

A Pacific Mobility Index to strategically guide the Pacific Engagement Visa

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The Pacific Islands Forum Special Leaders Retreat “family photo”, February 2023

Photo Credit: Pacific Islands Forum/Twitter

In this blog, we introduce the Pacific Mobility Index (PMI) as a tool to guide the implementation of the revolutionary **Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV)** under its proposed annual 3,000 visa lottery ballot system.

Whilst the PMI we are proposing is currently only a concept, it promotes the **strategic allocation of visas** and aligns its rationale to the **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**. It recognises the sensitive competing priorities in the region, and promotes regional agreement that aims to avoid tension. The PMI incorporates Australia’s own priorities for considerations of climate vulnerability and low access, and aims to strengthen the delivery of these highly prized visas.

The PEV is a first for Australia. It is **a new visa** that targets increased access to permanent migration pathways specifically for citizens of the Blue Pacific. In the interest of advancing and strengthening Australia’s ties, relationships and people-people connections to the Pacific, **wider collective consultation in the region** should foreground the successful delivery of the PEV.

Should the PEV roll out as initially announced by the Albanese government, citizens of **12 eligible Pacific Island countries** and Timor-Leste, who have access to the internet or have family members that are technology savvy, will be able to make an online pre-application for a PEV. Four members (aside from Australia and New Zealand) from the apex regional body the **Pacific Islands Forum** – the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Niue – are not included. Eligible citizens will have the opportunity to enter a ballot, at a nominal non-refundable fee of A\$25, to be randomly selected and then invited to apply for the visa. This is a tested and proven system that New Zealand’s **Pacific Access Category Resident Visa** has successfully delivered exclusively to citizens of Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga and Fiji.

When Labor first announced the PEV in opposition, it said that the 3,000 visas

would be distributed on a pro rata basis. More recently, [the government has said](#) that visas would consider “several factors including population size, diaspora in Australia, existing migration opportunities and expected demand”.

Making population size central to the allocation of visas would mean that bigger countries like Papua New Guinea, with its population of more than 8 million, would get a much bigger share of the visas as opposed to its smaller sister island states Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru. Is this fair, when these smaller atoll island states are at greater risk of existential threat from climate change? Would there be other considerations to account for when determining visa allocation? Would the PEV create tension, division and rivalry within the region that can be mitigated? These are serious questions we urge Australia to consider, and for this reason we propose the use of the PMI to strengthen the PEV’s delivery.

The conversations around country inclusion or exclusion in the PEV for Blue Pacific citizens should be brokered through the Pacific Islands Forum, which has already begun consultations to develop a [regional migration strategy](#) aligned to the [International Organization for Migration’s Pacific Strategy](#). In light of the [varying views](#) expressed in the [23 submissions](#) to the Australian Parliament [Senate Inquiry](#), and the fact that the ballots should be opening very soon, our PMI proposal presents a practical way forward. It aspires to establish a fair determination of visa allocations that respects and recognises the priorities of each of our Pacific family members. It reflects the Blue Pacific 2050 virtues of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives. For these reasons, we believe that the PEV should consider a systematic framework such as the PMI to inform its visa allocation approaches.

The PMI would operate similarly to the Human Development Index. It would rank the status of countries against three core dimensions: climate vulnerability, diaspora, and social wellbeing.

Climate vulnerability takes precedence in the PMI. To assess this dimension, geographical features of Pacific Island countries would be considered. These include mean elevation, total land mass, and coastal population. These would be used to establish the degree of susceptibility to climate threats.

The second dimension, diaspora, is cognisant of the Pacific’s extremely low diaspora numbers in Australia. To assess this dimension, the existing diaspora populations relative to the total country populations would be considered, with preference given to countries with lower diaspora-population ratios, to reflect Australia’s commitment to strengthening its ties with each member of the Pacific family.

The third dimension, social wellbeing (which includes economic wealth), considers the gross domestic product per capita of each Pacific Island country. It prioritises those that are not as economically resilient and therefore warrant a higher weighting in determining visa allocations.

In an increasingly contested region, the Blue Pacific continent has sourced its strength from working collaboratively as a region, maintaining solidarity under its framework for Pacific regionalism. The PMI aspires to the virtues of the 2050 strategy, and is consistent with [the legislation](#) introduced to operationalise the PEV. It would guide the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs in exercising their discretionary powers in allocating PEVs. Embedding a PMI framework would demonstrate Australia's Pacific family first approach in delivering a truly revolutionary visa.

Disclosures:

The views expressed are those of the authors only.

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