



Kiribati's National Labour Migration Policy: a climate change adaptation strategy?

By Carmen Voigt-Graf

The Kiribati Government sees migration as a long-term climate adaptation strategy. One specific step it has taken is the adoption of a [National Labour Migration Policy](#) in 2015.

Kiribati's development challenges are extreme even by Pacific Island standards. It has very limited natural resources and tourism potential, rapid population growth

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Date downloaded: October 26, 2021

and a severe lack of employment opportunities ([Census, 2010](#)).

There are two groups of countries particularly vulnerable to climate change, “small island developing states” and “least developed countries”. Kiribati belongs to both of them. While sea-level rise is a long-term challenge, Kiribati is already experiencing the adverse effects of changes in rainfall patterns, extreme weather events, and ocean acidification.

Migration with dignity

In an atoll state like Kiribati, there is no possibility of moving population to higher ground or further inland as a climate change adaptation measure. It is therefore not surprising that Kiribati has been leading the way in international fora in discussing international migration as a response to global warming. The Kiribati Government is concerned with avoiding a situation where a large number of I-Kiribati are forced to relocate as refugees.

The former President of Kiribati, Mr Anote Tong, repeatedly made the point that a relocation of the population will be a necessary but last resort, while emphasizing the importance of education and training in enabling citizens to ‘[migrate with dignity](#)’ Migration can increase resilience to climate change by providing households with a new source of income while simultaneously decreasing the strain on limited resources as a consequence of the reduced population in source communities.

Current migration opportunities

Despite the dire situation in Kiribati, there have been few migration outlets for its population. In contrast to several other Pacific island countries (PICs), Kiribati has not benefitted much from labour market access to Australia and New Zealand as clearly demonstrated in the World Bank-ANU [Pacific Possible labour mobility report](#).

- **Seafaring:** After independence, seafaring has presented the best overseas employment opportunity, but numbers are declining. In June 2015, there were about 750 Kiribati seamen on board, compared to 1,452 in 2006.
- **Pacific Access Category (PAC) Scheme:** Under the PAC, up to 75 I-Kiribati are accepted to New Zealand every year for permanent settlement under a lottery scheme. They need to find a job within six months and fulfil other conditions. 3,000 applications are received annually for the 75 places available, indicating considerable migration pressure.
- **Seasonal work schemes:** Numbers participating in the seasonal agricultural schemes in Australia and New Zealand are small, despite the work ready pool of seasonal workers containing over 1,000 names. In 2014, only 168 participated.
- **New initiatives:** The Australian Government's 2015 [White Paper on Developing Northern Australia](#) includes a five-year pilot program to provide up to 250 multi-year work visas for Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu to work in lower-skilled jobs in Northern Australia in the aged care and tourism/hospitality industries. Similarly to Australia, New Zealand has recently introduced a pilot scheme for fishermen and seafarers from Kiribati and Tuvalu.

The Kiribati National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP)

The [Kiribati NLMP](#) was developed with technical assistance from the International Labour Organisation, under which I was engaged to assist drafting the Policy. It was adopted by the Government of Kiribati in 2015. Its long-term vision is to “provide I-Kiribati with increased opportunities to migrate with dignity by accessing decent work opportunities abroad”. Four policy areas have been identified:

1. **Protecting the rights of migrant workers and providing support services:** The Government is committed to strengthening existing legislation, improving pre-departure information and training of migrants, providing legal assistance, and providing on-site services in the main recipient countries;
2. **Promoting opportunities for decent foreign employment:** The Government aims to increase demand for I-Kiribati in existing areas of labour migration such as seafaring, fishing and seasonal agricultural work. It is also committed to identifying new opportunities including in non-traditional destination countries such as Taiwan and Canada. In order to take advantage of such opportunities, links between skills development initiatives in Kiribati and overseas employment opportunities will be strengthened and the Government undertakes to promote I-Kiribati workers abroad;
3. **Increasing the development benefits of labour migration:** This will be achieved through various initiatives such as mainstreaming labour migration into development plans, enhanced engagement with the diaspora, support for migrants' families, and for returned migrant workers; and
4. **Improving the administration of labour migration:** This will be achieved by creating effective legislation and regulatory frameworks, improving the collection of labour market data, and enhancing the collaboration with recipient countries.

It is too early to say whether the NLMP will be successful in enhancing labour migration from Kiribati. Ongoing Government commitment and sufficient financial and human resources will be required.

The Government recognises that improving the quality of training in Kiribati and offering internationally recognised qualifications is necessary for accessing more overseas labour market opportunities. This is an area where some improvements

have already been made. The NLMP also recognises that internationally recognised qualifications often do not translate into overseas employment. Other important factors include English language and general workplace skills, contacts to employers, and competition from other labour sending countries. The NLMP therefore recognises that an integrated approach is therefore required that addresses technical, English language and general workplace skills, links training provision in Kiribati with employment opportunities abroad, and the active promotion of I-Kiribati workers. It requires strategic long-term planning by the Government as expressed in the NLMP.

Australia and New Zealand

As its closest developed neighbours, Australia and New Zealand have a special responsibility in supporting the Government of Kiribati's efforts in creating opportunities to migrate with dignity. In particular this could include the following:

- introduction of an access quota for Kiribati in Australia, similarly to New Zealand's PAC, and an increase in the quota for Kiribati in New Zealand
- continuing support for skills development initiatives under the aid programmes
- exploring ways to facilitate the recognition of qualifications from Kiribati in Australia and New Zealand
- assistance with establishing links between potential workers and employers, and
- exploring the possibility of including an in-built prioritisation in seasonal worker programmes for Kiribati and other countries facing climate change impacts.

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About the author/s

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