

## **RSE: the ghosts of schemes past, present and yet to come.**

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Invited paper for the RSE Employers' Conference, Blenheim, 6-7 July 2017.

### **Looking back ...**

The Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) policy emerged from a crisis in New Zealand's labour market in the early 2000s. Without this crisis it might never have been. Immigration is always a delicate issue politically (think Brexit), and because it involves 'the other' politicians find it a relatively tempting area of policy to tamper with (think Trump). From 2002 New Zealand's Labour coalition government faced difficult labour market choices. There was an exceptionally tight labour market, expectations that the remaining unemployed would be employed and 'the Winter of Discontent' (in 2000) as business organisations reacted badly to re-regulation of areas like the labour market.

The tight labour market had led to a drop in traditional sources of labour to work in seasonal industries, and there was severe competition between them for the workers available. This competition was not just among horticultural employers but also with other agricultural producers and tourism operators. Employers became increasingly reliant on offshore workers to meet seasonal labour demands.

The changing nature of the market for horticultural produce, both domestically and internationally, was placing increasing pressure on growers to produce high quality, disease-free, unmarked fruit and vegetables that could be stored for long periods and maintain the appearance and flavour of freshly picked produce. The market for all kinds of horticultural produce was becoming more competitive, selective and discriminating, placing increasingly stringent quality obligations on producers, and demanding more environmentally and socially sustainable food production.<sup>1</sup> This in turn required a reliable seasonal labour force of skilled workers to pick and pack fruit.

In the background, there were increasingly shady and illegal recruitment practices, with an estimated 17,000 illegal workers employed across the horticulture and viticulture (H/V) industries as a whole in 2002.<sup>2</sup> Illegal labour, predominantly from Asia rather than the Pacific, was fundamentally unreliable and compromised the value and reputation of law-abiding growers and contractors within the industry. Enforcement action was deemed a threat to productivity, however, as growers grappled with tight timeframes during peak periods, and relied on seasonal workers from any source they could find.<sup>3</sup> Variation in the labour requirements of specific sectors (e.g. kiwifruit versus pipfruit) as well as variation in the numbers of workers available in each region created additional problems as employers competed for the same labour. Labour was a key point within the H/V productivity system where value was being lost, with poor quality decision-making and practice by staff, absolute shortages and high staff turnover.<sup>4</sup>

By 2005 the decline in numbers and quality of labour led to a crisis. Many apple growers were really struggling with several producers operating at a loss. There was an accusation of dumping from the

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<sup>1</sup> Tipples & Whatman (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Courtney (2008); Sharpe (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Beer & Lewis (2006); Hill, Capper, Wilson, Whatman & Wong (2007); Horticulture & Viticulture Seasonal Working Group (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Whatman (2007).

EU. If anti-dumping measures had been introduced they may have destroyed the export industry in pipfruit.<sup>5</sup>

It was against this background that a political struggle played out. Each year, as the season progressed, employers' representatives would become more vocal in the media to 'open the borders' and allow any passing tourist or overseas student to pick, prune or thin. Likewise, each year the local Regional Employment Commissioner would point to the thousands of workers still unemployed. Stalemate would ensue for a couple of weeks until the threat of 'fruit on the ground' would lead to some form of 'emergency' dispensation to use migrant labour.

Few New Zealand employers sought to enhance labour productivity through retention, higher wages and training, or to make other structural changes, such as better occupational health and safety standards on the orchard/vineyard and provision of low-cost housing, that might attract a more permanent New Zealand labour force. Instead it was more common for employers to adopt a business model based on low-cost staff, some of who were working illegally.<sup>6</sup> These practices produced worse productivity; there were fewer and fewer trained and reliable workers who had any reputation that they wanted or needed to maintain (a fundamental basis of any productive employment relationship). In the Hawkes Bay the demand was for 'anyone with a pulse', with one producer saying they had 800 percent turnover in three months.<sup>7</sup>

### **Which way could all this have gone?**

New Zealand's-labour intensive industries faced a 'wicked' or complex problem:<sup>8</sup> tight profit margins, a growing demand for labour, low wages and poor working conditions, poor quality work and low productivity, and a trend towards illegal use of casual workers under unacceptable working conditions. To address this, government and industry needed to work together to 'clean up' grower and contractor practices and enforce change within the H/V industries to enhance productivity. In such circumstances there were both 'probable' and 'preferable' futures for the H/V sectors that could have transpired.<sup>9,10</sup>

A 'probable' future was labour continuing to be tight, productivity continuing to be poor and the industry steadily losing smaller, highly leveraged growers. Probably there would have been some restricted access to migrant labour on a regular basis, whether those already in New Zealand or from offshore. The schemes would have resembled other programmes – rules based and individualised. These would not have solved productivity issues; but they might have arrested the industry slide. The sector would have become stuck, at risk from undercutting by lower-cost competitor countries. Exploitation would likely have continued, but perhaps the scale would have reduced.

A 'preferable' future is where we say what should happen, or what we want to happen.<sup>11</sup> The RSE work policy was a deliberate attempt to create a 'preferable' future; one that recognised that

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<sup>5</sup> Oral briefing to officials (including Richard Whatman) from Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry officials in 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Hill et al. (2007); Horticulture & Viticulture Seasonal Working Group (2005).

<sup>7</sup> In conversation with Richard Whatman, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> From a policy perspective, 'wicked' or complex problems refer to "challenging policy areas where there is little agreement on the nature of the problem" (Scott, 2006, p.573).

<sup>9</sup> Whatman (2007); Whatman & Van Beek (2008).

<sup>10</sup> McWilliams (2016). Designing Preferable Futures. Retrieved from <http://gsadesigninnovation.com/research/research-themes/designing-preferable-futures/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

increasing productivity and quality was the key to creating a sustainable and successful future for the H/V industries.

