

# Free(r) movement at the Forum

by Sadhana Sen and Stephen Howes

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L to R: Fiji's Finance Minister Biman Prasad, Tonga's Finance Minister and FEMM Chair Tiofilusi Tuieti and new PIF Secretary General Baron Waqa address Pacific media  
*Photo Credit: Facebook/ForumSec*

The annual Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) always has a wide-ranging agenda. This year the FEMM, which was held at the start of August in Suva, endorsed the now-finalised but yet-to-be-released Pacific Roadmap for Economic Development, advanced the new [Pacific Resilience Facility](#) (to be headquartered in Tonga), and worked on a plan to reverse the exit of banks from the region.

The most interesting development from this year's FEMM, though, was the endorsement by the new Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Baron Waqa of the ambition to free up the movement of people within the region. As he put it in his [opening address](#), "We must advocate for freer movement of our people within the islands including Australia and New Zealand, to facilitate greater regional economic cooperation and integration."

Despite the emphasis on the Blue Pacific, there has, until recently, been very little focus within the Forum on the aspirations of Pacific nationals to move across that Blue Pacific in search of a better life. The [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#) released in 2022 runs to some 31 pages while hardly mentioning labour mobility or migration, let alone the free movement of people, even as a goal to be achieved by that far-away date.

The Forum started embracing the issue of freedom of movement within the Pacific as recently as May when the outgoing Secretary General, Henry Puna, and the outgoing Chair, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, [backed the idea](#) one of us had put forward of a [Pacific Business Travel Card](#) to free up business travel.

But now the new Secretary General has gone much further to embrace the vision of free movement for all people within the Pacific. In making this call, he has joined, and no doubt been influenced by, the [leaders of Samoa, Fiji and Solomon Islands](#)

who have all recently voiced similar aspirations.

With his opening statement, Waqa not only brought the Forum into line with regional sentiment but, choosing his words carefully, called for not free but freer movement: free movement might be the ultimate vision, but it is not a practical, short-term aspiration. Note also how Waqa singled out Australia and New Zealand for attention, as these are the two major countries within the region that so many in the Pacific want easier access to.

The FEMM communique is yet to be released, but from the closing press conference, it seems that there is still a gap between advocacy and results.

Tonga is chairing the Pacific Islands Forum, and according to Tongan Finance Minister Tiofilusi Tuieti who spoke at that press conference, there was agreement that there should be “an assessment of the social and economic impact of ... labour mobility programs and also from human migration in the Pacific.” So perhaps more studies rather than action?

Biman Prasad, Fiji’s Finance Minister and a leading advocate on integration and free movement, also speaking at the press conference, said that a key element of the discussion was “was the ability of the Pacific Island countries, including Australia and New Zealand, to work towards a much better, deeper, meaningful regional integration”. On free movement specifically, Prasad said “we are hoping that this will remain on the agenda”. He talked about the relaxation of business visas, but also cautioned that “within the Pacific we need to free ourselves quicker than what we expect Australia and New Zealand and others to do”.

So, it seems that there is still a fair way to go. To gauge regional sentiment on this key issue, we asked a few ministers during the FEMM what they thought on the issue of free – or freer – movement.

Cook Islands Assistant Finance Minister Tukaka Ama said that his country supported free movement for PIF citizens, but added it was an area “that needs to be looked at carefully” as free movement might result “in a huge influx of people to a certain destination”.

Tonga’s Tuieti told us that his country has been advocating for free travel as part of wider regional integration but said that it may have to be introduced in phases.

Nauru Deputy Finance Minister and Special Envoy Maverick Eoe said that Nauru supported free movement “absolutely”. Commenting on reservations that Australia and NZ might hold, he said, “If we are part of a family in the region, families don’t close doors, simple as that. We’re in the Pacific, and the Pacific is family, open your

doors to everyone.”

As noted, Fiji’s Prasad has been a leading advocate for the free movement of people. On the question of freer vs free movement, he said: “Ideally, it has to be free movement. As part of a much deeper, meaningful integration, we will be pushing for this. We need to take some decisive actions, there might be some that need time to discuss and are done later. But there are low-hanging actions that we can work on immediately. So it has to be a phased, free Pacific.”

On Australia and New Zealand’s position, Prasad said:

There is much more dialogue and acceptance of the idea. I’m very pleased that since I talked about it last year it has gained traction. Almost all the Pacific countries support the idea. The benefits of integration may be differentiated but everyone benefits. Australia and New Zealand understand this. There might be some domestic imperatives in those countries but there is much more understanding and receptiveness to the idea than some years back.

Overall, there is strong support in the Pacific for free movement of people, but more work is needed to move the idea from vision to implementation (see [this blog](#) for some ideas on how to do that). The popularity of the Pacific labour mobility schemes is a preoccupation causing some concern to island nations. It is still early days and, as Prasad said, now that the idea is on the agenda, the key thing is to keep it there. Having the region’s top bureaucrat, the Forum Secretary General, on board will surely help make that happen. The next test will be to see whether free – or freer – movement of people makes it onto the agenda at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Tonga at the end of August.

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## Disclosures:

Sadhana Sen’s attendance at the Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting was endorsed by the Fiji Times, Marshall Islands Journal, Samoa Observer, Business Advantage PNG, and the Guam-based Pacific Islands Times.

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