PACIFIC MIGRATION

Devpolicy Blog Posts 2023-25

Pacific Migration

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Cover image	Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme workers during the summer grape harvest in Blenheim, New Zealand.
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This edited collection compiles some of the most compelling writing on Pacific migration from the Devpolicy Blog from July 2023 to April 2025.

Author biographies are provided at the back of the publication. Blogs in this publication reflect the views of the authors only.

Blog content is correct at date of publication on the Devpolicy Blog. Go to the individual blogs at https://devpolicy.org/ for blog references and data information.

Happy reading!

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Table of contents

A fully integrated Blue Pacific: our near-term ambition

Biman Prasad

16 June 2023

2023 Pacific Update (Development Policy Centre)

This is an edited extract from Biman Prasad's opening speech at the 2023 Pacific Update on 13 June.

By now we are all aware that we are at another critical juncture – in my mind the most critical juncture ever – in the history of our region and its future.

Our Blue Pacific faces not just the existential threat of climate change, but many other challenges in relation to geopolitics, superpower conflict, major social and economic challenges, a declining resource base in fisheries and forests, environmental degradation, and debilitating health problems.

The region is failing to deliver on its promise of decent and well-paying new jobs for our young – wherever they may be – in FSM [Federated States of Micronesia], across PNG, and across our region. The deficit in decent job creation is causing unease across our region and, most importantly, in urban centres across the Pacific.

Our region has been unable to make significant progress in reducing the gender gap. Figures and trends for GBV [gender-based violence] are distressing. If anything, the gender divide has been worsening in several countries and across many sectors of the economy.

The Pacific needs a breakthrough moment. We need to break through the constraints that a tired and archaic global financial architecture imposes on our countries. We need a breakthrough moment to sidestep the harsh fallout from a geo-economics that is about the interests of the largest states and economies. Blue Pacific's North Star, the Blue Pacific's 2050 Strategy, is foundational. It gives purpose, direction and framework for how the Blue Pacific engages with the global system.

For far too long, we have been on the receiving end of having things decided for us. For far too long, we have suffered from having programs conceived for us in distant capitals; of having our security challenges being determined for us. That period – that era – has now ended.

Fiji's Coalition Government has a clear vision on what solidarity can mean for us as a nation. A strengthened Pacific solidarity means that the Pacific's regional institutions can do more for us. Strengthening USP as the region's premier learning institution means that we will have better trained and educated graduates to help us respond better to the challenges I have described. A strengthened FFA [Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency] means that we become better at curtailing IUU [illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing] and fisheries related crime in our waters and on the high seas between our EEZs [exclusive economic zones]. Fiji will benefit from strengthened Pacific regionalism. So will all other states across the Blue Pacific.

A fully integrated Blue Pacific must be the near-term ambition for our region. A united and strengthened Pacific regionalism is the crucial starting point for that. Our people should be able to move back and forth between all our countries. They will build their careers across these countries.

Our businesses should be able to easily expand across the whole region. As they do so, they will create new opportunities and they will use the Pacific-wide presence to expand into Asia and further afield. They will create opportunities for the region.

I have said before and I repeat – Australia and New Zealand must be part of the Pacific story. There is no salami slice part of the Pacific family.

> "A unified Pacific-wide single market must include Australia and New Zealand. A starting point for that must be visa-free travel between Australia and New Zealand and Pacific Island states. The time for that has now arrived."

Fijian and Pacific businesses must be able to grow in the Australia and the New Zealand markets. Similarly Australian and New Zealand businesses should be able to expand across the Pacific. Out of this, we will create large businesses who will be able to stand their ground better in a new geo-economic universe.

It simply cannot continue to be the case that it is easier for Lithuanians to travel in and out of Australia than it is for Fijians. It simply cannot continue to be the case that Latvians have easier travel access into New Zealand than do Solomon Islanders.

The Blue Pacific must reach out into the world with a determination that is grounded in our history, that is knitted into our cultural fabric, and that reflects our identity.

As island states, we are stewards of nearly 20 per cent of the world's EEZs. As island states we are cultural custodians of some 15 per cent of the world's languages – over 800 in PNG alone. We are stewards of some of the world's most extensive biodiversity. The bio-origins of medicine and health products of the future lie in the Blue Pacific. Some 40 per cent of the world's tuna comes from our region. In a climate and food stressed future, blue foods from the Blue Pacific will play an important role for food security for all humanity.

So, as we seek to change the nature of our engagement with the world, we want the world to understand that we are not distant and powerless small states. We want the world to know that we are large ocean states. We are states that collectively have a large stake in humanity's future.

We are the world's largest continent – the blue continent. We are the world's lungs – providing oxygen for ourselves and for a growing oxygen-starved world. When we therefore think about the economic context that we find ourselves in, let us know that we will meet the world at a halfway point. To get to that halfway point, Fiji's Coalition Government is unequivocally clear – our solidarity and our shared sense of purpose, our urgency, are our starting points.

Our economic wellbeing rests on our solidarity. In many ways our very future as a people depends on our solidarity. The best days of Pacific regionalism clearly lie ahead of us. ■

Free movement of people within the Pacific: how?

Stephen Howes

15 March 2024

Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, pictured here with International Monetary Fund senior official Bo Li, became the latest Pacific leader to endorse the idea of Pacific-wide visa-free travel at a public address to an IMF-hosted gathering in Fiji during February 2024. (Facebook/Fiji Government)

The Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka is the latest to add his voice to calls for the free movement of people within the Pacific. That means the call has been supported now by leaders from Samoa, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The time for debating whether this idea should be taken seriously is over. The question now is how to take it forward.

The idea is not a utopian fantasy. Citizens of New Zealand and Australia, the Pacific's two largest countries, already enjoy virtually unlimited free movement between the two countries. Citizens of Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau hold New Zealand passports and so also enjoy the same rights. Therefore five of the Pacific Islands Forum's 19 members are already where other Pacific leaders are saying they want their countries to be.

Virtually all Pacific countries allow short-term, visa-free travel for the citizens of other Pacific countries. Australia and New Zealand both allocate permanent residency slots to various Pacific countries every year. There is a lot to build on.

At the same time, we should be realistic and acknowledge the obstacles. First, the oft-used term "visa-free" is anathema to Australia which insists that even those with New Zealand passports need a visa to enter the country; it's just one they pick up on arrival.

Second, New Zealand trialled visa-free access for Fijians, Samoans and Tongans for trips up to three months in December 1986 but dropped it quickly, in February 1987. ("Fears of a massive increase in the numbers of Pacific Island overstayers were prompted by cases of visitors enrolling children in Auckland schools, and by the organisation of special charter flights to bring Tongans to New Zealand." – Bedford and Larner, 1992, p.69.) Visa waivers for Tuvalu, Kiribati and Nauru were dumped in 2003.

Third, the Pacific includes countries of hugely varying size, from tiny Nauru with a population of 12,500 to large Papua New Guinea with a population of around 10 million. Allowing free movement of people between Nauru and Australia is one thing; allowing free movement between PNG and Australia quite another.

Fourth, people have different things in mind when they talk about the freer movement of people or visa-free access. Some are focused on short-term travel: being able to travel for a holiday, business or to visit family without the need to apply for a visa. Others want something much more ambitious: an EU-style agreement that supports long-term migration within the Pacific.

How to get beyond these obstacles?

My first suggestion is that we should articulate the goal as one of free movement of people rather than visa-free travel. This wording puts people first, and avoids getting caught up in linguistic minefields around different types of visa arrangements.

Second, this is a matter that should be taken up at the regional level. Migration – unlike temporary mobility for work – is not a trade issue and the most appropriate regional body to deal with the free movement of people is the annual Pacific Islands Forum Finance and Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM). Last year's FEMM did, perhaps for the first time, discuss migration matters. That is a foundation on which this year's and subsequent FEMM meetings should build on. Ultimately though, this is such an important issue that it should be discussed at the annual Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, which this year is in August in Tonga.

Third, what should leaders and ministers agree on? The free movement of people within the Pacific should be positioned as a common aspiration that all countries should sign on to. Each country should then have to report annually on what they are doing to realise that aspiration. Countries should be given some freedom as to how they interpret the goals, but expert or peer reviews should be undertaken to point out to countries where they could go further to expand Pacific migration opportunities. Countries should have to explain why migration privileges extended to some Pacific nations or non-Pacific ones are not extended to all Pacific nations. (This is the idea of giving Pacific countries "most favoured nation status" when it comes to migration policies, proposed by Fiji Deputy PM Biman Prasad in his Australasian AID Conference speech in December last year.)

The idea of the free movement of people across the Pacific fits in naturally with the now prevailing concept of the Blue Pacific. Now that it has been endorsed by the leaders of three Pacific nations, it is time for the regional architecture to step up and take it forward. ■

PEV quotas: winners and losers

Stephen Howes

1 May 2024

Allocation of the 3000 Pacific Engagement Visas

At the weekend, the government announced the first country quotas for its new Pacific Engagement Visa. We already knew that there would be 3,000 PEV visas annually, access to which will be made available by ballot, but until the weekend we didn't know how they would be allocated across the Pacific.

PNG citizens get the biggest allocation, 1,350 or almost half. It's not as much as would be justified given the country's population and its very small diaspora in Australia, but it is still a great outcome for the country, especially given concerns about the difficulty of getting a passport. Anyone aged 18 to 45 can enter the PEV ballot (with their partner and dependents), but you have to have a passport to do so. And in PNG, getting a passport, especially if you haven't already got a birth certificate, can take years. Given this constraint, 1,350 is a great outcome for Papua New Guineans, but also a risk to which I return.

Fijians are also big winners, emerging with 300 visas, the same number as is allocated for Timorese citizens. Timor-Leste has a somewhat larger population, and a much smaller diaspora in Australia (about one-tenth the size of Fiji's). When I had my own go at allocating the 3,000 visas, I suggested Timor-Leste should get 350 and Fiji 50. I was in the ballpark for Timor-Leste but nowhere close for Fiji.

Another interesting comparison is between Tonga and Vanuatu. Tonga has about one third the population of Vanuatu, and a much bigger Australian diaspora (about 18 times as big). But both countries have been given 150 visas: I recommended 100 for Vanuatu but only 50 for Tonga.

How to explain what seem to be inconsistencies? DFAT's website says that allocations were based not only on "population size, diaspora in Australia, [and] existing migration opportunities" but also on "expected demand and participating country views". There will certainly be a lot of demand from ni-Vanuatu and Timorese citizens. Perhaps the Tongan and Fijian governments were simply keener on the PEV. If so, kudos to them.

The citizens of two of the three compact countries also emerge as winners. I recommended that FSM, Palau and RMI be excluded from the PEV because their nationals already have unrestricted rights to enter the US (though not permanent resident status). That advice was ignored and FSM and Palau citizens get 50 visas each.

RMI citizens didn't get any visas, and nor did Samoans nor I-Kiribati. These three countries are yet to rule out participation, but are also yet to decide whether they want to be part of the PEV. The Australian government's press release says that discussions are ongoing. Kiribati has said that it hasn't had enough time to respond. The other two countries are known to be concerned about risks of brain drain and/or a diminishing population.

However, I don't expect them to hold out for long. Australia has left 300 visas out of the total of 3,000 unallocated for these three countries to take up. They are all democracies. And they are all very keen on migration. A recent survey found that 54% of Samoans would like to emigrate: one of the highest ratios in the world. Samoa and Kiribati both participate in the NZ ballot-based Pacific visa scheme. When Samoans and I-Kirabati notice that Tongans have just been given 150 Australian permanent residency visas, and Tuvaluans 100, they will wonder why they are missing out.

The PEV ballot will open on June 3. Details are now available on the Department of Home Affairs webpage, and are as we set out in our blog last month. No deadline has been given for ballot closing, which makes sense given that this is the first time one has been held.

It is simple to apply, provided you have a passport. I really hope the Australian government helps the PNG government speed up its issuance of birth certificates and passports so that as many Papua New Guineans as want to enter the PEV ballot can. ■

Note: The table below compares the announced allocation for 2024 with my recommendations from July 2022. The categorisation of countries is the one I used in the original blog.

	Official allocation	What I suggested
High access		
Fiji	300	50
Samoa		50
Tonga	150	50
Low access		
Papua New Guinea	1350	2020
Solomon Islands	150	180
Vanuatu	150	100
Timor-Leste	300	350
Climate-affected atoll countries		
Kiribati		100
Tuvalu	100	50
Nauru	100	50
US Compact countries		
FSM	50	0
Palau	50	0
RMI		0
Unallocated	**300**	
Total	**3000**	**3000**

Samoa should make the most of the Pacific Engagement Visa

Mika Kelekolio

14 June 2024

PALM scheme workers leave Samoa for Australia in 2021 (Facebook/PALMscheme)

When presented with an opportunity like Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) scheme, don't demur. Grab it with both hands and be grateful. Other Pacific countries including Fiji are all ready to sign on the dotted line. It's just basic common sense unless of course you live in Samoa, a country whose political leaders' decision-making tells you that sense is not a very common commodity.

Our Minister of Finance, Lautimu'ia Va'ai, is reported by the media to have said last week that our people would not be denied the opportunity, but we need to be cautious and not rush into making a decision, implying that we need to have some regulation in place first "for our protection … It is not a missed opportunity because the opportunity will always be there forever."

FOREVER! Really? What planet does the Minister hail from? We do not need regulation for people emigrating under the PEV scheme as they will be leaving permanently, unlike those going under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme for whom we need to negotiate work conditions and pay rates.

As one of my colleagues said cynically, "The only regulation we need is one that will protect us from corrupt politicians."

The Minister also fears that buying into the PEV scheme "will have a major brain drain [for our country] going forward." Yet, according to the Australian High Commissioner Will Robinson, "[t]he use of the ballot system will provide equal access for applicants regardless of skill level." Very much like New Zealand's Samoan Quota Resident Visa scheme by the sound of it.

We don't often get opportunities like this that can lead to a better life for some of our people and subsequently our economy. Where would we be now as a country, economically, had many of our people including thousands with skills and qualifications not left the country for a better future in New Zealand, Australia or the United States?

One of the major drivers of our economy is the hundreds of millions of dollars in remittances sent back by those very people — $776 million for the year 2022-23 when total government revenue was forecast at $895.5 million.

Leader of the Opposition, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele pointed this out by reminding the government that our people who have migrated overseas had contributed a lot to the development of the country by remitting money back to Samoa, stressing the importance of the government intervening to secure opportunities – like what the PEV Scheme offers – for our people.

I doubt many will disagree. It is the dream of every Samoan, skilled and semi-skilled, earning a below-average income, to emigrate to Australia or New Zealand to raise their family and earn a decent income. To deny them that opportunity for fear of "brain drain" on our work force is an ignoramus's way of saying to them: "Endure your current situation. You don't deserve any better."

Every country, developed, developing, or under-developed, experiences "brain drain" as its citizens leave for greener pastures elsewhere. New Zealand for example lost 47,000 skilled workers last year alone – doctors, nurses, teachers, and tradespeople — mainly to Australia where they'll be getting paid twice what they got in New Zealand. Yet, never once did the government consider placing roadblocks in front of them because it believed that the experience they bring with them when they return in the future can only be good for the country. Instead, they have in place a scheme strongly backed by businesses and industries through their training organisations to ensure that skill gaps appearing in any of the industries are plugged.

Samoa has benefited greatly from the decision by some of our people to migrate. Their well-qualified and highly skilled children and grandchildren are here serving our country in all spheres, legal, medical, education, trades, commerce, you name it. And their education did not cost our government a cent.

We've been complaining about this "brain drain" for the last 50 years but we do not seem to be able to come up with a concrete plan to ensure we have enough skilled workers and tradespeople coming through our education and vocational training system to replace those leaving the country. If we do have one, it doesn't seem to be working.

It's a problem that can be easily remedied but we need to begin by promoting and raising the profile of vocational education and trades training, starting at school. For example, two years ago my son, who is now 19 years old, was a year 12 student at college in New Zealand. He showed no interest in his schoolwork. I went and talked to his school's career advisor suggesting that he be placed with a building and construction industry contractor for work experience one day a week for the whole school year until he'd decided on what he wanted to do. He's now in his second year of an apprenticeship (carpentry) and loving it.

The beauty of the New Zealand system lies in the schools, industry training organisations and employers who, with the support of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, all work together to set career pathways for students to follow once they leave school.

For too long, we've been brain-washed to believe that the only form of post-school education that is worthwhile having is that offered by universities. Unfortunately, many students do not have the propensity to succeed academically. Therefore, when some of them leave school without a Senior Secondary Certificate, they feel they have failed.

My advice to the Minister: Brain drain should not be a big issue if we have an effective training scheme to plug any skill gaps. And remember: Our people are our biggest and most valuable export. So, "Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg for our country." ■

This blog was first published on the Samoa Observer website.

Why Kiribati should say yes to the Pacific Engagement Visa

Akka Rimon

24 September 2024

I-Kiribati are coming to Australia under the PALM scheme in greater numbers, including in the aged care sector (Supplied by Akka Rimon)

The Kiribati government's decision not to join the inaugural ballot for Australia's permanent migration pathway, the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), came as a surprise to many.

As an I-Kiribati mobility and climate change scholar who has had the privilege of working under two Kiribati government administrations with divergent views on migration, I am writing this article to show why rejecting the PEV is a missed opportunity.

Three out of the 12 Pacific island countries eligible for the PEV opted out of the visa. Samoa, it appears, declined due to concerns over the high level of outmigration of its people. The Republic of Marshall Islands has an existing pathway to the United States under its Compact of Free Association, and likely did not see the need for another scheme. Then there is Kiribati, a country with a fast-growing young population, high unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and few migration opportunities. No reason has been put forward by the Kiribati government for opting out. Was it an inclusive decision? Was it fair for the government to decide on behalf of everyone?

Kiribati sits at the centre of the world, at the intersection of the international dateline and the equator. It straddles all four hemispheres, making it a location of strategic importance in geopolitics today. Halfway between Australia and Hawaii, the country's total land area is 811 square kilometres, about the size of Canberra. Kiribati's 33 islands are dispersed over 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean territory, roughly the size of the states of Western Australia and South Australia combined. Labelled a small island state, Kiribati is essentially a big ocean state. It stands not more than three metres above sea level and its fragile geography is an impediment to its development and efforts to mitigate threats of climate change.

The economy of Kiribati is small, and its prospects for growth are limited due to its remoteness and internal dispersion. Its GDP per capita is below US$2,000 and its population of nearly 120,000 people is growing rapidly. This explains why access to international labour markets has remained a priority for every government that comes to office.

Labour migration is not new to I-Kiribati. The country prides itself on nearly 60 years of seafaring and associated work in the maritime and fisheries sector. More recently, New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme employ more than 3,000 I-Kiribati workers every year. Remittances have already become a key source of income for households and accounted for 8.4% of GDP in 2020.