The catalyst for the RSE was a crisis in the profitability of the horticulture industry because of an inability to get sufficient high-quality fruit and vegetables picked, packed and to the market in time. A preferable future required transformation across the H/V sectors, including shifting from a focus on quantity to quality and recognising that harvesting / pruning is skilled work that requires well trained, experienced staff. In order to attract skilled staff employers need to offer attractive employment conditions and incomes; improve workplace environments to support increased worker productivity; focus on skills training and development; address structural barriers to participation in seasonal work (e.g. providing access to childcare, housing or transport) and eliminate illegal work practices.<sup>12</sup>

The RSE scheme evolved from core principles underpinning what a 'preferable' future entailed. These principles were based on a deep understanding of the operation of the seasonal labour market, and appreciation of the political and economic drivers of it. The core RSE principles and understanding were initially developed through co-design<sup>13</sup> with industry, and further developed in consultation with Pacific Island countries (PICs). Because the-then Department of Labour was seen to be a significant producer of 'regulatory burden' on Small/Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) it was actively involved in seeking ways to ameliorate that burden. In 2004 a three-year cross-governmental and industry project, known as the Pure Business Project (PBP), was initiated. At the time, use of design approaches was rare in government anywhere, and not generally applied across multiple organisations.<sup>14</sup>

### **A Brief History of Nearly Everything**

The brief for 'Pure Business' was to use co-design to increase the public value of regulation on SMEs, not initially specific to the labour market or seasonal labour. After a year of work, the pipfruit seasonal labour market in Hawke's Bay was targeted for an experiment; partly because the Department had a substantial regulatory stake in the issue, and partly because some people in industry were desperate and 'government' promised to approach the issue with an open mind.<sup>15</sup> The PBP involved a series of workshops that brought together representatives from different government agencies,<sup>16</sup> researchers (to facilitate the project), as well as participants in every stage of the apple producing system. Participants worked together to understand the problems facing the industry and then co-design the structural changes the industry needed to make (shifting from short-term profit to long-term sustainability, and from quantity to quality of fruit picked), as well as the necessary immigration and employment policy responses required to support the industry's transformation. Twelve co-design sessions produced a draft plan for the reformation of the sector, including the introduction of a return worker migration scheme.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hill et al. (2007); Horticulture & Viticulture Seasonal Working Group (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Co-design "is an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders ... to help ensure the result meets their needs and is usable." [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory\\_Design](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_Design).

<sup>14</sup> Denmark's Mindlab was almost unique 12 years ago <http://mind-lab.dk/en/>, NZ now has its own "Co-design Lab" based in Auckland ([www.aucklandco-lab.nz](http://www.aucklandco-lab.nz)). Nesta have plotted 'Labs': [www.nesta.org.uk/blog/world-labs](http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/world-labs), there are more than 100.

<sup>15</sup> There is a succinct write-up of the development of RSE, including 'Pure Business' in [http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sog/researchcentres/egovt/research-projects/research-2007/research-2008/Connected\\_Services\\_ver\\_10.pdf](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sog/researchcentres/egovt/research-projects/research-2007/research-2008/Connected_Services_ver_10.pdf) p66-7 (Appendix 1). The core method was Developmental Work Research applied by Work, Education and Business (WEB) Research (<http://www.webresearch.co.nz/default.aspx>). See: <http://www.helsinki.fi/cradle/>.

<sup>16</sup> Government agencies included the Department of Labour, the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) responsible for placing local New Zealanders into seasonal work, and Inland Revenue.

<sup>17</sup> Whatman & Van Beek (2008); Whatman, Wong, Hill, Capper & Wilson (2005).

At the same time as the PBP was being held in the Hawke’s Bay, regional discontent with labour supply issues in the H/V industries became national. In response to concerns raised by industry, in August 2004 Ministers, government agencies<sup>18</sup> and industry representatives met to consider how to address seasonal labour shortages over the short, medium and longer-term, and agreement was reached to develop a seasonal labour market strategy. This work was led by Richard Whatman on the government side, and co-chaired with Jerf Van Beek of Horticulture New Zealand.

The Medium – Long-Term Horticulture and Viticulture Seasonal Labour Strategy was launched in December 2005 and policy work began to build around the introduction of a return worker scheme. The key stakeholder groups that drove the desire for industry transformation, and the impetus for the development of the RSE policy, are shown below in Figure 1, highlighted in orange.

**Figure 1: Key stakeholder groups driving industry transformation and development of RSE**



Initially the concept was for a return worker scheme that had world-wide coverage, but the intervention of the then Prime Minister Helen Clark made it clear that Pacific States were to be the principal orientation of the scheme. That, and a guarantee of ‘New Zealanders first’ in any employment. Also, the workers were to be well cared for and receive a reasonable income, as far as that could be managed. While the requirement to focus on the Pacific initially appeared difficult for government to sell to industry, it later came to be seen as essential, for very practical reasons. Immigration NZ already had extensive relationships and shared knowledge with Pacific states, the scale between New Zealand and the Pacific worked (unlike, say, with Thailand where exploitation and fraud might have been much less transparent), there was shared history and expectation of continuing relationships (vital when the partners were about to enter into a ‘repeat game’ of return migration).

On 16 October 2006 the New Zealand cabinet agreed that a temporary seasonal work policy should be implemented, beginning with workers from the South Pacific (Fiji,<sup>19</sup> Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu

<sup>18</sup> Impetus for a joined-up government intervention in the H/V labour markets emanated from several policy agencies: Department of Labour, MSD, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the Inland Revenue Department (Department of Labour, 2010, p.3).

