities, including Fiji, the Solomon Islands, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many more (Faleolo 2021, Tabe, 2011, Teaiwa, 2017).

As Roman (2013) observes, Kiribati diaspora populations have cultivated a virtual global homeland, sustaining a strong sense of Kiribati identity even as they assimilate into their host countries. This adaptive strategy enables I-Kiribati migrants to navigate the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and citizenship, ultimately redefining what it means to be I-Kiribati in the context of diaspora (migration) and climate change. Through their persistent love and observation of their cultural heritage and identity, I-Kiribati diasporas are reconfiguring the boundaries of citizenship, nationality, and belonging, challenging dominant narratives of displacement and cultural erasure. As the world grapples with the complexities of climate change, migration, and increasing geopolitical competition, the experiences of I-Kiribati diasporas, albeit small, offer a powerful testament to the resilience and adaptability of Pacific cultures in the face of adversity. These rich migration experiences must be included in the reconceptualisation of resilience for I-Kiribati.

The decision of I-Kiribati individuals to migrate is an exercise of agency and a fundamental human right to move and live between multiple worlds without compromising their identity and connection to place. The concept of resilience in the Pacific Island context must transcend territorial boundaries and acknowledge the intricate, transnational lives and identities of Pacific Islanders. Like many global communities, Pacific Islanders have historically relied on migration as a vital strategy for survival, advancement, and development, exemplifying agency and self-determination. To develop a deeper understanding of resilience, it is crucial to incorporate migration options, particularly in light of the escalating trends in climate-related and disaster-induced movements worldwide. Unlike in the past, current projections indicate a high likelihood of climate-induced migration, necessitating proactive planning and policy responses to ensure safe, orderly, and regular migration (IOM, 2025; McCLain et al., 2022). By recognising the complex interplay between migration, resilience, and climate change, policymakers and stakeholders can invest towards more effective, inclusive, and sustainable climate-mobility options that prioritise the needs and agency of Pacific Island communities.

This entails shifting from a solely territorial understanding of resilience to one that acknowledges and supports the transnational lives and aspirations of Pacific Islanders. In turn, this supports the maintenance and negotiation of cultural connections and identities across multiple spatial and temporal contexts (Koro et al., 2023). Moreover, it places importance on culture and identity evolving

constantly and not bound to, although closely tied to, ancestral land and culture. By acknowledging and valuing the diverse experiences of Pacific Islanders, including those who migrate, this research adds to the Pacific climate-mobility discourse and the ideals of resilience as inherent in inclusive and nuanced policies and narratives that prioritise the wellbeing, agency, and human rights of all Pacific Islanders, regardless of their location or migration status.

7.7 Resilience or Brown Saviourism?

In drawing this chapter to a close, it is fundamental to pose a critical question that emerged among participants in understanding interpretations of resilience: *Whose resilience, is it?* This inquiry has been central to the study's interrogation of the climate resilience agenda in the Pacific, prompting deeper reflection on the politics of representation and authority. One concept that has sharpened this analysis is Brown Saviourism, a term coined by Arjun Shankar to critique the role of dominant-caste Indian technocrats and diasporic professionals in global help economies. Shankar's (2023) work highlights how these actors, particularly within education and development sectors, ascend to saviour roles by leveraging their social and economic privilege—often under the guise of benevolence—while marginalising the very communities they claim to uplift (Shankar, 2023).

Brown Saviourism builds on earlier critiques of White Saviourism, notably Teju Cole's formulation of the White-Saviour Industrial Complex, which exposes how white actors are frequently lauded for offering aid to impoverished African communities while ignoring the structural and systemic roots of poverty—especially those linked to American imperialism and global economic inequality (Cole, 2012). While parallels with White Saviourism are evident in the conduct of aid, development, and labour migration in the Pacific, Brown Saviourism offers a more resonant lens for this research—particularly in examining elite representation within Pacific Island states. In the case of Kiribati, for example, certain elites may position themselves as the authentic voices of their communities, asserting authority over adaptation narratives—particularly through a 'no-retreat' stance on climate change that prioritises in situ resilience over migration-based strategies. The Kiribati Government's recent policy shift, which reinforces the notion that I-Kiribati should remain in their homeland and not be displaced by climate impacts, may appear encouraging in its affirmation of sovereignty and place-based identity. However, in contexts where viable options and robust protection mechanisms are lacking, such a framework raises critical concerns. By claiming to know what is best for their people—and by making decisions on their behalf—these actors risk silencing the diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and adaptive preferences of individuals within their communities.

This dynamic exposes a deeper tension within climate resilience discourse: whose voices are amplified, whose agency is recognised, and whose version of resilience is legitimised. It invites urgent reflection on the politics of representation and the need for adaptation strategies that are not only technically sound but also socially inclusive and ethically grounded. In the context of Pacific elites promoting a resilience agenda that emphasises staying in place over migration in the face of climate change, Brown Saviourism or Pacific Saviourism can manifest in several ways. Firstly, it promotes resilience as the primary response to climate change and often prioritises staying in place over migration. This agenda can be framed as empowering communities to withstand environmental challenges, but it may also neglect the rights and desires of individuals who wish to migrate. Secondly, it can be paternalistic for elites to decide what is best for the community without adequately consulting or representing the voices of those most affected, especially those at the vulnerable end of the climate challenge. This can result in policies that prioritise the interests of the elite over the needs and rights of the broader population. Thirdly, the resilience agenda may be tied to cultural narratives that emphasise the importance of ancestral lands and traditional ways of life. While these narratives can be powerful, they can also be used to justify policies that limit individual choices, particularly those related to migration. Furthermore, promoting a resilience agenda can reinforce existing power dynamics, where elites maintain control over decision-making processes, as observed in the Pacific Engagement Visa experience, which can marginalise those who advocate for migration as a viable adaptation strategy or who seek to exercise their right to mobility.

By framing migration as a last resort or a failure of resilience, Pacific elites may limit the agency of individuals who wish to migrate. This overlooks the fact that migration can be a proactive and dignified response to climate change, and the risk that the resilience agenda may not account for the diverse needs and aspirations of Pacific communities, which is a profound concern. Moreover, there is a significant risk of disempowerment when resilience is emphasised without addressing the structural inequalities and resource constraints that many Pacific communities continue to face, notably in climate adaptation. The concept of Brown Saviourism or Pacific Saviourism foregrounds the complexities and potential pitfalls of elite-led adaptation agendas, particularly when Pacific elites promote a resilience framework that prioritises remaining in place over migration. While the emphasis on in situ resilience may reflect commitments to cultural continuity and territorial sovereignty, it can also obscure the lived realities of those for whom migration may represent a viable—and preferred—adaptive strategy.

Resilience, though undeniably important, must not be framed in ways that silence alternative pathways or impose singular visions of what adaptation should look like. A more inclusive and ethically grounded approach would recognise migration as a legitimate form of climate adaptation and centre the dignity, agency, and decision-making rights of individuals and communities (McNamara et al., 2024; McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; Remling, 2020). Such a reframing is essential to ensure that resilience is not merely a technocratic ideal, but a lived and participatory process shaped by those most affected.

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that labour mobility—particularly through structured programs such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme—functions as a vital climate adaptation strategy for I-Kiribati communities navigating the intersecting pressures of environmental vulnerability, economic precarity, and constrained domestic opportunity. Far beyond its economic utility, labour migration emerges as a socially embedded and culturally resonant pathway for enhancing *te maiuraoi* (wellbeing), *te kabwaia* (prosperity), and te toronibwai (self-reliance and dignity), enabling social, economic, and climate resilience. When strengthened with climate-sensitive design, the PALM scheme holds transformative potential to meet the adaptation needs of Kiribati, enabling transnational households to exercise greater agency in the face of uncertainty.

Recent analysis of remittance flows among PALM workers in Australia reveals sectoral variation in the amount sent home. Across all three occupational categories—abattoir, aged care, and hospital (registered nursing)—the baseline monthly remittance falls within the AUD 400–600 range, indicating a shared minimum threshold of financial support. However, workers in aged care and nursing roles demonstrate the capacity to remit up to AUD 1,500 per month, compared to abattoir workers whose remittance ceiling typically ranges between AUD 1,000 and AUD 1,200. This disparity reflects differences in wage structures, employment conditions, and possibly remittance obligations, with aged care and nursing workers positioned to contribute more substantially to household resilience through higher and more stable financial transfers.

Income data across island contexts—Marakei, TUC, and BTC—further reinforce this pattern: remittance-receiving families consistently earn more per household than their non-remittance counterparts. These earnings translate directly into resilience indicators. Remittance households are demonstrably more capable of financing housing repairs, investing in education, maintaining food security, and responding proactively to climate-related shocks. In contrast, non-remittance families

often rely on government support mechanisms and exhibit lower adaptive capacity, constrained by limited financial buffers and fewer strategic options. Even in urban centres such as TUC and BTC, where formal employment is more accessible, remittance families often match or exceed the per-household income of lower-tier government employees—many of whom remain dependent on social protection support. This suggests that remittances can rival, and in some cases outperform, local wage structures in building economic security and adaptive capacity.

These findings challenge dominant framings within the resilience discourse, which too often treat climate adaptation as a fixed set of interventions designed and delivered by institutional elites. In Pacific contexts, such as Kiribati, resilience is not simply about remaining in place—it is about securing dignity, agency, and strengthening future possibilities for adaptation, including through mobility. Labour migration, particularly when ethically structured and community-informed, is not a failure of adaptation but a strategic and legitimate expression of it.

This chapter cautions against Brown Saviourism and the risk of it being manifested in the Pacific and Kiribati's resilience agenda policy approaches, which seek to deter migration in the name of national resilience or decolonial purity. Such efforts risk undermining the lived strategies of those most affected by climate change. Adaptation policies must be co-designed with communities, grounded in their realities, aspirations, and knowledge systems. Governments have a moral obligation to support citizens who seek better lives beyond national borders, recognising that transnational mobility is not a threat to resilience—it is its embodiment.

Labour mobility, as evidenced throughout this chapter, facilitates a multidimensional form of resilience—social, economic, political, and cultural—that extends far beyond individual earnings. Socially, it strengthens transnational kinship networks and redistributes care across borders. Economically, it enables households to build financial buffers, invest in education and housing, and respond to climate and livelihood shocks with greater autonomy. Politically, it challenges static notions of citizenship and adaptation, asserting the right to mobility as a legitimate response to structural vulnerability. Culturally, it affirms *te maiuraoi* (wellbeing) through the pursuit of dignity through pathways such as the PALM scheme and the Pacific Engagement Visa. In revisiting Te Waa that carries people, knowledge, and purpose across shifting seas, these findings underscore how resilience is cultivated through careful balancing of opportunity, responsibility, shifting policies and politics, and collective navigation.

Chapter 8 : Conclusion

> *"This scheme is a practical measure that shows our respect for the Pacific and will build a stronger Pacific Family"* (Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 2023).

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined the intricate and evolving nexus between climate change, labour mobility, and adaptation in Kiribati, centring the lived experiences, cultural worldviews, and aspirations of I-Kiribati communities as they confront the realities of climate adversity. Anchored in Te Waa of Mobility—an indigenous framework symbolising the deliberate and skilled construction of a canoe for a purposeful journey—this research has critically explored the socio-economic, cultural, geopolitical, and environmental forces that shape migration decisions. It highlights how I-Kiribati people, navigating the looming threat of displacement, exercise agency and resilience in charting their own course toward a climate-secure future, whether it is through remaining in situ or migrating.

Through the lens of Te Waa framework and informed by the voices of frontline communities who demonstrate agency in 'building their own canoe', the study has illuminated how migration can serve as a vital and dignified adaptation strategy. However, as the findings underscore, migration is not a panacea. It is a complex and often challenging process that requires careful planning, ethical governance, and cultural sensitivity—much like the meticulous craftsmanship involved in constructing a seaworthy canoe. Only through such precision and care can migration pathways lead to a climate-resilient and informed future.

This concluding chapter synthesises the key discussions and insights presented throughout the thesis, reaffirming the central argument: that adaptation is indeed and importantly facilitating climate adaptation; however, it must be people-centred, culturally grounded, and inclusive of both in situ and ex situ strategies. Migration, when approached with foresight and respect for indigenous agency, can be a powerful tool for resilience and self-determination in the face of climate change. This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 8.2 presents the key findings, Section 8.3 outlines policy recommendations and future research directions, and Section 8.4 discusses the limitations of the research. Section 8.5 outlines the next steps for the Pacific, and Section 8.6 concludes the chapter.

8.2 Key Findings

Chapter One opened by setting the scene. It begins by stating the purpose of the research, which is to explore labour migration as a potential climate adaptation strategy. It does so by being critically mindful of the debates surrounding climate coloniality and climate apathy, as well as the risks that labour migration carries in further deepening injustices and vulnerabilities without addressing the root causes of the climate problem. While agreeing with this narrative, the chapter argues that for low-lying nations like Kiribati, time is of the essence. Even if global emission targets are met, it may be too late to reverse the climate impacts for Kiribati, which faces the prospect of becoming uninhabitable within the next 50 years or less. As such, the chapter asserts that migration is not only imminent but urgent. However, for migration to be a just and effective adaptation strategy, Pacific nations must be actively included in policy discussions and global debates, including those related to migration.

Chapter Two critically explored the concept of adaptation from a Kiribati community perspective. The findings revealed that adaptation is not merely a technical or policy-driven process, but one that is deeply rooted in cultural identity, spiritual connection to the land, and collective memory. While adaptation is often framed through external and state-led interventions, the chapter emphasised the importance of foregrounding I-Kiribati interpretations of adaptation—grounded in their own epistemologies and lived realities, which has for hundreds of years included, and continues to include labour mobility and migration. These insights challenge dominant narratives and call for a more inclusive, people-centred approach to climate adaptation.

The chapter also reviewed key literature on climate-induced migration, labour mobility, and the unique vulnerabilities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), identifying critical gaps and reinforcing the need for decolonial, Indigenous, and human rights-based theoretical frameworks. Finally, the chapter introduced Te Waa of Mobility framework, which aims to contribute to the understanding of the drivers of migration from an atoll and Pacific perspective that foregrounds people and communities, cultural and spiritual values, and mobilities across dual or multiple homes. The framework is supported by empirical evidence from those at the climate periphery.

Documenting the lives and experiences of I-Kiribati people and examining how communities use migration to cope with environmental changes adds nuance and valuable insights to the study of migration, migration theory, and the climate–migration nexus. The framework highlights the dual nature of migration, as both a strategy for resilience and a potential source of vulnerability. This ambivalence mirrors the symbolism of Te Waa, the traditional canoe, which can traverse turbulent

waters with grace if carefully constructed and attentively maintained, but risks capsizing if neglected or poorly prepared. Just as the seaworthiness of a canoe depends on collective craftsmanship, foresight, and balance, so too does the success of migration as an adaptive pathway hinge on inclusive planning, robust support systems, and respect for the diverse needs and aspirations of those undertaking the journey.