While PALM and RSE participation is a good start, there are plenty of reasons why Kiribati should be seeking more migration opportunities and embracing the PEV.

First, Kiribati suffers from the tyranny of distance, resulting in high living costs and low living standards. For many economically vulnerable communities, migration to a first-world country like Australia, whether short-term or permanent, provides an escape from economic hardship. My own PhD fieldwork in Kiribati found remarkable growth in the popularity of labour migration schemes. In particular, I-Kiribati workers in Australia spoke highly of the PALM scheme and compared it favorably to the situation of being unemployed in Kiribati.

Second, Kiribati is one of the most densely populated places on earth. More than half its population is concentrated on the small strip of land that serves as the capital – South Tarawa. Attempts to control rural-urban migration have been trialled and failed to stem the flow. Migration under the PEV would be one practical way to reduce population pressures.

Third, Kiribati is highly vulnerable to climate change. Migration is not the solution to climate change, but having migration options is one effective adaption response in a global system that lacks governance mechanisms to protect climate-threatened communities. While rejecting apocalyptic climate vulnerability narratives is crucial to maintaining agency, the reality is that certain aspects of Kiribati's geography render the country susceptible to climate change impacts.

Fourth, while PALM and RSE have been popular in Kiribati, the country is still a minor player in these schemes — for example, providing only an average of 5% of all PALM workers entering Australia in recent years. Indeed, the country's isolation and other factors make it difficult for Kiribati to compete against other countries for temporary migration places (high transport costs being one factor), so it might be better suited to permanent migration schemes such as the PEV. The PEV will also be valuable in growing the Kiribati diaspora in Australia, which is tiny (just 1,263 in 2021). And the PEV is better than PALM in that it allows family accompaniment, does not tie the worker to a single employer, and allows access to many government benefits. These measures promote migrant safety and wellbeing and reduce the risk of exploitation.

A fifth point is that rejecting the PEV risks increasing the dependency of the I-Kiribati population on government handouts such as the social protection program – te mwane n aki mwakuri or unemployment allowance – and the copra subsidy. The former pays A$50 monthly to all I-Kiribati aged 18-59 years, while the cost of the latter increased dramatically from A$1 to A$4 per kilogram in the last four years, despite challenges for coconut producers with irregular shipments and competition in the international market. Both schemes, while designed to alleviate poverty, defeat the government's purpose of building social resilience, and are fiscally unsustainable. By building sustainable economic opportunities for growth, including through migration, the government could treat the country's dependency syndrome.

Finally, there is no doubt that the PEV would be very popular. The government needs to explain why it has rejected the PEV in 2024 given that Kiribati participates in New Zealand's PEV-equivalent, the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa scheme. In 2019, the most recent year for which we have data, 58 I-Kiribati applied for each one of the 75 PAC visas available. A fair process would be a nation-wide consultation before the next PEV ballot in 2025.

Kiribati is at a fundamental point in its history where it strives to challenge colonial constructs, exercise sovereignty amid geopolitical tensions, reinforce national and cultural identity, and chart its own future. However, as vital as this is, the government must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Transforming Kiribati into the Dubai and Singapore of the Pacific is not impossible but it will not happen overnight, unless the government capitalises on the PEV to achieve its goal of increasing overseas employment by 100% by 2036. Until then, the rights of I-Kiribati to employment, migration, and culture, regardless of where they are in the world, must be fully recognised and not compromised in the name of decolonisation, nationalism or geopolitics.

Time for a PNG Engagement Visa

Natasha Turia and Stephen Howes

16 September 2024

(Natasha Turia)

Notwithstanding uncertainty around 300 unallocated visas, and disappointing results in Palau and FSM, the first Pacific Engagement Visa ballot was a stand-out success. Pacific-wide, more than 56,000 registrations were received by the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) ballot for some 3,000 PEVs. (To remind the reader, the PEV is allocated by ballot to reduce risks of brain drain and to equitably distribute visas in a situation of excess demand.)

No doubt, increased access to decent job opportunities, better healthcare and education benefits triggered high interest. All in the hope of securing a better life for individuals and their families in Australia.

Fiji (30,512) recorded the highest number with more than 50% of PEV registrations. PNG came second with over 8,000 registrations, six times its quota of 1,350 PEVs.

This is an impressive result for PNG in the space of three months. Unlike in Fiji, where migration seems to have become a national habit, PNG has no tradition of out-migration. In fact, PNG has one of the lowest shares of remittances to GDP in the world, and only a tiny diaspora, with fewer Papua New Guineans in Australia than Samoans or even Cook Islanders. PNG's participation in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme has also been disappointing. As of 31 July 2024, of the total 31,950 PALM visa holders in Australia, 1,995 came from PNG or only 6%, much less than Fiji (6,365), Vanuatu (5,950) and Solomon Islands (4,940).

And yet, the PEV ballot shows, there is a lot of interest within PNG for migration, and furthermore for permanent migration.

As more Papua New Guineans secure passports and the PEV becomes better known, the number of PNG PEV ballot entrants will increase exponentially over the coming years. The current quota given to PNG under the PEV of 1,350 is completely inadequate and, at 0.01% of the population, only of symbolic value at the national level.

What should Australia do? An incremental increase in the quota PNG receives under the PEV will benefit a few hundred more Papua New Guineans but is neither here nor there at the national level.

> “Australia needs to be braver and make a permanent shift to its migration policy by establishing a specific permanent residency pathway for PNG separate from the PEV.”

New Zealand shows how this can be done. Instead of a single, Pacific visa, New Zealand has two: the Samoan Quota Resident Visa exclusive for citizens of its former colony of Samoa; and the Pacific Access Category (PAC) which provides visas for other Pacific countries to which New Zealand has been historically close. In fact, more visas are provided to Samoa (1,100) than all the PAC countries put together: Fiji and Tonga normally get 250 each, Kiribati and Tuvalu 75 each (numbers have changed to make up for the visa's suspension during COVID).

Following New Zealand's example, Australia should introduce a PNG Engagement Visa alongside its Pacific Engagement Visa. The PEV could continue or expand, but PNG would be taken out and given its own visa, the PNGEV.

What should be the PNGEV quota? The Samoa model mentioned earlier would suggest a quota of around 50,000 (based on the ratio of PNG's to Samoa's population). Perhaps one-fifth of that amount — 10,000 — might be a realistic starting point, while still large enough to make a difference at the national level in PNG. Recall that some 20,000 applied for the PEV (primary applicants plus their family members). Many more will apply next year.

Such a move would be highly appropriate for two countries that are "joined at the hip", as PNG's Prime Minister James Marape put it in his address to the Australian parliament earlier this year. It would be appropriate given their shared military history, symbolised by the Kokoda Track. It would also be appropriate given PNG's status as a former territory of Australia and the shameful White Australia policy that kept Papua New Guineans out of Australia for decades. And it would be appropriate given Canberra's concerns about Chinese influence in PNG.

In terms of timing, the introduction of the PNGEV would be appropriate now because this day next year will be the 50th anniversary of Papua New Guinea's independence. The PNGEV would be a practical initiative to right the wrongs of the past (the White Australia policy) and to belatedly welcome Papua New Guineans to Australia's shores.

Much better than a new National Rugby League team, or more aid, the PNGEV would supercharge people-to-people links between the two countries. It is also no exaggeration to say that it could change PNG's destiny. Papua New Guinea is not on a positive trajectory. According to a recent survey of PNG university students, for every 5% who thought PNG was heading in the right direction, 95% thought the country was heading in the wrong direction. Foreign aid cannot bring about fundamental change. Even PNG's politicians seem helpless to change the path the country is on. Only more integration, more international exposure and ultimately more public demand can change PNG's national trajectory.

If Australia really wants to make a difference in PNG, it needs to think bigger, and think PNGEV. ■

Note: The PALM numbers mentioned have been adjusted slightly to give correct figures for 31 July 2024.

The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union: Tuvaluan values or Australian interests?

Jess Marinaccio

15 November 2023

(Jess Marinaccio)

The announcement of the new Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union on 10 November 2023 at the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands has generated widespread media attention. With claims that "Australia has struck the 'most significant' Pacific agreement in its history with the tiny island nation of Tuvalu", news media have focused on a pathway established by Australia to allow Tuvaluans access to Australia in response to the threat of climate change.

News media have also focused on the provision in Article 4 where Tuvalu would cede seemingly wide-ranging security and defence control to Australia, with the assurance that:

> Tuvalu shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters. Such matters include but are not limited to defence, policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure, including ports, telecommunications and energy infrastructure.

This specific clause on cooperation for security and stability is largely seen as part of an attempt by Australia and other Western powers to "secure" the Pacific against the influence of China.

These points of media focus are indeed critical. The security and stability portion of the Union indicates a highly neocolonial Western influence as Australia gains a say in virtually any matter that could be considered as relating to Tuvalu's security and defence.

However, given that Tuvalu's Parliament will dissolve in approximately two weeks, and the current Cabinet will go into caretaker mode as elections for the new government approach, it is questionable whether the Union will last in the long term. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has noted that both the Australian and Tuvaluan governments have yet to formally approve the Union, but under Tuvalu's Constitution, a Cabinet cannot make any major policy decisions or enter into significant contracts or undertakings while in caretaker mode. If Tuvalu's government changes after the upcoming elections, a new government may simply dissolve the Union.

Yet, despite questions as to the longevity of the Union, what has been left out of some media analysis of the agreement is the integration of Tuvalu's foreign policy goals and cultural values into the document, which has represented an objective of the Tuvalu government since 2020. It also links to major decisions made as part of the PIF Leaders Meeting.

Two striking aspects of the Union are its integration of the main concepts underpinning Tuvalu's 2020 Foreign Policy: Te Sikulagi – that is falepili (being a good neighbour) and kaitasi (shared responsibility) – and its acknowledgement that Tuvalu's statehood will be maintained in perpetuity despite the impacts of climate change.

Tuvalu's 2020 Foreign Policy takes a values-based approach to diplomacy, interweaving Tuvaluan values into the practice of international relations and asserting that Tuvaluan culture and values are "uniquely suited to guiding international relations in today's interconnected world".

The Foreign Policy specifically highlights falepili and kaitasi as Tuvaluan values that should be forwarded in the realm of international diplomacy, and although these two ideas are merged under the term falepili in the Union, they are both represented in the document.

The Union emphasises both "good neighbourliness" and an intertwining of mutual respect and interest. Although this integration of Tuvaluan concepts in the Union can be viewed cynically as Australia leveraging Pacific values to further its own security concerns, a more empowering approach is to recognise the strength of Tuvalu's foreign policy goals in ensuring an emphasis on customary values and practices in any bilateral document to which it is tied.

More importantly, Article 2 of the Union makes a significant statement in recognising that "the statehood and sovereignty of Tuvalu will continue, and the rights and duties inherent thereto will be maintained, notwithstanding the impact of climate change-related sea-level rise". It echoes Tuvalu's 2020 Foreign Policy which states that "Tuvalu insists that all countries forming relations with Tuvalu recognise the statehood of the nation as permanent".

As explained in a recent blog I co-authored with Tuvalu's former Foreign Minister Simon Kofe, the newly amended Tuvalu Constitution asserts a similar vantage point in stating that, "The State of Tuvalu within its historical, cultural, and legal framework shall remain in perpetuity in the future, notwithstanding the impacts of climate change or other causes resulting in loss to the physical territory of Tuvalu".

This represents a new area of international law that has been somewhat contested as there was previously no need to codify what statehood and maritime boundaries would look like if nations were so deeply affected by climate change that they would lose their land territory. Now that sea-level rise threatens territorial integrity, Tuvalu has been pushing for other countries to recognise its statehood as permanent so that it can remain a sovereign nation even in the event it has no land.

Prior to the Union, the government of Tuvalu had signed at least nine joint communiqués with other nations, including Vanuatu, Palau, and Niue, who agreed to recognise Tuvalu's statehood as permanent despite the effects of climate change. Part of the Union, then, represents Australia's concession to Tuvalu's foreign policy goals – goals it had not previously agreed to recognise since the 2020 Tuvalu Foreign Policy was established.

This sentiment has also been powerfully reflected in the 52nd PIF Communiqué, which has endorsed the 2023 Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise. Similar to Tuvalu's Foreign Policy, the Declaration asserts that "the statehood and sovereignty of Members of the Pacific Islands Forum will continue, and the rights and duties inherent thereto will be maintained, notwithstanding the impact of climate change-related sea-level rise".

Although the security aspects of the Union raise serious concerns about problematic neocolonialism and increased Western influence in the Pacific region, Tuvalu's ongoing work to elicit concessions from its diplomatic partners, especially regarding its continued sovereignty and access to maritime resources, should not be overlooked. ■

Tuvalu's amazing migration deal

Stephen Howes and Finn Clarke

5 July 2024

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Tuvalu Foreign Minister Paulson signing the Falepili Union explanatory memorandum in May 2024 (X/SenatorWong)

Further details recently released in relation to the Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union treaty reveal just what a good deal Tuvalu has obtained.

We already knew that the treaty would give 280 special visas to Tuvaluans every year, and that these visas would not be tied to any work requirement. We now, through the treaty's explanatory memorandum, have the following information:

◊ The visas will be allocated by ballot, and will give the holders permanent residency; these features were both expected, but are now confirmed.

◊ There is no maximum age requirement: applicants just have to be 18 or older.

◊ There are no disability bars.

◊ Minimum residence periods for access to a number of benefits and services will be waived.

◊ There is no risk of forfeiture of the right to permanent residency from being outside of the country. Rather, the "[v]isas would provide for indefinite permanent residency, with freedom for unlimited travel to and from Australia".

Some of this is quite remarkable, and some unprecedented. The waiving of minimum residence periods is unusual, but is a feature of the new Pacific Engagement Visa. Every other visa, except the one that allows New Zealanders to move to Australia, discriminates against people with a disability. And every other permanent residency visa has a "use it or lose it" provision. You can stay in Australia for as long as you like as a permanent resident, but if you leave the country, and stay away too long, you may not be allowed back in, at least not after five years since the granting of the visa.

An earlier blog expressed concern that Tuvaluans would move to Australia for five years simply in order to gain citizenship and/or meet minimum residency requirements. Now, however, that incentive has been much diluted, in particular because of this fact that a Falepili visa will give its holder the right to enter Australia any time no matter how long they have been out of the country.

Earlier estimates of the number of Tuvaluans (2,200 out of a population of 11,300) who want to migrate to Australia are no longer relevant when considering demand for the Falepili visa. Now I would expect everyone to apply, if only to obtain the option to travel to Australia if and when the time is right.

Citizens of Cook Islands are holders of New Zealand passports, and one wonders whether it wouldn't have been simpler to offer Australian passports to Tuvalu citizens. Perhaps that is what we will offer Nauru (the fact that they have switched recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China is an added obstacle but not an insurmountable one). Or perhaps in a few years, we will simply issue the Falepili visa to any Tuvaluan who requests it and drop the annual cap of 280.

Tuvalu and Australia have not had a particularly close relationship in the past. Tuvalu still does not have a high commission in Australia — its embassies or high commissions are in Europe, Fiji, New Zealand, Taiwan and the US — and has only now, as part of the new deal, agreed to open one in Canberra. Australia only opened its high commission in Tuvalu in 2019.

Now, however, of all the countries in the world, Tuvalu has the second closest migration relationship with Australia after New Zealand. And in some ways, Tuvalu's migration relationship with Australia is actually closer than New Zealand's. There is no cap on the number of New Zealanders eligible to move to Australia every year. But, for example, no matter how long New Zealanders stay in Australia, unless they become citizens or permanent residents, they cannot join the National Disability Insurance Scheme: Tuvaluans will be able to from day one.

China has changed everything, enabling Tuvalu to transform its migration relationship with Australia in return for the security concessions Australia obtained. The Falepili treaty will be of enormous benefit to Tuvaluans, and, for Australia, has set a new and welcome benchmark for its deep, bilateral integration with the Pacific. ■

We want the forest but fear the spirits: labour mobility predicaments in Samoa, Part one

Malama Meleisea

7 July 2023

Professor Malama Meleisea speaking at the Pacific Update 2023 (Development Policy Centre)

This first part of a three-part blog series is an edited version of the keynote address given by Professor Meleisea at the Pacific Update on 15 June 2023.

Professor Meleisea's keynote address was based on an article since published in a special issue journal. Reference: Allexeyeff, K., Schoeffel, P. & Meleisea, M. (Eds). Labour mobility in Samoa: Past and present [special issue]. Journal of Sāmoan Studies, 15, No.1, 2025.

Since 2007, Samoans have become aware that those returning from seasonal work often have the means to build modern houses, to buy cars and furniture and home appliances, and to give large donations to their churches. Having money for these things raises the social and economic status of their families in a hierarchical society.

Evidence of the desperation to earn money from seasonal work was demonstrated in 2021, when thousands of anxious Samoan men and women tried to crowd into a church hall where registration was being held, accidently breaking its windows and doors.

The dilemma of labour mobility was expressed at a welcome home event for seasonal workers in Samoa last year. Our Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa told the assembled young men and women and their families, "I want Samoa to be a place where our people want to live."

If you will excuse my cliché, the government can be said to be "between a rock and a hard place". In other words, Samoa wants prosperity without losing its most capable people, but at the same time it wants prosperity that cannot be afforded by working in Samoa. Or, as the Samoan proverbial expressions put it, "we want the trees in the forest but are afraid of their spirits" (E mana'o I le vao ae o lo'o mamalu mai le aitu I le aoa), or "we want yams but we are afraid of the work of digging up stones so we can plant them" (E mana'o e le ufi ae fefe I le papa). The government is concerned about the increasing expectation among Samoan people that labour migration is the only means of achieving a better life.

As of early 2023, Samoa had five labour mobility schemes under government supervision and regulation. The schemes have been framed by both the receiving and sending governments from a win-win perspective, intended to assist the sectors in New Zealand and Australia experiencing labour shortages, and at the same time assist unemployed Samoans and other Pacific Islanders to earn money, acquire job skills, and accumulate savings to send home to improve standards of living and economic development.

Of these schemes, one supplied a small number of semi-skilled workers for construction work through the New Zealand Canterbury Trade Employment Initiative; another supplied meat workers to a New Zealand meat packing company. But far larger were the schemes on which many thousands of Samoans have gone aboard to work.

The Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in New Zealand commenced in 2007, to supply seasonal labour from selected Pacific Island countries to the horticulture and viticulture industries. Temporary visas are offered to workers under the scheme for three to a maximum of seven months.

The Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in Australia has since 2018 offered visas for seasonal work in the agriculture, hotel and restaurant sectors for up to nine months per contract.

Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) offers longer term visas for employment for up to three years in rural and regional hotels and restaurants, health care and social assistance, as well as non-seasonal agriculture, forestry and fishing. Many of the Samoan workers hired on this scheme to care for old people in rest homes have paid thousands of dollars in fees. These are for qualifying courses offered by private Australian training firms that then find them jobs in rural and remote Australian towns. In addition, the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) has offered free training in trade skills to Samoans and other Pacific Islanders, that qualify them to work in Australia.

At the same time, the Star-Kist Company in American Samoa is actively recruiting graduates from Samoa with technical and vocational qualifications to work in its cannery in Pago Pago.

The New Zealand and Australia labour mobility schemes were specifically designed to provide work to unemployed young people, however our research has shown that a significant proportion of the workers left jobs in the private and public sectors to become seasonal workers. They somehow managed to fool the government agency managing the schemes, as well as labour recruiters in Samoa and abroad, that they were unemployed. Thus the situation is that the public and private sectors in Samoa and overseas employers were competing for services from the same pool of young, fit, literate people.

The government of Samoa has long sought foreign investment, especially in industries that would create employment opportunities. It was hoped that Samoa's large number of unemployed youth and its low minimum wage would attract such investment. So when the Yazaki Corporation of Japan showed interest in relocating their automobile wiring assembly plants from Australia to Samoa, the government responded with tax incentives and promises to provide land and build premises for the company to lease without a charge.

According to a study of Yazaki in Samoa by Masami Tsujita, working conditions on the assembly line were arduous. In the last five years of Yazaki operations in Samoa, the starting rate for shop-floor operators was at Samoa's then minimum wage of SAT2.30 per hour, or about SAT4,800 per year, with an annual pay increase of ten cents.

During its 26 years of operation before it closed, due to Australia's policies on the automobile industry, Yazaki employed over 60,000 local workers. Initially they were mostly female, but over time an increasing number of young men joined as well, mostly young early school leavers with an average age of 20–23.

The company had to change its policy to allow the rehiring of workers who had left, because workers often left due to family obligations. They had mixed incentives. Their wages were not enough to support a family, but were enough to make them feel they were serving their families – a key Samoan value. However, when the family needed their services that became their priority.

Seasonal work has now replaced Yazaki as a means of earning money for their families. But now it is mostly young men instead of mostly young women, and they are earning significantly higher incomes. ■

We want the forest but fear the spirits: labour mobility predicaments in Samoa, Part two

Malama Meleisea

10 July 2023

Samoan workers head to Melbourne to work in a meat processing facility in 2021 (Facebook/AusHCSamoa)

This second part of a three-part blog series is an edited version of the keynote address given by Professor Meleisea at the Pacific Update on 15 June 2023.

Professor Meleisea's keynote address was based on an article since published in a special issue journal. Reference: Allexeyeff, K., Schoeffel, P. & Meleisea, M. (Eds). Labour mobility in Samoa: Past and present [special issue]. Journal of Sāmoan Studies, 15, No.1, 2025.

The Samoan government, which put an abrupt temporary stop to the labour mobility schemes earlier this year, is considering a draft policy paper that draws attention to key concerns about the impacts of labour mobility programs on Samoa.

The first of these policy considerations is in response to representations to government by private sector employers about losing workers, in particular losing technicians and service workers who they had trained on the job. The government is also concerned about the loss of junior skilled and educated government workers, including police, nurses, teachers and clerical staff, to seasonal work.

Michael Yemoh's 2022 survey of 30 small businesses chosen at random from members of the Samoa Chamber of Commerce, found that all of them reported loss of middle and lower level employees that they had trained, and that many of the workers they lost were skilled technicians. Evidently their former employees were prepared to live in restricted conditions far from home doing mostly heavy unskilled work because the pay, even after hefty deductions, was far more than they could earn in Samoa.

It is often said that seasonal workers will return with better skills to contribute to Samoa. At a conference on labour mobility in Samoa in November 2022, speaker after speaker insisted that there was no "brain drain" but only "brain gain". But as one young seasonal worker returning from Australia told us jokingly "... if we ever get a blueberry industry in Samoa, I will be able to train all the pickers".

In effect, private businesses in Australia and New Zealand are being backed by their government to source labour from overseas to overcome their labour shortages at the expense of Samoa's private sector, which was clearly not intended when these schemes began. Except for the businesses selling cars, home appliances and building materials, the private sector has been hit hard, losing their investment in training workers and facing similar labour shortages to employers in rural New Zealand and Australia, in circumstances where they can't compete on wages.

Most of the industries in which Samoan seasonal workers are employed overseas are unlikely to ever be established in Samoa. Local wages will not attract Samoans to return to local employment unless they have no other choice. Most of them hope to do seasonal work again, year after year. This narrows new opportunities when the same workers are recruited recurrently.

In most cases, overseas recruiters not only offer better pay than jobs in Samoa, but a chance to save money. The Samoa Ministry of Commerce and Industry annual report for 2020 estimated that in six months, in the 2017-18 season, an RSE worker in New Zealand earned between SAT14,601 and SAT18,723 after tax and deductions. The corresponding earnings for six months under the SWP in Australia were between SAT13,374 and SAT16,897. Seasonal work can impose employment circumstances that facilitate saving money. Some have compared these circumstances to being sent to boot camp. With contractual requirements to occupy employer-provided living quarters, required saving arrangements in bank accounts, and restrictions on drinking alcohol, saving is made easy.

The government is well aware that there have been some abuses of Samoan and other Pacific Island workers by overseas employers and local contractors, despite the general satisfaction of returning workers with their experiences. There are also social costs of family separation and breakdown, the loss of skilled and reliable workers in the public and private sectors, and the uneven access to seasonal work, where many of those who most need the opportunity are rejected by the government agency and by local labour recruiters.

After stakeholder consultation, the Government of Samoa is considering setting a cap by which 12,000 currently unemployed workers will be mobilised annually, 6,000 each for New Zealand and Australia. The draft policy proposes to strengthen the capacity of the Labour Employment Export Programmes Division of the Ministry of Labour and Industry for mobilising and reintegration of workers.

The government is also considering opening a dialogue with Australia and New Zealand towards measures that will improve and enhance the protection and security of workers while they are working in their countries. It wants these countries to address well-documented issues such as unfair deductions from their wages, substandard accommodation, and workers being laid off unpaid for periods when they had to cover their own living expenses because the labour hire firms had not found work for them.

To achieve these improvements, the Government of Samoa is considering imposing an accreditation procedure and costs on Australia and New Zealand employers who wish to recruit from Samoa, so that Samoa can afford to address the issues currently undermining the schemes.

Samoa is considering cost-recovery measures for the facilitating of the labour mobility schemes in-country by a facilitation fee. This would include requirements for employers to disclose information on wages and taxes, a refund entitlement before contracts are signed, prohibiting the imposition of additional charges when workers arrive in Australia or New Zealand, and improving entitlements of workers for leave, working conditions, fair pay, medical and insurance coverage, housing and pastoral care. The Government of Samoa is considering requiring liaison officers to be placed near working sites in Australia and New Zealand, and more transparent information-sharing mechanisms between the three governments.

The draft policy also proposes to end mobilisation of workers under the PLS scheme, which offers visas for contracts of three years or more in rural and regional Australia with pathways for emigration.

The government proposal for improvement is also directed to increasing equity, and preventing the best qualified workers from being siphoned away from Samoa. This would include tightening of selection processes to ensure that only those genuinely unemployed are mobilised. People would only be eligible if they have been unemployed for a significant period of time, for example more than six months.

To achieve this, it is proposed that all labour mobility operations be consolidated and centralised through the Government of Samoa. Ensuring registration and oversight of all private recruiters and overseas employer companies and contractors would form part of this initiative.

In order to allow more Samoans to benefit from seasonal work, the draft policy proposes to disallow workers from taking sequential contracts, and require that returning workers spend at least a year back in Samoa before reapplying for a contract. This would mean increased opportunities for those wanting to work who have not previously been mobilised. Employers in Australia and New Zealand clearly prefer to hire workers who they have already trained in a previous season, but they would be required to take account of Samoa's equity requirements. The policy also proposes to set a limit on the number of times a single worker is mobilised under the schemes. ■

We want the forest but fear the spirits: labour mobility predicaments in Samoa, Part three

Malama Meleisea

11 July 2023

Samoan PM Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa meets Samoan PALM workers at a Tasmanian orchard, March 2023 (PALM/Facebook)

This third part of a three-part blog series is an edited version of the keynote address given by Professor Meleisea at the Pacific Update on 15 June 2023.

Professor Meleisea's keynote address was based on an article since published in a special issue journal. Reference: Allexeyeff, K., Schoeffel, P. & Meleisea, M. (Eds). Labour mobility in Samoa: Past and present [special issue]. Journal of Sāmoan Studies, 15, No.1, 2025.

One of the major initiatives of the new government elected in Samoa in 2021 has been to fund district committees to prepare district development plans. This proposal existed previously, but was not funded. Now each district has been given one million tala to establish an office, appoint support staff, and begin the planning process. It is expected that this will lead to implementation of needs-based projects to benefit each village in a district, as well as shared district facilities and services.

With regard to equitable labour mobilisation, it is proposed that these district committees select the workers for each season, subject to the national and district quotas and the eligibility criteria. But it is uncertain how district committee selection will work if private recruiters meet the new licensing criteria.

For example, one recruiter, who has been highly praised by consultants evaluating labour mobility schemes, runs a non-profit trust which is funded by the workers it recruits. They pay for training and do voluntary work in the village and district as directed, and once they are mobilised, they pay five dollars a week to the trust in whatever currency they are being paid in. This income funds the salaries and operational costs of the trust, which has a single Samoan trustee, the businessman who operates it. What will happen if the government requires this recruiter to hand over the job to the district committee? That remains to be seen.

There are several other potential flaws in the government's proposed policy changes, discussed below and in the previous blog. First, the district committees are an innovation, and are only slowly becoming effective. Most of them are chaired by the local member of parliament and comprise a representative nominated by each village council in the district. Many are taking time to perceive the advantages of having district planning in their own hands instead of the hands of public servants and aid donors. Furthermore, in electoral districts where the local member belongs to an opposition political party, there are perverse incentives to undermine the committees and make the government look bad when developments do not eventuate.

Another issue is the demographic quotas. According to the 2016 population census, 35% of youth (aged 18-35) reported domestic duties as their main activities, 53% of them female. In Samoa the largest proportion of labour, although not specifically enumerated, can be assumed to be employed in household-based informal businesses of farming, fishing, food vending, handicrafts and produce marketing. In the formal economy, according to 2016 census data, 41,142 people said they were employed. The remainder were self-employed or working for their family. In urban areas formal employment rates are only slightly lower than in rural areas in these age groups.

Labour mobility schemes are based on the assumption that the unemployed are mainly those with basic levels of education, however 2020 data from the Samoa Qualifications Authority suggests unemployment is also a problem for young people who have graduated with post-school qualifications, with only 52% of graduates finding employment within six months of their graduation. This suggests a mismatch between higher education and training outcomes and the local labour market. It may also reflect low pass rates in the penultimate school certificate examinations in English and maths.

Most Samoan children complete eight years of primary education, and a high proportion continue to Years 9-13. Post-school education and training institutions had 4,969 students enrolled of both sexes, but only 873 of them were enrolled in technical and vocational (TVET) courses. Of those 4,969 students, the largest number, almost a quarter (1,041), were enrolled in fields of study classified as "society and culture".

While there may be proportionately more eligible unemployed young people in the rural districts, those people may lack cash income but they do have the means of a subsistence livelihood available to them by planting, fishing and small-scale trading. This is seldom the case for those who are unemployed in the urban districts. However, the urban districts have been given smaller quotas for worker selection, assuming there are more jobs available in urban areas.

Unemployment for these urban people can mean poverty that involves serious hardship, with no means of feeding and housing themselves adequately. These are the people whose children walk in the sun and rain to sell small cheap items such as cotton buds, cardboard air fresheners and hairpins, or homemade goods such as taro chips, lavalavas and fans. After dark, these children of the urban poor may be seen begging outside fast food outlets.

To conclude, I want to reflect on the political problems that the government will face if and when it puts some of these policies in place. At present, the cost of living in Samoa is extremely high and all except those on the highest pay scales are experiencing hardship. We are strongly impacted by inflation and supply chain disruption. Most of what we need day to day in Samoa is imported, and our few food crops are exported. Nearly everyone in the eligible age range would like to go and earn higher wages as seasonal workers.

Now, after 20 years of one-party rule, we have two strong mutually antagonistic parties, both of them highly populist in their approaches to politics. How are Samoans going to accept restrictions on labour mobility if they think this will affect their chances to work overseas?

I predict restrictions are likely to be deeply resented, which is why our government is between a rock and a hard place, and taking a long time to announce the proposed measures. For the same reasons, our government has been holding off on other necessary policy measures, such as just electoral laws, and repealing the laws passed by the previous government to establish two separate judicial systems. So whatever the pros and cons of the labour mobility schemes are, politics is going to be a serious consideration.

The other serious risk is that, by imposing more restrictive policies and asking the receiving countries to share the costs, Samoa will have a more reduced access to labour mobility than it wants. Receiving countries may simply look elsewhere where conditionalities remain weak. I assume, although I cannot confirm, that the reason Samoa's policy has not been announced (at the time of writing – June 2023) is that our Prime Minister is seeking a consensus with other Pacific Island governments, to join with Samoa in taking a united regional approach to labour mobility to overcome the issues that I have touched on. ■

Can PNG really supply 8,000 people to work overseas?

Natasha Turia

7 November 2023

Governor Allan Bird (centre) with people from East Sepik leaving to work in Australia (Greater Sepik Labour Mobility program)

Papua New Guinea continues to have a low share of jobs under both the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) schemes. From the total 48,000 visas issued under the schemes in 2022–2023, the 'big three' Pacific Island countries of Vanuatu (16,562), Samoa (6,736) and Tonga (6,449) dominated. PNG received only 1,459 visas. It has 3% of the total, yet based on country population alone, it should be able to supply a workforce that can fill the entire labour quota of these schemes.

The PNG government remains committed to sending a cumulative 8,000 people to work overseas by 2025. But, despite recent rapid growth, it will not reach its target if it does not more than double its current numbers every year over the next two years. The challenge, acknowledged by the government last month in parliament, is to fully engage with every district and province to achieve equal opportunity across the country.

PNG introduced reforms in three key areas in 2019, which were aimed at generating this growth.

First, the Labour Mobility Unit (LMU) was established at the Department of Treasury to manage the central government-led Work Ready Pool (WRP). This is the only recruitment pathway to obtain visas for PALM and RSE jobs. This is unlike the more successful 'big three' countries, which access all three recruitment pathways to send people to Australia and New Zealand: WRP, agent and direct recruitment by employers.

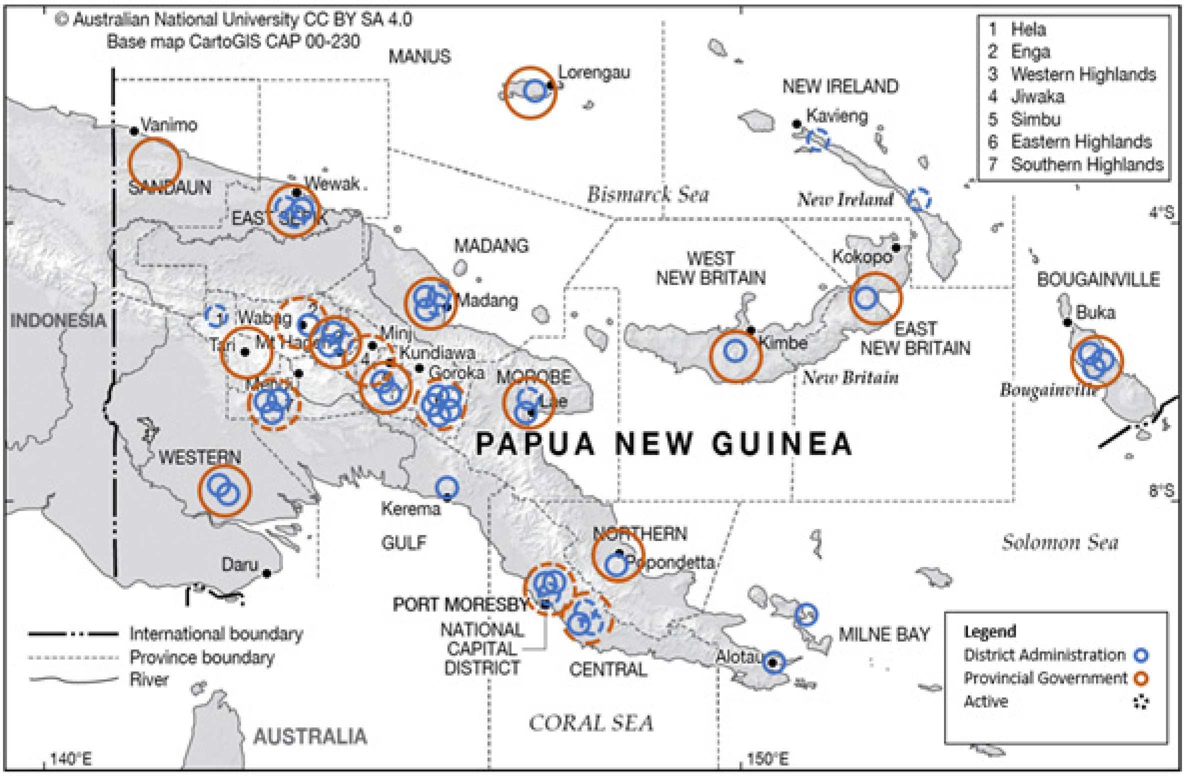
Second, smaller labour sending units, known as recruitment hubs, were to be established within PNG's existing decentralised governance structures, comprising 22 provincial governments, 96 district administrations, and Motu Koita Assembly (MKA). This means there are 119 electorates with sponsorship by an elected Member of Parliament – either a governor, an open member or the chairperson of the MKA. Initial screening and recruitment of workers is to be conducted by the hubs in their electorates and supported by the elected MP. These candidates are then vetted by the LMU and admitted into the WRP. The current arrangement is that the hubs supply a workforce to the LMU that is captured in the WRP that the employers then draw people from.

To date, around 55 hubs have registered, up from 13 in 2021, but only 12 hubs have deployed people (Figure 1). While the number of registered hubs has quadrupled, this same growth rate is not reflected in the number of people deployed. Only PALM has engaged through the current recruitment hub arrangement, resulting in increased growth compared to the RSE.

RSE employers are yet to fully engage through the hub arrangement and currently negotiate with the LMU to place the people they recruit into the WRP. This presents barriers to diversifying opportunities and there is scope to adapt the current arrangement to a hybrid model which incorporates hubs to increase uptake.

