

Pacific labour mobility over the last year: continued growth

by Charlotte Bedford

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Fiji Employment Minister Agni Deo Singh visiting seasonal workers in New Zealand in May 2023

Photo Credit: [Fiji Government/Facebook](#)

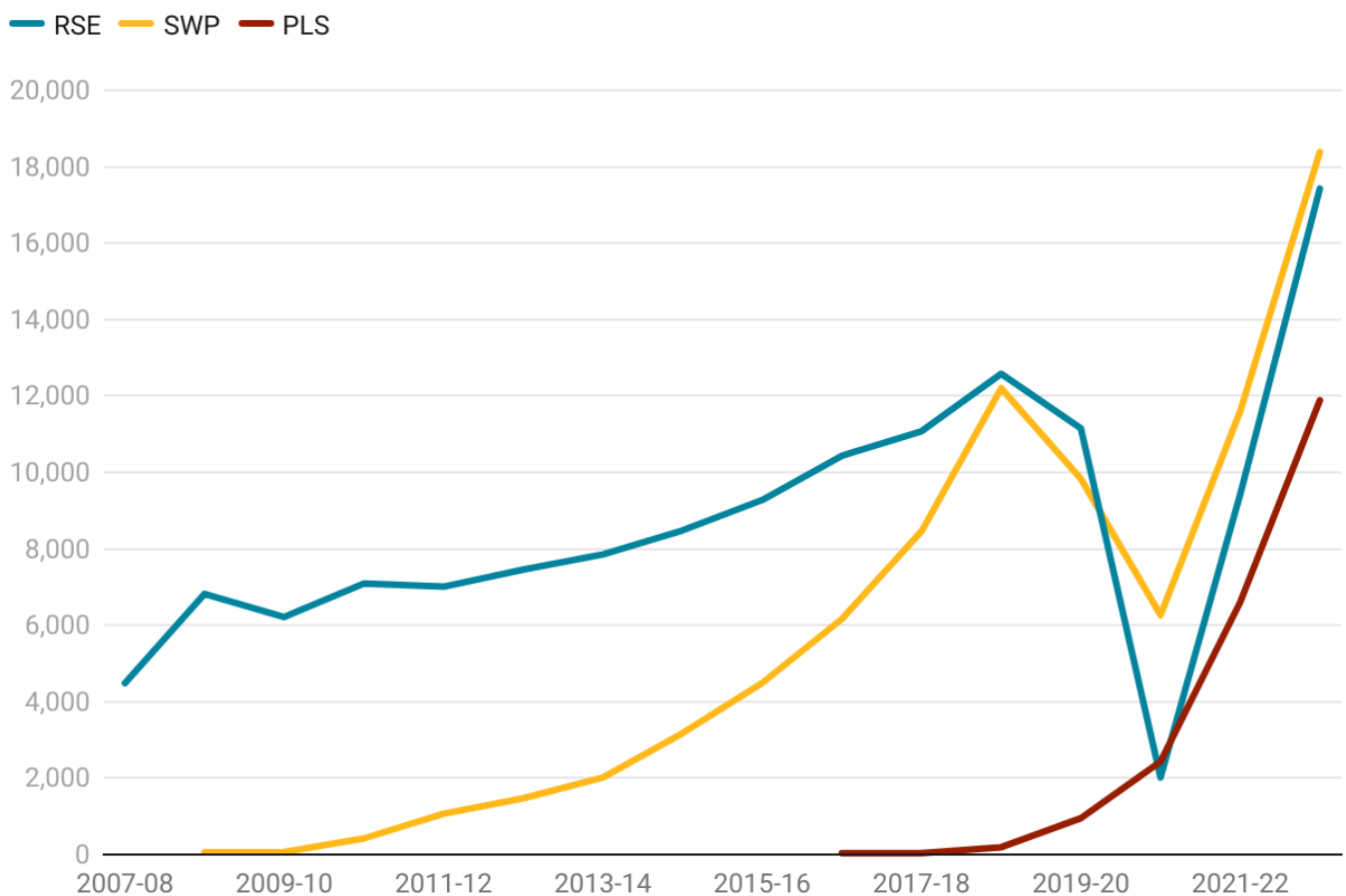
Following the reopening of borders across the Pacific region in mid-2022 in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a quick recovery in temporary labour migration flows to Australia and New Zealand.

A combined total of almost 48,000 visas were issued to workers participating in Australia's PALM (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility) scheme and New Zealand's RSE (Recognised Seasonal Employer) scheme between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2023 – virtually double the 24,975 visas issued in 2018-19, the last full year of recruitment pre-COVID.