Chapter Three outlined the research design and introduced Te Waa of Mobility as an indigenous Kiribati methodological framework. Drawing on the metaphor of canoe-building and ocean voyaging, Te Waa framework provided a culturally resonant lens through which to conceptualise migration as a journey requiring preparation, navigation, and safe arrival. This chapter detailed the qualitative methods employed—te maroro and semi-structured interviews, karaki (storytelling), participant observation, and narrative inquiry—while also addressing ethical considerations, researcher positionality, and the importance of culturally responsive research practices. The methodology underscored the value of Indigenous knowledge systems in shaping both the research process and the outcomes that it hopes to contribute to the study of Pacific migration.

The chapter outlined the foundational elements that enable Te Waa—as both a metaphor and a methodological framework—to navigate the opportunities as well as the challenges that it encounters on the journey toward new epistemological horizons. By centring the research question, the chapter asserts the importance of Te Waa remaining a safe and effective vessel for knowledge creation and livelihood. This is not only relevant for Kiribati as an atoll nation among the most vulnerable to climate impacts but also applies to any country. It emphasises the need for migration policies to prioritise people's values, feelings, epistemologies, and most importantly, their needs as valued citizens and active agents of economic growth in their new homes. Te Waa framework also serves as a powerful reminder for the researcher to remain critically self-aware, attuned to the social, political, and cultural currents that shape their positionality and influence the research process. Further, the chapter stated that Te Waa, as a methodological compass, does not sail in isolation—it is guided by the winds of socio-economic, political, demographic, environmental, and climate change forces. These must be acknowledged, negotiated, and integrated into the research journey.

To ensure the reliability and validity of research outcomes, the chapter underlines that a researcher must, like a skilled navigator, test the waters and assess the climate—both literal and metaphorical—before setting sail. This includes reading the subtle signs that emerge during interviews and interactions, such as emotions, silences, and hesitations, that signal when to speak, when to listen,

and when to step back and allow others to take the lead. Through Te Waa methodology, this study is equipped not only to explore whether labour mobility serves as a viable climate adaptation strategy for I-Kiribati but also to do so in a manner that is ethically grounded, culturally respectful, and methodologically sound. This model can usefully inform other migration studies that centre on people, values, and the co-construction of new knowledge, ensuring that it is both contextually relevant and navigated with care with those for whom it pledges to support. This ensures that the voyage is not only purposeful but also safe, inclusive, and transformative.

Chapter Four provided a contextual foundation by mapping the labour mobility landscape in Kiribati. It examined the socio-economic, educational, and employment dynamics that influence participation in regional labour schemes, particularly the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) program. The chapter highlighted systemic challenges, including an outdated education system that prioritises academic achievement over vocational readiness, resulting in high youth unemployment and limited domestic opportunities. Labour mobility schemes have emerged as critical pathways for economic participation, especially for school leavers who are excluded from scholarship-based advancement. The chapter also explored the role of government policy, training institutions, and international partnerships in shaping access to and outcomes of these schemes.

This chapter then examined the multifaceted dynamics shaping labour mobility in Kiribati, highlighting how geographic isolation, limited economic diversification, and climate vulnerability intersect to constrain domestic development opportunities. These structural realities—deeply embedded in Kiribati's spatial and environmental context—are not easily altered. However, they do not preclude progress. Instead, they demand strategic leadership, policy innovation, and the effective mobilisation of human capital as key levers for national resilience. In noting this, the research foregrounds that given these structural and developmental challenges, labour migration, both temporary and permanent, emerges as a critical climate adaptation strategy—particularly through schemes such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) program and the Pacific Engagement Visa—which offer Kiribati vital opportunities to integrate into regional economic systems and enhance capabilities to remain and adapt or migrate and re-home.

These schemes not only provide employment and income for I-Kiribati workers, but also support the country's development. They serve as a crucial mechanism for climate adaptation, enabling households to diversify their livelihoods and reduce pressure on fragile domestic ecosystems. The chapter argued that the success of labour migration as an adaptive strategy hinges on one essential

condition: the alignment of training with employment outcomes. While reforms such as the TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP), now known as the Kiribati Australia Skills for Employment Partnerships, have significantly improved access to vocational education, the persistent disconnect between skills acquisition and job placement—both domestically and abroad—limits the full realisation of migration's potential. The absence of robust data systems, mismatches between training and local industry needs, and barriers to accessing higher-level qualifications abroad all contribute to this gap.

To overcome these challenges, the chapter proposes that Kiribati must continue to invest in a coordinated, whole-of-government approach that integrates education, employment, and migration into national development and adaptation planning and policy making. This includes strengthening institutional capacity to align such training with domestic needs and infrastructure, while expanding access to international qualifications, and advocating for equitable participation in regional training initiatives, such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) and others. Moreover, it requires a deliberate effort to position labour migration not as a stopgap, but as a long-term development strategy—one that supports economic self-reliance, enhances adaptive capacity, and affirms the agency of I-Kiribati in navigating their future. In summary, this chapter argues that labour migration offers Kiribati a strategic pathway to overcome the constraints of geographic isolation and climate vulnerability. When migration is thoughtfully aligned with vocational training, job creation, and embedded within broader national development planning, it holds transformative potential—not merely as a reactive measure, but as a proactive tool for resilience. Under such conditions, the Kiribati government is uniquely positioned to unlock the full economic and adaptive capacity of its citizens, reframing mobility as a catalyst for prosperity, dignity, and sustainable growth.

Chapter Five addressed the central research question by investigating the extent to which labour mobility serves as a mechanism for climate adaptation. Drawing on rich participant narratives, the chapter documented the tangible climate-related hazards confronting Kiribati today—rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, declining agricultural productivity, extreme weather events, and shifting rainfall and prolonged drought patterns, among others. These lived experiences underscore the urgency of adaptive strategies that are both locally grounded and forward-looking. Labour mobility was shown to contribute to household economic security, skills development, and knowledge transfer, offering a form of adaptive capacity that complements, rather than replaces, traditional resilience strategies.

Key findings underscore that labour migration facilitates economic adaptation through remittances that support household resilience, infrastructure development, and diversification of income sources. Equally important are social remittances, which encompass the transfer of knowledge, skills, and values that enhance community capacity and promote innovation in climate response. These forms of exchange contribute to social adaptation, reinforcing kinship ties and enabling migrants to maintain active roles in both their home communities and their adopted countries.

The chapter also highlights the significance of cultural and spiritual adaptation, where migration decisions are deeply informed by connections to *aba* (land), *taetae n Kiribati* (language), and *kainga* (family and clan). Concepts such as *toronibwai* (self-sufficiency and resilience) and *kabwaia* (prosperity and dignity) are central to understanding how I-Kiribati navigate the moral and emotional dimensions of migration. These values shape preferences for circular and seasonal migration, allowing individuals to fulfil obligations at home while engaging in economic activities abroad, while also preparing them for permanent migration should this option become a choice or a last resort.

Environmentally, labour mobility offers indirect benefits by reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems and enabling migrants to invest in climate-resilient practices upon return. In this context, Te Waa framework's mobility philosophy is at play, promoting mobile identities and cultural coherence, while also extending on the principles of the Migration with Dignity policy as a cornerstone of Kiribati's adaptation strategy. While the policy is no longer recognised politically, its outputs—the expanded opportunities from labour mobility schemes—are helping to reframe migration as a rights-based and forward-looking choice that empowers citizens to respond to climate uncertainty with agency and cultural integrity, while also breaking away from harmful narratives, including those of refugees and vulnerability.

Importantly, migration in Kiribati is not driven by a single determinant. It reflects a complex interplay of factors including but not exclusive to environmental vulnerability, economic necessity, and cultural and spiritual identity—all of which are increasingly shaped by the cascading effects of climate change such as rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, food and water insecurity, and intensifying extreme weather events. While labour mobility holds significant adaptive potential, it must be carefully managed to ensure that migration is safe, inclusive, and sustainable**.** This includes equitable access to migration opportunities, protection for migrants and their families, and support for those who remain. As climate impacts intensify, labour migration must be integrated into a broader resilience

framework—one that honours the lived realities of I-Kiribati communities and promotes adaptation that is not only effective, but also culturally grounded and socially and economically just.

Chapter Six examined the geopolitical dimensions of labour mobility, revealing how regional power dynamics—particularly between Australia and China—shape migration policies and influence perceptions of sovereignty among I-Kiribati. The chapter highlighted how geopolitical competition has placed the Pacific at the centre of strategic contestation, with labour mobility emerging as a key policy tool.

Through a nuanced analysis of the complex intersections between climate change, migration dynamics, and the re-emergence of sovereignty in Kiribati, the chapter analysed ways in which I-Kiribati people's perceptions of sovereignty are being reshaped. The findings of this chapter underscore a profound shift in the understanding of sovereignty among I-Kiribati people; whereby economic wellbeing has emerged as an integral component of their conception of sovereignty. This also reinforces the theory of economic resilience, without which, adaptation to climate change would be thwarted. This redefinition of sovereignty transcends traditional notions rooted in political independence and self-governance, acknowledging instead the intricate relationships between the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political aspects of human existence and the drivers of labour migration. For I-Kiribati people, sovereignty is no longer solely about statehood, territorial integrity, or the exercise of political power. Instead, sovereignty encompasses the ability to thrive economically, access opportunities both within and beyond Kiribati's borders, and build a secure future where I-Kiribati can exert their sense of *oi n aomata* (personhood and worthiness).

This chapter critically examined the Pacific Engagement Visa and the Falepili Union Treaty as exemplar outcomes of intensifying geopolitical contestation and the evolving influence of external actors on climate change and labour migration governance in the region. These initiatives illustrate how sovereignty is increasingly assessed not through static territorial control, but through a government's capacity to respond meaningfully to the adaptive needs of its citizens—particularly in the context of climate-induced mobility. Such frameworks invite a reimagining of sovereignty as transnational, liminal, and relational—responsive to the shifting geographies and lived realities of Pacific peoples rather than confined to rigid borders. They also foreground the importance of recognising migration as a non-linear, multi-directional process, one that complicates conventional understandings of identity, belonging, and statehood. In doing so, they reveal that sovereignty itself is not immutable,

but capable of morphing across space and time, shaped by both policy architectures and the everyday choices of mobile communities.

Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, critically examines how labour mobility in Australia, notably the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, has contributed to cultivating resilience among I-Kiribati. It explores how this pathway might be further strengthened as a strategy for climate adaptation. The chapter begins by investigating the concept of resilience, which has emerged as a central narrative of climate response across the Pacific Region and argues that while resilience discourse is vital in contesting dominant portrayals of Pacific nations—particularly Kiribati—as passive and vulnerable, a significant risk remains. Specifically, elitist framings of resilience may obscure the lived realities of grassroots communities, which are not only the least economically equipped but also the most exposed to the escalating impacts of climate change.

By foregrounding experiences of I-Kiribati workers in Australia and communities at the frontline of climate disruption in Kiribati**,** the chapter reframes resilience not as a top-down abstraction, but as a contextual, relational, and rights-based practice—rooted in everyday strategies of adaptation. The chapter argues that by adopting this approach, the understanding of labour migration as a legitimate form of climate adaptation can be deepened, directly engaging with the central inquiry of the research and challenging dominant narratives that overlook grassroots' vulnerability. Through a resilience lens, the chapter explores how I-Kiribati perceive labour mobility as a catalyst for building economic security and climate-resilient communities grounded in *te maiuraoi* (wellbeing). It does so by analysing empirical findings from interviews and income data, illustrating how I-Kiribati participants conceptualise labour migration as a resilience-building strategy. It explores the lived experiences of workers in Australia and their families in Kiribati, analysing how these experiences align with—or diverge from—official adaptation narratives.

The chapter then assessed the role of remittances in shaping household resilience, with comparative analysis across island contexts (Marakei, TUC, and BTC) revealing significant disparities in adaptive capacity between remittance-receiving and non-receiving families. The section then distinguishes between varying levels of resilience, emphasising the importance of financial autonomy, housing security, and the ability to respond to environmental shocks. It then assesses the remittance-sending power of I-Kiribati workers and how this demonstrates a greater capacity among these workers and their families to mitigate, cope with, and adapt to socio-economic stressors. The chapter then highlights how labour migration is perceived as both adaptive and maladaptive. It concludes with a

discussion of Brown Saviourism and the need for adaptation policies to be co-designed with communities whose lived realities must be ethically centred and structured in climate change responses.

Drawing together the threads of this research, the findings underscore the legitimacy and urgency of labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy for Kiribati. As an atoll nation situated at the forefront of global climate vulnerability, Kiribati faces disproportionate exposure to the adverse effects of anthropogenic climate change—including intensified storm frequency, altered precipitation patterns, and saltwater intrusion into freshwater lenses (Barnett & McMichael, 2018; Donner & Webber, 2014; United Nations Security Council, 2023). The dominant narrative of disappearing islands, while problematic in its fatalism, is nonetheless grounded in a sobering scientific consensus: sea level rise poses an existential threat to the habitability and sovereignty of Kiribati and other Small Island Developing States (Shibuya, 2009).

This reality is not abstract—it is lived daily by I-Kiribati communities whose voices have been central to this study. The research has illuminated how climate impacts are reshaping everyday life, constraining adaptive capacities, and prompting both a desire to remain rooted in place and a growing openness to migration as a viable and dignified response. Labour mobility and permanent migration opportunities have emerged not merely as economic options, but as culturally resonant strategies that intersect with notions of *oi n aomata* (human dignity), *toronibwai* (self-sufficiency), and *kabwaia* (prosperity). These findings challenge narrow interpretations of resilience and instead reframe it through the lens of mobility, agency, and cultural continuity.

In addressing the central research question—whether labour migration can serve as a climate change adaptation strategy—the thesis has drawn on community fieldwork to offer a nuanced understanding of the interplay between mobility, adaptation, and resilience. While national resilience agendas have mobilised adaptation programs, they often fail to account for the lived realities of I-Kiribati, including their deep seafaring heritage and increasing reliance on migration schemes as forward-looking development pathways. In a context where atoll habitation, employment, and access to essential services are becoming increasingly constrained, labour migration programs—particularly those offering permanent pathways—are not only popular but deeply valued as coping mechanisms in the absence of robust domestic protection and adaptation infrastructure.

The magnitude of the climate threat facing Kiribati is unparalleled. The prospect of complete inundation and population displacement presents a scenario unmatched by any other nation (Barnett, 2017). This thesis has been motivated by the diminishing feasibility of in situ adaptation (McNamara, 2019) and the glaring absence of international legal frameworks to protect those displaced by climate change (McAdam, 2010). Within this context, labour migration emerges not as a last resort, but as a proactive and strategic adaptation measure—one that must be recognised, supported, and ethically governed.