<sup>19</sup> Fiji was subsequently excluded following the military coup in December 2006 as part of the sanctions against the military regime.

and Vanuatu) and that the policy should include a mechanism to ensure that local labour was used before immigration options were considered.<sup>20</sup> Critical to the development of the RSE policy was Gary Jones's work with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to establish a reliable estimate of labour demand, so that allocation of workers and 'New Zealanders first' could be realistically managed. The Cabinet decision also followed on the heels of a New Zealand government inter-agency consultation about possible responses to calls from Pacific Forum countries for greater access to New Zealand and Australia's labour markets.<sup>21 22</sup>

The fact that two papers went forward on the same Cabinet agenda – one on the RSE policy and a related paper on Pacific labour mobility, meant "the focus on the Pacific was sharpened and made explicit in the RSE, which enhanced the scheme and increased its political support".<sup>23</sup> Helen Clark announced the essence of the RSE policy at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Fiji in October 2006. The policy was then trialled, with support from the World Bank, in the 2006-07 harvesting season in Central Otago. This provided the Department of Labour and MSD with the opportunity to assess how worker allocations, the New Zealander first principle and pastoral care could work in practice.

The development of policy and its implementation was achieved in six months; an almost impossible timeframe. This would not have been achieved without the already established frameworks and existing relationships both in New Zealand and the Pacific. It was not, however, a smooth crossing. Many employers opposed the obligations and costs that the policy imposed. There were heated regional meetings. There was a 'crackdown' on tax evasion and exploitation of unlawful migrant labour, and the Department of Labour introduced RSE immigration and labour inspection teams that were tasked with problem solving rather than punishment of RSEs. Enough employers became RSEs in 2007-08, including some of New Zealand's largest H/V enterprises, to meet a substantial part of expected demand.

### **The RSE scheme as a complex and evolving system**

An evaluation of the first two years' operation of RSE concluded that the policy had delivered on the fundamental goals that it was set up to achieve, with the important caveat that for the policy to be successful and sustainable in the longer term, the interests of all major stakeholder groups would have to be carefully managed and balanced.<sup>24</sup> Academic research on aspects of the RSE programme over the first five years also reported largely positive findings,<sup>25</sup> with the RSE put forward as a 'best practice' scheme – delivering positive outcomes for employers, workers and PIC communities.<sup>26</sup>

With rising labour productivity in the H/V industries profits recovered, and industry investment and expansion began to occur. RSE had a spill-over effect on the labour market generally, relieving

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<sup>20</sup> Cabinet Policy Committee (2006a, 2006b).

<sup>21</sup> Cabinet Policy Committee (2006c).

<sup>22</sup> Since the mid-2000s enhanced labour mobility between island countries and those on the Pacific rim has featured increasingly in discussions of the Pacific Forum, the key political organisation at the regional level. These discussions have been driven mainly by three factors: population growth and growing demand for employment opportunities for burgeoning youthful populations, especially in Melanesia and Micronesia; the process of trade liberalisation in Oceania and calls for increased access to labour markets in Australia and New Zealand by Pacific workers; and the role of migration as one strategy for adapting to negative impacts of climate change, particularly for the low-lying atolls of the central and northern Pacific (Kiribati, FSM, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu) (Chan, Cotton, Kavaliku, Tito & Toma (2004); Hayes (2010)).

<sup>23</sup> Institute of Policy Studies (2006, p. 66).

<sup>24</sup> Department of Labour (2010).

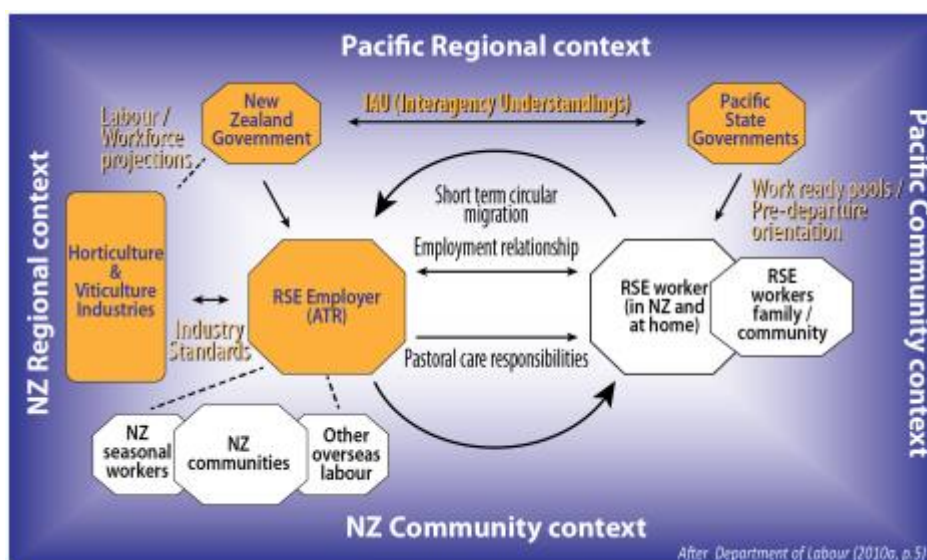
<sup>25</sup> See for instance Bailey (2014); C. Bedford (2013); Cameron (2011); Gibson & McKenzie (2014); Kumar (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Gibson & McKenzie (2014); ILO (2009).

pressure on New Zealand workers, and opening up more desirable employment opportunities for them. This led to more, and longer, employment of local workers. Generally, RSE workers received reasonable or significant net income from their work each season, and could repatriate earnings to the islands. Absconding was low, because of obligations placed on employers and social sanctions placed on workers in the Pacific. Accommodation and other pastoral care elements were largely met.<sup>27</sup>

These, then, can be considered the ‘originating conditions’ of RSE. The initial focus for co-design and development of RSE was on State/Employer/Pacific State relationships and dynamics (highlighted in Figure 2), with all parties working collectively to build value for the whole, not just for themselves. Over time, this focus has needed to expand to include other groups and dynamics with impacts on RSE workers’ island-based families and communities, and local New Zealand communities that host thousands of RSE workers each season, only just coming into the frame towards the end of the first decade of operation.