Third, unlike standard practice across the region where individuals meet their own costs to travel for work, in PNG the hubs support mobilisation costs for people from their electorate through provincial or district services improvement program funds (constituency development funds) or internal revenue.

Figure 1: Registered and active recruitment hub clusters in PNG



Source: Natasha Turia. Note: Active hubs are based in the following provincial and district electorates: National Capital District, MKA, Central, Hiri-Koiairi, Abau, Namatanai, Kavieng, East Sepik, Enga, Southern Highlands, Western Highlands and Lae.

This support varies from limited to fully funded, and can cover paying for passports, police clearances, health assessments for visas, domestic airfares and related accommodation costs.

However, accessing these funds can cause delays in progressing recruitment. Hubs that have been able to secure funding and access service providers have outperformed others. There remain questions as to how sustainable this model will be at the scale required.

The reforms, while positive, have also highlighted complex challenges impacting on PNG’s capacity to simultaneously scale and guarantee equal access.

There are a limited number of PNG Civil and Identity Registry offices, and police clearance issuing centres throughout the country, and even fewer PNG Immigration & Citizenship Authority passport issuing centres. Currently the latter are located only in Port Moresby, Lae and Kokopo.

There are only three registered panel physicians, two located in Port Moresby and one in Lae. Hubs located further away from major centres, like Namatanai, Enga and East Sepik, find it more challenging and costly to access service providers. Fully operational providers of services such as issuing birth certificates and passports, and panel physicians, need to be established in more provinces to scale numbers across PNG. The proposal for a one stop shop model would contradict the goal of decentralisation.

Resourceful hubs have been able to overcome some of these challenges with limited support from the LMU. Upfront credit payments to registered panel physicians is one such initiative. But there needs to be a sustainable hybrid financing model, with both hub and individual investment.

Hubs could consider establishing a pool fund or revolving fund, acting as a guarantor with a private commercial bank as the fund manager. Individuals apply for the labour mobility loan to cover predeparture costs and repay over a fixed amount of time at an agreed rate during their employment overseas. Failure to repay would result in hubs blacklisting individuals from the LMU-WRP which would impact their ability to apply for future employment opportunities.

PNG still needs to establish itself as a trusted recruitment brand that can efficiently mobilise people into jobs. It will need to carefully manage expectations among recruitment hubs, employers and interested applicants if it is to gain traction and increase uptake.

Beyond alternative financing models, there are some immediate practical steps that can be taken to boost labour mobility growth.

First, invest in communication outreach to ensure accurate information is disseminated, through the LMU as the central authority via its own designated website. Lessons can be learnt from the Solomon Islands LMU, which has published a labour mobility policy and strategy. PNG is yet to finalise these documents, and consultations towards formulating them are well overdue.

Second, build the capacity of all the recruitment hubs to achieve equitable access and market share of the PALM and RSE schemes. This can be done by developing a recruitment hub tool kit that contains entry requirements for registration – be that access to operating office space, funds, or staffing arrangements – and standard operating procedures. A policy handbook similar to that of the Australia Awards scholarships should also be developed.

Third, proactively facilitate connections between employers and the hubs at key dates during the year. A regional trade show format covering the New Guinea islands, Momase, Highlands and Southern regions could be arranged for interested employers to attend.

With ongoing labour shortages in Australia and New Zealand, there remains untapped potential to access PNG's large workforce. But PNG is unlikely to reach its 8,000 person target by 2025 unless efforts are aggressively stepped up. ■

Why do Australia's seasonal worker numbers continue to fall?

Richard Curtain

16 January 2025

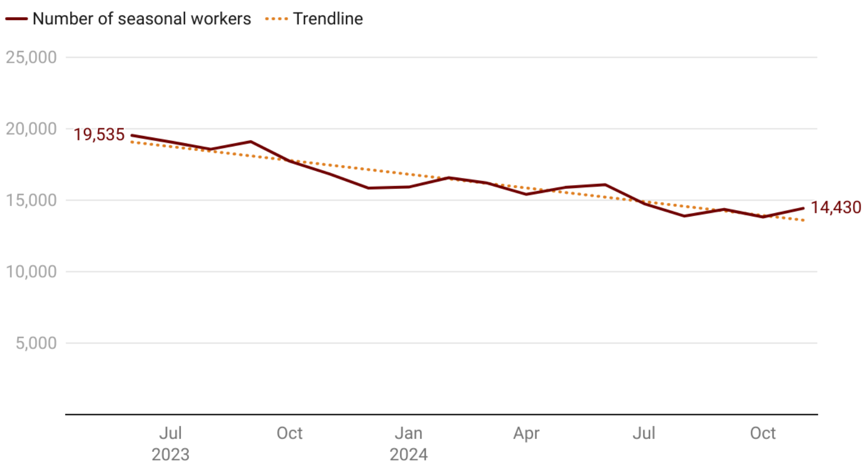
Workers in a vineyard (Unsplash/ Tobias Rademacher)

The trend in Australian employer demand for seasonal workers — officially short-term Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (ST PALM) workers — from the Pacific and Timor-Leste continues to fall. Based on the latest PALM scheme monthly data, seasonal worker numbers in Australia fell by 26% between June 2023 and November 2024 (Figure 1). If ST PALM workers in agriculture alone are considered, the fall is from 19,370 in June 2023 to 14,015 in November 2024, a drop of 28%. This blog builds on my earlier analysis to explain this downward trend.

A major cause of lower employer demand for seasonal workers appears to be the increasing availability of an alternative supply of lower cost and more flexible foreign workers at harvest time. These are the working holiday makers (WHMs, also known as backpackers).

The increase in backpacker numbers has been huge. From a pre-COVID average of 140,298 backpackers in Australia between June 2017 and December 2019, the number of WHM visa holders has reached an average of 180,000 over the four quarters to the end of September 2024.

Figure 1: Number of ST PALM workers in Australia, June 2023 to November 2024



Source: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, PALM scheme monthly data report - April 2022 to November 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

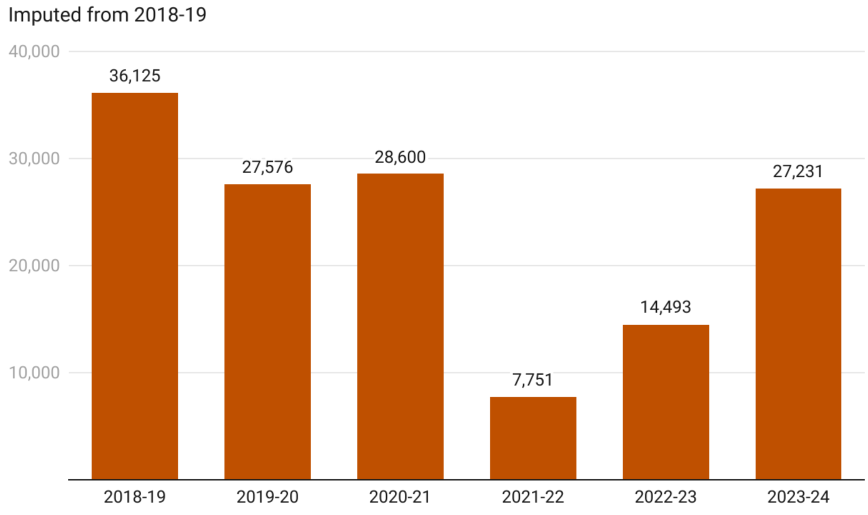
By the end of November 2024, the total number of WHM visas holders in Australia had jumped to as many as 213,394. The OECD in its International Migration Outlook 2024 (page 27) has noted that this huge influx of temporary workers has resulted in Australia having nearly as many working holiday makers as the other OECD countries put together in 2023 (46% of the total).

To assess the impact of this increase on the rural workforce, overall backpacker numbers need to be further interrogated to reveal the actual number working in agriculture. For this we can use data on second and third-year visa approvals. These data refer to visas granted, not current visa holders in Australia, as reported above for backpackers overall. Eligibility for a second and third-year WHM visa is based on proof of prior work in a specified industry in a rural and regional area for three or six months. The basis for calculating the numbers of WHM visas granted for work in agriculture is explained in the data note at the end of the blog.

Figure 2 shows that the number of backpackers working in agriculture based on subsequent visas granted in 2023-24 is still below the pre-COVID figure of 36,125 in 2018-19. The main reason for the difference is the fall from 84% of second and third-year visa applicants working in agriculture in 2018-19 to 50% in 2023-24. However, the share of backpackers working in agriculture could expand further in the future. This might happen if temporary work opportunities, such as the medical and care work approved during COVID, or bushfire and natural disaster relief-related work, are no longer eligible. This would put further downward pressure on employer ST PALM demand.

Then there is the effect on demand of the Australian government's new PALM Approved Employer Deed of Agreement, adopted on 26 June 2023 together with its detailed mandatory guidelines. The proposed changes that hit the headlines were for approved employers to pay workers for a minimum of 30 hours work per week every week, to be implemented from 1 July 2024. This was later changed to the "120 hours over four weeks" work requirement. Despite the latter change, this and a range of other tightened requirements have increased the burden on approved employers.

Figure 2: Number of second- and third-year working holiday maker visas granted, based on prior work in agriculture, 2018-2019 to 2023-24



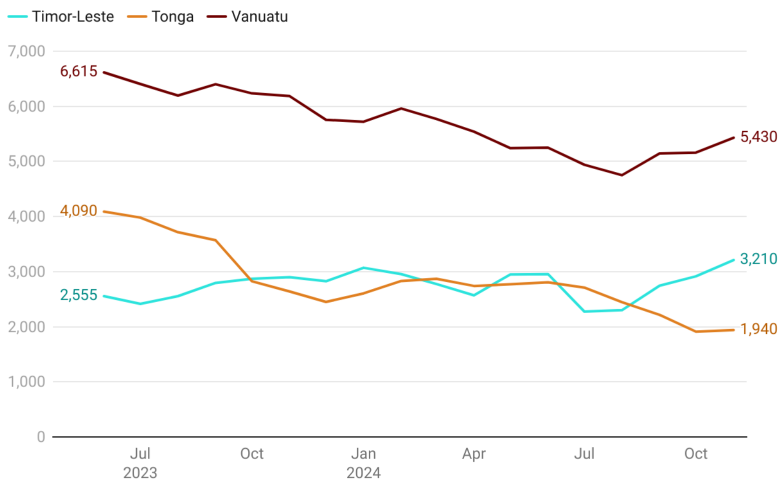
Source: Department of Home Affairs 2024, BP0017 Working Holiday Maker visas granted 2023-24 to 30 September. • Created with Datawrapper

Those other requirements include minimum take-home pay requirements, more obligations related to worker accommodation, support and transport, and a requirement for more detailed contingency planning in an unpredictable work environment. All this has given employers reason, as they have indicated to me, to either withdraw from the program or, at a minimum, reduce the duration of the employment contracts offered under PALM — and to push them towards hiring backpackers.

There is also the reality that many PALM workers abscond and/or claim asylum. Government data show 2,270 PALM workers (short and long-term) absconded in 2022/23, and 2,340 claimed asylum. Workers who abscond cost employers time and money. Widespread absconding also undermines PALM's key selling point: providing a reliable workforce.

What role, if any, have sending-country factors played in causing the fall in the number of ST PALM workers? The November 2024 PALM scheme data show that the three main sending countries continue to be Vanuatu (37.6% of the workers for that month), Timor-Leste (22.2%) and Tonga (13.4%). However, there are significant differences across countries. Between June 2023 and November 2024, Vanuatu experienced a below-average 17.9% decline, Timor-Leste a growth of 25.6%, and Tonga a large drop of 52.6% (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of ST PALM workers from the three main sending countries, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste and Tonga, June 2023 to November 2024



Source: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, PALM scheme monthly data report - • Created with Datawrapper

Richard and Charlotte Bedford (2024) have analysed the PALM and New Zealand RSE data together to September 2024. They found that comparable data for RSE workers from the same countries does not reveal a sustained decline in participation. This indicates that the decline in ST PALM workers is due in large part to Australia-specific factors interacting with major sending-country factors, including absconding.

In conclusion, approved employer feedback suggests that growers are cutting back on the fixed costs of their core workforce. While some growers are opting out of the program altogether, others appear to be reducing the length of time that they are employing ST PALM workers who must be employed on fixed-term contracts as well as being paid the extra 25% casual worker rate. These growers are then increasingly supplementing their smaller core workforce with backpackers employed flexibly as needed. The latter are also paid as casual workers but without the additional costs incurred by workers engaged under PALM requirements.

With further growth expected in the number of backpackers working in agriculture, Australia's seasonal worker program will continue to shrink, diminishing the demand for workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste. ■

Author note: I am grateful for valuable comments received from the Pacific Labour Mobility Branch, Office of the Pacific, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Responsibility for the analysis, of course, is mine alone.

Data note: The share of second- and third-year WHM visas granted for work in agriculture (and other nominated industries) is based on the proportion reported in the Department of Home Affairs' annual WHM visa program report. According to the report dated June 2024 (page 7), the specified work required to be eligible to apply for an additional visa includes "work in the agriculture, mining, construction, tourism and hospitality industries, as well as bushfire and natural disaster recovery work, and critical COVID-19 work in the healthcare and medical sectors". Data on the proportion working in a specific industry, as outlined above, are reported each year for each visa type (subclass 417 and 462) and type of visa (second- or third-year visa). Not reported in the blog is the much higher number of second- and third-year visas granted for the first quarter of 2024-25 compared with the same quarter for the year before (29,875 for second-year visas in first quarter 2024-25 compared with 8,762 visas in first quarter 2023-24).

It is not possible to project the proportion of the second- and third-year visa holders working in agriculture in the first quarter of 2024-25 because of the recent changes in visa requirements. These include the temporary relaxation of work-eligibility conditions for WHM visa holders affected by COVID-19 and the permanent removal of this requirement for British backpackers. For the latter group, the work requirement in designated areas and industries was removed as part of the UK Free Trade Agreement (UKFTA). Instead of having to complete the required three-month or six-month specified work requirements, UK nationals can now work in any sector, anywhere in Australia, and still remain eligible for a second- or third-year WHM visa providing all other eligibility criteria are met. This change, implemented from July 2024, has contributed to the large increase in the number of second- and third-year visas being granted to British backpackers in the first quarter of 2024-25 (13,988 out of 37,154 or 37.6%). The actual share of backpackers on second- and third-year visas from other countries who had worked in agriculture in 2024-25 will only be known when the next Department of Home Affairs annual WHM visa program report 2024-25 is released sometime in September 2025.

Will free agency fix PALM?

Stephen Howes

11 November 2024

Fijian officials visited a meat processing facility in Ararat, Victoria (Facebook/PALMscheme)

Recent articles by Matt Withers and Sophia Kagan have argued that (a) the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme suffers from unacceptable levels of worker exploitation, and (b) one solution is to allow PALM workers to move between employers.

I have addressed the first claim elsewhere. In fact, when surveyed, workers overwhelmingly express satisfaction with the PALM scheme. It is true that a large number of PALM workers are making protection claims and absconding but this can be (or at least seem to be) a rational move for workers, as it may give them longer to work in Australia and place fewer restrictions on where they can work (while they wait for their protection visa to be rejected, which can take years).

What about the second claim, that PALM workers should be allowed to move between employers? As an economist, allowing workers to choose is appealing, but does this proposal actually make sense?

PALM workers can be divided into two types, roughly equal in size: short-term who come for a few months, and long-term who come for a few years. The short-term PALM scheme is Australia's seasonal worker program or SWP. Many countries have an SWP. As far as I know, none allows workers to move between employers, except when the move is initiated by employers (for example, in New Zealand). Employee-initiated movement was proposed for the US, but it didn't get up, and it is not practised elsewhere. This is for good reason. The workers are only in the country for a few months. There just isn't enough time for them to line up another job. Moreover, employers go to the expense of hiring SWP workers to provide them with a reliable workforce. If that workforce is no longer reliable, it won't be hired.

What about long-term PALM workers? I have advocated that this group should be able to bring their families to Australia if they want to, and this reform is now being piloted. This is not something that would be practical for short-term workers but it could make sense for long-term workers. Can we say the same for free agency? If a worker is here for four years, there would certainly be enough time for them to look for a new job. However, there would be some serious downsides to introducing free agency.

First, free agency would reduce demand for long-term PALM employees just as it would for short-term ones. If an employer cannot be sure that workers will stay with them, they will be less willing to incur the substantial upfront costs involved in hiring PALM workers. Sharing those upfront costs would be difficult to arrange. The benefits of PALM participation are massive for Pacific workers and families, and we should be wary of doing anything that will reduce demand for their services.

Second, free agency would put pressure on employers to keep their workers happy, but only if the option to leave is a credible one. The government has just given temporary skilled shortage workers (TSS Subclass 482 visa holders) the right to be unemployed for six months to give them time to swap employers. That shows that finding a new job is not easy, and there is just no way that PALM workers would be given the right to be unemployed for some period to look for a new job (or for any other reason).

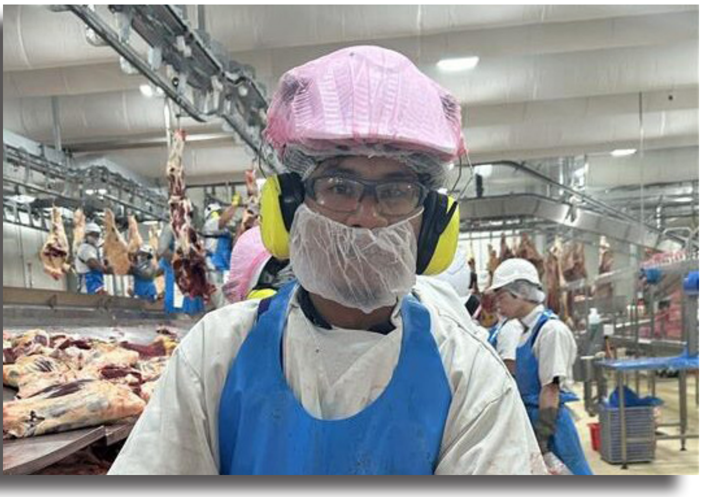
Third, free agency would do little to reduce exploitation. Consider a bad PALM employer. Their workers are unhappy. They want to change employers. Any new employer will require a reference from the existing employer. The incumbent bad employer can then prevent their workers leaving by writing a bad reference, or by just speaking on the phone to the prospective employer. By labelling the workers as troublemakers, the bad employer can deter the prospective new employer from offering them a job.

In fact, under free agency it is good employers – especially ones who are geographically remote – who would be punished, as they would abide by the rules and write good references for good workers.