Moreover, the thesis situates labour migration within broader geopolitical currents, including the Pacific Engagement Visa and the Falepili Union Treaty, which reflect the shifting dynamics of regional influence and contestation. These frameworks reveal that sovereignty is increasingly measured not by territorial fixity, but by a government's capacity to respond to its citizens' adaptive needs. Migration, in this light, is not a threat to sovereignty but a reconfiguration of it—transnational, liminal, and responsive to the lived realities of Pacific peoples.

Labour migration represents a vital future mobility pathway for Kiribati, offering a strategic response to the intersecting pressures of climate vulnerability, economic insecurity, and diminishing domestic opportunities. As traditional livelihoods become increasingly untenable due to rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and limited access to employment and services, migration—particularly through structured labour schemes and permanent visa pathways—provides I-Kiribati with access to income, skills, knowledge, transnational networks, and adaptive capacity. Yet this mobility is not merely functional; it is deeply cultural. Te Waa framework, grounded in Kiribati epistemology, offers a universally resonant model for understanding migration as a journey shaped by values, memory, and meaning. The canoe (waa) becomes a metaphor for movement that is intentional, relational, and spiritually anchored—centring safety, dignity, and agency across diverse migration contexts. Globally, this framework speaks to the need for research responsibility and ethical co-creation, urging scholars to navigate alongside communities rather than charting courses on their behalf. In the context of climate change, Te Waa is especially relevant: it guides the understanding of migration as a spatial and temporal process, shaped by shifting ecologies, evolving identities, and the imperative to move with care, foresight, and collective wisdom. As such, labour migration in Kiribati is not a departure from resilience—it is a redefinition of it, and Te Waa offers a compass for navigating this transformation in a changing world.

8.3 Policy Recommendations: Advancing Labour Mobility for Climate Resilience in Kiribati

This section outlines strategic policy recommendations designed to foster a paradigm shift in Kiribati's climate adaptation and development planning. It emphasises the need to harness the synergies between labour mobility, economic development, and climate resilience, particularly through targeted engagement with Australia's healthcare and aged care sectors.

1. Expand participation in Australian labour mobility programs

- Kiribati should actively increase its participation in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme and the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) to grow its climate-mobility access.
- Strategic outreach and bilateral coordination are needed to overcome geopolitical and structural constraints and limited diaspora networks which have historically hindered the expansion of Kiribati's migration opportunities.

2. Leverage comparative advantage in healthcare and aged care

- Building on the success of the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI), Kiribati should ask for an aged care stream of the PALM scheme as a growth sector.
- This focus aligns with Australia's labour market needs and Kiribati's existing training infrastructure, offering a mutually beneficial pathway for skilled migration.
- The benefits will impact both I-Kiribati wishing to migrate and those who prefer to return home, a win for the health sector in Kiribati.

3. Strengthen diaspora governance and institutional networks

- Policies should recognise and support the role of the I-Kiribati diaspora in Australia as a critical institutional framework for sustainable migration.
- Leveraging informal networks and existing governance systems can enhance program effectiveness and promote development outcomes, as argued by Gamlen (2014).

4. Promote skills reintegration and circulation

- Returning workers should be supported in reintegrating into Kiribati's health system, thereby contributing to local capacity-building and improved service delivery.

5. Align KIT training with local, regional, and international labour markets

- Both the Government of Kiribati and the Government of Australia should assist the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT) in developing targeted bridging programs to ensure graduates can transition into domestic, regional, and international employment.
- Training curricula should be reviewed to better align with Kiribati's infrastructure realities while maintaining compatibility with Australian qualifications.

6. Create employment pathways for KIT graduates

- One of the persistent challenges in vocational training reforms and past investments has been the chronic cycle of training without employment, where graduates are equipped with qualifications but face limited opportunities to apply their skills in meaningful ways, let alone have sustainable employment. While educational and vocational initiatives have played a critical role in capacity-building, their impact on alleviating acute unemployment has remained marginal. This disconnect underscores the urgent need to strengthen the training–employment nexus by aligning curricula with labour market demands, expanding job placement pathways, and ensuring that vocational programs translate into tangible livelihood outcomes for graduates. A dedicated PALM aged care stream for Kiribati should be established to absorb KIT graduates into Australia's healthcare sector.
- This initiative would address youth unemployment, reduce the underutilisation of skilled workers, and promote economic growth through brain gain.
- The Government of Kiribati should expand Labour Agreements to other countries in the Pacific Region instead of just Australia and New Zealand, promoting stronger engagement for work within the region, in other Pacific Island Countries.

7. Integrate internships and apprenticeships into migration schemes

- Programs should incorporate internships, apprenticeships, and job placements for aged care and nursing graduates to gain practical experience in Australia.
- These placements would enhance employability, facilitate skill transfer, and strengthen bilateral cooperation between Kiribati and Australia, while supporting both countries' acute need of quality healthcare services.

8. Embed labour mobility in climate adaptation planning

- Labour migration must be formally recognised as a climate adaptation strategy within Kiribati's national development and resilience frameworks.

- This approach acknowledges the spatial and temporal dimensions of climate mobility and affirms the dignity and agency of I-Kiribati in navigating their futures.

9. Foster ethical and inclusive migration governance

- Migration policies should be co-designed with communities, centring their values, aspirations, and lived experiences.
- Currently, the PALM scheme and the Kiribati Ministry of Employment determine the placement of workers across various locations and sectors in Australia, often with limited input from the workers themselves. As the program evolves, it would be highly desirable to introduce greater flexibility—particularly for skilled participants—to allow them to choose the industry in which they work. Empowering workers to align their placements with their qualifications, interests, and long-term career goals not only enhances job satisfaction and retention but also strengthens the developmental impact of labour mobility for both sending and receiving countries.
- The Te Waa framework offers a culturally grounded model for ethical migration governance and policy, emphasising safety, dignity, and relational leadership.

By implementing these recommendations, Kiribati can transform labour mobility into a strategic pillar of climate resilience and sustainable development. This approach not only addresses immediate economic and environmental challenges but also affirms the rights and agency of I-Kiribati to shape their futures with dignity—both at home and abroad.

8.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the initial plan to include New Zealand in the study, which unfortunately did not progress as planned due to the timing of the research starting amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the New Zealand component of the work was dropped, given the uncertainty surrounding travel and the need to maintain efficient planning for fieldwork scheduling and preparation. As a result, the research was unable to expand its participant representation to New Zealand, which is not only a significant labour-receiving country for Kiribati but also provides a model that Australia is emulating. This would have added value and insight to this research.

While this study foregrounds community perspectives and prioritises lived experience, the sample size and geographic scope may not fully encompass the diversity of I-Kiribati experiences across the country, diaspora communities, and intersecting demographic groups. As such, the findings reflect a

focused subset of voices rather than a comprehensive representation of the broader population. This limitation underscores the need for expanded, longitudinal, and multi-sited research to capture the full spectrum of climate mobility experiences and adaptive strategies within and beyond Kiribati.

A second limitation of this study was the time constraint, which precluded the implementation of a comprehensive tracer study on the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI). Originally envisioned as a key component of the research, the tracer study aimed to map the trajectories of KANI graduates, assess their integration into Australia's healthcare sector, and explore the potential for building a diaspora-led network to support recruitment and professional development aligning with aspirations to establish a dedicated PALM aged care health stream for Kiribati or a supporting network for migrants under the Pacific Engagement Visa, given Australia's ongoing age care training investments in Kiribati. However, with only five KANI nurses included in the final sample, it was not feasible to pursue this initiative at scale or to generate robust insights into how these graduates exemplify the principles of the Migration with Dignity policy in practice. While Kiribati's diaspora in Australia remains comparatively small relative to other Pacific communities, there was clear interest in understanding how informal networks operate to facilitate assimilation, peer support, and the recruitment of fellow I-Kiribati—mirroring patterns observed in other Pacific Islander diasporas. The absence of this tracer study limits the depth of analysis on diaspora governance and the long-term developmental impacts of skilled migration.

The third limitation is the acknowledgment of the temporal constraints of climate mobility as inherently dynamic and shaped by evolving environmental, political, and economic conditions. The research reflects a certain period, and future shifts—such as new migration policies or climate events—may alter the relevance or applicability of certain findings. This focus on current policy structures and participation data means the analysis of labour mobility programs, such as the PALM and the PEV, is subject to change due to geopolitical shifts, bilateral negotiations, and regional contestation, which may affect Kiribati's future engagement.

Another limitation is that the research focuses on qualitative insights and community narratives, which do not incorporate extensive qualitative modelling to consider the broader themes of migration flows, economic impacts, or scientific projections of climate change. As such it may be limited in its ability to strategically inform policy.

Another limitation relates to the recommendation for strengthening institutional systems and Labour Sending Units, particularly through extended pre-departure briefings and more comprehensive reintegration programs. While these measures are critical for ensuring ethical and effective labour mobility, their implementation may be constrained by Kiribati's current level of absorptive capacity and institutional readiness. The research acknowledges that these systems are part of ongoing development efforts and that their success hinges on coordinated action among domestic stakeholders, international partners, and regional institutions. Without sustained investment, technical support, and policy alignment, the envisioned reforms may struggle to achieve their intended impact—underscoring the need for long-term capacity-building and inclusive governance frameworks.

Finally, while the Te Waa framework offers a culturally grounded and conceptually rich lens for interpreting migration, its universal application across diverse contexts remains interpretive and symbolic in nature. Rooted in Kiribati epistemology, Te Waa embodies values of relationality, dignity, and spiritual navigation that resonate deeply within Pacific worldviews. However, its metaphoric and cultural specificity may not translate seamlessly into other migration settings without careful adaptation. The risk lies in inadvertently imposing Pacific epistemologies onto contexts where different cultural logics, historical trajectories, and migration narratives prevail. To avoid epistemic overreach, any extension of the framework must be guided by principles of co-creation, cultural humility, and collaborative knowledge-making with the communities for whom it is intended. This limitation underscores the importance of ethical research practice—ensuring that frameworks like Te Waa are not universalised in ways that dilute their meaning or obscure the distinctiveness of other cultural migration experiences. Instead, its value lies in inspiring context-sensitive models that honour local ways of knowing while fostering transnational dialogue on mobility, resilience, and adaptation in a changing world.

8.5 Where to From Here?

The climate change literature is dominated by debate either prioritising climate vulnerability or agenda setting for resilience-building, both of which have significantly shaped climate policies. Migration has also generated immense interest, given projections of climate-induced mobility and the imperative to establish protective mechanisms in the absence of climate-migration laws, which this research proposes can be capitalised on existing labour migration pathways. However, as the thesis discusses, there is a risk that the dominant or prominent debate overshadows adaptation strategies by influencing its own political views and interests over those of the communities it serves. This

research cautions against this and the risk of repeating the conundrum of prioritising prominent voices over subaltern realities.

This study underscores the need for more research on Kiribati, particularly how the PALM scheme, and the Pacific Engagement Visa which Kiribati now joins, offer a critical pathway for Kiribati to address its development challenges, enhance its economic and climate resilience, and promote the human dignity of its citizens. By leveraging its comparative advantage in the Australian healthcare and aged care sectors, Kiribati can create a dedicated health PALM stream that not only addresses labour shortages in Australia but also generates critical skills, knowledge, and economic benefits for Kiribati. In the same vein, support could also be channelled towards I-Kiribati participation on the PEV ensuring their success and smooth transition, while carefully managing the pace of outmigration to avoid the challenges currently faced by other Pacific Island Countries.

As a country most exposed to the existential threats of climate change, Kiribati requires innovative solutions that prioritise the dignity, wellbeing, and resilience of its people. The proposed Kiribati health PALM stream offers a vital opportunity for Kiribati to assert its agency, exercise its sovereignty, and reclaim its narrative in the face of climate-induced disruptions. By establishing a dedicated health PALM stream, Australia and Kiribati can forge a transformative partnership that prioritises human dignity, promotes economic development, and fosters climate resilience. This partnership could transform the potential of labour migration programs in Australia into achievable, sustainable development and climate resilience for climate-vulnerable communities. The research argues that a climate-mobility dimension is integrated into labour mobility policies, as proposed in the Pacific Mobility Index—to guide equitable access to jobs and climate change challenges in Pacific Island Countries (PICs). To unlock the full potential of this initiative, Australia and Kiribati may consider engaging in a collaborative, inclusive partnership, prioritising the needs, aspirations, and dignity of the I-Kiribati people while addressing their own healthcare needs.

8.6 Conclusion

A central argument advanced in this thesis is the need to move beyond the dominant narrative that equates climate resilience solely with in situ adaptation. Instead, this research contends that resilience must be understood as a comprehensive and flexible approach—one that encompasses both in situ and ex situ strategies. Migration, when voluntary and well-supported, can be a dignified and empowering form of adaptation. It is not a failure to adapt, but rather a legitimate and proactive response to the existential threats posed by climate change. This perspective affirms the right of I-

Kiribati people to choose whether to remain in their homeland or to migrate, and to do so with dignity, agency, and purpose. As climate change continues to dominate Kiribati's development discourse, the concepts of adaptation and resilience have gained increasing prominence. However, resilience must be understood within the context of persistent and compounding vulnerabilities. It is not merely about withstanding environmental shocks, but about expanding the choices, capabilities, and futures of its people.

The findings of this research underscore a critical imperative: to fully realise the potential of migration as a resilience-building tool, migration pathways must be managed with foresight, equity, and long-term vision. This includes ensuring that labour mobility schemes are accessible to all segments of society, that they uphold the rights and welfare of migrants, and that they are integrated into broader national and regional climate adaptation frameworks. For Kiribati and other Pacific Island nations, this means aligning migration governance with the resilience agenda—recognising that mobility, when justly and inclusively managed, can serve as a cornerstone of sustainable development in the face of escalating climate risks. Building resilience in Kiribati is not solely about resisting environmental change—it is about enabling people to adapt and thrive in spite of it. Migration, as both a right and a strategy, must be embraced as part of a holistic, forward-looking, and culturally grounded response to the climate crisis. This thesis has demonstrated that adaptation is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a multifaceted process that must reflect the values, aspirations, and lived experiences of those most affected.

This concluding chapter returns to the political landscape in which this research was undertaken—shaped by the Australian Labour Party's return to office in 2022 and its renewed emphasis on Pacific Family diplomacy. The party's re-election in 2025 reinforces this commitment and signals a critical opportunity to move beyond diplomatic formalities toward a more substantive and enduring partnership with Pacific Island nations. This continuity in leadership brings with it heightened expectations for climate action that is genuinely inclusive, collaborative, and grounded in Pacific values.

