

One ocean, one people — why not one passport?

by Seone Lolesio and Shailendra B. Singh
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People departing Cairns International Airport
Photo Credit: [Unsplash/Sawada Kedavra](#)

Centuries ago, movement across Oceania was limited only by the vastness of the ocean, not by borders or bureaucracies. Our ancestors needed nothing more than courage, traditional knowledge and a canoe to travel, trade and reconnect with kin across thousands of miles.

Today, the barriers are less natural and more political. They are often quite formidable, despite much talk about the free movement of people.

For many Pacific Islanders, visa applications are not just complicated — they are costly and can be emotionally draining. Applicants must pay high fees up front, often amounting to hundreds of dollars, with no guarantee of success.

These fees are almost always non-refundable, even when visas are rejected without transparent reasons. The process can feel arbitrary and alienating, with decisions made by distant officials who often lack cultural understanding or regional context. Families invest time, resources and hope — only to be met with silence, denial or demands for more paperwork.

With all the recent high-level discussions about the virtues of Pacific integration and solidarity, it's time to ask: what if there were a single document — a Pacific Citizen Passport (PCP) — that opened doors across the region for all eligible Pacific citizens?

We already enjoy relatively free movement across Pacific island independent and self-governing countries. But it's when we try to move outside — to Australia, New Zealand, the US or Europe — that the Pacific identity often hits a wall. For many Fijians, especially, visa processes remain complex, uncertain and, at times, even humiliating. Too often, genuine cases are denied by the power of a heavy-handed visa official.

This disconnect is felt sharply in the diaspora. Our people identify proudly as Pacific Islanders, whether they are from Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati or elsewhere in the region. But in immigration policies, not everyone is seen that way. Indo-Fijians in New Zealand and Australia often find themselves excluded from “Pacific”

pathways, despite generations of regional history.

At the same time, Pacific labour continues to be welcomed — often under stringent conditions. New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Australia’s Pacific Australia Labour Mobility program provide temporary work but little long-term certainty. Our contribution is valued, but our mobility is still limited — lest we overstay our welcome.

The frustration is evident in the recent decision by the [Prime Minister of Vanuatu](#), Jotham Napat, not to sign a landmark strategic pact with Australia unless Canberra relaxes immigration restrictions for his citizens.

However, some recent developments are encouraging.

New Zealand’s Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, during a visit to Tonga in May 2025, [reaffirmed his government’s commitment](#) to expanding migration opportunities and reforming visa systems for Pacific citizens. While not yet as ambitious as a “visa-free Pacific”, it’s a move in the right direction.

Fiji’s Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Biman Prasad, [has gone further](#), advocating for visa-free travel between Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island countries. He describes this as a “near-term ambition” critical for a more connected Blue Pacific. As Prasad said, “our people should be able to move back and forth between all our countries. I have said before, and I repeat — Australia and New Zealand must be part of the Pacific story. There is no salami slice part of the Pacific family. A unified Pacific-wide single market must include Australia and New Zealand. A starting point for that must be visa-free travel between Australia and New Zealand and the Pacific Island states. The time for that has now arrived.”

In Prasad’s view, visa-free travel to Australia and New Zealand is a starting point for a better economic future and for stronger regional unity, especially in the current geopolitical climate.

For Australia, such a move would align with the spirit of its Vuvale Partnership with Fiji. *Vuvale* in the Fijian language means “family”, conveying the idea that “my home is your home”. As articulated on the website of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the [Vuvale pact](#) “recognises the respect and reciprocity of our partnership”. The Vuvale vision was reaffirmed by Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka on his July visit to Australia, where he proposed [filling 5,000 vacancies](#) in the Australian Defence Force with Fijian recruits.

Visa-free travel could be the precursor to a Pacific Citizen Passport — a bold step toward enhancing regional mobility, economic integration and cultural exchange. A

travel document that affirms our collective identity and opens real doors to education, employment and family connections.

The European Union offers the best-known example of regional integration, with passports issued under the authority of each member country that enable visa-free travel and employment rights across member states. Similarly, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has adopted a regional passport — again, issued under the authority of each of (so far 12 of 15) member countries, but standardised — to facilitate both intra-regional and international mobility among its member states. The CARICOM passport is a strong symbol of unity, regional cooperation and a shared Caribbean identity. While the Pacific context is different, the CARICOM approach offers helpful lessons.

To be clear, a Pacific Citizen Passport would not be separate from national passports; it would be issued by national authorities but in a common, agreed format, and would remove travel hindrances in the region and facilitate deeper collaboration.

A Pacific Citizen Passport, with the standardisation process potentially managed through the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and progressively including the 18 Forum member countries and territories (including Australia and New Zealand), could be a significant step toward building regional connection and identity.

We already see Pacific unity in sport. In Super Rugby, Pacific teams like the Fijian Drua and Moana Pasifika represent not just countries, but a region. When Trump raised tariffs recently, there was a call for a Pacific-wide response.

This same spirit should guide our policy decisions, not just at the top level but also at the grassroots, giving real meaning to the rhetoric about a people-centered approach. Why shouldn't a student, a family, or a skilled worker have ease of movement? Why should this remain the privilege of only sporting, business and political elites?

Perhaps it's time for Pacific leaders — and our partners in Wellington, Canberra and beyond — to think outside the proverbial box. To think big, be expansive in their vision and build something that truly reflects our shared values of kinship and mobility. To match the ambition of our ancestors who sailed the ocean with nothing but the stars to guide them. To honour the late Professor 'Epeli Hau'ofa's vision of "one ocean, one people".

It's time to imagine — and implement — what comes next.

One ocean. One people. Why not one passport?

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