Like winning the lotto: the SWP in good times and bad
By Jemma Mackinnon, Kerry McCarthy and Rachel Mason Nunn
11 August 2020

In late July, Good Will Hunters’ Rachel Mason Nunn sat down with Jemma Mackinnon and Kerry McCarthy, two Approved Employers who have been engaged in the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) for some time. Here are some edited highlights from their discussion, available as a podcast here.

Kerry and Jemma recruit seasonal workers from Solomon Islands, and Tonga and Timor-Leste, respectively. Participation in the program has been beneficial for both employers.

**Kerry:** *We only started off with two workers at the very beginning and a small family farm ... We have expanded and grown our business over the years, only because we know we have a reliable workforce that will show up to work every day when those workers return. Giving us the confidence, as I said, to expand, to try new things, knowing that we’ve got people that will hit the ground running every day. And have as much enthusiasm for our own farm as they do. They’re very proud of the work that they do. Doing the right thing, and being productive, and pleasing us is very important to our workers. And, you know, you just don’t get that anymore. It’s just beautiful.*

For Jemma, access to the “return, reliable, trained workforce” the SWP affords has also helped to grow their business and create domestic employment opportunities.

**Jemma:** *Before we had the Seasonal Worker Programme, we were half the size we are, and we had a turnover of 400 staff. Now, this season, the season just*
been, we had 120 workers, and we’re double the size we were four years ago. So, we have a local cohort of about 45 per cent, and then our seasonal workers with that. And there is no way that we would have been able to expand the way we have and employ the local workforce that we do without the seasonal workers.

It’s also a great opportunity for the workers.

**Kerry:** [Visiting and staying with our workers in their remote villages] we have seen ... the economic benefit to these workers. Especially being so remote, job opportunities over there are very scarce ... it’s like winning the lotto for them, the opportunity to come here. So, the wealth is spreading. They’re employing neighbouring workers from other villages to come and assist them with manual labour ... Very much investing in their community church and the community school. And ... they’re learning so much here. They’re taking back ideas. We have a very big chat with them about what they’re going to do in the future, planning for the future. And some of those kids in that village school, they’re specifically going to school - a greater [roll call] turning up every day so they can learn English and come and work in Australia. So, bringing a lot of hope to those very isolated rural communities. It’s wonderful ... it is like winning the lotto, you know? It’s just an amazing opportunity. There are thousands and thousands of workers wanting to come to Australia. So, the opportunity to be chosen and to actually succeed in the program and be a return worker is life-changing for them.

**Jemma:** In Timor, they have about 20,000 people on the list, and that was out of one recruitment drive that they did two years ago, or a year and a half ago now ... and from Timor, coming to Australia, I think there’s about 1,000 workers a year, maybe a little bit less. And most of them are return workers. So, when you’re looking at a list of 20,000, waiting for that opportunity to get chosen is as you say, like winning the lotto.

COVID-19, and the resulting border closures, restrictions on domestic movement, and ongoing uncertainty, have challenged many seasonal workers, and their
employers.

**Kerry:** There was a lot of extra work for Approved Employers to care for those workers. Mental health issues, talking about the workers’ welfare to begin with. So, they are stuck in Australia. They cannot get home. And they’re getting phone calls from home, “Please come home” ... [it’s been a] very emotional, huge emotional, rollercoaster for those workers. So, very difficult times for employers and workers. Some workers have been repatriated home. Some countries have not offered flights home at all. So, [it’s] out of our control, out of the workers’ control, and that’s a really big issue. A lot of work has been done by Approved Employers to redeploy workers ... A lot of red tape with that movement has restricted it flowing really, really well, but we’ve tried to cover the workers as much as possible and offer them alternatives.