In the lead-up to the earmarked Australia and the Pacific COP31, and amidst renewed commitments to Pacific Family diplomacy, Australia and its regional partners stand at a pivotal juncture—one that demands a decisive shift from symbolic gestures to transformative, community-led action. Embedding labour mobility within a just and inclusive climate agenda offers a tangible pathway to reshape the Pacific's future—not as a narrative of displacement and loss, but as one of resilience, dignity, and

shared prosperity. The question that has anchored this research—*Does labour migration in Australia facilitate adaptation, and if so, how?* —must now be situated within the broader resilience discourse in the Pacific. A critical question for future consideration emerges: *what is climate resilience and whose resilience is it?* Policy elites or geopolitical interests cannot dictate the answer; it must be co-authored with communities, grounded in their lived realities, cultural values, and aspirations for the future. Only then can climate adaptation transcend its technocratic confines and become a lived, relational process—one that honours the strength, wisdom, and sovereignty of Pacific peoples. As Kiribati and its neighbours chart adaptive pathways, the Te Waa framework reminds us that mobility is not merely movement—it is navigation shaped by purpose, values, and collective wisdom. In this light, Te Waa of future mobility must continue to paddle forward, guided by principles of inclusivity, adaptability, and resilience.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Australian
National
University

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2023/382)

{E a tia n kariaiakaki te kamatebwai aio bwa ena waki mairoun te Kura n Reirei ae Rietata ae te ANU ao n tia n kabwataki man te Komete (n nambwana ae 2023/382)}

(Attachment 1): A list of indicative questions for interviews

Below is a list of indicative questions to be used in the interview. It is acknowledged that conversations may evolve in a fluid manner in line with common semi-structured interview practice.

For Workers:

1. Tell me about yourself: Name, Age, Home Island.
2. Gender: Man _______
   Woman _______
   Non-binary _______
   I prefer the term _______
   I prefer not to say_______
3. How long have you worked on the scheme?
4. Do you enjoy your work on the scheme? List three things you like most about your work and three things that you find most challenging.
5. Is the scheme a good thing for you? And for Kiribati?
   a) Please explain why you say so.
   b) Name two skills that you learnt from the scheme.
6. What do you understand about:
   a) Climate change
   b) Migration
   c) How did the scheme empower you (or your family) to address climate change?

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Australian National University

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2023/382)

(Attachment 3): Participant Information Sheet

Researcher:

Akka Rimon, PhD Candidate, Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University.

Project Title: Te Waa of Future Mobilities in Kiribati: A model for adaptation to social, economic, and environmental stressors.

General Outline of the Project:

- **Description and Methodology:** I am conducting qualitative research to increase understanding of the underlying dimensions of mobility in Kiribati. I will be analysing two programs in Australia namely the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM), which is a labour mobility pathway) and the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI), which is a scholarship program for permanent migration).

- **Participants:** 150.

- **Use of Data and Feedback:** The data will be used to inform the thesis and address the hypothesis on how labour mobility facilitates adaptation to social, economic, and environmental stressors in Kiribati. It will also contribute to the academic scholarship on the climate-migration nexus, providing perspectives from Kiribati, one of the most vulnerable nations in the world to climate impact. It is hoped that the findings will inform the new Australia Pacific Engagement Visa.

At the start of the interview, the Researcher will make it known to the Participant on consent for the interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, if they wish to have the transcripts of the individual recording for review before the analysis is finalised. If so, the Researcher will share a copy of the transcript to the Participant via email at least 2-4 months after the interview to allow them to revise or correct statements before they are published.

After submission of the thesis, the Researcher will write to participants and thank them for their contribution, providing a summary of key findings and advise that upon acceptance, the final thesis will be lodged in digital form with the ANU Digital Theses Collection. Her contact would have already been shared with the participants from the time of fieldwork, but she will avail herself to participants at any point after completion of research should they have inquiries. In terms of the thesis proper, the Researcher will make this shareable

Appendix C: Information Email

Australian
National
University

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2023/382)

{E a tia n kariaiakaki te kamatebwai aio bwa ena waki mairoun te Kura n Reirei ae Rietata ae te ANU ao n tia n kabwataki man te Komete (n nambwana ae 2023/382)}

(Attachment 2): Information Email

Date:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Request for Interview: Climate Migration

Mauri and greetings from the Australian National University in Canberra.

My name is Akka Rimon, I am an I-Kiribati woman, currently undertaking PhD studies in Regulation and Global Governance focusing on climate migration. My research aims to understand how labour mobility can provide an option for climate-displacement in Kiribati. It is inspired by the concern over the lack of international protection and international law for climate-displaced communities like Kiribati.

To increase understanding in this field, I wish to request an interview with you to discuss your views on migration and the role that it could play as an option for adaptation. This is part of a broader fieldwork that I am conducting at selected sites in Kiribati, New Zealand and Australia. Please note that the interview will be one-on-one (face to face) and will last up to an hour. I attach the Information Sheet for full details.

Thank you for your time and hear from you soon.

Kind regards,

Akka Rimon

+61 475277849

Office number:61256039

Email: akka.rimon@anu.edu.au

Appendix D: Inquiry into Australia's Response to the Priorities of Pacific Island Countries and the Pacific Region

Submission: Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

ANU Institute for Climate, Energy & Disaster Solutions

This submission is the collated perspective of independent researchers that work at The Australian National University. The views and opinions expressed in this submission reflect those of the authors and contributors.

Lead authors: Jason Alexandra, George Carter, Mahealani Delaney, Stephanie Hadobas, Mark Howden, Kabin Maharjan, Mona Esmaeili Mahani, Lakshmin Mudaliar, Roslyn Prinsley, Akka Rimon and Liam Taylor

28 June 2024

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University)
CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

Hon Shayne Neumann MP
Committee Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

Dear Hon Shayne Neumann MP,

Please find enclosed a submission by the ANU Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions (ICEDS) to the Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

Based in the ACT, ICEDS connects industry, governments and communities with climate, energy & disaster-risk research from The Australian National University (ANU). Our goal is to advance innovative solutions to address climate change, energy system transitions and disasters. We facilitate integrated research, teaching and policy engagement across disciplines.

Our submission also complimented the submission made by the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs, the leading international centre for applied research on the Pacific.

The enclosed submission contains contributions from experts in transformational adaptation, pacific studies, food systems, climate science and disaster solutions.

Our network of ANU researchers will gladly offer further consultation.

Sincerely,

Professor Mark Howden
Director, Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions

TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University)
CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

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TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12002 (Australian University)
CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

Executive Summary

The Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions (ICEDS) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region. This submission evaluates Australia's climate support and initiatives for mitigating climate change and assisting Pacific nations in adaptation, as well as its role in supporting Pacific nations during disasters and emergencies. Additionally, it identifies opportunities for enhanced and deeper Australia-Pacific climate engagement.

Australia has a shared history, culture and geography with the Pacific which underscores our commitment and responsibility to working with the Pacific in responding to the effects of climate change impacts. As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia has a shared responsibility to the Blue Pacific where all have agreed that "climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific." On the international level, Australia has also committed to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

The 2015 Paris Agreement aims to limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C, with efforts for 1.5°C. However, current projections indicate a rise of 2.5-2.9°C this century. The Pacific advocates for a 1.5°C limit to reduce catastrophic risks to Pacific communities. Currently, at 1.2°C of warming on a decadal basis but noting the past 2 months are 1.63°C warmer, the Pacific already experiences severe climate-related events such as king tide inundation, sea-level rise, cyclones, marine heatwaves and drought. If emissions continue unchecked, irreversible damage will increase, also putting immense pressure on development partners like Australia.

Pacific nations, contributing less than 0.03% of global emissions, are disproportionately affected by climate change. They face significant threats to their livelihoods and sovereignty due to climate impacts driven by emissions from other countries. Urgent action from countries like Australia, who identify as a member of the 'Pacific family,' is essential.

The primary risks to Pacific nations include water and food insecurity, reduced health and well-being, loss of cultural cohesion and biodiversity, economic decline and the potential inhabitability of islands. Hence, climate action should be central to Australia's response to the Pacific. There is a strong expectation by Pacific nations that Australia must align its emissions reduction efforts with its Pacific commitments and take significant steps toward them.

This submission recommends that:

1. Urgent climate action be central to Australia's engagement and response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.
2. The effectiveness of all other efforts in the region could be assessed in the context of rapidly growing climate-related risk.
3. Australia can accelerate domestic and exported emissions reduction to improve the relationship between Australia and Pacific nations and the efficacy of Australia's other development investment in the region.
4. Australia could strategically partner with Pacific Island nations to support their ambitious renewable energy goals, leveraging its expertise and resources in sustainable energy system solutions.
5. The Australian government could:
    a. integrate climate change and disasters in existing migration programs as a criterion for granting visas.
    b. research the humanitarian impacts of international human mobility on Pacific Islanders remaining behind.
    c. establish a program or institution on climate/disaster preparation that disseminates information and trains new migrants.

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CRICOS Provider Code: 00120C

6. Adaptation projects could:
    a. take a principled approach to maximise effectiveness and reduce chances of having perverse or unintended impacts.
    b. address priority areas articulated by Pacific nations
    c. continually ramp up the quality and quantity climate finance, which will enable key priority areas to be addressed
    d. provide capacity building support for loss and damage assessments
    e. consider the context of projected warming, as the efficacy of adaptation actions reduces with a warming climate.
7. Australia's response to disasters and emergencies in the Pacific can prioritise long-term, locally led resilience building, valuing Traditional Knowledge and with equitable and culturally appropriate interventions.
8. The Australian Government can strengthen their response to climate change in the Pacific by:
    a. foregrounding First Nations and Pacific Islander voices in the design and delivery of COP31
    b. continuing to support the Pacific with IPCC engagement
    c. developing executive education programs that can fill a needs gap for upskilling in climate, energy and disasters

Climate Change: Current and Future States

Pacific Island nations are on the frontlines of climate change while being amongst the least responsible for causing it, contributing less than 0.03% of total historical emissions.[1] It is important for this fact to be central to discussions as it highlights the gross injustice faced by the Pacific, whereby their livelihoods and sovereignty are being undermined and threatened by climate impacts driven by emissions generated by other countries. Addressing this requires proportional action from countries like Australia who are partly responsible for climate change, who can provide support to dealing with impacts from it and who identify as a member of the 'Pacific family'.

The global community have committed to acting on climate change through the 2015 Paris Agreement, with the overarching goal to hold "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" and pursue efforts "to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels."[2]

Despite this, we are currently on track for a global average temperature rise of 2.5-2.9°C above pre-industrial levels this century.[3] 2023 was the warmest year on record, with the global average near-surface temperature 1.45°C above pre-industrial levels. The past 12 months have averaged 1.63°C above pre-industrial levels.

The Pacific have been advocating for keeping climate-induced temperature rise to a maximum of 1.5°C.[4] While the Paris Agreement states 2°C warming as the limit for global warming, Pacific nations continue to push for 1.5°C as the target to strive for, highlighted in the Pacific-led campaign '1.5°C to stay alive'.[5] This is because we know that every increment of warming increases impacts and risks and this has particularly damaging effects for those on the frontlines of climate change, including Pacific nations. Pacific nations have rallied around the call for

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[1] ESCAP (2022)
[2] UNFCCC (2016)
[3] UNEP (2023)
[4] SPREP (2023)
[5] SPREP (2016)

limiting warming to 1.5°C as this offers the best chance of avoiding the worst climate impacts, including the existential risk to habitability in low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu.[6]

Although the threat to survival on the islands is often framed as the most prominent risk, there are numerous, complex and significant risks to Pacific nations that have and will continue to emerge in a warming climate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that climate change risks and impacts are "becoming increasingly complex and more difficult to manage. Furthermore, multiple climate hazards will occur simultaneously and multiple climatic and non-climatic risks will interact."[7]

Recommendation One: Urgent climate action should be central to Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

At the current temperature rise of 1.2°C, the Pacific are already experiencing severe climate-related events including king tide inundation, sea-level rise, back-to-back cyclones, crop productivity losses, marine heatwaves and drought, with many occurring earlier than what has been predicted by modelling.[8] If the key driver of the climate crisis (greenhouse gas emissions) is not addressed, irreversible loss and damages will continue to be felt in the Pacific and there will be immense pressure on traditional aid donors like Australia to be continually responding to climate-induced extreme events and impacts, including large humanitarian and disaster relief actions.

Key risks to Pacific nations include[9]:

- Water insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Reduced human health and well-being
- Loss of cultural cohesion
- Loss of marine and coastal biodiversity and fishery productivity
- Economic decline and livelihood losses
- Reduced habitability of islands
- Submergence of reef islands
- Loss of terrestrial, diversity and ecosystem services
- Loss of exclusive economic zone (EEZ) rights linked to land sovereignty in the case of sea-level rise submerging islands[10]
- Mass unplanned mobility and migration (including forced relocation and displacement)

[6] IPCC (2018)
[7] IPCC (2023)
[8] IPCC (2022)
[9] IPCC (2022)
[10] Gordon (2021)

Recommendation Two: The effectiveness of all other efforts in the region should be assessed in the context of climate risk.

Mitigation

Australian Government Responsibility for Mitigation

The IPCC have found that human activities have unequivocally caused global warming and this has primarily occurred through the combustion of fossil fuels.[11] In their latest assessment, the IPCC found that the remaining carbon budget to limit warming to 1.5°C was 80% used and will be completely exceeded by the GHG emissions generated from existing fossil fuel infrastructure alone.[12] This does not include fossil fuel projects still in the pipeline, those approved since 2020 or emissions since 2020, putting the carbon budget at serious risk of being exhausted in the very near future.[13] Therefore, new fossil fuel projects undermine our ability to limit warming to 1.5°C. Furthermore, there are very few carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies currently deployed on large scales that can offset the emissions generated from fossil fuel projects.[14] The IPCC's most recent Mitigation of Climate Change Report shows that CCS technologies are amongst the most expensive and least effective means mitigating against climate change.[15]

Given the current emissions trajectory outlined earlier in this submission, there is a need to continually ramp up ambition on climate mitigation. Particularly, there is an urgent need for the Australian Government's response to dealing with its own emissions to align with its position as a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, a signatory to the Boe Declaration of 2018 and a nation that identifies as being part of the 'Pacific family'. Furthermore, a phase-out of fossil fuels continues to be demanded by Pacific nations, highlighted by the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. This movement is spearheaded by Vanuatu and Tuvalu and has gained renewed interest and momentum. The treaty calls for a binding plan to end the expansion of new coal, oil and gas projects and a transition away from fossil fuels. For Australia, considering this treaty would not only demonstrate global leadership but also win favour in the Pacific where the governments of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Niue, Timor-Leste, Palau, Samoa, Nauru, Republic of Marshall Islands, Vanuatu and Tuvalu have all called for endorsement of this treaty.

