

Development for whom? Land ownership for Vanuatu's returning migrants



House built by a Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme worker on return to Vanuatu
Photo Credit: Rochelle Bailey

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10 September 2025

Nearly 12,000 ni-Vanuatu citizens are participating in Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme or New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme at the current time. While many Pacific labour migrants join these programs to improve their lives by **investing in land and housing**, insecure land ownership on their return to Vanuatu threatens these gains.

Instead of progressing to new goals after purchasing land and building a home, many workers find themselves forced to repeat the seasonal work cycle due to contested land titles. They return to Australia and New Zealand and use earnings to fund legal battles to protect their investments, at the cost of lost income and time with family. These recurring problems of eviction and insecurity show that the workers' sacrifices can result in little long-term benefit, though the number of workers affected remains unclear.

This blog highlights the urgent problem of returning workers losing land and housing investments and argues the government of Vanuatu must urgently investigate and address these land ownership issues.

As highlighted in **previous research**, Pacific labour mobility programs have contributed to internal migration in Vanuatu, especially to Port Vila (Efate) and Santo (Luganville). There are multiple reasons for this, such as challenges in establishing local businesses in rural areas with limited income capacity, in addition **to migrating for education**, marriage and job opportunities. These are all considerations important for Pacific migrants and the future welfare of their families. Most of the land dispute cases raised with us have been from seasonal workers who have relocated to Efate or Santo, but there are also cases of this occurring in other islands.

Acquiring land and building homes is the most **visible and transformative** type of

development impact resulting from labour mobility programs thus far. However, in Vanuatu, it is difficult to access land or obtain a house loan from commercial banks, unless returning migrants have partners with secure permanent employment. Therefore, land is often obtained via various types of agreements (verbal or written) from landowners.

Recently, workers have reported to us that people and in some cases whole communities are targeting workers engaged in the PALM or RSE schemes. These landowners are aware that returning migrants have limited opportunities to access commercial banks or often have limited knowledge of land-owning laws and procedures (*kastom* or otherwise), and they take advantage of this.

This has resulted in returning migrants purchasing land that is not surveyed, registered in land registry records or titled. The authors are aware of several eviction orders, and chances are there are many others who have been affected and are not speaking out for various reasons — such as shame or fear. Furthermore, many of these landowners wait until the returning migrants have finished building their homes before evicting them — gaining new homes for themselves.

One returning migrant shared how, after years of working overseas, he was able to transform his family's thatched hut into a permanent, cyclone-proof home. This was more than just a structure — it represented safety, progress and pride for a family deeply rooted in their ancestral land. It was also a symbol of sacrifice and determination. However, just as the family settled into their new home, they received a chilling threat: “I've marked your house for when we evict you — your house will be mine.” Families in nearby villages, backed by power and money, were determined to claim the land. One RSE worker was evicted twice — once in Santo and again in Port Vila. Due to the uncertainty, families often endure sleepless nights, constantly fearing for their safety, the future of their homes and their livelihoods.

The legal costs of these disputes are now among the reasons many returning migrants are repeatedly seeking work overseas. But these threats have also had a direct impact on workers' ability to participate in Pacific labour schemes. One worker said he was afraid to return to Australia for work, knowing that his family could be evicted in his absence, leaving them defenceless.

This type of insecurity has led to a growing trend in some communities, where families are encouraging others to seek work overseas as a collective strategy to build up a larger pool of savings — not just for economic opportunity, but as a means of safeguarding their identity, legacy and the legal right to remain on either

their ancestral or newly acquired lands. These land ownership challenges are not only causing immense emotional and psychological strain, but also costing workers millions of Vatu.

Owning land and building homes is a significant outcome of participating in Pacific labour schemes. Migrants save earnings for a few seasons to reach this goal, investing in themselves, their families and future generations. While international cross-border seasonal work offers economic opportunity, it also exposes workers to the fragility of land tenure and complex power dynamics back home, resulting in new anxieties. As more workers return home with dreams of land and housing investments, the question is: can labour mobility schemes be truly transformative if there is no tangible benefit?

Often periods of time in their home country between seasons, before returning to Australia or New Zealand, see workers making quick deals and taking shortcuts in land acquisition. Considering the substantial efforts invested in reintegration programs like *Famili I Kam Bak*, there must also be greater emphasis on equipping returning migrants and their families with vital information and procedures when either securing their inherited land or purchasing new land.

Most importantly, we call on the government of Vanuatu and local chiefs to actively investigate and address the growing issue of dubious land ownership practices affecting returning migrants.

Disclosures:

This research was supported by the [Pacific Research Program](#), with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.

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