



Agri-food systems knowledge and skills exchange between Australia and the Pacific through circular migration:

Experiences from Seasonal Worker Programme participants

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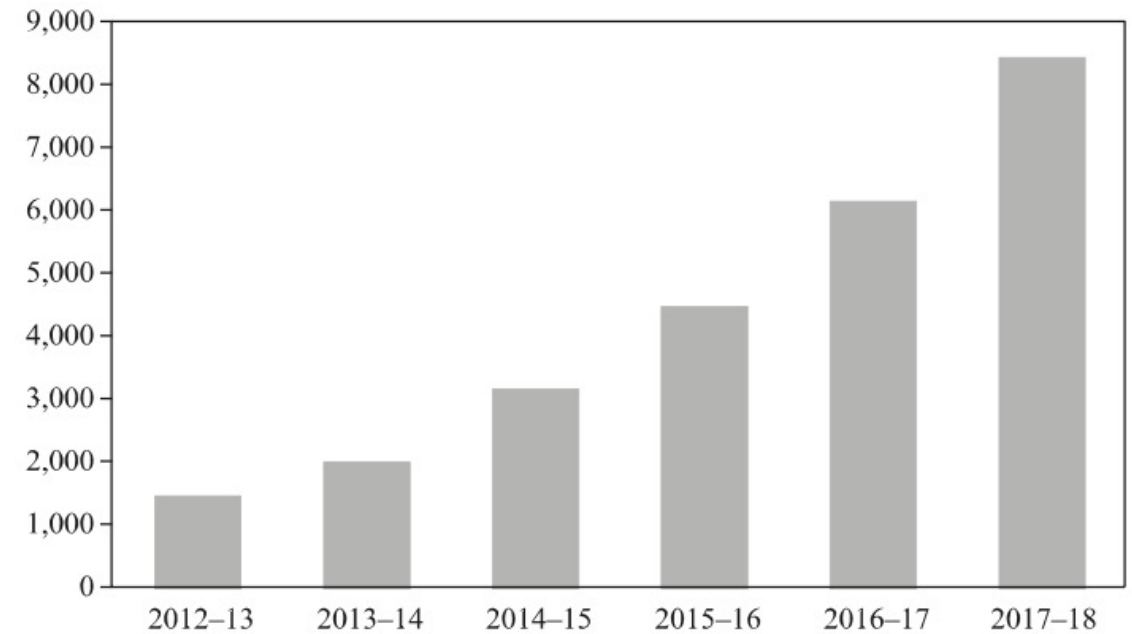
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Circular migration and agri-food systems

- COVID-19 unemployment in PICTs, regional focus on 're-opening' and agriculture as a driver of development
- SWP has been growing since 2012
- 60% of SWP participants work in Australia at least twice, 70-80% spending a second season
- 'Circularity' in migration provides benefits to worker and employer (i.e. continuity)
- Tonga and Vanuatu have high levels of SWP participation
- Solomon Islands SWP participation is growing
- All 3 countries (Tonga, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands) have high reliance on agriculture for livelihoods



Number of Seasonal Worker Programme visas issued each season (from Gibson and Bailey 2021, using DESE data)



Aim of the study

We aimed to identify the barriers to and enablers of agricultural skills and knowledge exchange between Pacific Islander and Australian farmers who are participants in the SWP

Policy relevance

Pacific labour mobility as a driver recovery from COVID-19 and support agricultural development in the Pacific.

Research partnership and data collection

- Research partners + farmer and community organisations with link to farmers:
 - Pacific Island Council of Queensland (PICQ)
 - Pacific Island Farmer Organisations Network (PIFON)

- In May-June 2021 conducted:
 - 63 semi-structured interviews in-person with current and former SWP workers (95% are smallholder farmers) from:
 - Tonga (n=22),
 - Solomon Islands (n=30),
 - Vanuatu (n=11)