Fourth, free agency would not solve the main PALM problem which is the staggering number of PALM workers applying for protection visas (2,900 in 2023–24). Unless this problem is solved, by reducing the processing (including review) time for these applications, PALM's social licence will be under threat. That hundreds of PALM workers are applying for asylum each month, and often absconding in the process, makes it look like they are being exploited, even if in fact they are leaving to find a job in the city.

Introducing free agency would have some symbolic value. But it is not feasible for short-term PALM workers. It would reduce demand for long-term PALM workers, have low take-up, do little to reduce exploitation, and take attention and effort away from the main problem with PALM, namely the large numbers applying for asylum.

Superficially attractive, introducing free agency is not a PALM reform worth pursuing. ■



Free agency is a right, not an option

Matt Withers and Sophia Kagan

21 November 2024

Pacific Australia Labour Mobility worker from PNG at the Cootamundra meatworks (Facebook/PALMscheme)

Stephen Howes has responded to our recent articles advocating for free movement of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers between employers as a provision against exploitation, arguing that "free agency is not a PALM reform worth pursuing". In this reply, we outline an alternative case that situates the freedom to change employers – what Howes terms "free agency" – as both necessary from a human rights perspective and eminently workable in practice.

Howes makes five interrelated points in considering the merits of the right to change employers and we address these in turn.

First, he argues that introducing free agency for PALM workers to switch employers is impractical for short-term workers due to time constraints. While we believe the right to change employers is one that should be enjoyed by all workers, we also acknowledge that this is a less pressing concern in the case of short-term workers, as they are employed for no longer than nine months before returning home and deciding whether to reapply. There is an implicit option to change employers from one season to the next. That said, there is a precedent for short-term workers to have the ability to change employers under the UK's Seasonal Worker Visa, provided the original and new employers fall under the same sponsoring "scheme operator".

Second, Howes anticipates reduced demand for PALM workers under free agency, noting the upfront costs borne by employers and the associated expectation that those workers will not change jobs. This reasoning doesn't add up. PALM workers bear more cost than any other party in the labour mobility arrangement and any outstanding debt obligations to the original employer could simply be subrogated by the new employer and thereafter reclaimed through deductions, as usual. Moreover, upwards of 70 percent of PALM-long workers are employed in the meat processing sector, which has chronic labour shortages and, unlike the horticulture sector, has no recourse to labour supply options that are cheaper than PALM workers. It is hard to see demand abating.

Third, Howes argues that although free agency would create desirable pressure for employers to keep their workers happy, it would only do so if the option to leave were a credible one. He thinks it would not be, based on the difficulties faced by temporary skilled shortage workers (TSS Subclass 482 visa holders) in finding employment quickly. We agree free agency would create powerful incentives for employers to invest in the happiness of PALM workers – including, we would add, in supporting familial accompaniment measures which are currently contingent on employer approval. While the option to change jobs would indeed need to be credible, we suggest this could be achieved by the creation of a recruitment pool for PALM workers already in-country and looking to change employers. Priority recruitment of these workers could be encouraged by government subsidies to reduce costs associated with the transfer of workers' debt obligations, if applicable. Workers who have already paid off their debt via deductions will be cheaper and potentially more attractive for new employers.

Fourth, Howes claims that free agency would "do little to reduce exploitation" because bad employers would seek retribution against departing workers by providing negative appraisals. As the weight of industrial relations scholarship attests to, the right to change employers is integral to the functioning of labour markets and a cornerstone safeguard against exploitation. The ability to freely sell one's labour in an open market is largely what distinguishes capitalism from feudalism and is a foundational assumption of all neoclassical economics. No other workers in Australia are subject to the expectation that their employers have sole claim to their labour. Why should PALM workers be treated as an exception for fear of employer retribution, as Howes suggests? If reference letters are really a deal-breaking concern, omit them and require new employers to screen workers on the same basis as they would fresh applicants to the scheme.

Finally, Howes claims that the right to change employers would not stem the growth in protection visa applications by PALM workers, which he believes is largely happening for reasons other than exploitation. He argues that only a reduction in visa processing times will solve this problem.

We agree that PALM workers' motives for seeking temporary protection visas are currently unclear due to a lack of publicly available data – the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations refuses to publish the findings of a study recently conducted by the Pacific Labour Facility. However, this is a related but distinct issue: there is nothing to say that reforms to reduce visa processing times couldn't be implemented in tandem with free agency. In addition, free agency will almost certainly resolve the concerns of some workers seeking protection visas as a means of disengaging from the scheme. At present, PALM workers have no practical recourse but to disengage when faced with abuse; relaxing restrictions on employer-tied visas would empower workers to make those decisions within the remit of the scheme.

What, then, should be done?

At present, the restrictions imposed on long-term PALM workers are analogous to widely condemned "unfree" guest worker arrangements in places like the Persian Gulf, Singapore and Hong Kong. In fact, guest workers in Qatar have greater rights to change employers than do Pasifika and Timorese workers in Australia. Recent comments from the President of the National Farmer's Federation signal that employers recognise that "competition and flexibility can be positive forces for both workers and employers". By contrast, unfree labour leaves the PALM scheme open to criticism from a modern slavery perspective, undermining claims to "best practice" and potentially harming diplomatic relations across the region. We envision an alternative "high road" approach that can underpin the sustainability of PALM. Enshrining the right to change employers is not only consistent with basic human and labour rights frameworks, but also offers Australia an opportunity to depart from the Asian guest worker model and do labour mobility better.

By creating recruitment pools for workers seeking to change employers, organised on an intra-industry or intra-state basis, the scheme could do away with labour hire middlemen and create a government-run facility through which approved employers can enlist workers already in-country. Similarly, this facility could safeguard the rights of workers seeking to switch jobs and minimise the expenses of new employers seeking to hire, effectively intervening to cover the costs required to make labour mobility work well for all parties.

Yes, this would entail additional public expenditure in administering the PALM scheme, but we consider this consistent with the scheme's international development objectives, and justifiable as a subsidy for essential industries in rural and regional Australia. ■

Unpacking PALM worker asylum seeking

Stephen Howes

8 November 2024

Backlog of applications (Unsplash/Wesley Tingley)

The first blog in this two-part series made two main points: that the total number of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers on farms is falling, and that the number of PALM workers applying for asylum is now in the hundreds per month. The blog argued that these points may be related. It is a risk for employers that workers that they have paid to recruit and travel to Australia may claim asylum and leave.

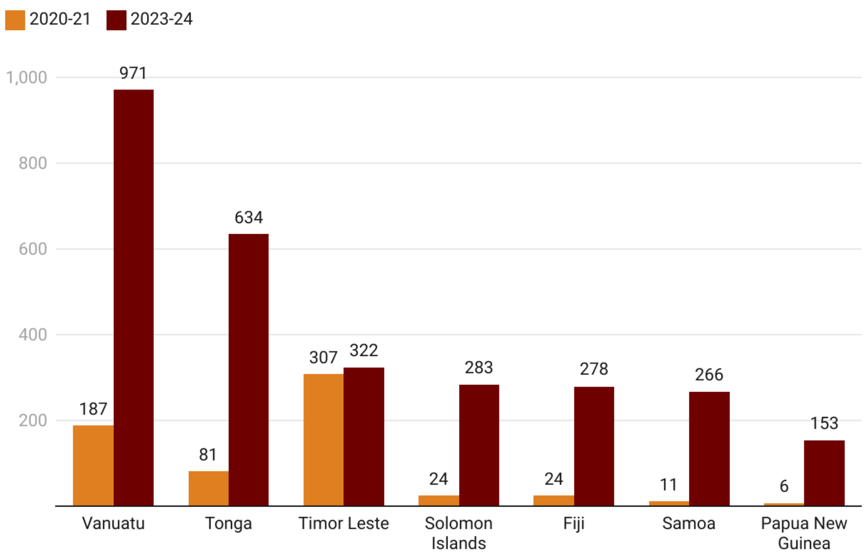
The large number claiming asylum is not evidence that PALM workers are being badly treated. Claiming asylum on the basis of a bogus claim is a scam, and is strictly speaking illegal, but it can be a rational decision for a PALM worker. The bridging visa received after making an asylum claim typically comes with unrestricted work rights, access to Medicare and an expected long wait time till a final decision on granting asylum is made. This is a good deal for many PALM workers all of whom are tied to a single employer, and who don't get Medicare.

Of course, some workers are badly treated by their employer. However, the evidence suggests that workers are overwhelmingly happy with the PALM scheme. A representative survey of 1,400 PALM workers carried out in 2022 by researchers from the Australian National University's Development Policy Centre and the World Bank found that 98% of workers said they would recommend the scheme to their friends. The average satisfaction rating for worker experience on a scale of 1 to 10 was around 8.5. The recent report by the Office of the New South Wales Anti-slavery Commissioner that alleged widespread exploitation of PALM workers failed even to mention this research.

A limitation of the ANU/World Bank survey is that it surveyed few disengaged (absconded) PALM workers. If you believe that they are the badly treated ones, then the survey is of little use. But there is no evidence for this. It may equally be the case that those who disengage are those who have more initiative and/or more outside contacts. Given that, the survey is the best evidence we have, and the only representative survey of PALM workers.

I have been warning of this problem of PALM asylum-seeking behaviour since February 2022, and it is sad to see how much worse it has got since then.

Figure 1: Growth in asylum applications by main PALM sending countries, 2020-21 vs 2023-24



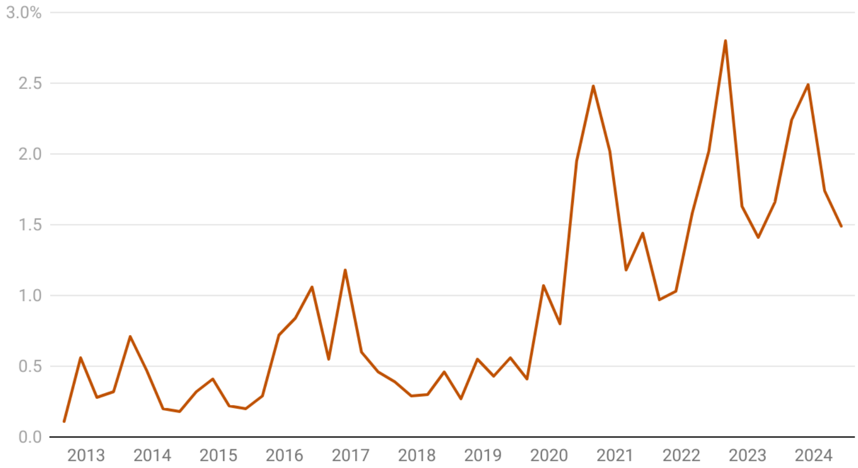
Source: DHA data on protection claims lodged by individuals who have ever held a PALM, SWP or PLS visa provided to Weekly Times • Created with Datawrapper

In 2020-21, there were on average 53 asylum applications per month from PALM workers. By 2023-24, this number had increased to 244.

This rapid growth has been across nearly all countries, but two countries, Vanuatu and Tonga, are responsible for just over half of protection visa applications (1,600 last year).

One reason the number of PALM workers claiming asylum has grown is that there are simply more workers in the country. But the main reason is that a much bigger share is putting in protection claims.

Figure 2: Share of Pacific and Timor-Leste workers on temporary employment visas who applied for asylum in that quarter, September 2012 to June 2024



Source: Department of Home Affairs data on protection visa applications provided to Devpolicy; and data on visa holders from the DHA website. Where "<5" is provided by DHA, this has been replaced by 2. • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2 shows applications for asylum every three months back to 2012 as a share of PALM-sending-country workers on temporary employment visas in country at the end of the three-month period. The great majority of both the numerator and denominator in this ratio are PALM workers.

No one would claim exploitation wasn't a problem in PALM before 2019. In fact, it is in recent years that regulation has tightened and so exploitation has gone down. Why then have asylum applications among PALM workers exploded? Something else is driving the push to claim asylum.

Figure 2 shows that the move among workers to claim asylum started to take off even before COVID. This was likely a contagion effect from the thousands of Pacific tourists and tens of thousands of non-Pacific visitors who had by then been applying for asylum for years. Word got around.

Then the pandemic supercharged the process. This was a time of great uncertainty for PALM workers, including around income, and it was also a time when they spent longer in Australia, and had time to learn from other non-PALM migrants and intermediaries about asylum applications as a way of obtaining a superior work visa.

Applications for asylum have stayed high even as the pandemic has finished, perhaps as this route to greater freedom has become still better known, and as special visas issued during the pandemic started to be closed, but workers didn't want to return.

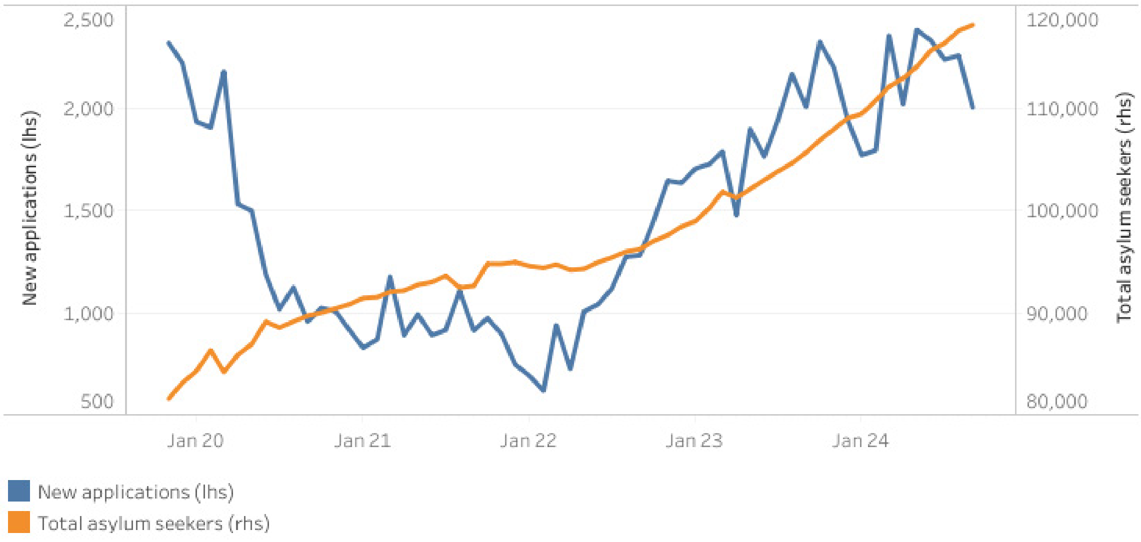
To its credit, the Australian government did about a year ago take measures to reduce asylum application processing times, not only among PALM workers but across the board. In October 2023, it allocated additional resources to both the Department of Home Affairs, which does the initial assessment, and the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART), which assesses appeals.

Unfortunately, these reforms have had no evident impact so far at the aggregate level. Figure 3 covers all asylum applicants, not just PALM ones. It shows that the number awaiting either a final decision on their asylum claim or deportation (now 118,000) continues to rise, and that the number submitting an application is now at or above its pre-pandemic high. The latest data from the ART shows the median refugee appeal case takes about four years to finalise, up from three years last year and just over two the year before.

Figure 3 also helps put the PALM problem in context. In 2023-24, PALM asylum applications were just 14% of the total. The use of the protection visa as a work visa is a much bigger problem for Australia, in which PALM has now been caught up.

The government is also now prioritising PALM asylum applications for processing. In September, for example, 78 Tongan asylum applications were rejected (3 were approved) and 78 ni-Vanuatu applications as well (1 was approved). Quick rejections will discourage applications.

Figure 3: New applications for asylum and total number of asylum seekers in Australia, November 2019 to September 2024



Source: Humanitarian program statistics from the DHA website.

Figure 2 may show a decline in the share of temporary Pacific workers claiming asylum: down from 2.5% in the December quarter to 1.5% in the June quarter. But this ratio is volatile, and it is still high by historical standards. It is far from problem solved.

Both disengagement (absconding) and onshore protection claims are virtually unheard of among New Zealand's Pacific seasonal workers. This is not a coincidence. The two go together. A protection visa is an attractive enticement that intermediaries and co-workers can dangle in front of a PALM worker to encourage them to leave the scheme.

Just last week Vanuatu's Minister of Internal Affairs, Andrew Napuat underlined the link between absconding and applying for protection by calling on the 2,000 ni-Vanuatu workers who have left PALM but are still in Australia to return home and asking the Australian government to make sure they don't receive protection visas.

If hundreds of PALM workers continue to claim asylum every month, the scheme will struggle to survive. Disengagement rates will remain high, employers will get fed up, and the scheme's social license will be undermined (since it will look like workers are leaving because they are being badly treated, even if that is not the reason). Much more is needed from the Australian government, including the Administrative Review Tribunal, to speed up the processing of protection visa applications. ■

This is the second in a two-part blog series on the problem of PALM workers claiming asylum.

Read part 1 titled 'Pacific PALM workers applying for asylum in record numbers' on Devpolicy Blog.

Pacific labour mobility: let's talk about sex

Lindy Kanan, Keely Moloney, Sera Ratu and Kalowi Kaltapang

2 September 2024

PALM worker education session (True Relationships and Reproductive Health)

Improving the wellbeing of people engaged in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is a priority for the Australian Government. Despite this, significant barriers remain for PALM participants in accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services and information, including support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Through our collective experiences as researchers, service providers and educators, this blog outlines what we believe are core issues regarding the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of PALM participants while in Australia, with five recommended actions.

First, it's important to recognise that in most PALM sending countries, SRHR is a sensitive and taboo subject. Cultural, social, and religious norms play a significant role in access to SRH care and information. Once in Australia, PALM participants can face several SRHR challenges, as listed below.

Access to SRH services among PALM participants is often hindered by factors including lack of information, stigma, fear of judgement, limited access to technology or digital literacy, along with concern about costs, language, transport and confidentiality, for example when using translators. These issues are compounded by geographical and social isolation as well as cultural barriers.

It is difficult to find information on which SRH services are covered by PALM health insurance, or which service providers provide free or subsidised services. For example, it's unclear whether a termination of pregnancy is covered so, unsurprisingly, PALM participants accessing abortion care have varying experiences regarding cost, care and navigation of service pathways.

There is also inconsistency around insurance coverage for pregnancy and childbirth. We know of PALM participants who have given birth in Australia with all prenatal and obstetric costs covered by health insurance, while others have paid thousands of dollars for delivery care in hospital. Some participants have even been told by their employer that they have no option but to return to their home country to give birth, despite already serving the 12-month insurance waiting period for maternity care.

Power imbalances within the scheme, including the onus placed on approved employers to ensure their employees' welfare and wellbeing, can leave PALM participants in a particularly vulnerable position. In the absence of independent support mechanisms, PALM participants may have little option but to disclose sensitive, private information to their employers, such as their pregnancy status. At the same time, participants who have experienced SGBV while in Australia might be hesitant to report violence and seek support, especially if they are unclear about their visa entitlements or concerned about their safety and confidentiality being breached.