**Jemma:** We’re quite a tight-knit community down here [in Tasmania]. There’s a group of about five farms who have seasonal workers ... We had about 450 workers with us all, and we managed to send them all up to the mainland to get them work, which was a huge effort ... That hasn’t come without issues, both from the administration of the program and the red tape that we had to go through, and just the extra information that we have to give, which seems completely pointless. And then, once their contracts have finished over the winter, they hopefully will come back to us in the summer to complete another season with us. But we’re anticipating that’s going to really be a drain on them, because they will have essentially, by the end of their contract with us, they’ll have worked for 18 months straight ... it’s going to be a difficult ride. They’re already seeing them lethargic, mental health issues. And as Kerry said, the drain on not only them, but us as Approved Employers, is huge.

The welfare of seasonal workers is closely scrutinised and has received a fair deal of media attention of late.

**Kerry:** I think the workers should speak for themselves. You will always have the
situations where something has gone wrong ... But the program is so important to us ... We appreciate our workers, we value our workers, and our workers just, as I’ve said, this opportunity is gold to them.

**Jemma:** If there are people out there who are blatantly doing the wrong thing, we don’t want them, because we need this program to work, we want this program to work for the long haul ... we don’t want our workers and our friends, and their friends, to be exploited.

Kerry argues there are bigger, industry-wide issues at play affecting both the uptake and reputation of the SWP.

**Kerry:** One of the biggest hindrances to the expansion of the program, apart from a lot of bureaucratic red tape, that a lot of employers aren’t willing to confront ... is illegal cash labour in Australia from illegal workers ... We really need to clamp down on this industry and we need the Australian government to take it seriously. It’s impacting the reputation of the Seasonal Worker Programme ... it’s not fair on farmers who are paying the correct wage, and it’s not fair on the workers who don’t get that correct wage and who don’t get the protection that they would being legally employed. So, a lot of vultures out there doing the wrong thing and encouraging illegals to work for them, and we really need to get rid of that industry to begin with. Then we will see the Seasonal Worker Programme grow, the Pacific labour mobility programs grow with confidence, and a lot of this chat about terrible treatment of workers may go away because you may find that a lot of those workers are not working legally to begin with.

Listen to the full Good Will Hunters podcast with Jemma Mackinnon and Kerry McCarthy [here](#).

This post is part of the #COVID-19 and the Pacific series.

**Disclosure**
About the author/s

Jemma Mackinnon
Jemma Mackinnon is the Human Resources and Seasonal Worker Programme Manager for Mountford Berries in Langford, Tasmania.

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Kerry McCarthy and her family own a vegetable farm on the Darling Downs in Queensland and have been employing workers from Solomon Islands under the Seasonal Worker Programme since 2012.

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Date downloaded: 27 June 2024

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In late April, Good Will Hunters’ Rachel Mason Nunn sat down with Dan McGarry
to talk about Tropical Cyclone Harold, COVID-19 and the recent change of leadership in Vanuatu. Here is an excerpt of their discussion.

Rachel: You have said that the response to Cyclone Harold is a week behind what the response to Cyclone Pam was at the same time. What do you mean by that?

Dan: I think we’re actually further than a week behind now. I think we’re losing ground on a daily basis, and I’m extremely concerned.

Now, look, I have to preface all of this by saying that I have a personal stake in this. My family, my wife’s family, is directly impacted by this. I have one young nephew who was badly injured while he was clearing brush. My father-in-law is in very serious condition with chronic heart disease and hasn’t been treated yet. The village in which they live has not received a single bit of aid, either shelter or food, even though they’re only five kilometres away from the local distribution centre.

So, I need to make it very clear that I am biased in all of this. That said, I have had the opportunity to do a fly over of a significant amount of the area. We did get on the ground, and I spoke to people, including the Mayor of Luganville and other people who were at the coal face, as it were, in the disaster response.

And I’m deeply concerned by it, by what I’m seeing. There’s a great deal of national pride being invested in this locally-run disaster response, but it ignores some huge gaps in our capability that, quite recently, I mean in fairness to the people who are doing the response, could never have been filled locally.

For example, we only have one helicopter pilot operating commercially here in Vanuatu, so we can’t run a fleet of aircraft moving into some of the more remote areas, providing emergency medical teams and emergency response in a timely fashion.