**Figure 2: The initial focus for RSE design and development – key stakeholders and relationships**



The RSE scheme is a complex adaptive system. Briefly what this means is:

- The system is a whole that is both greater than and different from its parts. Understanding what is happening in the system cannot be achieved by examining what is happening to each part separately (e.g. government policy or compliance, RSE employers, workers and their families), because the parts are interconnected and interdependent and the interactions of the parts lead to evolution of the system as a whole.<sup>28</sup>
- Changes in one part of the system lead to changes in all parts and the system itself, and these changes occur in unpredictable ways because it is a complex system.
- Two distinctive features of systems are the concepts of feedback and equilibrium. A feedback loop is “a circular arrangement of causally connected elements, so that each element has an effect on the next”.<sup>29</sup> Feedback can be positive or negative. Negative feedback loops initiate

<sup>27</sup> In the first year of operation there were a few tensions and disputes, as both employers and workers learned what to expect of each other. There were a handful of significant disputes or problems, one where an employer was overstretched financially and the workers were at risk of losing money, and a few of cases of absconding or drunkenness.

<sup>28</sup> Patton (1990).

<sup>29</sup> Capra (1997) cited in Walby (2007, p. 464).



changes within the system that help to stabilise and maintain the system's equilibrium. In other words, a change in one part of the system is matched by an adjustment elsewhere in the system to maintain a relatively stable state. Positive feedback loops, on the other hand, enforce small changes that escalate further change, and move the system away from equilibrium.<sup>30</sup> This can lead to the occurrence of tipping points, where forces within the system reach a critical threshold and a small change may have a large ultimate effect. Tipping goes in one direction - it is not possible for the system to 'go back' after reaching a tipping point as the state of the system changes.<sup>31 32</sup>

- Originating conditions are important for the direction of system development. However, every system carries its own contradictory pressures that might, if not checked, develop as probable and undesirable, rather than preferable, futures.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the RSE, this means the programme, as a whole, behaves in a particular manner that is quite different from, and cannot be reduced, to the behaviour of individual agents (government officials, employers, workers etc.). The success of the programme depends on how individuals interact, the relationships they form, and how their interactions are organised to ensure the policy's objectives are kept in balance. The RSE scheme exists because of the interactions between different groups within the system that work to reproduce it. As a result, while the RSE scheme has operated as a relatively stable programme over the first ten years, it is not a static scheme. The programme continues to evolve and is susceptible to change.

To effectively manage and cultivate growth in complex systems stakeholders need to be 'gardeners', instead of 'craftsmen'. As Parris (2017) explains:

When we [craftsmen] are merely creating something, we have a sense of control; we have a plan and an end state. When the shelf is built, it's built. Being a gardener is different. You have to prepare the environment; you have to nurture the plants and know when to leave them alone. You have to make sure the environment is hospitable to everything you want to grow (different plants have different needs), and after the harvest you aren't done. You need to turn the earth and, in essence, start again. *There is no end state if you want something to grow.*<sup>34</sup> (emphasis added)

### RSE today: a 'best practice' scheme?

In 2016, the value of NZ horticultural products exceeded NZ\$8 billion for the first time, keeping the sector on track to meet Horticulture NZ's target of \$10 billion by 2020.<sup>35</sup> Kiwifruit, apples and wine continue to dominate, but there's increasing diversification in the types of crops produced as well as

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<sup>30</sup> Cilliers (2000); Midgley (2006); Walby (2007).

<sup>31</sup> Bryne (1998); Page (2009); Rogers (2008).

<sup>32</sup> An example of a positive feedback loop is employers' responses to the 'NZer first' policy. Employers were encouraged to show they were seriously addressing the NZer first requirement, but their efforts to get unemployed New Zealanders off income support were deemed inadequate. This led to a 'tipping' point in early 2015 with the institutionalisation of the New Zealand Seasonal Work Scheme that employers were required to engage with if they wanted to maintain (in some cases) or increase their RSE workforces. By taking on more New Zealanders this had spillover effects to training and increasing productivity of NZ workers and other seasonal staff. The New Zealand Seasonal Work Scheme is a new structure that falls within the overall RSE complex system.

<sup>33</sup> There is a lot written on Complex Adaptive Systems as they apply to human systems. In policy, a discussion from the OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/science/sci-tech/43891980.pdf> and System Failure, Chapman, op. cit.. Also see: D. Meadows analysis of the effectiveness of intervention in a complex adaptive system <http://www.donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>. See also: <https://www.farnamstreetblog.com/2017/02/cascade-of-sand-complex-systems/>.

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit. <https://www.farnamstreetblog.com/2017/02/cascade-of-sand-complex-systems/>.

<sup>35</sup> Plant & Food Research (2016).

export markets, with New Zealand-grown fruit, vegetables and flowers exported to 124 countries in 2016.

The three main sectors continue to experience significant growth. Kiwifruit exports increased to almost \$1.7 billion in 2016, 42 percent above 2015, with expansion in crop production of the gold-fleshed kiwifruit, Zespri SunGold, supporting the industry's rebound after the Psa bacterial disease, discovered late in 2010, caused widespread damage to crop production. Wine exports have increased, reaching \$1.56 billion in 2016, and there is ongoing expansion in the apple industry, with exports up 23 percent on 2015 to \$692 million in 2016.