 - 4 semi-structured interviews with Australian SWP employers in Queensland

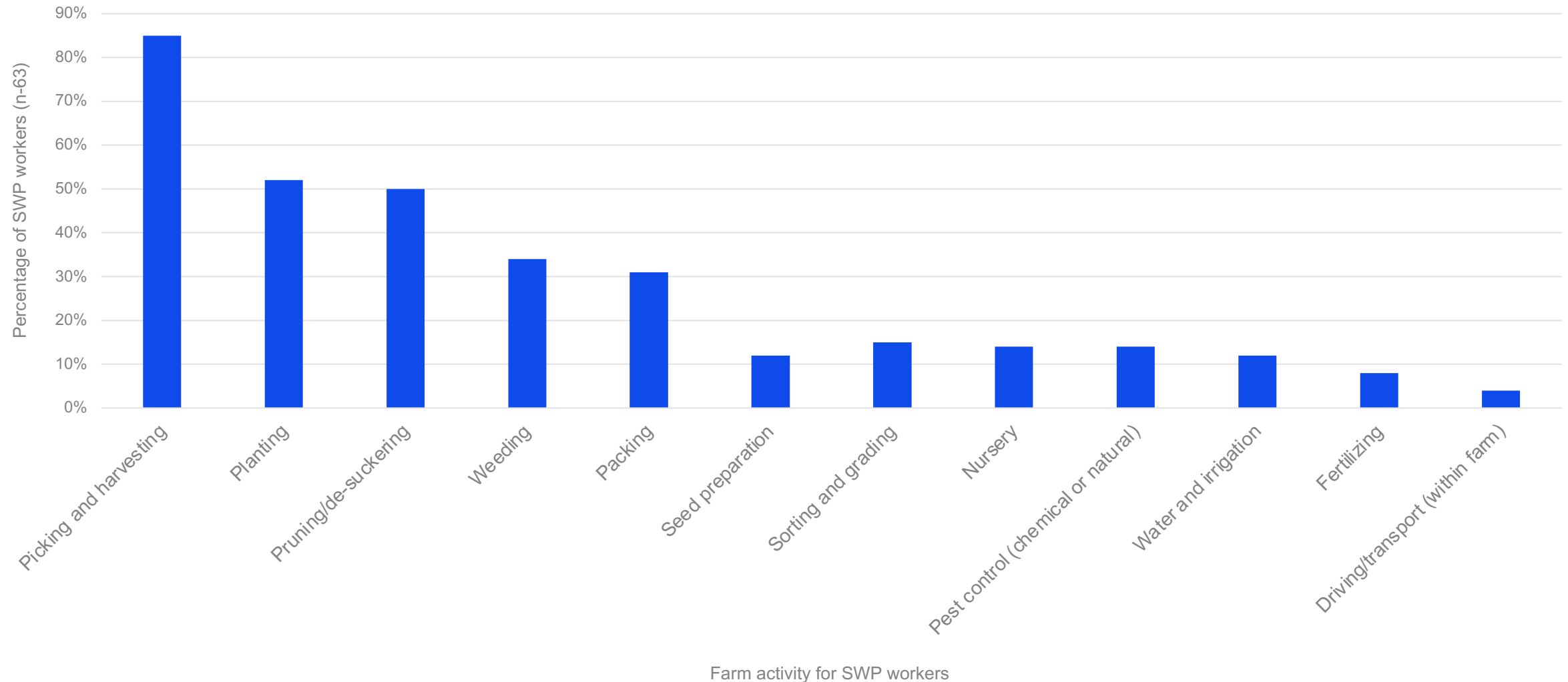


Growers Federation of Tonga
 @grofedtonga · Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)