We don’t have huge stocks of tarpaulins and various other things that are needed
for short-term shelter. We don’t have huge stocks of food standing by and ready in order to replace the losses from people in their gardens. Even though we’re doing our very best to provide something that’s appropriate, nutritious, and timely, it’s not working, and that’s a really big concern.

As I said, my own family’s village, they’re five kilometres away from the distribution point and they have yet to receive a single bit of formal aid. We were the ones who sent the very first gifts of food off, and that was just to help the family.

So, yes, I’ve got significant concerns about the capacity of the Government of Vanuatu in the National Disaster Management Office to actually achieve this kind of aspirational goal of having a locally run disaster response.

Rachel: Is it largely due to the absence of international actors that the local response has been inadequate?

Dan: We do need international actors—but these resources are available to us. This is the thing that I find galling: because of the timing of this disaster, the fact that the COVID-19 crisis came right at the time of the general election, and now, Cyclone Harold has happened, [it] has coincided almost perfectly with the election of a new Prime Minister and Parliament.

The entire political leadership of the country has basically spent its time serving its own purposes rather than the national needs, and you know, regardless of the necessity of it, and the fact that, constitutionally, we’re required to do these things, it has taken our eye off the ball, and it’s left people in charge of a double disaster, nationally, and of an unprecedented shape, then with no leadership.

And therefore, they’re trying to fill the void, but oftentimes, they’re doing it in ways that are inappropriate, and the international ties, these are things that are normally organised at the highest level, usually at the ministerial level for the courser-grained stuff, and then down at the operational level by others. But
without the leadership at the highest level, that finer-grained stuff that happens as we operationalise, it just doesn’t transpire.

So, we have a situation where the United Nations had to say, “Look, we’ve got money. All you need to do is ask.” We’ve got the World Food Programme, who have millions of dollars’ worth of goods available to us, who have yet to receive a response, just an acknowledgement to their offer of support. I know for a fact that the people in DFAT and the ADF are more than willing to do significantly more than they already are, and it is quite a bit.

And so, we have this perverse situation where you’re seeing more relief flights from defence forces going to Fiji, which is less damaged with a smaller sort of affected population. They’ve got more flights going to Fiji than they have to Vanuatu, where we’ve got about 75,000-76,000 people who were severely affected by this cyclone, and about 100,000 overall who were affected.

It boggles the mind, but sadly, this is what happens when you have a vacuum of leadership at a critical juncture in that country’s history.

Rachel: I believe Vanuatu did accept $3.8 million from the UN. Is that correct?

Dan: Eventually, once a rather stroppy message was sent to say, “Guys, all you have to do ask.” But look, if we compare that to the scale of response that was required in the wake of Cyclone Pam, which admittedly affected a larger population, but was somewhat less severe in the worst-affected areas, we ended up requiring in excess of US$50 million in order to handle the relief and recovery periods over the first sort of three years or so.

The Australian government very kindly stumped up $35 million, I believe it was, in budget assistance immediately after Cyclone Pam, and that was crucial to maintaining our economy, just keeping the ball rolling as it were.

And that’s the kind of thing that can only be negotiated at the highest level, and
that’s the kind of thing that’s not happening now, and I have deep, deep concerns about it.

The reason I mentioned my own family’s experience is because we are one of thousands of families that are facing similar circumstances and similar challenges. If I thought it was just me, I wouldn’t say it, but because I know that this is the general experience, I think it’s grounds for concern.

I think that if we don’t recognise the scope of the problem then we won’t address it and we will see the death toll rising.

**Rachel:** Are you optimistic at all that the scope of the problem will be recognised in the short term?

**Dan:** As things stand currently, I think some people know what needs to be done in order to rectify the biggest problems here, and like I say, it’s mostly a lack of leadership and coordination. Whether the will to change that is present within the current government remains to be seen. I haven’t seen any indication yet.

*Listen to the full Good Will Hunters podcast with Dan McGarry and Odo Tevi, ‘What will cyclone Harold, COVID-19 and a new PM mean to Vanuatu?’ [here](https://www.devpolicyblog.com).*

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