According to Pipfruit New Zealand, "a million new apple trees are being planted across the country as international demand for New Zealand apples continues to soar".<sup>36</sup> Widespread industry investment and expansion has injected hundreds of millions into local economies, resulting in significant economic and social benefits across the country's growing regions. This growth is "creating hundreds of new permanent and part-time jobs for Kiwis", supported by the RSE scheme which provides certainty of labour to ensure fruit is picked at optimum quality.<sup>37</sup>

Significant gains in the sector come on the back of labour productivity, which in turn comes on the back of the RSE workers. By the end of March 2017, a total of 6,607 RSE workers had arrived in NZ for the 2016/17 season, with 91 percent of the visas issued to workers from Pacific Island countries. Of those workers, 2,500 were from Vanuatu, with another 2,500 combined from Samoa (1,300) and Tonga (1,230). The annual RSE employer survey shows positive feedback from employers regarding their RSE workers, and continued industry investment and expansion due to having a reliable core workforce of seasonal labour year after year.<sup>38</sup> RSE has made a significant difference to the H/V industries specifically, and the economy more generally. But are a fair share of the benefits of that growth going back to workers and their families?

More critical analysis of the scheme is starting to appear in research that examines some of the benefits and costs of participation, particularly for RSE workers, participating RSE households and communities.<sup>39</sup> There are signs of growing tensions across the programme, some of which have been reported in the local media, and a sense that the scheme is beginning to fray at the edges. Concerns are starting to be voiced: exploitation of undocumented labour is creeping back into the sector;<sup>40</sup> dissatisfaction with workers' earnings and living costs in New Zealand; concerns about RSE workers' rights and welfare;<sup>41</sup> disruption for families and communities coping with the repeated absence of seasonal workers; and rising inequalities at the community level between participating and non-participating households.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pipfruit New Zealand (2016a).

<sup>37</sup> Pipfruit New Zealand (2016b).

<sup>38</sup> Research New Zealand (2016).

<sup>39</sup> See for instance Bedford & Bedford (2016; 2017a); MBIE (2015).

<sup>40</sup> In 2017 MBIE introduced harsher penalties for RSEs found in breach of employment or immigration law. Employers now face a stand down period, anywhere from six months to two years, before they can recruit migrant workers again if they incur employment standard-related penalties, such as infringement notices from the Labour Inspectorate (Lewis, 2017a).

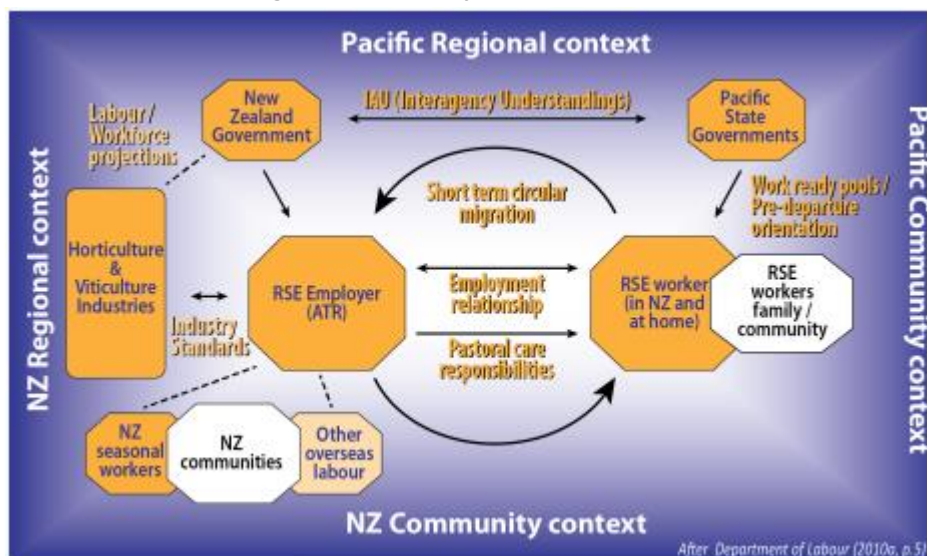
<sup>41</sup> Concerns regarding worker vulnerability and possible exploitation in the horticulture and viticulture industries have recently been raised in both New Zealand and Australia. See Stringer (2016) and Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee (2016). Researchers examining aspects of the RSE and SWP schemes have also raised concerns about worker vulnerability. See Anderson & Tipples (2014); Ball, Beacroft & Lindley (2011); Cameron (2011); Kumar (2012); MacDermott & Opeskin (2010); Newman (2013); Reilly (2011); Rockell (2015).

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Bailey (2014); Craven (2015); Kaigen-Lepon (2010); Rockell (2015).



Resources are stretched in the Pacific to manage RSE. In New Zealand, there has been a pretty consistent push for the RSE scheme to become more like other parts of MBIE’s core business – conforming to a particular business model, rather than recognising the unique properties of this particular programme. The scheme has become part of the policy, industry, and Pacific landscape, and with this it has come to be seen as ‘business as usual’. As a result, there is little ongoing exploration of what a ‘preferable’ future means for RSE over the next decade. Rather, there’s perhaps an assumption in Government, PICs and industry that the status quo will continue. Figure 3 identifies the groups and relationships within the RSE system, highlighted in orange, that have been the focus of research over the past 10 years, and are now considered ‘business as usual’.

**Figure 3: RSE today – business as usual**



### Current tensions: a potential Black Swan?

The phrase ‘Black Swan’ is now commonly used to identify unexpected and unwelcome events, it was introduced to the world by Nassim Taleb in his book of the same name in 2007.<sup>43</sup> The lesson is that prediction generally ignores events that are unexpected, that have an extreme impact and are made to seem predictable by explanations afterwards. Taleb (2014) argues that in order to prepare for the unexpected, you need to reduce risks and be open for disruptive opportunities, through a willingness to experiment, fail and learn.<sup>44</sup>

The RSE scheme has continued to be a programme apart, not least because some of the people first engaged with it have remained a part of it. Knowing what existed before and seeing the difference RSE has made has resulted in persistence of work on its originating ethos of creating public value across government, enterprise and the Pacific. The original concerted effort to create a different approach – a ‘preferable future’ – will, however, necessarily have faded or atrophied as the different parts of the system settle into feedback loops that reinforce their current behaviour. Treating the scheme as ‘business as usual’ increases the risk that a Black Swan lands. Some of the tensions that

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/56380/the-black-swan/>. ‘The Black Swan, the Impact of the Highly Improbable’ - the name comes from the Northern hemisphere conclusion that swans were only white, until exploration of Australia revealed the existence of Black Swans.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/176227/antifragile-by-nassim-nicholas-taleb/9780812979688/>. The ‘learn by doing’ approach is also a design approach – ‘fail fast and early’, ‘rapid prototyping’ etc.

are beginning to surface in the scheme that could lead to the arrival of a Black Swan are discussed briefly below.