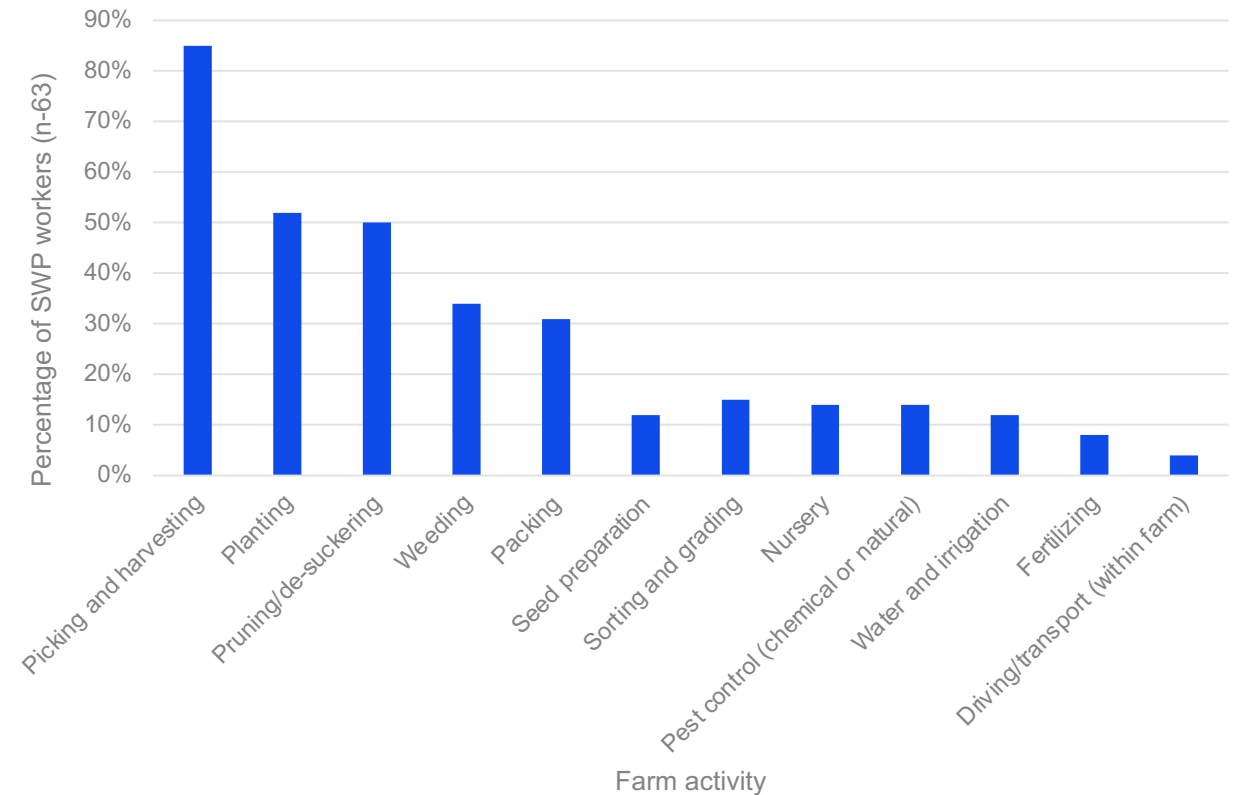
Kastom Garden Association
 food futures and nutritional health for Solomon Island communities

Results 1: Agricultural skills acquired in Australia and applied in PICs



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- 70% of the SWP worker study participants said they had learned something relevant from Australian farms
- 46% provided examples of skills application in Pacific Island Countries
- 45% had invested actual SWP incomes into home garden operations
- Interaction with employers is crucial for learning – often not possible in very large farm operations (eg banana).
- Processing and marketing of interest to workers – but little exposure.



Results 1: Example quotes of skills and knowledge transfer

De-suckering and pruning

Solomon Island Worker 20:

back home, we do not thin the baby [plant]. At home we just let it grow. I [got some] ideas from this. [I noticed that] after cutting the babies out, the plant grows better. There is a difference. I have not seen people doing this [in the Solomon Islands]

Supervisor-Employer interactions:

Tongan worker 16:

Our supervisors [also show us] how to do the irrigation. I'm learning how to do some of the piping so I'm planning when I go back [to] try some of the irrigation stuff from here just on the cabbage