Mitigation and International Diplomacy

Past inaction on climate change has had detrimental impacts on the relationship between Australia and Pacific Island Countries & Territories and there is a risk of future relationship strain if PICTs do not consider Australia to be acting ambitiously enough on this key regional issue. Particularly, a perceived lack of action on climate mitigation can undermine the Australian Governments' ability to receive widespread regional support for hosting COP31. For example, key civil society actors like the Pacific Elders Voice (comprising influential leaders from the region) have been critical of Australia's climate mitigation efforts, arguing that continuing approval and operation of fossil fuel projects contradict their commitment to the Pacific family and call for fellow Pacific Islanders to defer their support for Australia's COP31 bid until concrete action is seen.[16]

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[11] IPCC (2023)
[12] IPCC (2022)
[13] IPCC (2023); Lamboll et al (2023); Friedlingstein et al (2023)
[14] Rode et al (2023)
[15] IPCC (2022)
[16] Pacific Elders Voice (2023)

As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia has specific responsibilities to the Pacific to cut emissions in line with the aspirations of fellow Forum members. The Forum and Australia have agreed that climate change is the single greatest threat facing the Pacific.[17] The Forum has already stated that despite aspirations to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, current global commitments fall short of the reductions needed to meet temperature goals and due to this, the Pacific faces existential threats from rising sea levels and intensified climate hazards.[18]

Forum Leaders have continuously called for greater ambition to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Australia's commitment to reducing its emissions will be continually scrutinised by Forum members in line with this goal. Forum leaders have already called on Australia to support the Port Villa Call for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. If Australia truly does "aspire" to meeting this priority of the Pacific, Australia should consider urgent actions such as moratorium on projects.[19] By doing so, Australia can help prevent the worst impacts of climate change and uphold its role as a responsible and welcomed member of the Forum.

Recommendation Three: Australia can accelerate domestic and exported emissions reduction to improve the relationship between Australia and Pacific nations and the efficacy of Australia's other development investments in the region.

Mitigation in the Pacific

Most Pacific Island states have a heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels for energy needs; the volatile fuel prices, supply chain disruptions and transport costs to isolated islands are prohibitive. Despite this context, Pacific governments have set ambitions renewable electricity goals to be attained in 2020 and 2030. Australia should be the partner of choice in the Pacific's goals for energy transition through research, technical and financial initiatives. It will be long term investment, but it is an investment that could be connected to the transition (and lessons) from remoted and rural Australia.

Recommendation Four: Australia could strategically partner with Pacific Island nations to support their ambitious renewable energy goals, leveraging its expertise and resources in sustainable energy system solutions.

Adaptation

Detrimental climate change impacts are becoming increasingly apparent across the Pacific, leaving little doubt about the need for urgent and effective adaptation. Adaptation is critical for responding to climate change, particularly as there is a level of climate-related impacts already 'locked-in' due to historical emissions. Pacific nations face many barriers to adaptation, including a lack of long-term and easy-to-access financial resources, capacity constraints and the need for upgraded technologies. Australia can support Pacific nations adaptation priorities as they are often heavily reliant on external funding, as articulated in their Nationally Determined Contributions and accompanying National Adaptation Plans. For example, the Marshall Islands targets are 100% conditional on external support.[20]

Principles to guide adaptation projects

In a recent project, ICEDS evaluated ten Pacific Island adaptation projects funded by the Australian Government. Alongside this, the team undertook a literature review on evaluation of

[17] Boe Declaration (2018)
[18] Pacific Islands Forum (2024)
[19] ABC News (2023)
[20] NDC Hub (2022)

adaptation and good-practice adaptation finance. Given the context-specific nature of adaptation, clear investment principles can usefully help guide funding initiatives. The Australian Government can enhance project effectiveness and ensure the presence of social and environmental safeguards by adopting a principled approach to adaptation. Recommended principles for adoption are outlined below:

Table 1: Proposed principles for adaptation[21]

Principles	Description
Locally-led adaptation	The Australian Government is already embracing the concept of locally-led development. This approach ensures that communities directly involved in adaptation efforts are not merely consulted but are actively leading these projects. These communities possess unique social and environmental knowledge, making them best suited to understand what will work in their specific contexts. Additionally, local ownership of projects is crucial for their long-term sustainability.
Support subsidiarity – decision-making at the most local level possible	Subsidiarity is making the locus of decision-making for adaptation, including finance, as local as appropriate. Responsibility and authority should sit primarily with local institutions and communities, with other tiers of government involved at the scale that suits their mandates and capabilities.
Address structural inequalities and centre equity and justice	Adaptation initiatives should address structural causes of vulnerability. This means integrating approaches for addressing social, economic and political inequalities that are root causes of vulnerability. Effective long-term adaptation requires integrating considerations of equity and justice. Projects must be designed to benefit all populations, particularly vulnerable and marginalised communities, to be sustainable in the long run.[22]
Support long-term predictable funding	Support long-term development of local governance processes, capacity and institutions. Funding needs to be predictable, with long term commitments to stable programs. A lack of long-term funding can lead to maladaptation in projects, for example seawalls that do not have ongoing support for maintenance can lead to increased erosion, disrupt local ecosystems and end up not providing long-term protection against sea-level rise.[23]
Invest into local capabilities	Adaptation initiatives should enhance the capabilities of local people and institutions.

[21] Modified from Global Commission on Adaptation 2021)
[22] IPCC (2022)
[23] IPCC (2022)

Develop understanding of climate risk and uncertainty	Adaptation decisions need to be informed by local, traditional, Indigenous, generational and scientific knowledges.
Adopt flexible programming and learning	Enable adaptive management to allow for and address the inherent uncertainty in adaptation. Encourage a culture of learning and improvement.
Create transparency and accountability	Processes of financing, designing and delivering programs need to meet high standards of probity, transparency and accountability.
Collaborate on action and investment	Collaboration across sectors to ensure that initiatives and funding sources are synergistic.
Recognition and inclusion of different forms of knowledge	Adaptation programs can have stronger socio-cultural and environmental outcomes by incorporating traditional, local and Indigenous knowledges in project design and implementation. Traditional Knowledge encompasses the practices, innovations and wisdom developed by Indigenous and local communities through centuries of interaction with their environment. It is developed from a deep tapestry of experience, transmitted orally from generation to generation. It is deeply embedded in a community's cultural heritage, including language, rituals and social norms. Traditional Knowledge often takes a holistic view of the world by integrating all aspects of life, such as spirituality, social relationships and environmental stewardship[24].
Culturally and contextually appropriate:	Culture plays a crucial role in adaptation efforts in the Pacific, where interpersonal relationships and social cohesion serve as vital safety nets. Given that culture is an integral part of Pacific society, adaptation projects must be culturally appropriate, taking into account aspects such as customary tenure, chief and local leadership systems and culturally respectful methods of engagement.

Priority Areas in Adaptation

Climate Finance

Despite a significant quantity of climate finance being mobilised in recent years, the Pacific are still experiencing a significant shortfall in finance for adaptation, mitigation and losses and damages.[25] Stronger investment in climate adaptation in the Pacific is needed now and investing early makes strong economic sense for Australia. As a traditional aid donor in the region, Australia will continue to be called upon to support Pacific nations in responding to future climate-related impacts. Investment on adaptation and mitigation actions now will reduce the resources Australia needs to provide as aid in the future. As an example of the cost-savings of

[24] Berkes 2018
[25] UNDP (2021

early investment, UNEP estimates that globally every USD 1 billion invested in adaptation against coastal flooding leads to a USD 14 billion reduction in future economic damages.[26]

Mitigation strives to avert the extent of climate change, adaptation assists countries in dealing/coping with climate impact, whereas loss and damage acknowledges that significant impacts will persist regardless of mitigation and adaptation measures. Therefore, climate financing for 'loss and damage' should be separate from mitigation and adaptation funds. This framework and principle should be considered when designing climate financing for Pacific nations.

Agreement to establish a loss and damage fund was reached at COP27 in 2022, yet Australia still has not pledged any contributions into this fund.[27] Whilst Australia has committed funds to the Pacific Resilience Facility, current levels of commitments are negligible when compared to the scale of expected losses in the Pacific. In this way, loss and damage remains a key priority area for Pacific nations who have been pushing for the establishment of a meaningful fund for decades. The need for funding loss and damage becomes apparent when considering that there are limits to adaptation (explained more below) and a degree of climate-related impacts already 'locked-in' from greenhouse emissions to date.

While the details of the loss and damage fund are still being finalised, countries will need to be able to prove claimed losses and damages are attributable to climate change. Furthermore, the region will need to build loss and damage assessment capacity. Given this, Australia could support Pacific-led research now to collect data and conduct assessments that would support future attribution claims for when the fund becomes operational. However, it should be noted that there are many losses that cannot be accounted for in economic terms, such as loss of connection to ancestral land and inability for future generations to visit their homelands.

Climate Mobility

Climate change presents the single greatest threat to the security and prosperity of our Blue Pacific Continent. The world is no longer on track in keeping the global temperature rise below two degrees Celsius. This begs the question: if the global system isn't delivering – how can the Pacific prepare itself? Climate change transcends our borders and will continue to undermine our ability to grow food, access clean and fresh drinking water, and trigger the mass movement and relocation of our Pasifika peoples from their homes. The existential threats of climate change will affect our homes, our way of life, and our very survival. According to Pacific Security Outlook Report for 2023-2024[28], all global climate indicators – greenhouse gases, temperature, ocean heat and acidification, and sea level rise – will continue to increase and challenge livelihoods, the blue economy, and put pressure on our resources — our food, water, and health systems which in turn induce conflict and unrest, and indeed erode the resilience of our vulnerable groups and governments. The 2010 UNFCCC Cancun Framework for Adaptation reinforced this and in 2018, climate was embedded in the Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. This recognition for climate impact on mobility signals concerning trends that migration will continue to be shaped by climate events and demands political leadership and commitment.

Climate change will affect mobility trends and challenge our cultural and national sovereignty and regional stability. We need Australia's political commitment and leadership to inform proper management and preparation for the safe movement of Pacific peoples, and the development of protection mechanism to ensure safe, prosperous, and secure labour mobility and permanent migration programs.

[26] UNEP (2023)
[27] Morton (2023)
[28] PIFS & Pacific Fusion Centre (2024)

While movement across the Pacific Region is often economically driven, climate change has the potential to shift the migration landscape significantly and drastically. Pacific islanders will leave their countries in droves seeking secure homes and livelihoods elsewhere. This requires without a doubt, proper policy discussions, preparation, and future-mapping. The Falepili Treaty between Australia and Tuvalu has raised queries and will continue to raise expectations of low-lying nations who also seek a similar pathway for climate adaptation. In the same vein, the Pacific Engagement Visa questions Australia's genuine Pacific diplomacy and climate leadership, especially as the visa quota numbers are not reflective of intentions to support low-lying nations, most vulnerable to sea level rise. What does this mean for Australia's Pacific Family concept? Is Australia building an inclusive mobility pathway that benefits everyone in the Pacific or only those countries that align to its diplomatic interest? Furthermore, is the region, including Australia, ready to a future defined by mass movement, forced relocation and displacement? There is no time more critical, than today, to address this looming crisis.

Human mobility has always been a traditional coping strategy in the Pacific. It allows Pacific households to withstand economic, political and climatic shocks. More specifically, safe, regular, and orderly mobility pathways enable them to improve their living standards, escape political instabilities, and build resilience to withstand climate adversities. At present, Australia has the following Pacific-specific international migration programs:

Pacific-Australia Labour Mobility Scheme, which recruits semi-skilled and low-skilled Pacific workers between 9 months to 3 years for the agricultural, horticultural, viticultural, meat works, hospitality and aged-care industries.

Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships, which offers Pacific students an opportunity to obtain internationally recognised qualifications and serve their home countries following completion.

Pacific Engagement Visa, which allows all Pacific Islanders to permanently reside in Australia and build diaspora communities.

Special Mobility Pathway under the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty, which enables Tuvaluans to live, study and work in Australia.

These programs have provided several development benefits, including addressing labour shortages, elevating youth unemployment, establishing small businesses and investing in education. Importantly, they have contributed to national disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building efforts in Australia and the Pacific. For instance, Fijian seasonal workers assisted with emergency evacuation during the 2022 Lismore Floods[29] while others helped save trees, homes and irrigation infrastructure during the 2019 Bushfire that affected Northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland.[30] Samoans, Ni-Vanuatu and Fijians sent higher remittances to non-migrant relatives,[31] made monetary donations,[32] and sent in-kind relief[33] during the 2009 Upolu Tsunami, 2015 Tropical Cyclone Pam and 2021 Tropical Cyclones Yasa and Ana. Remittance-receiving families have invested in solar panels and strengthened house structures. In addition, remittances can be an alternative funding source for climate relocations, and the new skills may encourage crop and income diversification.[34]

Nevertheless, existing programs have several shortcomings, adversely impacting their positive impact on climate resilience in the Pacific. First, climate change and disasters are not explicitly written into existing initiatives. Tuvaluans and I-Kiribati are highly susceptible to climate risks

[29] PALM Scheme (2023)

[30] Mangan (2019)

[31] Le De et al (2015)

[32] Kate (2021)

[33] Bailey & Shiu (2016)

[34] Dun et al (2023)

(e.g. coastal erosion, inundation of farms, and salinisation of freshwater lenses), inevitably affecting island habitability. Most people want to remain on their ancestral lands, but many engage in temporary labour and international upskilling schemes to accumulate resources (i.e money and knowledge) for in-situ adaptation. Others choose to migrate permanently to protect future generations. The integration of environmental stressors as a criterion for granting visas will ensure their needs are met.

Second, the absence of able-bodied youths is affecting disaster response, recovery and resilience in the region.[35] During disasters, able-bodied youths perform first responder duties, including aiding the elderly, children, and persons with disabilities with evacuations. Following disasters, they assist with recovery efforts such as cleaning the debris and reconstructing damaged buildings. Existing migration programs positively select the working-age population (i.e. 18-45-year-olds) in good health, depleting Pacific communities of their first responders. Little is known about the humanitarian impacts of cross-border human mobility thereby warranting further investigation.

Third, access to climate/disaster information/training for new migrants is limited. The Pacific diaspora, associations and churches assist them with integrating into Australian society but are over-capacity and sometimes overlook preparedness support. Pacific Islanders possess the expertise and are experienced in disaster response and recovery, specifically extreme weather events (i.e tropical cyclones and flooding) and geophysical hazards (i.e earthquakes and volcanic eruptions). However, they are new to bushfires and lack information on, for example, how to minimise its spread and prepare for evacuation. Hence, the government should set up a program/institution focusing on climate/disaster preparation at the state level. It should provide information on Australia's environmental risks, support services, and eligibility criteria for accessing such services.

Recommendation Five: The Australian government could:

- *integrate climate change and disasters in existing migration programs as a criterion for granting visas*
- *research the humanitarian impacts of international human mobility on Pacific Islanders remaining behind*
- *establish a program or institution on climate/disaster preparation that disseminates information and trains new migrants.*

Climate Resilient Food Systems

Food systems in the Pacific are highly vulnerable to climate change, taking into account both socio-economic and biophysical factors.