Through our work, we have seen the physical, emotional and financial consequences of these challenges for PALM participants. Unintended pregnancy, including pregnancy due to rape, has resulted in some female participants having to make seemingly impossible decisions, sometimes even hiding their pregnancy for fear of losing their job. In many cases women have been ostracised by families and communities at home due to pregnancy, and don't know where to turn for help. When participants do seek pregnancy and abortion care, they typically face exorbitant medical fees, often placing them in financial hardship.

With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations to the Australian Government.

First, engage Pacific civil society organisations to provide standardised, comprehensive SRHR information to participants prior to departure. The International Planned Parenthood Federation has eight Member Associations across PALM sending Pacific countries, several of whom provide in-country pre-departure briefings and SRH screenings to PALM participants. However, the pre-departure process can be overwhelming, giving participants little opportunity to seek advice on important issues related to their health. Engaging local organisations to provide standardised, comprehensive SRHR information to those within the "worker ready pool" phase would enable conversations about SRHR in a culturally sensitive way and provide a point of contact for participants on their return home.

Second, expand programming delivered by Australian health providers and organisations to deliver culturally relevant SRHR education for PALM participants while in Australia. True Relationships and Reproductive Health currently offers on-site education sessions for PALM participants that cover SRHR and respectful relationships, delivered by bilingual health educators, in single-sex groups and a culturally safe environment. To date, they have reached over 1,500 PALM participants in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania – with 98.5% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that they understood the information more when delivered in their language. While this is an impressive number, tens of thousands of PALM participants have not yet received this information (there are currently 34,230 participants in Australia and 21% are women).

Third, empower PALM-approved employers to better support their employees' SRHR. Approved employers are required to provide information to PALM participants on local services when they arrive, including access to appropriate sexual health advice and local SRH services. However, there is a need to better equip employers to support PALM participants to access services and information relating to SRHR, including for reproductive health and SGBV. This could include training, standardised resources and tools which can better enable employers to understand SRHR issues and refer their employees on to services and support.

Fourth, provide PALM participants with up-to-date, accessible information on available SRH services and insurance coverage while in Australia. PALM participants need to know which services are covered by insurance in relation to sexual health, pregnancy, termination of pregnancy and childbirth, and where to access them. While the Australian Government has developed a range of resources to assist participants in seeking support and information (for example, here and here), these must be better contextualised, emphasising free or insurance provider-approved services in each state.

Fifth, increase protection mechanisms, confidential welfare and support channels, and capacity for PALM stakeholders to identify and respond to safeguarding violations. Establishing an independent, confidential reporting mechanism is important for ensuring participants can report and seek support for SGBV, sexual harassment, exploitation or bullying. This should include ensuring that more Pacific Islander women are engaged in welfare and social support roles, and that clear referral systems are put in place with approved service providers and crisis centres.

Australia's Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations Tony Burke asserts that the wellbeing of Pacific and Timorese people in the PALM scheme is of central importance. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are pivotal to wellbeing, and the solutions are there for the Australian Government to act upon. ■

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of Dolores Devesi and Tina Peau. This blog is associated with ongoing research into safety and wellbeing and the PALM scheme, including an ANU DPA report co-authored in 2023 and subsequent research by Lindy Kanan, and a Masters research thesis by Keely Moloney. This blog also reflects the experiences of SRHR service providers in the Pacific region who interact with PALM participants.

Pacific paternalism keeping families apart

Stephen Howes

26 October 2023

(Unsplash/National Cancer Institute)

In July of this year, the Australian government introduced a new aged care visa. The Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement (ACLA) allows the employment of aged care workers on temporary visas, with the prospect of a pathway to permanency. To qualify, workers have to be offered a salary of at least $51,222. This is well below the minimum required for a normal temporary work visa (the Temporary Skills Shortage visa), which has recently been increased to $70,000. Despite this being not much above the minimum wage, aged care worker migrants are (of course) allowed to bring their families with them.

Now consider the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM). PALM allows workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste to work in Australia for up to four years. Based on a recent ANU-World Bank survey of 537 long-term PALM workers (those here for more than a year), the average salary of these workers is around $61,000, well above the ACLA minimum of $51,222.

Pacific workers, however, though earning significantly more on average than the aged care minimum, are denied the right to bring their family with them.

The Labor government went to the federal election with a promise to end the mandatory separation of families from PALM workers. (This was only for long-term PALM workers who are here for at least a year, which seems reasonable, as short-term or seasonal workers are only in-country for a few months, too short a time to relocate a family for.) This was a welcome and overdue reform. However, though it was originally meant to be implemented from January 2023, progress has been slow.

First of all, it was decided that a pilot had to be undertaken. Then it was decided that not even a pilot could be undertaken without legislation put in place to give PALM workers extra benefits. For example, PALM workers will be given Medicare. They will also get the childcare subsidy, and family tax benefits. None of these benefits is available to the new aged care visa holders or other temporary workers. Legislative reform takes time, and the new legislation was only put before parliament last month. Because the legislation also covers benefits for those on the new (and completely separate) Pacific Engagement Visa, which the Opposition is against, it is possible that this legislation will get stuck in the Senate.

The start date for the family accompaniment pilot was meant to be January 2023, then January 2024, and has now been further delayed.

There is a clear inconsistency here. If PALM workers earn more than the aged care visa minimum, and aged care visa workers are allowed to bring their families, then PALM workers should be. Or, at the very least, all PALM workers earning more than the aged care minimum should be able to bring their families with them.

The current situation is not only inconsistent, but it is paternalistic towards Pacific workers and their partners. Workers on the aged care visa and their families are allowed to take the risks involved with the visa holder being on a low-income wage. In most cases, where there is a family, there will be a partner and the partner will also work. But in some cases, there could be children but no partner, or perhaps the partner can't find a job. $51,000 is not a lot of money for a family to survive on without welfare benefits.

In effect, we are saying that it is alright for an aged care worker to take the risk of bringing their family to Australia on a $51,000 salary, but not for a Pacific worker on an average $62,000 salary. All of a sudden, when it is a Pacific worker, we become worried about their family, and about the risk that they will struggle on a single, relatively low income. It makes no sense at all.

Perhaps this is the price you pay for having a scheme like PALM limited to a group of countries. Governments get more involved, and governments are notoriously risk averse. Pacific governments are also worried about the risks associated with family accompaniment.

But this is an explanation for the current inconsistency, not a justification. Australia should not, where practical, be mandating family separation as a condition of entry for a work visa. We don't do it for any other categories of migrant workers, and we shouldn't do it for Pacific workers. By all means, change the legislation to give Pacific workers and their families more benefits. (For consistency, this should be done for other low-income migrants as well.) But don't make that a condition for ending a policy of mandatory work-related, migrant family separation. Treat Pacific workers as adults. Inform them and their families of the costs they will face in Australia, and let them decide. If a pilot is needed, commence it immediately.

Policy consistency is preferable to Pacific paternalism any day. ■

RSE changes: employers win, Pacific workers lose

Charlotte Bedford

26 September 2024

Workers picking kiwifruit in New Zealand’s Bay of Plenty (Facebook/baykiwifruitcontracting)

The New Zealand coalition government’s recent changes to Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) policy settings were a topic of much discussion at this year’s annual RSE conference which was well-attended by RSE employers, industry bodies, government officials, Pacific country representatives and other key stakeholders.

RSE employers were upbeat about the policy changes which will help to reduce their costs of participation, a key outcome that employers and industry groups have been lobbying for.

After 17 years of operation, the RSE scheme is still dominated by small producers — 62% of the 179 active employers in 2024 recruited fewer than 50 workers each, with half of those recruiting fewer than 20 workers. For many of the scheme’s smaller producers, rising employment costs and tightening profit margins, especially in the wake of the pandemic, have made RSE participation potentially unsustainable.

For Pacific countries, the three changes to policy settings that directly affect workers’ take-home pay — removing the requirement for employers to pay all RSE workers 10% above the minimum wage, removing the guaranteed payment for 30 hours’ work per week, and lifting the freeze on worker accommodation charges — are less welcome.

From September, the 10% loading above minimum wage is only applicable to RSE workers in their third and subsequent seasons of work. Arguably, this change has been implemented to recognise the skills and experience of returning workers — recognition that Pacific countries have sought for returning workers for some time. But there are several problems with imposing a blanket requirement to pay those in their third or subsequent season a higher wage than a new RSE recruit.

First, data on RSE worker return rates over the 17 years from 2007 to 2024 show that for many Pacific countries the average number of seasons worked is below three (Figure 1). Workers from Vanuatu – the largest RSE supply country – return on average for three seasons, while for Samoa and Tonga, it is 2.9 seasons and 2.8 seasons respectively. All other Pacific countries have lower return rates. It is only Asian countries whose workers, on average, return for more than three seasons, and will therefore repeatedly benefit from the higher wage rate.

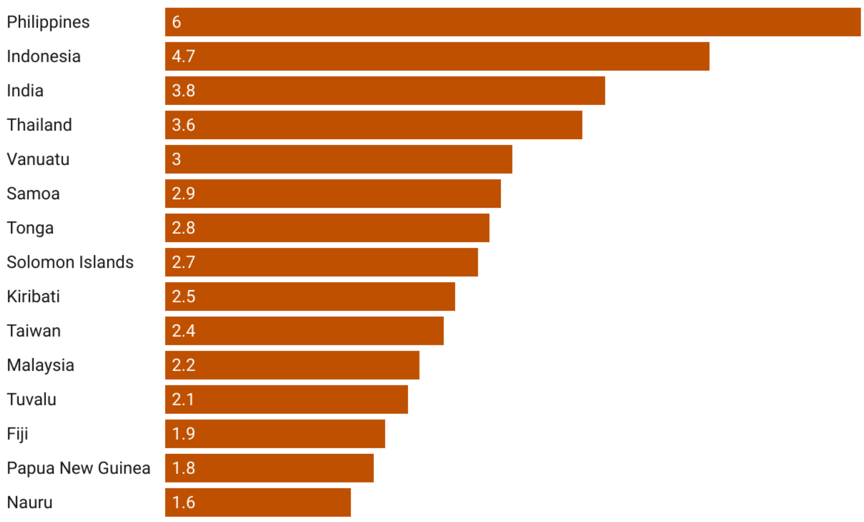
Second, setting a wage rate based on the number of seasons worked encourages people to return more often to New Zealand to earn more money, whether they are particularly productive workers or not, and when it may not be in the best interests of their partners, children and extended family members who remain at home.

Third, basing higher wages simply on length of service doesn’t automatically recognise skills and productivity. There could well be workers in their second season who are more skilled and productive than those who continue returning.

Moreover, there could be workers who have spent their first two seasons working with a particular crop (perhaps picking mandarins) who are shifted to a new crop in their third season (say, pruning grapevines) and who are automatically being paid more for performing a task in which they are not yet skilled.

An alternative is to leave decisions about rewarding skills and experience to the discretion of the employer.This has historically been the approach, and employers already have a range of ways in which they choose to reward workers, whether in the form of higher wages, or via other incentives such as payment of the workers' full return airfare costs or subsidies for weekly accommodation charges.

Figure 1: Average number of seasons worked under RSE, 2007–2024



Source: Unpublished Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment arrivals data • Created with Datawrapper

The requirement for RSE employers to guarantee payment for at least 30 hours' work per week was introduced during the pandemic as a protective mechanism to ensure workers stranded in New Zealand could cover their weekly living expenses. Under the new policy settings, RSE employers must guarantee payment for 30 hours per week averaged over four weeks (that is, they must now guarantee payment for at least 120 hours' work over four weeks).

According to National MP Catherine Wedd who spoke at the conference, this shift to an averaging approach has been made so that we can "better compete with Australia". This makes little sense; it is unclear how diluting worker protections in the form of guaranteed pay, as well as paying them less, makes New Zealand more competitive in the eyes of the Pacific.

One of the ways in which New Zealand has historically tried to differentiate the RSE scheme from Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is by arguing that, while Australia pays higher wages, we have a scheme that is built on strong employer-employee relationships, a high standard of pastoral care and strong worker protections.

Now it seems Australia offers both higher wages and better worker protections. While PALM Approved Employers are also required to guarantee 30 hours' pay averaged over four weeks, they have a guaranteed minimum pay threshold of A$200 per week to ensure workers' pay does not drop below this level after deductions. Moreover, if a PALM employer cannot offer 20 hours of work in any given week, then the employer must cover the cost of the worker's accommodation and transport — and these costs are not recoverable from the worker.

There are no similar protections under the RSE scheme. Now, workers have their wages averaged over a four-week period but will, in all probability, still be paying weekly deductions, with no minimum pay threshold in place. Furthermore, with the removal of the freeze on weekly accommodation charges, workers will likely be paying more each week in rent.

Notwithstanding the problems above, some changes to RSE settings are warranted. Employers have valid concerns about rising costs, especially for many of the scheme's small producers. Fundamentally, the RSE scheme is employer-driven, so it needs to remain financially viable for employers to recruit from the Pacific if the scheme is to survive.

The main concern here is about the lack of consultation with the countries that supply the people who will be most affected by the changes. Pacific stakeholders are still waiting for anything meaningful to come out of the RSE policy review which started pre-pandemic, was completed in 2023, and has been languishing since then. The current round of policy changes was, on the other hand, pushed through in a matter of weeks.

Given arguments can be made both for and against the recent changes, proper consultation with Pacific stakeholders would have been prudent. As Vanuatu's High Commissioner to New Zealand, Jimmy Nipo, noted in his presentation, realising the benefits of the RSE scheme is a balancing act. Balancing the benefits for New Zealand and for Pacific countries — and maintaining important bilateral and regional relationships — requires regular, open dialogue. ■

Women in New Zealand's RSE scheme: a small but stable workforce

Charlotte Bedford

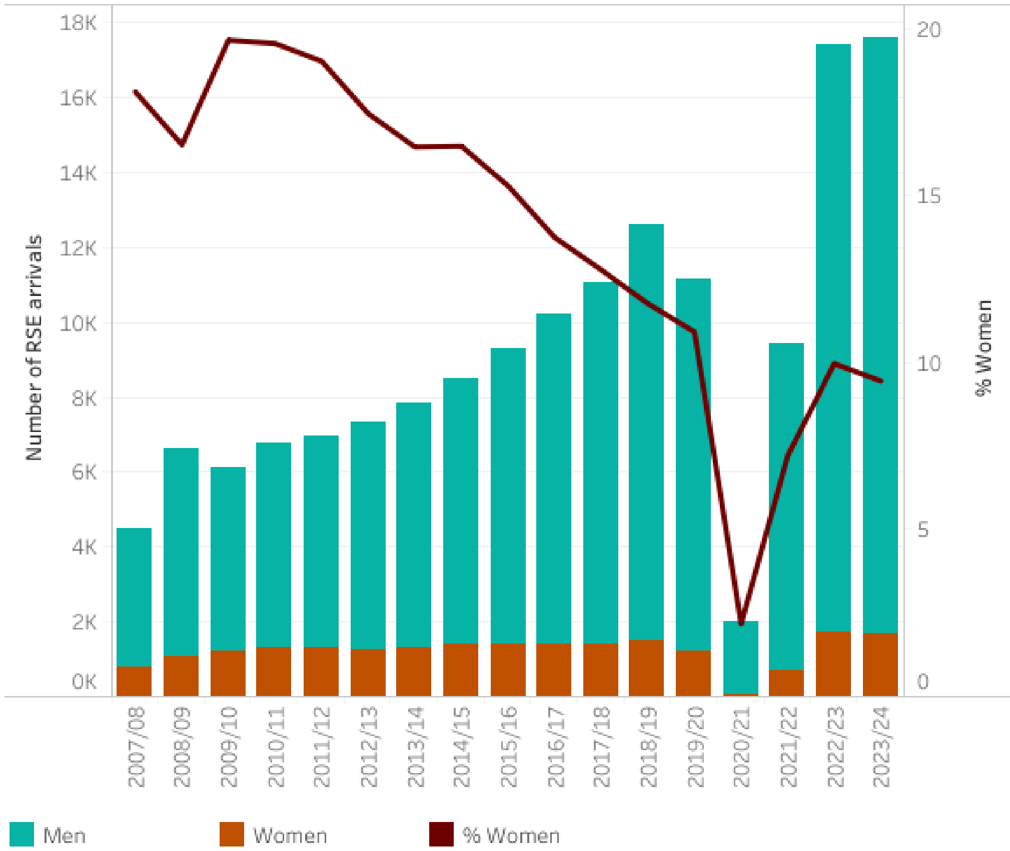
3 April 2025

Female I-Kiribati worker pruning fruit trees under the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme (Richard Bedford)

Since the outset of New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, employers have largely recruited men for horticultural seasonal jobs. The majority are employed for hard, physical tasks, such as harvesting and pruning, in the orchard or in the vineyard. The dominance of men is in part due to restrictions imposed by Immigration New Zealand (INZ) and the Ministry of Social Development on the recruitment of overseas labour for jobs packing fruit and vegetables. Much of the latter work is done by women, and jobs in packhouses have tended to be reserved for New Zealanders, especially in regions with a higher than average unemployment rate. This restriction on packhouse work, coupled with a common belief among RSE employers that work in the field is better suited to men, has limited opportunities for women.

In the year to 30 June 2024, women made up only 9.5% (1,664) of the 17,599 RSE workers who arrived in the country. This was the lowest percentage for a financial year since the scheme began in 2007 (excluding 2020-21 and 2021-22 when recruiting was affected by COVID) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: RSE arrivals by gender and percentage share of women from 2007-08 to 2023-24



In terms of actual arrivals, the 1,664 RSE women recruited in 2023-24 in fact represented the second highest number for a financial year since 2007, only exceeded by the number in the previous year (1,738). But as RSE arrivals have increased over time, up from around 4,500 in 2007-08 to over 17,500 in 2023-24, the percentage share of women has declined.

As Figure 1 shows, the number of women recruited for the RSE scheme has remained relatively static over time. Over the 17 years to 30 June 2024, the difference between the maximum and minimum number of women recruited annually has been less than 1,000; in the case of men this difference has been over 12,000.

While the overall female participation rate is relatively low, there are significant differences by source country. Table 1 shows the number of individuals (rather than annual arrivals) who have been recruited at some stage between 2007 and 2024 by RSE employers for each source country. During the 17 years, 7,628 individual women accounted for a total of 20,795 female RSE arrivals over the same period.