One of the fundamental tensions is the employer-driven nature of the scheme and employers' use of return workers. Employers want a core seasonal labour force of skilled workers who require minimal training and set high standards for the rest of the workers, and this is achieved by bringing back the same experienced workers year after year. Workers are, for the most part, keen to return to New Zealand over successive seasons because of the opportunities to earn a decent income and gain additional skills.

For the employers and return workers involved, this arrangement looks like a 'win-win'. However, the repeated use of the same workers is creating problems of entitlement; employers think they are entitled to the same workers each year, and workers think they're entitled to the work and the income it generates. This, in turn, can create what are known as 'distortion and dependence effects'.<sup>45</sup> As Martin (2001, p.1) explains: "Distortion refers to the fact that economies and labor markets are flexible: they adjust to the presence or absence of foreign workers". Employers start to make decisions that assume migrant workers will continue to be available (e.g. expanding production in areas where little local labour is available, and avoiding raising wages when local workers are no longer willing to do the work). Dependence refers to the fact that migrants, their families, and countries become dependent on overseas jobs to maintain livelihoods.

When the RSE scheme was implemented, it was likely envisaged that RSE workers would make selective use of the scheme to earn an income and further their livelihoods at home, because of the then policy requirements around settled workers and their families; not that they would necessarily want to return to New Zealand year after year. However, it is now clear that many workers do want to come back and work over successive seasons, and this raises questions around dependence and entitlement. Real problems may emerge in future if workers assume that work in New Zealand will always be available and they do not prepare themselves properly for life back in the islands.

The repeated use of the same workers also comes at a cost to workers' families and communities. For family members, the primary benefits of participation in offshore seasonal work are material as a result of remittances – better nutrition, housing, education and health care. The negative impacts relate to the social and emotional costs, such as family stability, cohesiveness and the emotional qualities of family life.<sup>46</sup>

At the household level, the impacts of sending a worker abroad are influenced by a range of factors: who migrates and who is left behind, the length of the migrant's absence, the worker's ability to communicate with family members while overseas, the role of the extended family in the changing allocation of labour and agricultural production, and the household's access to and use of remittances.<sup>47</sup> <sup>48</sup> Migrant households can benefit from remittances, but local incomes and other household inputs are lost when workers are absent. A key question is whether the opportunity costs

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<sup>45</sup> Martin (2001).

<sup>46</sup> Wells (2012).

<sup>47</sup> Asis (2008, 2012); Borovnik (2007); NZAID (2009); Piper (2008); Toyota, Yeoh & Nguyen (2007); Wells (2012).

<sup>48</sup> Research with RSE workers has identified negative impacts at the household level including: the effects of parental absence on children; strains on marital relationships; negative impacts on agricultural production due to loss of labour (fewer gardens, loss of crop diversity, and increasing reliance on imported goods). See for instance Bailey (2009, 2014); C. Bedford (2013); Craven (2015); Rockell (2015); Rohorua, Gibson, McKenzie & Martinez (2009).

of the migrant's absence are outweighed by the new income earned abroad. This depends in part on duration of absence. If the period of overseas employment is short, and the financial costs of participating are high, then there can be little or no net gain to households.<sup>49</sup>

Findings from the *RSE Remittance Pilot Project* show that older workers and those who are married tend to remit more frequently, and send home larger aggregate amounts, than younger workers and those who are single.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, if remittances are considered the primary gain from participation in seasonal work, it makes sense for employers to recruit older, married workers. However, research on the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) has found that employers' preference for older workers with children and/or other dependents exacerbates negative impacts on families,<sup>51</sup> illustrating there can be trade-offs between the financial gains and social costs for migrant households.

At the community level, there are two core issues. The first is the unequal access to participate in seasonal work among island-based communities, and the second is the uneven distribution of development benefits that result from participating in overseas employment. Growing inequalities between participating RSE/SWP households and non-participating households; tensions between the use of remittances for individual/household purposes and for wider community projects; and changing community dynamics as a result of migrants' changing attitudes and values have all been reported in recent research.<sup>52</sup>

Unequal access to seasonal employment opportunities is caused by a range of factors: knowledge about seasonal work schemes; ease of communication between employers/agents and communities (recruitment may focus on the communities that are most accessible); employer preferences; transportation costs; and the existence and strength of kinship ties between current and prospective seasonal workers. Furthermore, not all communities want to be involved in seasonal work.<sup>53</sup>

Strategies for the recruitment of RSE and SWP workers have varied across PICs. The World Bank surveys in Tonga and Vanuatu found that in Tonga a process of village-level nomination of RSE workers favoured those from relatively poor, rural households, whereas in Vanuatu workers were selected from wealthier-than-average households.<sup>54</sup> In Fiji, community leaders are involved in the selection of workers and recruitment is targeted towards rural communities. In PNG on the other hand, recruitment is handled via the government work-ready pool with little outreach to rural areas.<sup>55</sup> While from a development perspective spreading opportunities to participate in seasonal work is important, there are potential trade-offs between spatial equity and efficiency as employers may seek to minimise their costs by recruiting workers from the most convenient locations.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gibson (2015).

<sup>50</sup> Between October 2014 and September 2016 data were collected on the earnings, deductions and remittances of 487 Samoan and Tongan men (2014/15) and 142 Ni-Vanuatu men (2016) who were employed continuously for 18 or more weeks as seasonal workers under the RSE. Details of the surveys conducted as part of the project can be found in Bedford & Bedford (2016, 2017a, 2017b); Gounder (2015) and MBIE (2015).

