

A proposal for a new regional compact to promote people mobility

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Labour mobility was a key topic for discussion with Australia's Foreign Minister, during her visit to Fiji two weeks ago

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

The call for Australia to offer more labour mobility access to the Pacific has been a common theme of commentators (e.g. from the [Lowy Interpreter](#) and [ASPI Strategist](#)), as a key part of a response to recent geopolitical manoeuvring in the Pacific.

In a [recent article](#) for the *Australian Economic Review*, we propose a new regional compact for Australia to promote people mobility. The purpose of the regional compact is to greatly improve linkages between the Pacific and Timor-Leste and Australia (and other potential partners such as New Zealand), through more and better organised labour mobility and new upskilling opportunities.

We put forward six reasons why a new approach to international mobility in the Pacific and Timor-Leste region, and therefore a new Australian migration policy, is needed:

- The region includes both states with high international mobility levels (and high remittance dependency rates) and states with low mobility.
- Population growth is rapid, youth population shares are exceedingly high, and the lack of paid jobs in the small formal economies is a common problem.
- Climate change impacts are among the most pressing in the world, with vulnerability to rising sea levels.
- Small populations across vast geographical areas distant from larger global populations make for a unique regional context.
- Geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific have created a wider global, as well as regional, significance.
- There is a declining overall commitment to overseas aid funding as a share of GDP by the Australian government, but an increased Pacific emphasis within that reduced commitment, and a consistently high level of aid dependence (as a share of GDP) in many Pacific economies.

We argue for a new regional compact based on three guiding considerations:

- to show special recognition by Australia of the development position and challenges of our near neighbours
- to offer more open access on a controlled basis, for mutual gain
- to create mobility pathways that are not over-managed by government to the detriment of meeting broader policy objectives.

A strong focus on these issues would see the 'Pacific Step-up' currently underway increase in ambition, broaden in scope, and pivot from a country-by-country programmatic approach to a significantly more scalable and sustainable partnership. This new approach would include three concrete objectives.

First, a key regional performance measure is needed, such as the graduation of all low-mobility (as measured by the emigrant share of the population) Pacific countries and Timor-Leste to medium- and high-mobility status. This requires growing significantly the Pacific diaspora in Australia to a predetermined level. One way to do this is through the pathway that Labor has recently announced: the Pacific Engagement Visa, that will provide direct access to a quota of permanent places based on applicants having a job in advance and evidence of being able to speak and read English. There is also a need for clear pathways to permanent residence from the current temporary work schemes. A related change would be to open up the Working Holiday Maker program to the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

Second, there needs to be a major reduction in the inconsistencies in qualification recognition, and other barriers to skilled labour mobility, within the Pacific and between Australia (and New Zealand) and the Pacific. This will be difficult to achieve, given the power of professions to use qualifications to restrict migrant access, but the gains can be large in the Pacific case and the need is clear and manageable. Access to migrant pathways, which require qualifications based on Australian (and New Zealand) competency standards, would also create a strong domestic demand for regional governments to invest more in lifting the quality of their own education institutions.

Third, flexible and responsive education aid programming is required to support Pacific human capital development. This could include teacher exchange, involving families for longer term employment stays, and opening up access to domestic education at different levels (for example, early childhood through to in-country vocational training and [HECS/HELP](#)). Also important are lead vocational and higher education partnerships in the region, such as that between the [Australian National University and the University of Papua New Guinea](#). All innovative initiatives under the compact should be piloted, evaluated, and then scaled up.

Embedded in this shift is a necessary move from a focus on the short term – temporary migration, skills shortages and limited term aid programs – to long-term and comprehensive foundational policies that will be a permanent feature of Australia's policy ecosystem to support economic prosperity in Australia, the Pacific and Timor-Leste for decades to come.

Australia can and should provide a lead in the Pacific region in advancing new policies to work with partners to enhance outcomes for the region, using the vehicles of skilling and labour mobility.

Read the full article '[It is time for a new regional compact!](#)' in the Australian Economic Review.

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