Table 1: RSE worker recruitment during the 17 years to 30 June 2024 by source country

Source country	Women recruited	Total recruited	% Women
Pacific			
Fiji	135	1,954	6.9%
Kiribati	421	1,296	32.5%
Nauru	12	60	20.0%
Papua New Guinea	116	922	12.6%
Samoa	492	10,661	4.6%
Solomon Islands	697	3,131	22.3%
Tonga	995	8,516	11.7%
Tuvalu	195	645	30.2%
Vanuatu	2,605	20,368	12.8%
Sub-total	5,668	47,553	11.9%
Asia			
India	0	131	0.0%
Indonesia	87	928	9.4%
Malaysia	1,118	2,144	52.1%
Philippines	41	168	24.4%
Taiwan	75	126	59.5%
Thailand	639	2,514	25.4%
Sub-total	1,960	6,011	32.6%
Total	**7,628**	**53,564**	**14.2%**

Source: Unpublished MBIE arrivals data • Created with Datawrapper

From the Pacific, Kiribati has had the highest female participation rate over the 17-year period. Almost a third (32.5%) of all I-Kiribati individuals who have participated in the RSE scheme since 2007 are women. Other Pacific countries with high female participation rates include Tuvalu (30%) and Solomon Islands (22%).

For Kiribati and Tuvalu, this can be partly attributed to a concerted effort in the early 2010s by officials in INZ (which administers the RSE scheme) to encourage employers to recruit women from the two central atoll countries. INZ undertook facilitated recruitment drives in both countries to support RSE employers with their worker selection. As a result of these initial recruitment drives, there are now a small number of RSE employers with well-established, long-standing connections with groups of I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan RSE women (and men).

When looking across all RSE source countries, some of the Asian countries have the highest female participation rates. Women have made up about one-third (33%) of the 6,011 seasonal workers recruited from Asia since 2007. This is almost three times the share of women (12%) who have been recruited from the nine Pacific countries over the same period (Table 1). However, there has been little change in the numbers of women and men recruited from the six Asian source countries due to New Zealand government caps.

The Pacific country which has consistently had the lowest female participation rate is Samoa. Over the 17 years, less than 5% of the total number of Samoans (10,661) who have been employed under the RSE scheme have been women. Samoan cultural values and practices have played an important role in influencing the participation of women in short-term overseas labour mobility schemes. Samoan women have been much less involved in seasonal labour migration than women from two of their Polynesian neighbours — Tonga (12%) and Tuvalu (30%).

RSE employers who recruit women tend to employ them for specialised tasks (for example grafting rootstock in a fruit tree nursery), for work on particular crops such as picking citrus and berries, for packhouse work and to provide support to other RSE workers in informal pastoral care roles.

But there remain barriers to the participation of women in seasonal work, both in the Pacific and in New Zealand. Traditional customary roles in some Pacific societies may dictate that hard, physical tasks in the orchard or vineyard are only suitable for men, while there is a preference for women to remain at home to raise their families and perform household duties.

Packhouse jobs are largely reserved for New Zealanders. Provision of suitable RSE accommodation can also be a barrier, especially when customary practices dictate men and women are to be housed in separate accommodation facilities.

RSE policy settings are also a hindrance. In the interests of efficiency, INZ encourages RSE employers to utilise fewer RSE workers but maximise utilisation of them over the full contract period of seven months (up to nine months for Kiribati and Tuvalu). For women, there are not seven months of work available in the packhouse. To get seven months' work, they also need to perform harvesting, pruning and maintenance jobs. Many RSE women prefer shorter contracts (for example, five months) so they can return home to their families and have a longer break between contracts.

Significant advances in packhouse automation have already reduced the need for seasonal workers for packing jobs. Automated systems enable thousands of pieces of fruit to be automatically graded, sorted and packed every day. These technologies operate at high speed and ensure consistent quality. As more packhouse operations across New Zealand incorporate technology into their facilities, demand for people to fill traditional packing roles will continue to fall. Instead, workers with a higher level of skill will be required — to operate and maintain automated systems, in quality assurance and in safety roles.

Looking ahead, without a change to the RSE policy settings to broaden the types of jobs that RSE workers can undertake — away from the traditional work of planting, maintain, harvesting and packing crops — it is likely that women will remain a small, and declining, share of the RSE workforce. ■

New data to inform big decisions around Pacific labour mobility

Dung Doan, Matthew Dornan and Ryan Edwards

18 November 2023

(Pacific Labour Facility)

There has been much discussion about how the rapidly expanding labour mobility programs in Australia and New Zealand have affected lives in the Pacific. Many have pointed to the significant economic benefits to Pacific islanders, such as being able to earn much more abroad than at home. On the other hand, some are raising concerns about the toll of separation on families, instances of worker exploitation, and the risk of Pacific island countries losing their skilled workers. Recent changes in the programs add complexity to these contemporary issues.

This is a critical moment for labour migration in the region, as sending and receiving countries consider what policy shifts, if any, might be needed to address concerns.

Although anecdotal evidence exists, what has been lacking in this conversation is comprehensive and updated data and rigorous research from an independent and qualified third party.

In light of this, we have released a new joint study between the Development Policy Centre and the World Bank, The Gains and Pains of Working Away from Home, based on a large survey of those directly affected by labour mobility: Pacific migrant workers, their households and their communities.

The Pacific Labour Mobility Survey is the first major collection of data since the introduction of the Pacific Labour Scheme in Australia. Conducted between November 2021 and March 2023, the survey includes more than 2,000 workers in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme plus more than 4,200 households (with about 25,600 household members in total) in Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu.

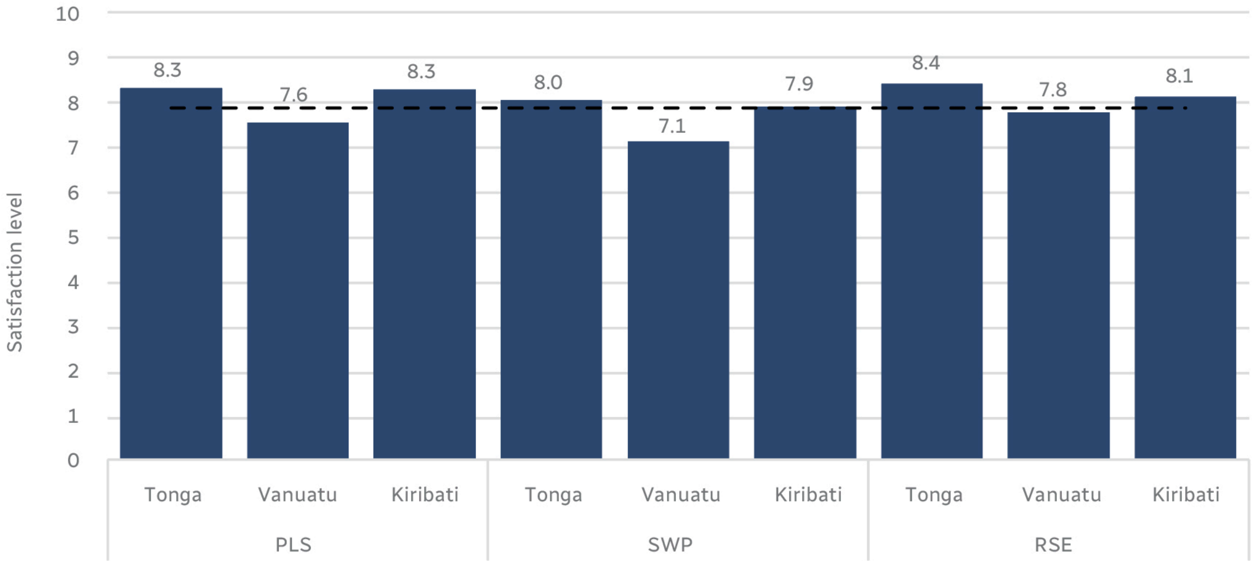
Findings from the survey challenge some popular misconceptions and demonstrate that these programs are seen as overwhelmingly positive by participants and their families.

Overall, the labour mobility schemes have brought net positive impacts, both economic and social, to workers, their households, and communities. This finding alone suggests that reforms to support the further growth of these schemes should be prioritised, and that policy changes which might compromise this success should be approached with the utmost caution.

Most workers are very satisfied with their experience in host countries (see Figure 1), and the schemes are widely perceived as beneficial by both participating and non-participating households (Figure 2).

Importantly, there is no evidence of any decline in worker satisfaction relating to the pandemic, recent growth in the scale of the schemes, or the many ad hoc policy changes which were made during this period, suggesting that these turbulent times have for the most part been well managed.

Figure 1: Workers' satisfaction with their current employment, on a scale of 1–10

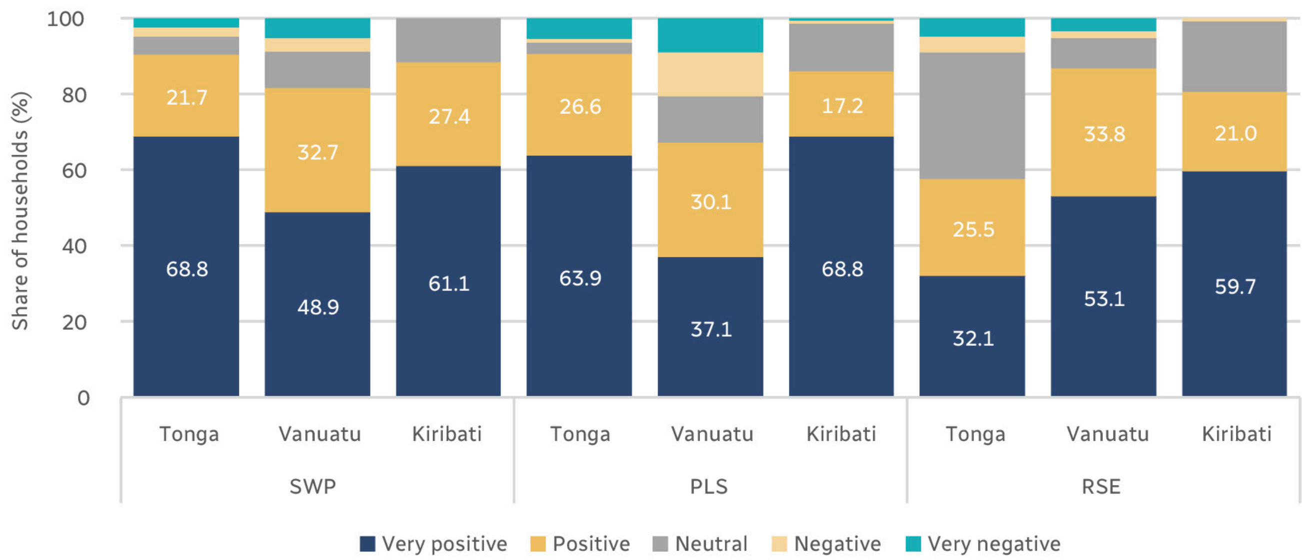


Note: The line is the average satisfaction level across all schemes and nationalities. Source: The Gains and Pains of Working Away from Home.

That participants earn significantly more than they would at home is well known. Less well known is the scale of these gains, which our new data help clarify: between three and four times pre-departure earnings for Tongan workers and up to 10 times pre-departure earnings for ni-Vanuatu workers. On average close to 60% of their earnings can be saved and sent home. This suggests that rising cost-of-living concerns in host countries do not appear to have put a brake on the economic attractiveness of the schemes or the net benefits derived from them for workers or their families back home.

The survey also suggests that participation in labour mobility schemes generally strengthens family relationships, empowers women and shifts gender-related norms. About four in five surveyed workers reported improvement in their relationships with their children, and two-thirds reported improved marital relationships – findings that challenge commonly held assumptions about the impacts of family separation.

Figure 2: Perception of impacts of participation in labour mobility on community among sending households



Source: The Gains and Pains of Working Away from Home.

The World Bank also conducted a complementary qualitative study to shed light on gender and social dimensions of labour migration in the region. The study is based on more than 450 in-depth interviews with migrant workers, their families, community members, government officials and those involved in the recruitment process. This exercise for the most part reaffirms the survey findings described above, while examining in more depth concerns about those left behind, the complexity of the recruitment process, unexpected pay deductions and pressures on family relationships.

Historically, women's participation in labour mobility programs has been limited, with women constituting around 13% of participants. Barriers highlighted by participants in the study include the need for approval by family members, unfavourable community attitudes rooted in traditional gender roles, and the fact that some employers and recruitment agents simply prefer to hire men. Women interviewed also mentioned issues related to shared living arrangements, personal safety, and healthcare. Again, the reports offer practical suggestions to help address such challenges.

Now is a moment of opportunity. This new data provides powerful insights and evidence to support the growth of, and reforms to, labour mobility programs to deliver even larger gains for families, communities, and Pacific countries.

The Pacific Labour Mobility Survey will continue to gather information on the same variables from the same people in future rounds of data collection. This offers us the chance to continue capturing their stories over time. The data will be made publicly accessible so that they can be used for analysis and to help inform policy decisions for years to come. ■

The joint Development Policy Centre - World Bank Report, The Gains and Pains of Working Away from Home is available on the Development Policy Centre's website and the World Bank website.

The World Bank Report, Improving Outcomes of Pacific Labor Mobility for Women, Families, and Communities is available on the World Bank website.

Material remittances in Pacific labour schemes

Rochelle Bailey

28 April 2025

School equipment provided by seasonal workers (Alex George)

In the context of Pacific labour schemes, material remittances are items purchased with incomes from participants' overseas employment — often referred to in the Pacific as gifts-in-kind or informal remittances, which are terms that undervalue their worth. They come in the form of materials for creating businesses, household goods, educational and health items and objects requested from communities.

Unlike financial remittances, which are easier to track and have an explicit dollar value, material remittances are difficult to trace or translate into a dollar value. Yet they are significant culturally, financially and socially, ranging from tractors and cars and pots and pans to schoolbooks and desks and solar panels that contribute to economic, cultural and social development. Based on information from interviews with Australian Pacific Australia Labour Migration scheme (PALM) and New Zealand Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme workers, we can estimate that they spend between $500 and $1,000 annually on material remittances. This does not include material items purchased with their earnings in Pacific home countries. When using lower estimates of $500 for the approximately 50,000 migrants in both the RSE and PALM schemes, this total equates to $25 million.

Material remittances are well documented and recognised globally as social practices and agents of change. Yet, scholarship on and general understanding about remittances in these programs often overlooks material remittances and their contribution to social and economic transformation under these Pacific labour migration schemes. Material remittances are multifaceted: they are associated with relationships between senders and receivers and often reflect reciprocal obligations. Factors such as earnings, costs, transportation and social and cultural expectations determine what migrants remit in material form.

In previous work, I reported that "next to money transfers, material remittances contribute significantly to the improvement of living conditions of their recipients, their households, and their broader communities, which are most notable in the built environment, household goods, resources for education, community projects, customary practices and business opportunities". Remitted material goods are often perceived ambivalently: as a developmental aid to transformation and modernisation and, at the same time, associated with a loss of tradition, creating inequalities and jealousies within communities. Not all material remittances are equally valued, and some are reported as having negative impacts within communities (see here and here). However, my Vanuatu case study shows that material remittances have contributed to positive development outcomes that are largely misunderstood or undervalued.

In a recent book chapter, I explored various ways in which material remittances are invested in, transported and viewed in Vanuatu. Exchanging monetary incomes such as financial remittances for material goods has an enormous flow-on effect for businesses both within the receiving and sending countries. Some businesses in Vanuatu have recognised this and provided customers (especially those building or renovating houses) with discounts upon their return because they are grateful for the increased business. This too has been mentioned by Australian and New Zealand businesses and other academics.

In terms of transporting material remittances, a lot has changed since people travelled home with suitcases full of goods — with people now using container ships to send home goods and other larger items such as vehicles, and even heavy mechanical items such as tractors, to enhance business opportunities at home. Yet these remittances are still undervalued and seemingly not a priority for research. Hence there a lack of understanding of the value of material remittances in society, and of how they contribute to the "development" agenda and how various stakeholders view them.

There are advantages in documenting material remittances. When the RSE first began in Vanuatu, workers had to fill out a debrief return form about their experiences for the Vanuatu Department of Labour Employment Services Unit (found here). It is important to note that even in the initial years, 2007 to 2009, the Vanuatu government had a field on that form to list what type of goods workers were bringing home and they also placed value-laden judgements on various types of material remittances, in terms of their contribution to development. These judgements on what workers purchased were reinforced by their employers, home communities and other Vanuatu government officials.

As workers became more confident in their yearly access to the RSE, they were able to remit larger goods, such as solar panels, boat motors, cars, household furniture and so on, providing avenues for new income-generating opportunities either for themselves or family members — thus being able to make significant transformations in their households and communities. For some workers, material remittances have been higher than or of equal value to their financial remittances.

There are debates among Vanuatu stakeholders about the importance and value of remitting material goods. For instance, there are reports that guns have been hidden in cars, and Vanuatu recruitment agents have argued that workers are being overcharged for getting goods home. And, as alluded to earlier, not all remittances are of equal value. Some have been argued to be associated with negative impacts, such as creating additional packaging rubbish in the Pacific, disrupting family time or hindering community participation with new DVD players, televisions, laptops or other equally "distracting" devices (see here and here). Nonetheless, remitted material goods can contribute to new income-generating opportunities and effect positive transformations in migrant households and at the community level.

The social value of material remittances is also important. Costs aside, material remittances play a role in families and societies that, without qualitative research, can be difficult to capture. In some cases, the financial, social and cultural values of material remittances are significantly higher than the their monetary values.

As noted above, there are approximately 50,000 PALM and RSE workers. If they all spent a modest $500 on material remittances, that would be a staggering $25 million that is making either a cultural, economic or social impact on families and communities in the Pacific. Also worth mentioning is the money these workers are spending in townships outside large metropolitan areas, contributing to local business development within Australia and New Zealand. As reported in the past, a local Salvation Army store credited RSE customers for the expansion of their store in Cromwell, New Zealand.