A significant portion of Pacific Island populations, such as 80% in Papua New Guinea, depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.[36] Coastal fisheries are also crucial, with 97% of the Pacific population (excluding PNG) relying on them as a primary protein source.[37] Climate change threatens these food systems through reduced fishery productivity, shifting fish distributions and compounding human pressures like overfishing and pollution. Additionally, diverse ecological and socio-cultural contexts influence farmers' needs and preferences, with factors such as gender, age, education and income further impacting how they are affected by climate change.[38]

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[35] Westbury (2022)

[36] Trudinger et al (2023)

[37] Veitayaki (2021)

[38] Friedman et al (2022)

Pacific Island Countries and Territories already face food security and nutrition challenges exacerbated by climate change, globalisation and supply chain disruptions. Climate hazards such as storms, extreme weather events, temperature changes, precipitation variations and sea-level rise consistently impact food systems. An ICEDS review of research on climate related threats to food systems revealed that Pacific food systems were already experiencing many impacts of climate change including reduced crop growth, reduced fishery catch, loss of land, saltwater incursion and increased pests and diseases issues.[39] A holistic approach, integrating local and Traditional Knowledge with scientific insights, is critical for building climate-resilient food systems. For instance, ICEDS project in Papua New Guinea combines Western climate and agriculture knowledge with traditional practices to enhance food security through climate-smart agriculture, demonstrating the importance of a systems approach to adaptation.

Water Security

Freshwater systems in Pacific nations are exposed to many diverse climate impacts and are among the most threatened on the planet.[40]

In Tonga and many other Pacific Island countries, traditional water sources and aquifers are increasingly strained, threatening both drinking water supplies and agricultural productivity. ICEDS received funding to deploy a state-of-the-art solar-driven desalination technology to pilot a sustainable solution to these urgent water security challenges and drought mitigation needs.

The desalination project addresses critical water security risks in the Pacific, where communities face severe freshwater shortages exacerbated by climate change and extreme weather events. By delivering clean, desalinated water for agriculture, the project enhances food security, supports local economies and builds capacity and resilience against climate impacts. Continued investment in innovative water management solutions is crucial to ensuring the Pacific region can adapt to climate variability and secure reliable water sources. Demonstrating the viability and economic benefits of desalination for agriculture highlights the transformative potential of such technologies, emphasising the importance of sustained funding and support for these initiatives.

Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based solutions (NbS) are a sustainable approach to protect, manage and restore ecosystems to address societal challenges and benefit people and nature.[41] NbS have proven to be effective adaptation measures in the Pacific, offering numerous benefits for both the environment and local communities.[42]

Projects like the Tanna Climate Change Adaptation Project in Vanuatu exemplify the positive outcomes of NbS, focusing on ecosystem-based approaches such as restoring degraded forests and enhancing agricultural practices.[43] These initiatives not only help to reduce the impacts of climate change but also contribute to biodiversity conservation and improve the resilience of local ecosystems. The Pacific Ecosystem-based Adaptation to Climate Change (PEBACC+) initiative, implemented across Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna, further underscores the regional commitment to utilizing nature-based strategies to address climate challenges.[44] By integrating Traditional Knowledge with scientific approaches,

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[39] Trudinger et al (2023)
[40] IPCC (2022)
[41] SPC (2023)
[42] SPREP (2023a)
[43] Clarke, T. *et al.* (2019)
[44] SPREP (n.d.)

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these projects create sustainable solutions that are tailored to the unique environmental and cultural contexts of Pacific Island nations.

Moreover, NbS like Fiji's Ridge to Reef (R2R) project demonstrate the effectiveness of involving local communities in conservation and adaptation efforts.[45] This multi-partnership project works to improve climate resilience and sustain livelihoods by engaging local communities in protecting and managing their natural resources. Such involvement not only empowers communities but also ensures the long-term success and sustainability of adaptation measures. NbS provide a cost-effective and socially inclusive approach to climate adaptation, delivering multiple co-benefits, including enhanced ecosystem services, improved food and water security and strengthened social cohesion. By prioritizing nature-based solutions, Pacific Island nations can build resilience against climate impacts while promoting sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

Limits to Adaptation

While adaptation actions are certainly needed to deal with the fallout from climate change, there are 'limits to adaptation' which need to be accounted for. Limits to adaptation describe when efforts by various social actors to manage climate-related risks can only be effective up to a certain threshold.[46] Beyond this point, these risks become intolerable, resulting in significant and irreversible loss and damage.[47] Furthermore, the effectiveness of adaptation actions reduces with increased warming and the extent of residual risks increases, as do the chances of future unintended consequences.[48]

Limits to adaptation include 'soft limits' (i.e. where social, political or economic challenges hinder implementation) and 'hard limits' where no existing adaptation measures can effectively prevent losses and damages. Hard limits beginning at 1.5°C are projected for coastal communities reliant on nature-based coastal protection and for coral reefs.[49]

These limits to adaptation highlight why there is a crucial and urgent need for Australia to continually ramp up ambitious mitigation. At higher levels of warming, hard adaptation limits will emerge, for example, atoll nations becoming uninhabitable due to sea level rise and lack of sufficient freshwater. Support from Australia can help to overcome soft adaptation limits through adaptation funding, technology transfer, upskilling and provision of education and research.

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[45] UNDP (n.d.)
[46] Adger et al. (2009), Dow (2013)
[47] IPCC (2022)
[48] IPCC (2022)
[49] IPCC (2022)

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Recommendation Six: Adaptation projects should:

a) *be informed by the principles outlined in this section to maximise effectiveness and reduce chances of having perverse or unintended impacts*
b) *address priority areas articulated by Pacific nations*
c) *continually ramp up the quality and quantity climate finance, which will enable key priority areas to be addressed*
d) *provide capacity building support for loss and damage assessments*
e) *consider the context of projected warming, as the efficacy of adaptation actions reduces with a warming climate.*

Disasters and Emergencies

Climate-Induced Disasters

Pacific nations are among the most vulnerable in the world to natural hazards, exacerbated by climate change, facing frequent and severe events such as tropical cyclones, storm surges, flash flooding and changes in precipitation patterns.[50] Tropical cyclones are particularly destructive. In the South Pacific basin, tropical cyclones can form as far east as French Polynesia, with an annual average of nine tropical cyclones. Of these, approximately four cyclones per year reach severe intensity, classified as hurricane strength.[51] The number of tropical cyclones per season can vary significantly, with some seasons experiencing as many as sixteen.[52] These cyclones are being intensified by climate change and bring extremely strong winds, heavy rains and destructive storm surges, causing widespread damage to infrastructure, homes and agricultural land. For example, Cyclone Pam in 2015 and Cyclone Winston in 2016 resulted in significant destruction and economic losses.[53] In 2023, Pacific nations experienced back-to-back tropical cyclones, leaving communities with little time for recovery before disaster hit again. Over the coming 24 months, climate hazards are expected to worsen.[54] With increasing intensity of tropical cyclones (9 to 14 predicted for 2024) and the potential for drought and extreme rainfall in different areas, water and food security and agriculture will be impacted.[55]

Increased intensity and frequency of other extreme weather events, such as severe storms and flooding, compound issues of rising sea levels and further threaten the livelihoods and safety of Pacific people.[56] Given these risks, there is an urgent need for comprehensive and collaborative disaster response and recovery strategies in the Pacific, with Australia playing a crucial role. Australian military involvement can provide essential logistical support and rapid response capabilities during natural disasters, ensuring timely assistance to affected communities. However, coordinated disaster recovery and resilience efforts, supported by Australian aid, should focus on long-term and localised resilience building, infrastructure restoration and the empowerment of local communities.

Agency and Localisation

Australian aid to the Pacific has become increasingly politicised, privatised and contested, resulting in a donor-driven system that often fails to empower Pacific communities or reduce aid

[50] IPCC (2022)
[51] Savin, C. *et al.* (2020)
[52] Savin, C. *et al.* (2020)
[53] Chandra, A. *et al.* (2021)
[54] Pacific Islands Forum (2024)
[55] NIWA (2024)
[56] IPCC (2022)

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dependency.[57] The aid is often controlled by large organisations and can be seen to serve Australian interests, marginalising local Pacific companies and communities.[58] This approach can undermine genuine development and strip recipients of agency. To address these issues, substantial policy changes are needed, including reflecting on the lived experiences of aid, supporting transformative initiatives outside the current aid system and insisting on long-term, locally-aligned development or rejecting ineffective aid altogether.

Furthermore, development approaches in Pacific Islands often prioritise external Eurocentric knowledge over local and Traditional Knowledge.[59] There is a need to shift towards decolonising, localising and empowering locally-led initiatives in aid and development.[60] For example, during the aftermath of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, the predominant distribution of easily transportable and storable food items like rice, noodles and canned tuna addressed immediate food security but often failed to align with local dietary preferences or support long-term nutritional goals.

True localisation requires more than just policy statements or procedural checkboxes; it demands a fundamental shift in how aid organisations operate. It requires genuinely valuing local knowledge, structuring and empowering communities to lead their recovery efforts, ensuring that disaster responses are effective, respectful and culturally appropriate.[61] This shift from "community-based" to "locally led" efforts requires strategies driven by communities themselves rather than merely situated within them.

Inclusion

Disasters do not occur in isolation or randomly; they arise from intricate interactions among historical, social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts, each affecting individuals differently.[62] For instance, women are more likely to be vulnerable to hazards, not due to innate characteristics, but because of unequal power relations and structural inequalities. Understanding disasters requires comprehending the unique dynamics of hazards, exposure, vulnerability and adaptive capacity in a specific community.

Australia's support for Pacific nations during disasters and emergencies must begin with a clear understanding of who is vulnerable and why.[63] This includes identifying the hidden structures and mechanisms underlying vulnerability and recognising how risks are unevenly distributed among different social groups. Inclusivity and localisation of the Australian aid response are crucial to ensure that all affected groups are appropriately supported.[64]

Gender, disability and identities are diverse with different needs and people in the Pacific associate them differently compared to the Australian context.[65] Western approaches to gender considerations in disaster contexts do not adequately reflect the experiences and needs of diverse gender minorities in non-Western environments.[66] Similar issues exist in areas like caste and ethnicity, highlighting the risks of homogenising all as equally vulnerable. These complex issues need to be addressed to make disaster efforts genuinely inclusive in the Pacific.

[57] Taylor, D & Middleby, S. (2023)
[58] Taylor, D & Middleby, S. (2023)
[59] Meki, T & Tarai, J. (2023)
[60] Meki & Tarai (2023)
[61] Westoby, R. *et al.* (2020)
[62] Ballard, C. *et al.* (2020)
[63] Pulwarty, D & Riebsame, W (1997)
[64] Poudel, D. *et al.* (2023)
[65] Pulwarty, D & Riebsame, W (1997)
[66] Oliver-Smith, A (2010)

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By considering these factors, Australia can provide more effective and equitable support to Pacific nations during disasters and emergencies, ensuring that aid efforts are truly beneficial and empowering for local communities. Enhanced understanding of vulnerability, policy reforms prioritising locally-led initiatives, valuing indigenous knowledge, developing culturally appropriate interventions and addressing the diverse needs of different social groups will collectively contribute to more resilient and empowered Pacific communities.

Recommendation Seven: Australia's response to disasters and emergencies in the Pacific should prioritise long-term, locally led resilience building, valuing Traditional Knowledge and equitable and culturally appropriate interventions.

Climate Security

Climate security refers to the intersection of climate change impacts and national or regional security challenges.[67] In the Pacific, climate security encompasses a broad range of human security issues, including the displacement of communities due to rising sea levels, the loss of livelihoods from declining fish stocks and increased competition over scarce resources such as fresh water and arable land.[68] Environmental and climate stressors can exacerbate existing social and economic vulnerabilities, leading to heightened tensions and potential conflicts within and between communities.

The Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide highlights how extreme weather events, such as tropical cyclones and prolonged droughts, disrupt food and water supplies, damage infrastructure and strain government resources.[69] These disruptions can undermine political stability, fuel gender inequality and violence, drive migration and challenge the governance capacities of Pacific nations. In this way, climate change is considered the pre-eminent Pacific security challenge under the Boe Declaration, which Australia is a signatory to, emphasising its critical importance to regional peace.[70] Australia plays a key role in the regional security architecture by providing leadership, resources and support for collective security efforts.[71] Despite this political awareness and impetus, there is limited research and policy action that defines climate security.

Climate Security is an urgent political agenda that requires collaborative multi partners to define and implement simultaneously policy actions. One approach would be to explore how climate mitigation and adaptation should be considered as key tools in addressing security challenges in our region. Research centres and researchers at The Australian National University have long term collaborations with national and regional organisations are in unique positions to convene and carry out dialogues, capacity and capability training, research among Australian and Pacific national security and climate change communities of practice.

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[67] Pacific Islands Forum (2023)
[68] Carter, G. (2020)
[69] Pacific Islands Forum (2023)
[70] Boe Declaration (2018)
[71] Wallis, J. *et al.* (2022)

Opportunities for Australia-Pacific Climate Engagement

Pacific Led Climate Research

Pacific-led research and interdisciplinary initiatives play a vital role in empowering Pacific communities to address climate challenges The Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) and ICEDS at The Australian National University models this approach through their commitment to conducting research that is deeply rooted in the priorities and perspectives of Pacific communities. By integrating diverse academic disciplines and collaborating closely with local stakeholders, researchers ensures that research outcomes are relevant and beneficial to those directly impacted. This collaborative model not only enhances the capacity of Pacific communities to respond to climate change but also supports the preservation and promotion of local and Traditional Knowledge systems. Empowering local researchers and leaders through such interdisciplinary efforts is crucial for developing innovative, culturally appropriate climate and disaster solutions.

COP31 and Australia-Pacific Climate Diplomacy

A global conference on climate change, requires the country's national university and its wide network to convene and frame a global goal or agenda on climate education and research. If Australia's bid is successful, COP31 presents a unique and significant opportunity to make collaborative and meaningful progress in mitigation, adaptation, finance loss and damage, and just transitions. The process for how COP31 is pursued will be a defining factor in both parties considering the conference to be a success. For this to happen, Australia will need to create unique diplomatic spaces and practices that work with the Pacific in making key decisions about the conference. This includes the Presidency work and thematic agenda, the physical layout of the blue and green zones, the appropriate and cultural-sensitive incorporation of Indigenous and Oceanic Diplomacy in the decision-making process of the conference to name a few. One suggestion is for there to be a co-presidency, with both an Australian Government president and a Pacific Islander president.

