Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa: building support infrastructure

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by Rochelle Bailey

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Beginning in mid-2023, the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) will allow up to 3,000 people to migrate annually from the Pacific and Timor-Leste to Australia. This is an exciting opportunity for those in the region and those already engaged in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. But at the same time, governments must consider the necessary support infrastructure for the PEV.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that support systems for migrants are seriously deficient. Inadequate support systems have been noteworthy in the past, and the current worker support reforms under the PALM scheme are addressing these.

Since establishing the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in 2012 and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) in 2018, Australia has invested significantly in creating support systems that enable smoother transitions for Pacific migrants. Instead of reinventing processes, we can build on the momentum of these programs and their support services to help PEV migrants to Australia.

The new PEV will be modelled on New Zealand's Pacific Access Category (PAC) Resident Visa, established in 2002. However, there will be significant differences. Most PAC residents live in two of New Zealand's major cities, Auckland and Wellington. PEV migrants will be more dispersed in Australia. Where PEV migrants live will affect their experiences and access to social and financial services.

One option for migrant support is to rely heavily on current diaspora communities. While this can be useful, depending on the diaspora must be approached cautiously. There has been an overreliance on the diaspora communities for PAC residents in New Zealand, leaving some communities vulnerable to additional hardships while supporting migrants.

It takes two years before PAC residents are entitled to permanent residency and therefore full welfare benefits. Dr Rose Namoori-Sinclair found that many of the PAC residents' well-being and welfare concerns arise during this time. For the i-Kiribati women she studied, this was often a two-year state of vulnerability. Dr

Namoori-Sinclair notes that there was limited consideration of social, cultural or health outcomes for PAC migrants during this time, and argues that more focus is needed on education and awareness of support systems.

Migrants are having to constantly navigate new bureaucratic and social systems in their new country of residence. These include laws and regulations, social and financial services, Australian cultures, language and local terminology, Australian employment contracts and the Fair Work Ombudsman, renting properties, electricity and power charges, communication systems, and so forth.

In partnership with sending country governments, effective pre-departure and on-arrival briefing systems need to be in place. Dr Namoori-Sinclair highlighted this as a missing link with PAC migrants. It is essential to acknowledge cultural barriers, nuances and opportunities during these briefings.

For example, most people coming from the Pacific make decisions based on collective rather than individualistic notions of being. Migration involves new expectations of self-responsibility when relocating to generally individualistic societies. This can be a barrier to accessing foreign systems of support, for example those that require monetary transactions or the sharing of personal information with strangers.

A holistic approach is needed in order to understand the nature of the migration experience and the support infrastructure that is required.

All migrants must be treated respectfully, placed with ethical employers, and provided with appropriate cultural support mechanisms. This respect should be extended to their employers and the communities that they relocate to, thus enabling mutual benefits.

Establishing good communications to open up lines of trust is essential. As already noted in Pacific labour mobility schemes, there is often a fear of speaking up, for cultural reasons or because of perceived repercussions. Opening dialogue and promoting early understanding of not only workers' rights and expectations, but also those of their employers, could mitigate some of these concerns.

Using existing Australian migrant settlement support services will be essential, but it is important to administer culturally appropriate support. All too often, migrants are put into the same box, with universally applied approaches to support. Much of this is related to financing and resources. However, as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has observed, "Tailor-made strategies which recognize, and target people's different profiles, capacities and aspirations are much more likely to have significant positive impacts than approaches that consider migrants as a

homogeneous category of population."

Additional funding should be directed to support PEV migrants. Furthermore, employers or their human resources (HR) staff should be equipped and supported to take on Pacific migrants. We tend to focus on preparing migrants who are coming into Pacific labour schemes – employers too require training in cultural awareness. The most crucial information employers or their HR teams need to know is how their employees can access vital services, such as health and social services.

Integration is key. The IOM notes that "Migrants' access to resources, experiences, skills and networks is strongly influenced by integration policies", and that well thought-out integration policies are vital to migrants' success. This aligns with the views of 'migration with dignity' scholars. As the IOM argues, we need policies that "empower migrants to be part of their host society, to exert their agency (the capacity to act) and access the same opportunities [as their neighbours]".

Finally, priority for the PEV should be given to current SWP and PLS workers who experienced extended periods of stay during COVID-19. Workers and advocates are calling for this, and similarly in New Zealand for increased PAC numbers. This makes sense, as the majority of SWP and PLS workers have settled and integrated into their locations, have employment and, in some cases, have employers willing to sponsor them. Out of respect for those who kept our industries afloat through the pandemic, this could be a positive first step in rolling out the PEV.

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