Irrigation

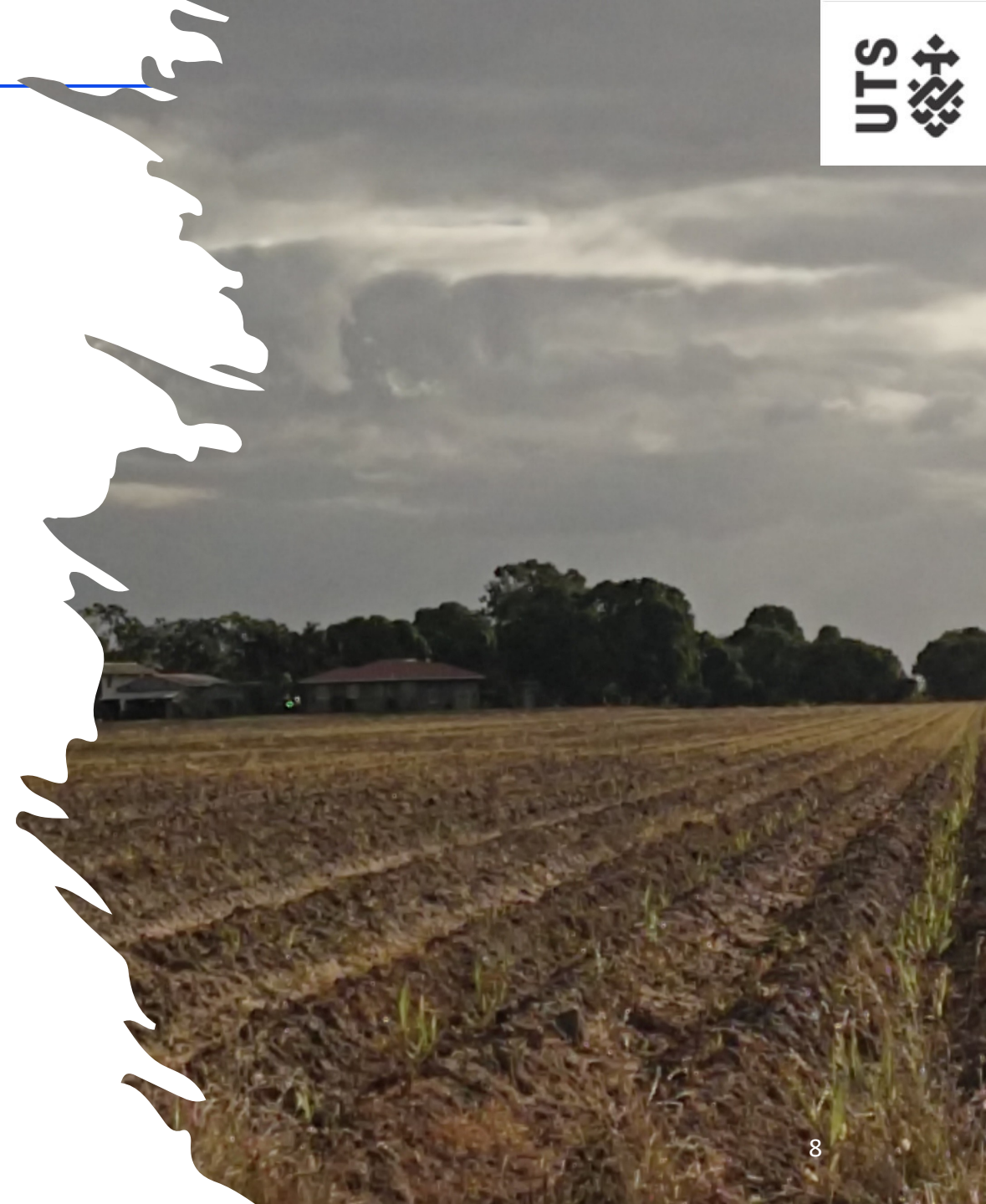
Employer 4:

All six of them are just sitting there on the ground watching [me] make connections on how to join it [irrigation pipes] and thread tape.