<sup>51</sup> Wells (2012).

<sup>52</sup> See for instance Bailey (2014); C. Bedford (2013); Craven (2015); Rockell (2015).

<sup>53</sup> Bailey (2014); Craven (2015); Rockell (2015).

<sup>54</sup> Gibson, McKenzie & Rohorua (2008); McKenzie, Martinez & Winters (2008).

<sup>55</sup> Curtain & Sherrell (2017).

<sup>56</sup> Gibson & McKenzie (2011).

Any future strategy for more equitable distribution of access to seasonal employment will need to start with the employers. This requires greater churn in the RSE workforce with higher numbers of new workers, and for New Zealand employers and PIC Labour Sending Units to work together to extend opportunities to new families and communities. For the scheme to truly be the 'best' for all parties, PIC governments need to take greater control over worker selection and rotation, in an effort to spread the opportunities more widely and minimise some of the social costs of participation. Bailey (2016) suggests limiting the number of years a worker can participate to six years, then a one to two-year break, before being eligible to participate again. This would encourage workers to focus more on their short-term development needs, rather than assuming they have an unlimited time span for employment.<sup>57</sup>

Research indicates that RSE workers' earnings tend to plateau around the fourth season of work, suggesting that employers may not have additional productivity gains by bringing back the same workers in successive seasons beyond their fourth year.<sup>58</sup> A number of employers are finding a reduction in work ethic among workers returning for successive seasons. As workers achieve their targets for income generation over repeated visits, there may be a plateauing in the desire for higher earnings that drove some of their earlier performance. Workers are also becoming more discerning about the type of jobs they do, and the work and living conditions they are prepared to accept.

Workers are beginning to assess the financial gains of some work over others (whether they prefer piece rates or hourly rates) as well as the physical demands of various types of work. Moreover, some have voiced concerns that the costs of living in NZ (accommodation, food, transport etc.) continue to rise over successive seasons, while their earnings have plateaued. Recent media reports have highlighted problems in Marlborough particularly, where a dearth of suitable rental accommodation is leading to overcrowding and high costs for RSE workers.

Many workers in Marlborough are employed by contractors, rather than individual growers, and there are concerns that contractors are extracting value from workers by paying them standard piece rates, while charging high accommodation costs. There is an increasing call for Marlborough RSEs to shift from using residential to purpose-built accommodation for workers, following the Hawke's Bay model. This would not only reduce the accommodation costs for workers, but would also free up residential properties for the rental market, helping to ease housing demand.<sup>59</sup> The preponderant use of labour contracting firms by growers in Marlborough creates a tension and encourages risk-shifting to the workers, potentially having the effect of suppressing local wages and increasing dependence on RSE, and therefore increasing the risk of a Black Swan.

As workers become more accustomed to living and working in New Zealand, there's been a reported increase in behavioural problems (such as absenteeism and alcohol-related incidents). Workers are also becoming frustrated with the limited opportunities to increase their earnings or move into more skilled positions. Rockell (2015) argues that the New Zealander first principle has contributed to this issue. By protecting New Zealand jobs, opportunities for RSE workers to progress into more skilled or supervisory positions are limited. Workers are instead locked into a repeated cycle of lower level jobs

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<sup>57</sup> Bailey (2016); C. Bedford (2013).

<sup>58</sup> Bedford & Bedford (2017).

<sup>59</sup> Lewis (2017b; 2017c); Watson (2017).

and income, partly because of a belief held by employers that the New Zealand first policy prohibits them from promoting RSE workers into more senior roles.

To address employers' demands for increasing productivity, while also reducing tensions around RSE workers' earnings, minimising the risks of misbehaviour, and spreading opportunities to participate in the RSE among Pacific communities, it is in employers' best interests to rotate workers and bring in new staff. As part of this rotation, employers need to consider strategies for knowledge and skills transfer to new recruits. One strategy would be for employers to draw on the knowledge of experienced RSE workers who have been transitioned into more senior roles. If RSEs can facilitate the movement of experienced workers into supervisory positions, these workers can be responsible for the training and oversight of new recruits. This would provide two benefits: experienced workers would see some job progression and the associated increase in earnings; and places would be freed up for new workers to be employed as pickers, pruners and packers.

Looking to the future, some PICs will need to think carefully about the numbers of workers that are employed offshore as seasonal workers each year. By June 2017 it is estimated that approximately 16,000 seasonal workers will have arrived during the last financial year to take up employment in NZ and in Australia under the Seasonal Worker Program. The majority of workers (approx. 11,000 or 70%) will have come from two countries: Tonga and Vanuatu. Of the workers from these two countries, 86 percent will be male, and 80 percent will be aged between 20-39 years.<sup>60</sup>

The SWP remains heavily reliant on Tonga – 47 percent of all SWP workers in 2016/17 will be Tongan. In the case of RSE, employers continue to rely on Vanuatu as the major source country. Approximately 44 percent of RSE workers for the 2016/17 season will be from Vanuatu, with another 21 percent each from Tonga and Samoa. A critical question then, is how sustainable is the recruitment of men aged 20-39 years from Vanuatu and Tonga if current preferences for workers from these two countries continues?

In the 2016/17 season, 23 percent of Tongan males aged 20-39 years will be employed under the RSE and SWP. This could increase to 47 percent by 2020/2021. Is it sustainable for Tonga to have this proportion of workers aged 20-39 years employed offshore? In the case of Vanuatu, nine percent of males aged 20-39 years will be employed under RSE and SWP in 2016/17. This could increase to 12 percent by 2020/2021. Is this sustainable for ni-Vanuatu communities? Can the Labour Sending Units in both Vanuatu and Tonga cope with increasing numbers employed offshore and the associated administrative burden this places on limited staff and resources?