COP31 presents an opportunity for The Australian National University to showcase and leverage its climate expertise through the Institute for Climate, Energy & Disaster Solutions and its Pacific studies expertise through the Department of Pacific Affairs and the Pacific Institute. Projects such as the Pacific Climate Diplomacy for more than five years assisted in the strengthening of Pacific leaders and officials negotiating capacity in the UNFCCC. This project is not only embedded within Pacific climate negotiation processes, but also recognised and sought after by Australian ministers, officials and wider public to inform engagement with the Pacific. This has led to the natural evolution of the project as a 'research and education broker' to harness Australia-Pacific relations in climate negotiations, showcase collaborative initiatives from this region in UNFCCC platforms in the areas of adaptation, finance, local community and Indigenous peoples, gender, youth and climate justice, as well as dialogues at the Pacific regional level. Moreover, ANU has for many years convened and participated in various Australia, New Zealand and Pacific university networks in climate change research and education. Such climate university networks are essential in marshalling a global response and narrative needed for COP31.

Executive Education

Pacific nations continue to actively and strategically prepare themselves to address ongoing challenges related to climate change, energy transitions and disasters. There is an urgent

opportunity to provide executive education to the numerous practitioners and policymakers working on climate, energy and disaster solutions across Pacific Island Countries & Territories. To develop and implement appropriate responses and solutions, people need access to the most recent climate and ocean observations, meaningful and useable projections across systems of interest, information on practical climate adaptation and emission-reduction measures and innovations paired with traditional, local and place-based knowledge to inform their decision-making. Furthermore, education spaces can foster learning amongst participants as they facilitate the sharing of best practices and lessons learnt.

Key regional documents including the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) outline education as a key priority area for policymakers and practitioners, including in the fields of climate-related change, the energy transition and disaster management. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a demand from professionals across the region to engage in higher education on these topics and to be recognised for this learning through credentials awarded by universities, for example through micro-credentials. This is a program idea the Australian Government may wish to consider funding. Furthermore, the Government may be interested in funding Master program scholarships for Pacific Islander students with a view to complete by/during 2026 (COP31). These programs would support regional collaboration through climate literacy and research and build Pacific capacity in these respective areas.

There is an opportunity for us to add value to existing executive education programs in the region where we already have connections with organisations that would be key partners including the SPREP Pacific Climate Change Centre and the Pacific Community (SPC). This is a great opportunity to support the Pacific through Australian research and professional development capacity.

Regional IPCC Collaboration

The Australian Government has previously supported Pacific nations engagement with the IPCC through an *IPCC Pacific engagement outreach* project and *Consultation on strengthening* Pacific *representation and engagement in the IPCC*. Both projects were coordinated through ICEDS. Through this project our Institute consulted with more than 180 participants from across the region and heard resoundingly that there was an appetite to strengthen Pacific Islands engagement with the IPCC, but resourcing and support were barriers.

The Pacific Climate Change Centre (PCCC) was an instrumental partner in this project and have been funded by the Australian Government to carry part of this work forward. Specifically, PCCC will be acting as a secretariat to coordinate regional IPCC focal points and facilitate applications for articles to be included in reports and for various IPCC roles. PCCC have expressed to ICEDS that they would like to continue the momentum and build on existing work between our two organisations. They have requested ICEDS to play a key role in supporting continued IPCC Pacific outreach and engagement. However, the most recent project involving ICEDS was completed in mid-2023 and there has not been funding to continue this essential piece of work. This is an area the Australian Government may wish to consider funding, which could also form as a key channel for engagement around COP31.

Recommendation Eight: The Australian Government strengthen their response to climate change in the Pacific by:

- *a) working with First Nations and Pacific Island stakeholders (leaders, officials and universities) in the convening, design and delivery of COP31*
- *b) continuing to support the Pacific with IPCC engagement*
- *c) develop an Executive education program that can fill a needs gap for professional education in climate, energy and disasters.*

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Appendix E: Submission made to the Australian Government on the Migration Amendment (Australia's Engagement in the Pacific and other Measures) Bill 2023, and the Migration (Visa Pre-Application Process) Charge Bill 2023

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This submission is made by the following Blue Pacific citizens and PhD candidates from the Department of Pacific Affairs of the Australian National University (ANU), namely: Natasha Turia Moka, Akka Rimon, Michael Kabuni and Jope Tarai.

We welcome and endorse the necessary legislative changes into the Migration Amendment (Australia's Engagement in the Pacific and Other Measures) Bill 2023 and the Migration (Visa Pre-application Process) Charge Bill 2023 for a Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV). We also put forward the recommendation to consider the application of a Pacific Mobility Index (PMI) to further strengthen the delivery of the PEV that can be used at the discretion of the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs.

The comments and views expressed in this submission are only that of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the individual countries of which we originate from or the institution we are affiliated to. Nor do we claim to reflect the wider regional views of the Blue Pacific continent. It is our interpretation of the Blue Pacific strategy as the guiding principle that promotes transformative engagements in the region as citizens of the Blue Pacific continent and indigenous Pacific scholars.

Position

This submission addresses two key elements of this Bill and its implementation in the Blue Pacific continent:

1. Our support of the Bill in advancing and strengthening Australia's relationship in the Pacific through greater open and fair permanent migration access schemes delivered through a "visa pre-application" or ballot process for a PEV.
2. Provision of additional guidance regarding any discretionary powers that may otherwise be used by the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, through an index that we are introducing as the **Pacific Mobility Index (PMI)**.

Blue Pacific narrative

How Australia chooses to navigate itself in the Blue Pacific continent amid the geo-political pressures, will lie solely on its ability to demonstrate that it is indeed part of the Pacific family. "Pacific diplomacy" through established channels of consultation that promote the interests of Pacific Island countries with Australia must be at the fore. Australia's proposed PEV would be a historical opportunity to demonstrate such sincerity and recognition of the diverse cultures, peoples, histories and environments of the Pacific. This diversity provides significant challenges and opportunities.

Australia's tied relationship with the Pacific is underpinned by its geo-graphical proximity, historical engagements and ongoing partnerships. Advancing Australia's relationship in the Pacific has now reached a new level of engagement with the issue of mobility. Fundamental to this emerging agenda, is the need for collaborative participation and engagement between Pacific stakeholders and Australia. Further consultation is required with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, South Pacific Regional Environment Program, and the South Pacific Commission.

Pacific Mobility Index (PMI)

Reaffirming the Australian Government's priorities and commitments to the Pacific, we introduce and put forward a PMI that reflects the competing priorities of PICs that can be administered through the Minister's general powers. For the purposes of this submission, we introduce only the first three key indicators: **climate vulnerability, diaspora population and historical ties.** This builds on the need for Australia to be more selective in how it distributes

the PEVs[1] where the narrative for new regional compact [2] is dawning. Upon careful and respectful administration of the PMI through an algorithm that enables scoring and ranking against each of these indicators[3]. Australia will be able to achieve a fair and proportionate distribution of PEVs across the region. This is a proactive response to the competing priorities experienced by countries in the Blue Pacific continent. We strongly believe that by providing this additional guidance through a PMI, it will help address the *"primary and immediate purpose of the Bill"*, which is stated to *"strengthen country to country ties; support wider mobility…assisting the future regional response to climate change pressures…"*

1. **Climate vulnerabilities**

Climate change is the single greatest threat in the Blue Pacific continent. According to the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Synthesis Report, climate change is accelerating at a rate and frequency higher and more intense than before. The report confirmed that the world is 1.1 degrees warmer meaning there is a very thin margin between where we are now and the desired 1.5 degrees level that the Pacific has widely advocated for, but also more critically the overshoot that we are likely to cross over, if the world fails to act now. While climate change is a global phenomenon, its impacts are inequitable, it is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in the Pacific, raising the question of climate justice for Pacific Island communities.

Legislating this Bill would demonstrate Australia's commitment in advancing the BOE Declaration and the 2050 Pacific Strategy to creating a prosperous, safer, and secure Blue Pacific Continent. Our proposed PMI recognises climate vulnerabilities and the wide ranging experiences it has among PICs in establishing a system that justifies re-allocation of PEV at the discretion of the Minister.

2. **Diaspora population**

The Pacific accounts for around 1% of the diaspora in Australia compared to China, England and India that rank in the top 10 of the diaspora population[4]. If Australia genuinely desires to be part of the Pacific family, there should be a strong and vibrant Pacific diaspora who are able to contribute meaningfully to both the Australian economy and their own home economies through remittance. Conventional migration schemes from Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) (even while undergoing significant reforms) and other pathways through family, work and refugees' status, have not proven successful in significantly increasing the Pacific diaspora. Australia can look to other successful permanent migration schemes such as the Diversity Visa program or commonly known as the "green card lottery" (United States of America) and Pacific Access Category (New Zealand) to strengthen their own PEV. Both the USA and New Zealand schemes aim to encourage permanent migration from nationalities who are underrepresented in their countries, and this is the case that Australia can redress by legislating the PEV, guided by our proposed PMI. It has the potential to increase the Pacific diaspora and strengthen Australia's commitment to the Pacific family.

3. **Historical ties**

Australia has a long-shared history and connection with the Pacific. This history includes its role with the Pacific in World War II, its colonial ties and the historical legacy of its commercial interests (extractive industry). Our PMI acknowledges and reflects the historical ties that Australia holds with the Pacific by ranking the extent to which its relationship with individual

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[1] https://devpolicy.org/pacific-engagement-visa-quotas-need-to-be-set-strategically-20220722/

[2] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8462.12468

[3] A scoring algorithm to rationalise and justify the results for rankings of each PIC in lieu of PEV is under development to ensure that visa quotas are fairly distributed

[4] https://devpolicy.org/pacific-islanders-in-australia-census-results-20230331/

PICs has evolved over time. Additionally, the legacy of Australia's commercial interests in the extractive industry as epitomised in the historical impacts of the extractive expeditions in the Pacific.

Most notably after World War II, Australia's (and New Zealand) involvement in mining phosphate in Nauru and Banaba through the Pacific Phosphate Company[5] resulted in forced migration of the people of Babana to Fiji, environmental destruction and health issues in Nauru. Similarly in PNG's autonomous region of Bougainville [6] , an Australian mining company's operations instigated a ten-year civil war which has decimated infrastructures and loss of lives.

These important and sensitive historical experiences of PICs and their relationship with Australia can be captured in how each country is scored and ranked in the PMI to inform the PEV. It will provide an opportunity for Australia to transform its historical ties to the Pacific, into a vibrant investment that prioritises the people of these Pacific countries, who share these connected histories with Australia. It provides a conduit for strengthened people-to-people relations through which both Australia and the Pacific have potential to dispense win-win benefits and greater understanding and security.

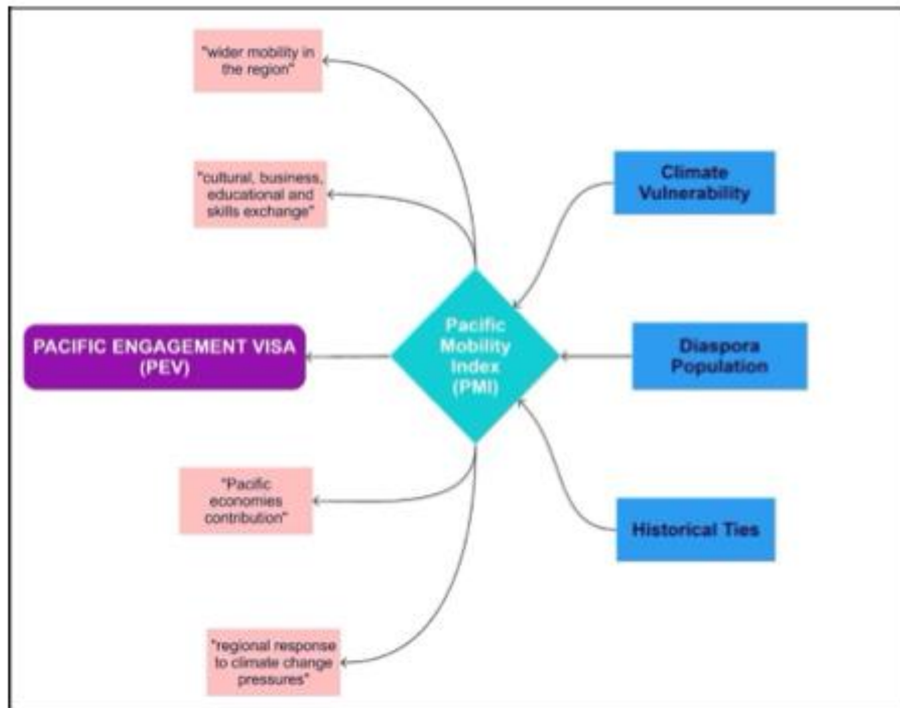

Diagram 1: Simplified flowchart of the PMI

The infographic above, outlines the initial three indicators of the PMI, and the four intended outcomes of the Bill in informing the fair and proportionate delivery of the PEV in the region. The full schematic outline and detail of the PMI is currently being developed for later

[5] Informed by Professor Katerina Teaiwa's work on phosphate imperialism and extraction in the Pacific - https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1031461X.2015.1082609

[6] Rio Tinto, Panguna Mine and the complaints lodged with the Australian government - https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/2022/4/4/devastating-impacts-of-rio-tintos-former-mine-going-under-the-microscope

publication. While we have not discussed the issue of brain drain, this is a dimension that can be incorporated into the PMI. Each of these Blue Pacific scholars have varying lived experiences that are embodied in these indicators, as they have worked, lived, and continued to survive in the Blue Pacific. As such, the intellectual labour and commitment in the PMI and the wider Pacific-Australia relationship is an embodied Blue Pacific contribution.

Conclusion

We, the Blue Pacific scholars, support and endorse the Bill for a ballot system to select eligible PIC citizens for the PEV. We also recognise the discretionary powers of the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs as stated in the Bill (page 4):

> "The Minister's general power allows the Minister to make administrative arrangements concerning the conduct of the ballot including, in particular, arrangements for the random selection of registered participants and the numbers of registered participants to be selected, having regard to the Australian Government's priorities."

The PEV would mark a historic step forward for Australia in forging its relationship with the Pacific as a family member who does not restrict pathways to permanent migration. The PMI informs the delivery of a fair and proportionate allocation of PEV across the Pacific, and we recommend its application by the Minister.

We stand on the shoulders of our Blue Pacific forebearers who have worked alongside generations of Australians in the recent past. We continue with this relationship by contributing this submission, in the hope that it will be considered to strengthen our forged relationship into the future.

Blue Pacific scholars

Natasha Turia Moka, *Papua New Guinea* PhD candidate, development practitioner and field builder for greater open and fair mobility access across the Pacific. .	
Date:	11 April 2023

Akka Rimon, *Kiribati* PhD candidate, former Government of Kiribati Secretary and researcher in migration and climate displacement.	
Date:	11 April 2023

Jope Tarai, *Fiji* PhD candidate, Pacific academic and Fijian scholar.	
Date:	11 April 2023

Michael Kabuni, *Papua New Guinea* PhD candidate, lecturer with the Department of Political Science at the University of Papua New Guinea.	
Date:	11 April 2023

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Appendix F: Navigating Te Waa of Positionality and Relationality

Akka Rimon: Navigating *Te Waa* of Positionality and Relationality

As an I-Kiribati person, I have frequently faced probing questions: 'Where do you come from?' and 'Where is that?' The ensuing exchanges often drag to more belittling investigations: 'Is it a country?' 'Why is it not on the map?' Subtle yet intense inquiries that sometimes diminish my sense of existence. My PhD journey, which began over two years ago, is motivated by a similar paradox: the lack of knowledge about Kiribati's existence despite its growing visibility due to climate change. The dichotomy challenged my worldview and resonated with Epeli Hau'ofa's framing of Micronesia, 'when they see a Micronesian island they naturally pronounce it small or tiny ... but if we look at the ... cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions' (Hau'ofa 2008:7). This emphasises the significance of Oceania's myths, legends, and oral traditions in shaping our understanding of the world.