[Eventually] we had a slight leak and then he wasn't happy with it so then he spent the next two hours pulling it apart, fixing it and fitting it back together

SWP workers' perspectives on barriers to acquiring agricultural skills and knowledge via the SWP

- Only working with one crop during their SWP tenure in Australia
- A tendency to be restricted to certain roles on farms in Australia leads to a lack of exposure and learning across all agri-food value chain elements
- Administrative barriers



SWP workers' perspectives on barriers to sharing agricultural skills and knowledge via the SWP

- 25% of SWP workers are sharing their own farming knowledge with Australian farmers/farm managers
- Limited sharing of farming knowledge between SWP workers while in Australia



SWP employers' perspectives on barriers to agricultural skills and knowledge exchange via the SWP

- Working and farming context in Australia often means the scale of commercial farm production and technology involved is too different
- There is an absence of support and interventions to enable knowledge to be 'translated' across the differing Australian and Pacific Islands farming contexts.

Agricultural skills and knowledge SWP workers would like to learn

- Exposure to different crops and stages of farming
- Specific skills or farm practices:
 - Soil preparation and management
 - Water management
 - Use and application of synthetic chemicals and plant hormones
 - Grafting techniques
 - Harvesting techniques
 - Greenhouse production
 - Nursery production
 - Farm machinery operation



Opportunities for agricultural skills and knowledge exchange via the SWP

Agricultural training suggestions from SWP workers/employers	Recruitment phase of SWP	Pre-departure phase	In-Australia phase	Return phase
Implement better strategic planning around worker recruitment e.g. recruit from agricultural training centres in Pacific Island countries	✓			
Improved training support and practical experience for new SWP workers to better equip them with the knowledge and skills required for work on large-scale Australian industrial farms		✓	✓	
Provide training in agricultural skills and techniques while on-farm in Australia from suitably qualified trainers			✓	
Training SWP workers to apply agricultural skills and knowledge acquired in Australia to their own Pacific Islands farms			✓	
Offer training in basic principles, techniques and operation of farming technology (e.g. pumps, solar technology, and irrigation)			✓	
Offer training that results in formal agricultural qualifications			✓	
Support workers to share agricultural skills and knowledge acquired with fellow Pacific Islanders in their home communities				✓

Opportunities for agricultural skills and knowledge exchange via the SWP

Infrastructure support suggestions from SWP workers/employers	Recruitment phase of SWP	Pre-departure phase	In-Australia phase	Return phase
Establish farms in Pacific Island countries as training venues for potential SWP workers and employment venues for skilled SWP workers upon their return home.		✓		✓
Establish an organisational and/or grant structure to support the development of small business initiatives for SWP workers in Pacific Island countries with the involvement of their Australian employers			✓	✓
Create an awards process to showcase success stories of SWP workers' agricultural investments and innovations in their home countries enabled through their participation in the SWP.			✓	✓
Loans should be made available to SWP workers to support agricultural activities in the Pacific Islands after returning home.				✓



Contributions of the study

- SWP workers' agricultural skills and learning is incidental
- SWP workers who are also farmers able to apply and creatively transfer the skills observed and acquired via the SWP
- SWP workers have agricultural ambitions in their home countries



Contributions of the study

- SWP changes could identify, solidify and create more opportunities for formal and incidental agricultural learning
- Circular migration offers agriculture and development benefits – beyond the well documented financial benefits

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Enable greater agriculture-oriented research and training within the SWP and broader international labour mobility

- DESE/DFAT still responsible for their own Pacific labour mobility programs – how could training be coordinated?
- Research opportunities for novel interdisciplinary agri-food systems studies
- Future research and training opportunities in wider value chain skills through PLS+SWP (food safety, meatworks, agriculture)

Recommendation 2: the Seasonal Worker Programme should be recognised as a pathway to ongoing COVID-19 socio-economic recovery

- Important diplomacy tool for the Pacific Step-up and future labour mobility
- Leverage existing Pacific agriculture training, education, and Pacific policy windows
- Challenge the framing of Pacific workers as ‘unskilled’ – de-colonize the framing of agricultural labour and livelihoods



Vinaka vakalevu
Tangkyu tumas
Thank you

www.aciar.gov.au Project CS-2020-212

Expected publication – October 2021