It is important to bear in mind that seasonal work overseas is only one option for 20-39 year old males. This is the age group that provides many of the international students as well as the new recruits into the civil services in the islands. In addition men aged 20-39 years may be employed overseas under other labour migration schemes. It is therefore critical to start thinking about the sustainability of these programmes for participating countries, and whether it is in PIC's best interests to allow large numbers to be employed offshore. To reduce the burden on individual countries, New Zealand and Australian employers should be encouraged to 'spread the love' across PICs to ensure certain countries do not lose too many from their productive working age groups over successive seasons.

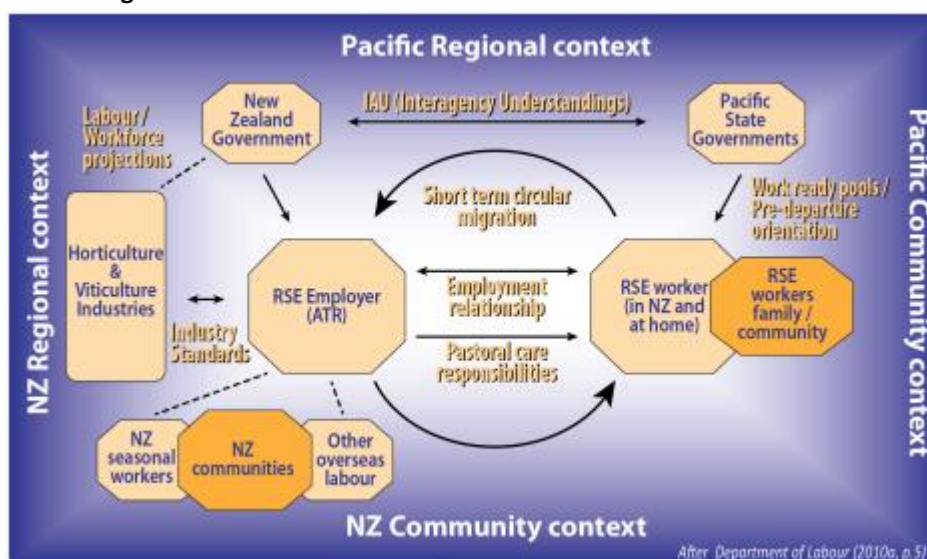
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<sup>60</sup> Ingram & R. Bedford (2017).

## What might all this mean for RSE and its future?

The original focus for development of the RSE scheme was on State/Employer/Pacific State relationships and dynamics. The two significant areas not featured as part of the system design were the family/community dynamics in the sending Pacific States, and the New Zealand receiving communities' relationships with the RSE programme (highlighted in Figure 4). System disturbances, and potential Black Swans might originate in these connected but less-observed places. The fragility of immigration – an area of public policy that evokes strong public sentiment and is always a 'hot topic', especially in election year - means the risks of strong reactions (e.g. tighter regulation or a restriction in numbers) to real or perceived problems are potentially great. After 10 years, we are arguably at the point where there needs to be a collective reimagining of the RSE scheme to assess where its 'preferable future', and risks, now lie.

Figure 4: Future focus of RSE - NZ and Pacific Island communities



It is important to keep in mind that RSE work policy is simply an instrument – it means little without the people who operate it on the ground and the relationships they forge. There is a need to re-examine the relationships and dynamics of the RSE system, particularly the existence of any feedback loops that may be shifting the system away from equilibrium, and to recognise that new parts of the system (PIC families and communities and New Zealand communities) require more attention. Management of complex systems requires constant vigilance, however business as usual temptations are to reduce resources in the 'gardening' activities needed to keep growing the value of RSE, as more immediate demands pull resources away, whether in government, enterprises or the Pacific. This might mean that 'soft signals' of a pest invasion in the garden are missed; again, the potential for a Black Swan's arrival increases.<sup>61</sup>

It is also imperative that we remember there are trade-offs for all participating groups. For workers and their families there are trade-offs between the financial benefits of participation and the social costs. For Government, continual oversight and management of RSE creates high overhead costs.

<sup>61</sup> MBIE has developed a regulatory approach across the agency that references 'stewardship' (notions of gardening) and 'regulatory system'. The regulatory management strategy does, however, have a picture of cogs and pulleys, on the cover page – a misdirected analogy. See: <http://www.mbie.govt.nz/about/our-work/roles-and-responsibilities/regulatory-systems-programme/stewardship/>.

These costs will continue for the foreseeable future if the programme is to be well-managed over the next decade. In this regard, the Strengthening Pacific Partnerships programme is of particular value, providing targeted support and capacity building to PIC Labour Sending Units, which in turn enables them to effectively manage labour sending processes. For Pacific states, there are potential trade-offs between the opportunities for their citizens to generate incomes abroad as seasonal workers, and the numbers that can be sustainably taken out of local communities, and this will require careful consideration in future as additional labour mobility opportunities arise. For all these costs, clear sight needs to be maintained of the enormous benefits that RSE produces for industry, government, New Zealand as a whole, and development in the Pacific.

To ensure the RSE scheme remains the 'best' scheme for all parties, there is a need for continual monitoring so that risks are minimised. It is essential that research on the scheme, as well as a clear evaluation and monitoring agenda, continues if there is to be an objective assessment of whether the policy is achieving its medium and longer-term goals. The RSE conference provides an important monitoring and balancing mechanism; it keeps growers and HR managers open to new ideas and discussions about what's happening in the industry, within New Zealand communities and in PICs. This in turn means RSEs don't focus solely on their individual enterprises and needs, but stay open to the bigger picture. All stakeholders in the scheme are at risk of encountering problems if they think that what exists now – the RSE in its current form – will be there in the future. The scheme will continue to evolve and all parties must evolve with it, preferably to a preferable future.



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