The two seasonal work programs – the short-term PALM stream (formerly the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP)) and the RSE scheme – continue to track at a similar level (Figure 1), despite the absence of a cap in Australia. In the year to 30 June 2023, 17,424 RSE workers arrived in New Zealand while Australia had 18,383 over the same period; roughly 950 more workers to Australia. In addition, close to 12,000 PALM visas were issued for the long-term stream (formerly the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS)), enabling workers to take up employment in Australia for up to four years.

For the RSE scheme, which pre-COVID was the primary source of offshore seasonal employment for participating Pacific countries, the expansion of Australia's PALM scheme, in particular the long-term PALM stream (PLS), represents a significant shift in the regional labour mobility landscape.

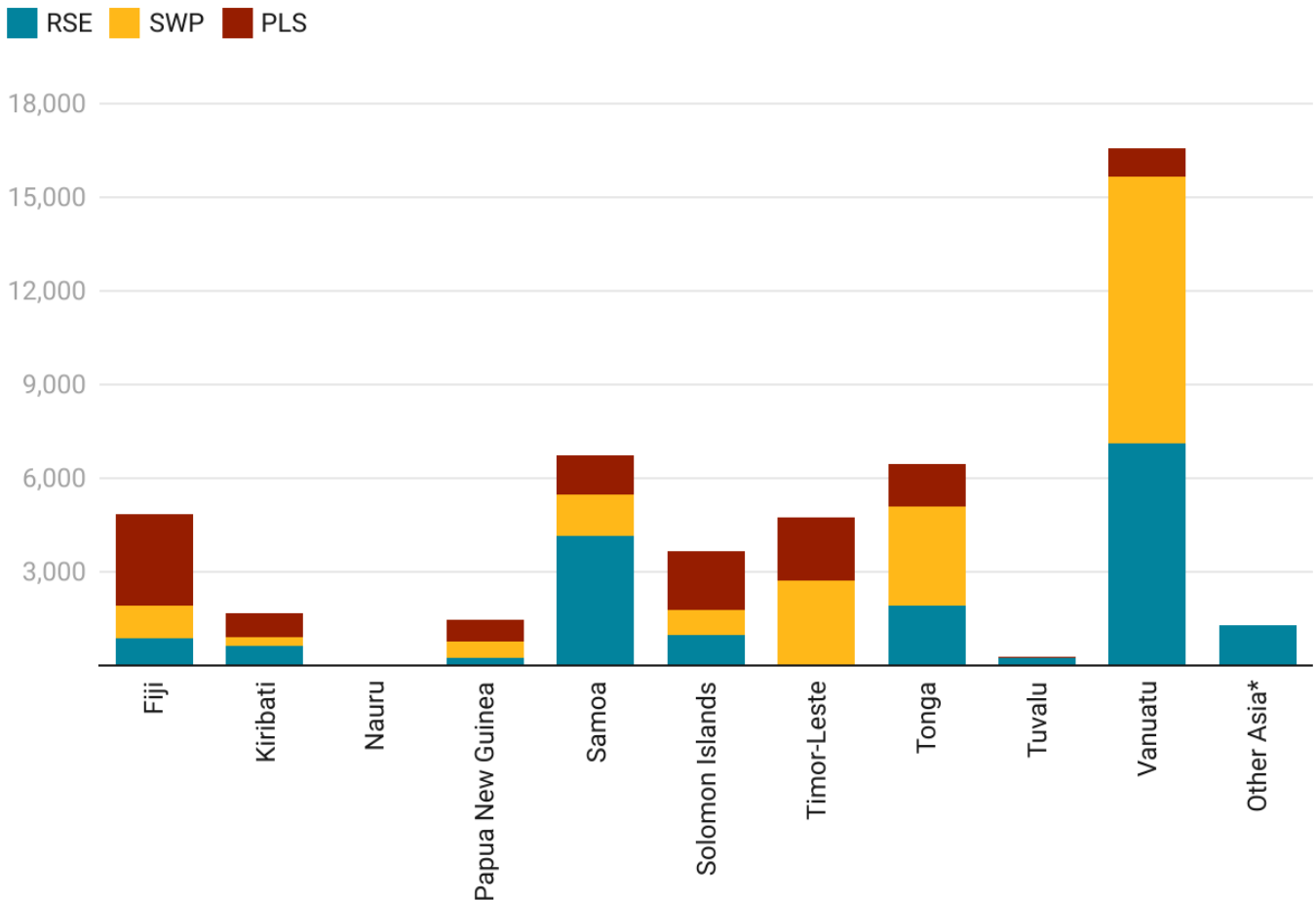
Figure 1: RSE, SWP and PLS workers 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2023



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Vanuatu remains the largest supplier of labour to Australia and New Zealand, accounting for 35% (16,562) of the total visas issued during the 2022-23 financial year (Figure 2). Ni-Vanuatu workers are primarily engaged in seasonal work; just under 1,000 ni-Vanuatu were granted long-term PALM visas in 2022-23.