Hau'ofa's assertion of Oceania as a thriving force of life and not an empty space underscores the significance of positionality and relationality in research, resonating with my purpose and driving my intended contribution to scholarship. By acknowledging Kiribati's importance, I assert its relevance, as a big ocean sovereign state (BOSS), an expansive blue continent whose location at the centre of the earth makes it a strategic focal point in global affairs today (Fujii-Takamoto 2022; Medina 17/7/2022; Morgan 2022). This realisation sets the stage for unpacking positionality, a crucial starting point for my inquiry.

Unpacking positionality, a personal reflection

As I delve into my PhD journey, I recognise the importance of acknowledging my positionality — who I am, where I come from, and what drives me in my work and aspirations. As an I-Kiribati woman, mother, and scholar, my identity is woven from the threads of my parents' origins: from Nikunau and Arorae in the south of Kiribati, to Marakei and Tarawa in the north, including Banaba, and Rabi Island in Fiji. Born and raised in Suva, Fiji, I navigated frequent moves between Kiribati and Fiji, forging a complex but established sense of belonging. My upbringing in a Christian family, my education, and lived experiences in both countries shape my worldview. Professionally, I have grappled with balancing national interests and competing development agendas in Kiribati, a nation marked by 45 years of aid, research, and development partnership, which has built to a certain degree the country's self-sufficiency, and, ironically, its dependency. Which begs the question: Despite efforts to decolonise from the constructs of colonialism, why is Kiribati

Figure 4: ***Te waa*****, Kiribati's most valued piece of architecture**
Source: Raimon Kataotao.

seemingly more dependent and entangled in the web of geopolitical relations today? (Connell 2002; Meki and Tarai 2023; Tawake et al. 2021; Taylor and Middleby 2023; Teaero 2001; Tong 2015).

As Beretitenti Sir Ieremia Tabai, Kiribati's first president, cautioned on the attainment of self-rule from the British administration in 1979, the true meaning of independence for Kiribati is to be self-reliant, 'It is better to subsist on your own than to rely on someone' (Scott 21/5/1989: para 3). Though tailored for the occasion of independence over four decades ago, this message rings as true and relevant today as modern-day Kiribati charts its path forward. This self-sufficiency versus dependency conundrum fuels my inquiry: How can research break cycles of external reliance? — which in the context of my research translates to: How can migration build economic and climate resilience? My positionality is rooted in two things: first, being I-Kiribati with firsthand lived experiences of climate change, which motivates my research in the field of climate mobility; and second, being Banaban with a resilient displacement history and a colonial legacy in Fiji, which informs my pursuit of climate options beyond borders. Acknowledging these dynamics is crucial for nuanced research. I recognise both privileges and unique experiences, and embrace the complexities of positionality in research conduct.

Te waa of positionality

Te waa (the canoe) holds profound significance in I-Kiribati and Pacific cultures, symbolising identity, history, and the resilience of Oceania's people. Crafted from ancestral knowledge, passed down through generations via song, myth, dance, and ritual (Grimble 1924; Mwemwenikarawa 1/2/2022 Whincup 2007), *te waa* embodies exceptional Kiribati workmanship and engineering of the highest standard in *te kaba* (canoe

building) and *borau* (the navigational process). Defined synonymously with life (Mwemwenikarawa 1/2/2022 *te waa* is more than just a piece of wood, 'it is a significant piece of architecture with a remarkable history' (Davies 12/3/2017: para 7). This powerful metaphor also inspires pedagogy, as Teresia Teaiwa envisions the canoe as a classroom (Teaiwa 2005, 2017) where the ocean itself becomes a library, from which knowledge and strength emanate and are navigated relationally, reflecting the spirituality of the interconnected Oceanian people with their *aba* (land) and *marawa* (ocean). The same ocean that Hau'ofa alerts us should unite and sustain the Pacific, not divide it as the hegemonic view of vast empty space implies (Hau'ofa 2008). In a similar lens, *te waa* profoundly represents Pacific value and indigeneity today, inspiring methodologies, studies, and policies to amplify Pacific people's voices and stories (Newport 2019), but also to link roots to routes as the impact of environmental deterioration increases prominently the potential of internal mobility (Yates et al. 2023).

Utilising *te waa* as a theoretical framework, I employ its intrinsic positional nature to navigate research investigations. *Te waa*'s purpose is to position the inquirer in relation to a suite of encompassing multifaceted factors including identity (ancestry, heritage), demography, and culture (age, gender, race, education, experience), and socio-economic dynamics (family size, employment). This positioning acknowledges fixed elements (race, identity, gender) and non-fixed elements (evolving beliefs, experiences), which intersect reflexively and subjectively, and which crucially recognise the inquirer's presence and their ability to gauge positionality in research (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022; Rabionet 2011; Scheyvens 2014). *Te waa*'s navigational essence enables researchers to do three vital tasks: first, identify biases and values; second, manage relationships and power dynamics; and third, engage reflexively as expected in qualitative research. The application of *te waa* centres an I-Kiribati Indigenous epistemology that highlights the significance of positionality and provides a nuanced framework for researching complex social contexts. As a navigating tool, *te waa* directs the way on the water towards a destination, be it a new fishing ground or a voyage of discovery to a new place altogether. Likewise, in research, a destination points to findings, decisions, policies, and knowing where the researcher or navigator stands on a subject of investigation, the direction or goal desired, and the dynamics that shape that journey.

For *te waa* to continually serve as a safe medium for livelihood and transportation, it must reflexively and routinely check that all its components are in good working order. As such, researchers are encouraged to be self-aware and attentive to the dynamics that shape their perspective or work environments. This enhances the researcher's ability to critically examine their influence on the construction and interpretation of knowledge (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022). *Te waa* as a positionality tool guides one's work in relation to other encompassing factors and towards a desired common goal and destination where epistemic and cosmologic influences are factored in. This is imperative, because development (or research) cannot be discussed without fully comprehending how a person thinks and behaves (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017).

Te waa of relationality

Relationality extends positionality by acknowledging interconnectedness and mutuality. It encompasses coexistence, belonging, and spirituality, binding individuals, communities, and the environment harmoniously. In Kiribati, relationality translates to a deep connection to *te aba* (the land), *maneaba* (a traditional meeting hall and governing structure), and *boti* (position in society as reflected in the *maneaba* seating) — where all live in peaceful coexistence (Talu et al. 1979; Uriam 1995; Whincup 2007). This whole of life philosophy (Vaai and Casimira 2024; Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017) in the Kiribati context is entrenched in the *maneaba* ideology, derived from two words: *mwanea* (to embrace) and *aba* (land). It signifies embracing the land and its inhabitants.

As a relational tool, *te waa* exemplifies sovereignty and communal wellbeing and its functionality relies on four core elements:

1. land and environmental resources that make up the substances that give it form;
2. collective expertise and contribution of elder and master builders, including women and youth;
3. ocean and the natural elements of wind and wave;
4. navigational skills through interpreting stars, birds, and clouds among others.

Similarly, relationality in research requires:

1. navigating dynamics and processes;
2. reading signs (contextual awareness);
3. developing situational awareness (knowing when to speak, act, or pause);
4. harmonious coordination between inquirer and participant.

Establishing relationality fosters mutual understanding, reciprocity, respect, and trust, and maximises research returns for all parties (Anae 2020; Tomlinson and Tengan 2016; Smith 1999).

Te waa provides a powerful metaphor for research relationality. On its own, it is ineffective; its purpose and functionality rely on the collective efforts of various actors. Each component — from the expertly woven *ie* (sail) to the carefully braided *kora* (coconut strings) that bind the structures — depends on environmental resources and skilled contributors. Even when fully constructed, *te waa* requires harmonious alignment with natural elements (wind, wave, clouds) and navigational expertise to set sail successfully. Similarly relational research demands careful navigation of complex dynamics. Researchers must:

- attune themselves to contextual signs (safety, validity);
- develop sensitivity to when to engage or pause;
- respect existing protocols and boundaries;
- foster reciprocal relationships, built on mutual understanding, respect, and trust.

Effective relational research mirrors the

synchronised movement of *te waa*'s components and the collaborative efforts of its builders. By embracing this approach, researchers can maximise meaningful outcomes by treading carefully with their own actions, in relation to those of the participants. As I navigate the research landscape, *te waa* inspires me to centre the voices and stories of frontline communities, often overshadowed by elite narratives. As a policymaker, development partner, or researcher — including myself — we can't fully grasp the economic and climate struggles of grassroots individuals. Acknowledging my role as an I-Kiribati insider, privileged researcher, and knowledge co-creator, I enter this space with humility, acknowledging that my education and experiences contrast with the lived experiences of the participants in my research. *Te waa* enables me to surrender my expertise, allowing participants to take the helm and guide me through their reality. By holding my hand and sharing their journey, they can help me build a deeper understanding of their resilience and navigational strategies for a climate-threatened future.

Te waa of mobility

In the climate security field, my research is deeply informed by *te waa*'s relationality and positionality principles, which help me understand climate-induced mobility from the perspective of the studied communities. Positionality and relationality serve as toolkits, guiding me to navigate biases, beliefs, and experiences throughout the research process. For example, *te waa*'s dual elements — *kaba* (the knowledge construction) and *borau* (the navigational process) — embody the resilience and adaptability of I-Kiribati people against the potential risk of climate displacement. Resilience, in whatever form it may be, is fundamental to my work, which argues that while rejecting apocalyptic climate vulnerability narratives is crucial to maintaining agency, the reality remains that certain aspects of Kiribati's geography render the country susceptible to climate change impacts (Rimon 2022, 29/9/2024). Thus, resilience begins from accepting a 'vulnerable–resilience' nexus as promulgated by Ballard et al. (2020) and McDonnell (2020). Building *te waa* symbolises constructing a future for these communities, which is an act of resilience. Each carefully crafted component of *te waa* represents the intricate relationships between culture, identity, and migration. Just as *te waa* sets sail with purpose to transport people between islands (migration) or to fish for the community (labour mobility), my research seeks to understand the complex journeys of I-Kiribati migrants, or decisions made by those who wish to remain in situ.

Te waa's spirituality and connection to land helps me appreciate the nuanced nature of migration — not merely in moving somewhere but notably in understanding its return element. Just as *te kaba* (canoe building) ensures the design of *te waa* allows it to always trace its path home or find land, so is the preparation for migration and informed futures. I-Kiribati may venture beyond their shores, but they always return home (circular migration/labour mobility) or find land where they can start life afresh (permanent migration). *Te borau* (the navigational process) guides me to explore the intersections of climate change, mobility, and cultural preservation, as human rights — to life, employment, migration, and culture, wherever I-Kiribati choose to go — and these rights should not be compromised, or confused with decolonisation, nationalism, and geopolitical elements. Through *te waa*, I recognise that migration is not a response to climate change but an assertion of I-Kiribati agency, resilience, and determination to chart their own course.

Broadly, as I-Kiribati meticulously craft canoes — carefully selecting and shaping each piece of wood to ensure seaworthiness and harmony with the ocean — researchers in academia build upon existing knowledge, carefully selecting and synthesising evidence to construct a sturdy framework for their findings. Both processes require patience, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of the materials and context. Just as a well-built *waa* can navigate the vast Pacific, a well-crafted research study can navigate the complexities of its field, providing a sturdy vessel for new discoveries and insights to emerge.

Conclusion

In today's complex research and development landscape, positionality and relationality serve as vital navigation tools, guiding researchers and practitioners in constructing knowledge while considering biases, values, and aspirations. By embracing these principles, researchers and policymakers uphold ethical standards, integrity, and reciprocity, effectively managing volatile power dynamics. As Kiribati, and the Pacific, navigate rising geopolitical tensions (Morgan 2022; Scott 2012; Wallis and Batley 2020), informed research and development play a crucial role in examining internal and external influences. Research and development empower Pacific Island countries to build their *waa* — assert their global presence and relevance — by adding value to academia, policy, development, and diplomacy in fostering Indigenous knowledge and agency. An endeavour where *te waa*'s principles of positionality and relationality are pivotal.

I conclude with a timeless proverb and song from Nonouti, my father's birthplace. It commemorates the triumphant completion of *te kaba* (canoe building) and the community's joyful celebration of this milestone as their *waa* sets sail. This wisdom from our I-Kiribati forebears echoes the research process and highlights the power of collective effort and shared achievement, resonating profoundly with us people of Oceania today, as we navigate the turbulent waters of national and cultural sovereignty, and socio-economic, geopolitical, and climate change challenges, charting our own course towards a resilient future.

E a tia te waa
E a tia te waa, E a bobonga raoi
A matoa nako bwaina ngkai
E kakaieie, ni biribiri
Inanon te nama i Nonouti

Tara aron butina ngkai
Tara aron birina ngkai
Tatanako iaon naona te naomoro
Ao ko a kan aki ooa mwina

Te waa is done, it is now complete
All parts are pieced and bolted
Elegantly, it glides, it runs
In the passage in Nonouti
Look, how it sails
Look, how it runs
Rapidly taking on the waves as they climb
So fast, you could lose its trail

Appendix G: Interview Data

How does climate change affect you?					
Site	SLR-Coastal Erosion	Food-Water Insecurity	Displacement	Extreme Weather	All
TUC	5	5	3	3	11
BTC	4	6	2	3	5
Marakei	3	5	5	3	4
Australia		8			12

How I-Kiribati define Labour Mobility?						
Site	Income	Prosperity	Self-Sufficiency	Diversified Income	Resilience	Overseas Employment
TUC	8	5	7	2	4	1
BTC	10	3	2	1	2	2
Marakei	11	3	3	1	1	1
Australia	10	5	2	1	1	1

The Social-Economic Dimensions of Climate-Induced Migration				
	Unemployment	Food/Water	Social and Economic Wellbeing	Dignity/Resilience
TUC	7	7	6	7
BTC	6	4	5	5
MARAKEI	6	5	4	5
AUSTRALIA	7	3	5	5

Collective Definitions of Sovereignty				
	Sustainable Employment	Can Support Children	Has a Business	Owns a Home
TUC	9	7	6	5
BTC	10	2	5	3
MARAKEI	8	7	2	3
AUSTRALIA	10	2	4	4