

Life as a seasonal worker: reflections of an au piki from Savai'i



Aerial view, Flaxmere, Hastings, NZ (Sean Hamlin/Flickr CC BY 2.0)

by Mitiana Arbon

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For Samoa, as one of the pilot countries on New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, the **tenth anniversary** of the scheme is a milestone. It follows the signing of PACER Plus in June and its accompanying **Arrangement on Labour Mobility**, aimed at enhancing and coordinating existing programs on labour mobility regionally.

Now the third largest contributing country to the RSE, Samoa has benefitted this season from an estimated AUD\$10 million **injected** into the economy, with approximately 1600 people employed through the program. With the New Zealand Government's **announcement** of a NZ\$10 million funding increase over the next five years to explore other industry options for the scheme, it is possible that the coming years will see continuing expansion of employment options and skillsets for Samoan workers.

The RSE has left a lasting mark on Samoans, who now refer locally to seasonal workers as 'au piki' – literally translating as 'group pickers', a reflection of both the horticultural focus of the current scheme and the fact that seasonal work is often undertaken as a coordinated village effort. The opportunities offered by the RSE are significant. Within five months, workers in New Zealand can **earn** more than three times the average annual wage in Samoa. But the work is often strenuous, with the physical distance from families placing an additional burden on *au piki*.

Mitiana Arbon reached out to a Samoan seasonal worker from his family village of Tafua tai, Savai'i for his reflections on what it is like to be an RSE *au piki*.

Can you tell me about yourself?

I am from a small village of Tafua tai, Savai'i, Samoa. When I am not in New Zealand working, I am at home looking after my parents who both passed away last year in January and December. I also collect coconut and charcoal and sometimes roast the coconuts before taking them to the shops to sell. I also look after my family's animals like pigs, chickens and cows. There is a lot of work involved, but it

is rewarding in the end. I am also my family's right hand when it comes to organising things in the village and church.

How many times have you participated as a seasonal worker and what made you decide to be one?

I have been going to New Zealand for eight years from 2007-2015, as the opportunity to be a seasonal worker was too good to pass. When the New Zealand and Samoan government program came up for seasonal work I thought it was a chance to do something different. There were two different types of work programs, one was through the government and the other through village and church. I went through the government with another guy in my village and that time I was a group leader.

The minister from my village then also asked the government about sending more people from the village and church so that the other families can get the benefits as well. Now I can see how much has changed in the village since the program started. Families are living in better housing as well as having cars. Some villages have even built new churches, bigger than before.

Now, there are lots of seasonal workers from my village including my brother as well. But since our parents were sick we both decided to stay home and look after them. Now with them both gone we wouldn't mind doing it again.

Where did you go to in New Zealand as a seasonal worker?

We went to Hastings, which is 8-10 hours outside of Auckland. We did lots of picking, from apples, grapes, pears, onions, to pumpkins. Sometimes growing the new trees, or thinning the fruit trees. I didn't know how to look after fruit trees before, particularly how you get them ready by thinning so there are not too many on the tree which results in tiny fruit. I also learnt when and what time of the year to grow the right types of fruit and what it means to be a good leader in supporting my work mates and group.

Seasonal work is hard but good, especially in winter when we are from the tropics. You would get up early while it's still dark, work hard all day and come back very tired, and then have to turn around and prepare our meals. I never complained, money doesn't fall from the sky. You either prepare to work hard and get the money, or get nothing. The New Zealand dollar rate is also great back home.

What process did you have to go through to become a worker? Was this a family or village decision?

Not much as well, as long as we passed our x-ray and the government paid for the visas. And while working overseas they gradually cut the money to pay for [the visas] out of our pay. Working very much came from the village minister. Sometimes you don't get a choice at all, as you just get told to be prepared to go, even though it should be both village and family decision. As a seasonal worker, I missed my family and my wife back home. Seven months away is such a long time away from your wife if you are a married person.

Did you find that you were well prepared for New Zealand?

Yes, after the first few times I went. It is not hard as long as you listen and keep in your head all the information of what to expect in that country. You know, sometimes people do silly things and end up getting sent back. But if you know you are in that country to work so you can help back home, then you will be fine. I have two sisters, a brother and aunty who live in New Zealand so they told me some things ahead of time that helped.

What was the salary like – did you manage to send money home?

We had to pay for everything. The accommodation we had to pay for. The mattresses and pillows, beds, and sheets because they were all separate from the house itself. They have it there but you have to pay it separately. We also pay for food and petrol for the work car and phone cards so I could ring home.

Depending if I was working five days or less, I would send NZ\$200 or more home per week. My family used the money for the church as we have to help pay the village loan for our new church building. Whatever was left over then we would use it for my own family affairs like buying a car, fixing the house, and items for the house. Also, we do put some in the bank book for doing shopping in the family store.

What would you tell other workers before they went to prepare them for seasonal work in Australia or New Zealand?

For me I would say to other people to work hard and obey all the rules and requirements when given from the owner or the boss. What comes to mind is *faalogo ma le usita'i* (listen and obey). Don't do anything silly that will jeopardise your job and end up getting sent back home. Your family are counting on you with the money you send back.

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