Samoa (6,736) and Tonga (6,449) are the second and third largest suppliers of labour respectively, between them accounting for a further 28% (13,185) of visas in 2022-23. More Samoans (4,160, 61%) are employed under the RSE scheme, whereas Tonga continues to provide more labour (6,449, 70%) to the Australian PALM scheme. For Fiji and Solomon Islands, the long-term PALM stream has been the main source of recruitment over the past 12 months, ahead of supplying labour under the seasonal work schemes (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sources of RSE, SWP and PLS workers, 2022-23

* Other Asia includes: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam

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The substantial expansion in recruitment during 2022-23 has occurred at a time when Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu have all been reviewing their participation in offshore labour mobility schemes. Concerns have been raised in both their public and private sectors about the growing numbers of working-age men and women heading offshore, and the potential **impacts of this loss of labour** on their domestic labour forces.

Since October 2022, the Samoan government has restricted approvals for seasonal worker departures to a month-by-month basis while undertaking a review of their engagement in the PALM and RSE schemes. The final outcomes of this review have yet to be endorsed by the Samoan Cabinet. However, some of the **proposed policy changes** were shared, publicly, at the **Pacific Update** conference in June 2023.

In April 2023 the Tongan government launched the **Tonga Labour Mobility Supply**

Management Strategy, which provides a framework to better manage and coordinate the supply of Tongan workers offshore. Unlike the situation in Samoa, there has been no direct intervention by Tonga's government to manage the flows of labour to Australia or New Zealand in 2022-23.

The Vanuatu government commenced reviews, in early 2023, of their Seasonal Employment Act of 2007 and 2019 National Labour Mobility Policy. A new draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan (2023-26) was **released for stakeholder consultation** in May 2023. The Vanuatu government also announced a new **Emergency Employment Visa** allowing at least 1,500 foreign workers to enter Vanuatu to fill labour shortages in the country's private sector.

The concerns about the loss of labour in Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga merit close attention. One measure of the impact of overseas labour migration in 2022-23 on the estimated working age populations aged 20-59 years, especially the male population, is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: RSE and SWP workers recruited in 2022-23 as % of working age population (20-59 years)

Nationality	Combined RSE+SWP	Total pop 20-59	% pop in RSE+SWP	Combined RSE+SWP males	Male pop 20-59
Samoa	5,459	84,913	6.40	5,074	44,034
Tonga	5,102	44,597	11.40	4,122	20,622
Vanuatu	15,639	135,948	11.50	13,725	67,155
Total 'Big 3'	26,200	265,458	9.90	22,921	131,811
PNG	763	4,965,680	0.02	663	2,540,970
Solomon Islands	1,784	319,190	0.60	1,476	160,600

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For Tonga and Vanuatu, over 11% of their working age populations have been engaged in the two seasonal work schemes in the past year. If looking solely at the

male populations, Tonga and Vanuatu had a fifth (20%) of their men aged 20-59 years recruited for seasonal work in 2022-23. For Samoa, 11.5% of their male population aged 20-59 years was absent for seasonal work over the same period (Table 1).

As New Zealand and Australia continue to expand their respective programs, approved employers should give serious thought to seeking seasonal workers from other approved source countries. Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands are two good examples. As Table 1 demonstrates, both countries had very small shares of their male labour forces aged 20-59 absent on RSE and SWP visas in 2022-23 – less than 1% in both cases. It doesn't make sense for employers to continue focusing on recruitment from three main sources when there are major alternatives available in the Pacific.

The world in which Australia's and New Zealand's labour mobility schemes are situated in August 2023 is very different from the one that existed when the RSE scheme was introduced in 2007. At that time Australia had no Pacific-focused labour mobility schemes.

There has been nothing short of a revolution in Australia's immigration policy regarding the Pacific during the past decade. This has, in turn, created a new regional labour mobility landscape to which participating Pacific countries, as well as New Zealand, will need to continually adjust. This message was given to RSE scheme employers attending the annual [Horticulture New Zealand RSE Conference](#) in Christchurch on 1-2 August 2023. If the RSE scheme is to retain its brand as "Resilient, Sustainable and Ethical", then one adjustment is to take heed of the concerns of our largest labour supply countries, and to carefully consider where to source seasonal labour in future seasons.

Note Data for New Zealand: RSE arrivals, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. Data for Australia: PALM visa grants, Department of Home Affairs. PALM visa grants relate solely to visas issued in the financial year 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023. Visa grants are an underestimation of the numbers in-country in Australia as at 8 August 2023 for two reasons: workers on the long-term PLS visa can stay for up to four years; and workers on the short-term seasonal visa are granted multi-year visas which means arrivals can be higher than visa grants.

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