

**Thinking about (unin)habitability through a regionally grounded perspective:  
the atolls of Oceania**

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**Introduction**

The risk of atoll uninhabitability in the context of sea level rise is a well-known issue, often simplified to assume an inevitable mass exodus of atoll populations. However, during thirty years of this narrative, what has not happened on any atoll is any mass migration, either anticipatory of climate change impacts or in response to material conditions of problematic habitability (Mortreux et al. 2023). Knowledge of the ‘inevitable uninhabitability’ narrative is high among atoll populations, but they are neither passive victims nor reacting irrationally to the science of climate change risk (Jarillo and Barnett 2022). There is a more varied and complex set of factors contributing to this voluntary immobility in atolls. These include current and planned in-situ adaptation projects such as land reclamation, strengthening of culture, identity, sovereignty and self-determination in the face of climate risk, and ongoing cultural stewardship of place (Kitara et al. 2021; Kitara 2019; Kofe 2021). Atoll populations, in short, are far from demanding international migration or relocation solutions. Atoll people, as the well-known activist group the Pacific Climate Warriors describe it, are ‘not drowning but fighting’.

For ethical reasons, claims that an entire atoll nation will no longer be habitable due to climate change should not be made lightly, particularly as there is no such certainty in science (Kench et al. 2018). Yet dystopian narratives about atoll uninhabitability have been repeated over and over again, enabling an unscientific leap from risk to apparent certainty. The narrative of inevitable uninhabitability of atolls is persistent and powerful, appealing to colonialist and racist ideas about whether atoll people can or even should remain on their own islands. The narrative is harmful when it fails to include or respect in any meaningful way the cosmologies, practices, values and knowledges of atoll people (Farbotko and Campbell 2022). The narrative is operationalised in real ways, such as through a reluctance among donors to provide financial assistance for atoll development and in-situ adaptation (Bordner et al. 2020). The narrative of ‘inevitable uninhabitability’ is, arguably, an additional risk to the self-determination of atoll people, beyond climate change itself.

**Resisting the narrative of ‘inevitable uninhabitability’**

There is a strong will and desire among governments and citizens alike on atolls, for populations to stay put. Atoll people are actively remaking and reclaiming their climate change-threatened places, in both narrative and material ways. In the atoll nation-state of Tuvalu, for example, people are affirming their preference for Tuvalu to remain habitable and inhabited. Place in Tuvalu is being actively reclaimed in ways that suggest local knowledge of habitability is embedded in everyday life,

while national government policies and projects in Tuvalu also facilitate the nurturing of ongoing habitability. These include decades of lobbying the international community for emissions reductions, the prioritisation of adaptation in-situ, and the maintenance of state sovereignty: international relocation and a virtual, digital Tuvalu are officially options of last resort, while major land reclamation projects are underway to enable staying in place. Scholars from Tuvalu highlight the cultural risks of forced relocation and articulate on-going strong connections to place, at the same time as acknowledging existing economic international mobilities of many island people (Falefou 2017; Kitara et al. 2021; Kitara 2019; Lusama 2004). Both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, urban-rural migration occurred in Tuvalu (Kitara et al. 2020). Rural areas received an influx of internal migrants moving away from the capital, Funafuti – people who preferred to move to remote islands with little in the way of paid employment or formal services. They were in search of a revival of their Indigenous culture and health security as the pandemic took hold (Farbotko 2021). Such internal mobilities of people in Tuvalu are in part a resistance against the narrative of ‘inevitable uninhabitability’ that has been circulated about Tuvalu for three decades (Farbotko 2022; Farbotko 2023).

### **Understanding the meanings of habitability in a changing climate**

The social and cultural construction of habitability and uninhabitability of atolls in a changing climate needs more attention in light of the ‘inevitable uninhabitability’ narrative and resistance to it. A good starting point is to recognise that there is unlikely to be an objectively knowable or temporally discrete point at which an atoll place becomes uninhabitable. A social-cultural approach also recognises that uninhabitability is not only the result of environmental change and deteriorating material conditions, such as damaged infrastructure or reduced agricultural output. Instead, habitability—especially for subsistence and Indigenous societies—is also, in addition, intertwined with local knowledge, belief systems, cultural practices, and values (Farbotko and Campbell 2022). A socio-cultural approach recognizes that people do not just inhabit areas where resources are accessible or where livelihoods are available, but often live in locations that make sense within the specific history and culture of those who live there. A socio-cultural approach sees habitability and uninhabitability as relational to each other and to context, and understands that perceptions of each can vary over time.

Once habitability is seen to be a situated and contextual phenomenon, questions must be asked about who can and should have the power to define uninhabitability. Since the qualities that make a particular place acceptable to live in are culturally and historically specific, Western science - however helpful in identifying the material effects of climate change on atolls - is limited in the extent to which it can grapple with the potentially dynamic meanings and experiences of habitability among atoll inhabitants. Currently, very little about how atoll populations perceive and practice habitability in socially and culturally specific ways in a changing climate (eg. in customary housing or disaster resilience) is documented (an exception is Yarina and Niuatui 2017). Complex issues at stake, such as self-determination, political agency, religion, ancestral ties to place, and cultural identity have barely factored into assessments of habitability of atolls. Currently, the process of defining uninhabitability is either glossed over or ignored (under the ‘inevitable uninhabitability narrative’) or seen as largely as a technical undertaking for experts (eg. Barnett et al. 2022; Duvat et al. 2021). The former leaves much room for the exercise of power in pushing forward with solutions that fit with the worldviews and institutional interests of external experts and their funders. The latter has not, to date, centralized atoll people as experts. Atoll people’s systems of knowledge and governance are largely missing.

## **Ways forward**

Atoll people have long had the question of ‘when will they go’ dominate sensationalist debates about their future, rather than much broader questions of what does habitability mean to atoll people in a changing climate and how do atoll people perceive uninhabitability? This needs to change if just and equitable solutions to atoll habitability risk are to be achieved with external partners. The simplistic ‘inevitable uninhabitability’ narrative can and should be countered by a shift in problem framing and narrative focus: to atoll population’s own knowledge and governance systems. Centralizing these, the meanings of habitability among the affected people themselves can become clear. There is a role for the international community to help build, without dominating, culturally respectful and ethical spaces for affected populations to define the central concepts of habitability and uninhabitability that underpin knowledge and policy that affects them so significantly. Atoll people should be at the forefront of imagining their own futures, and so the power to define the habitability of their place should be in their hands.

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