Although more challenging to trace and quantify, to fully understand and provide a holistic picture of remittances and development in these schemes, financial, social and material remittances should be factored into labour mobility research. Analysing the impacts of material goods in these schemes helps us understand the balance of negative or positive effects in Pacific societies and allows us to understand perceptions and values. ■

Book chapter: Bailey, R. (2023). Material Remittances in the Context of Seasonal Work: Social and Economic Change in Vanuatu. In S. M. A. C. S. (Ed.), Remittances as Social Practices and Agents of Change The Future of Transnational Society (1 ed., Vol. 1, pp. 317-338). Palgrave Macmillan Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81504-2_14

Remittance costs in the Pacific: measurement matters

Hiroshi Maeda, Ryan Edwards and Daniel Suryadarma

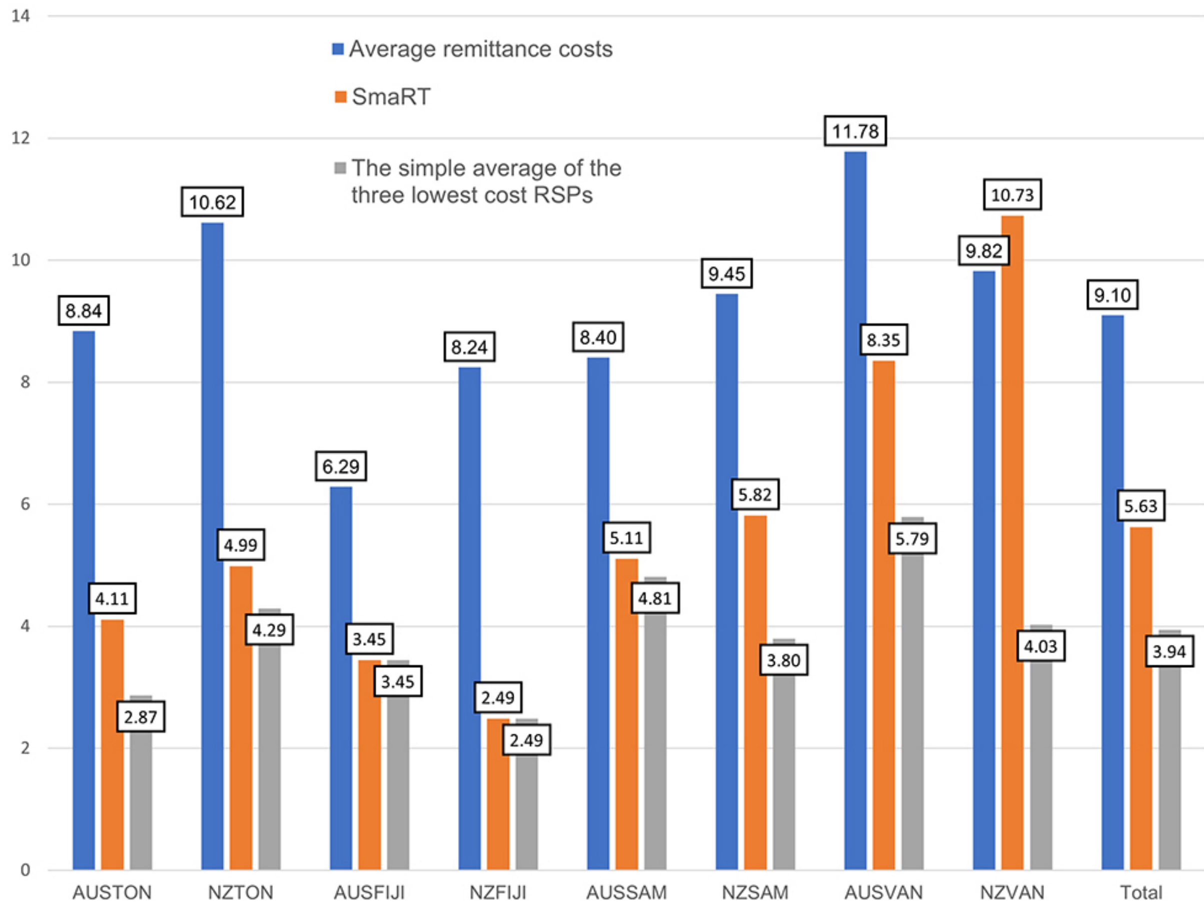
12 February 2024

(World Bank/Tom Perry)

Remittance costs in the Pacific are widely believed to be high. This blog shows how this common perception is a product of how such costs are measured. A different but reasonable approach paints a very different picture.

The World Bank's Remittance Prices Worldwide (RPW) website is often used to calculate average remittance costs globally and in specific corridors (sending and receiving country pairs). Average remittance costs are usually a simple average of the costs of using Remittance Service Providers (RSPs) listed in RPW. Figure 1 shows that the average remittance cost in the Pacific was 9.1% in the fourth quarter of 2022 (the "Pacific average" includes Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Samoa, as noted in a previous blog), higher than the global average of 6.25% and more than triple the global target of 3%.

Figure 1: Remittance costs in four Pacific island countries, March 2023



Source: Remittance Prices Worldwide.

However, this may not give the best picture of remittance costs in the Pacific. In 2016, RPW introduced the Smart Remitter Target (SmaRT) as an alternative measurement of remittance costs accounting for changes in remittance markets and RSP accessibility. SmaRT is a simple average of the three cheapest RSPs in a given corridor after dropping RSPs that do not satisfy certain criteria on transfer speed, access points, and availability of technologies. The average SmaRT of the four countries above is 5.63% in the same quarter (Figure 1). The simple average of the three cheapest RSPs is 3.94%, just 0.94 percentage points higher than the global target.

It is important also to consider potential fluctuations, which require higher frequency data. Send Money Pacific (SMP) and Saver Pacific (SP) are platforms that compare remittance costs and speed of transfer across different RSPs. A recent report on remittance data collection in the Pacific (funded by the Pacer Plus Implementation Unit and the Asian Development Bank, and done by Saver.Global, which runs Saver Pacific) highlights how this type of data is needed to understand fluctuations in remittance costs within RSPs over time. However, such data collection takes time and is limited to formal channels — and these two platforms only provide users with comparisons at a single point in time, not actually over time.

There are three main differences and one similarity between SMP and SP.

First, data coverage. Only SMP provides total remittance costs in percentage terms to the public. We derived it ourselves for SP data.

Second, the timing of data updates. SMP updates every Thursday, while SP updates irregularly, with some RSPs (for example, ANZ, KlickEx, and OFX) updated daily, in real time. This leads to a slight difference in costs reported for the same RSPs between the two platforms.

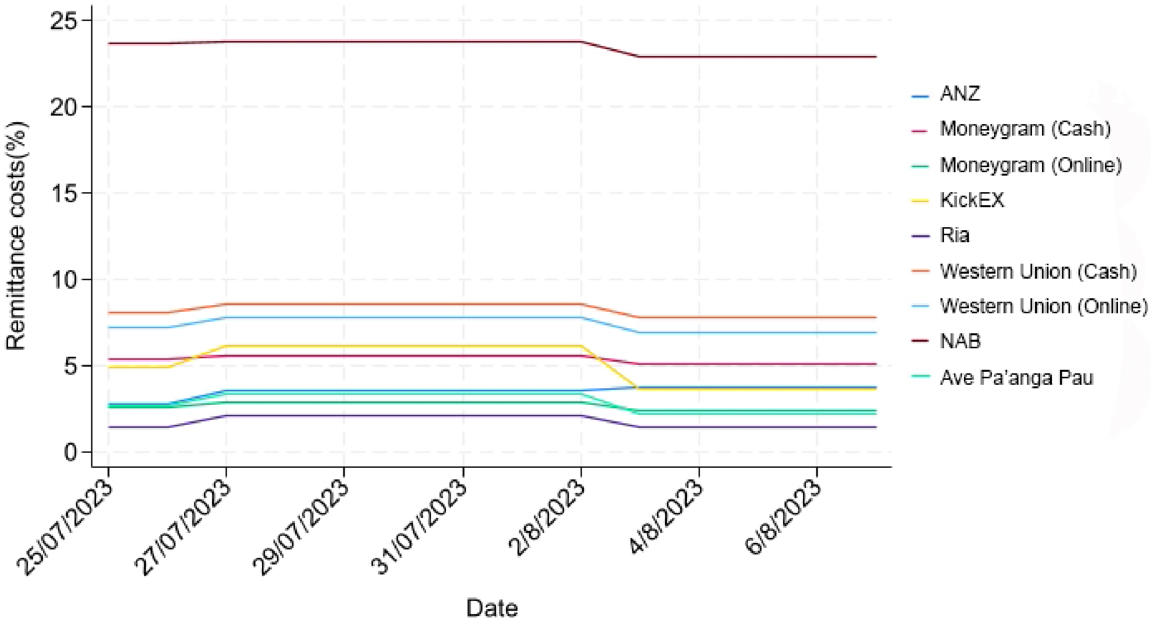
Third, the number of RSPs. On 3 August 2023, SMP presented 35 options from 14 RSPs (with different transfer methods) in the Australia–Tonga corridor and SP presented 21 options from 15 RSPs.

Importantly, both platforms show similar fluctuations in remittance costs over time although the cheapest RSPs can be different on some days by a tiny margin.

We manually collected the remittance cost data for each of the five lowest-cost RSPs, the highest-cost RSP, Moneygram, and Western Union, when sending 200 dollars (AUD and NZD) from Australia and New Zealand to Tonga each day from 25 July to 7 August 2023 (this final data collection followed weeks of pilot data collection before it). We recorded remittances reported to be received in local currency, fixed fees, exchange rates, total remittance costs in percentages, transfer methods, and transaction speeds.

Figure 2 shows the short-run fluctuations in remittance costs for the seven RSPs in the Australia–Tonga corridor using SMP data (see our full paper for results using SP and for the New Zealand–Tonga corridor). Low-cost options are clearly available, and there are large differences between low- and high-cost RSPs.

Figure 2: Remittance costs in the Australia–Tonga corridor (%)



Source: Maeda, Edwards and Suryadarma (2024).

In the Australia-Tonga corridor, Ria charges 1.7% on average, which is lower than OFX and NAB by more than 15 percentage points. In the New Zealand-Tonga corridor, the average cost of Ave Pa'anga Pau is just over 3%, but Kiwi Bank and ASB charge more than 15%. Importantly, the rank ordering is generally stable over time: what is the cheapest today is likely to be the cheapest tomorrow, and so forth.

Table 1 shows that the average of the five lowest-cost RSPs was 3.1% and 4.8% in the Australia- and New Zealand-Tonga corridors, respectively, more than five percentage points lower than a simple average from RPW.

Table 1: Average remittance costs for the five lowest-cost RSPs

	Average costs (%)	Standard deviation
AUSTON (SMP)	3.161	1.269
AUSTON (SP)	3.104	1.532
NZTON (SMP)	4.735	1.083
NZTON (SP)	4.784	1.154

Source: Maeda, Edwards, and Suryadarma (2024) • Created with Datawrapper

So, average remittance costs look quite different depending on what you take the average of, an analytical decision that can matter a lot for substantive conclusions. The long-standing perception of high remittance costs in the Pacific appears to be based on simple averages of remittance costs across all RSPs, regardless of market share and accessibility. Yet, if households and workers were to choose low-cost RSPs, average realized costs would be lower than 5%, perhaps close to the global target of 3% (Table 2).

Table 2: The lowest-cost RSPs in Pacific island countries

Australia		New Zealand	
Country	Cost (%)	Country	Cost (%)
Fiji	0.27	Fiji	0.25
Kiribati	0.00	Kiribati	1.63
PNG	2.34	PNG	4.05
Samoa	1.85	Samoa	2.41
Solomon Islands	1.19	Solomon Islands	3.11
Tonga	1.32	Tonga	3.76
Tuvalu	0.00	Tuvalu	1.91
Vanuatu	2.12	Vanuatu	1.77
Cook Islands	2.83	Cook Islands	0.00
Niue	3.54	Niue	0.00
Timor-Leste	3.02	Timor-Leste	1.54

Source: Authors' calculations using data from Send Money Pacific for three data-update days (21 and 28 September and 4 October 2023) • Created with Datawrapper

Unfortunately, in the case of Tonga, people tend to choose services that lead to higher realised remittance costs, as we will show in a companion blog. ■

This is the first blog in a three-part series.

Australians have much to learn about Pacific migration

Alyssa Leng, Ryan Edwards and Terence Wood

5 February 2025

PALM scheme workers return home to Vanuatu, December 2024 (Facebook, DFAT)

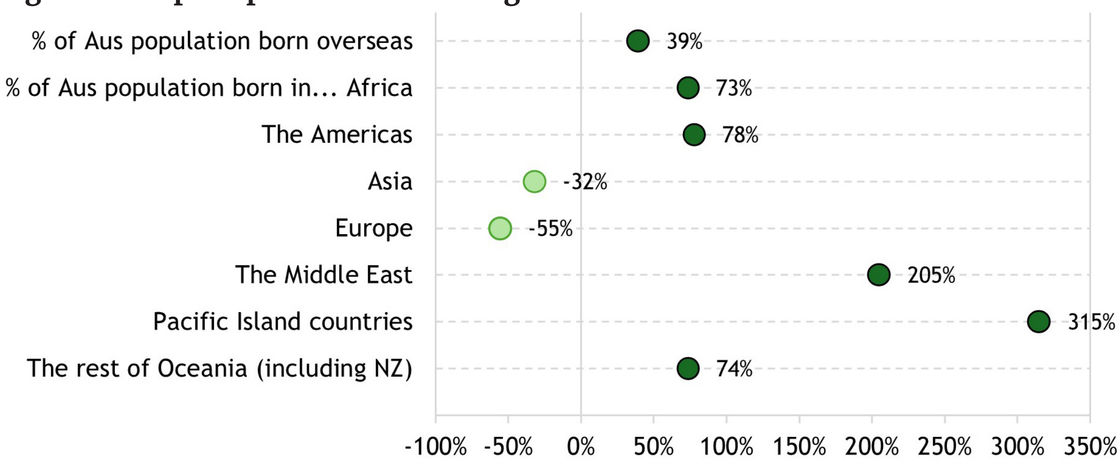
A lot has changed in the Pacific–Australia migration landscape over the last decade. To mention a few big and recent changes, the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) commenced in 2018, the PLS and the Seasonal Worker Program were merged into the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme in 2022, and new permanent migration pathways were introduced in 2024 with the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) and the Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union.

This expansion of migration opportunities for the people of the Pacific has taken place against a backdrop of persistent broader anti-migration sentiment within Australia. Which invites the questions: how aware and supportive are people in Australia of these recent Pacific migration policies? And do they understand how under-represented people from the Pacific are in our migration program?

To answer these questions and gain a better understanding of immigration policy preferences in Australia, we conducted a large, nationally representative survey of 5,282 respondents in September 2024. The survey investigated the accuracy of respondents' perceptions of how many immigrants with different characteristics are in Australia. We also asked respondents how many immigrants of various types Australia should accept and tested whether exposure to narratives or facts about immigration changes people's preferences for different types of migration policies.

Our full findings have today been released by the Development Policy Centre as a discussion paper: *Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences*. In this first of three blog posts, we report on perceptions towards Pacific migration and policy preferences held by those respondents who did not receive any extra information on various Pacific migration policies.

Figure 1: Misperceptions of where migrants in Australia are born



Source: Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper (2025).

The first finding to emerge from the survey is that people in Australia think that the share of immigrants from Pacific Island countries (including PNG) is more than three times — 315% more, to be precise — what it actually is. Respondents think that around 9.4% of immigrants in Australia were born in Pacific island countries (PICs), when it is in fact around 2.3%.

Our second set of findings relate to policy preferences. We asked respondents:

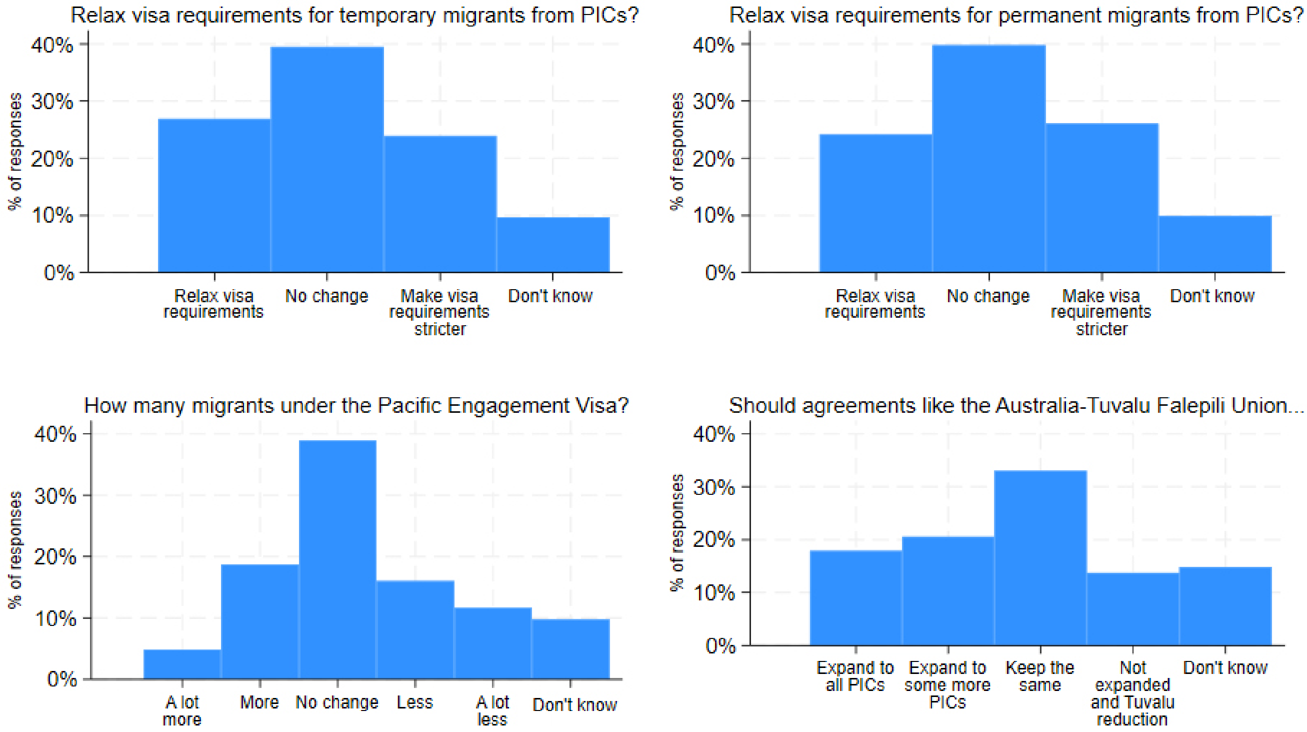
◊ whether Australia should relax visa requirements for PIC citizens for (i) temporary and (ii) permanent immigration (response options: relax visa requirements, no change, make visa requirements stricter, don't know)

◊ how many permanent PIC immigrants should be accepted under the Pacific Engagement Visa (response options: a lot more, more, no change, less, a lot less, don't know)

◊ whether arrangements like the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union should be extended to other PICs (response options: expanded to all PICs, expanded to only some more PICs, kept the same that is, keep arrangements for Tuvalu only, not expanded and numbers from Tuvalu should be decreased, don't know).

The most common response for all Pacific questions was to keep policy settings as is, that is, "no change" or "kept the same". We find that this is much more so for immigration from the Pacific than for immigration at large, where people generally want to see lower levels. This suggests that people tend to be more supportive of immigration from the Pacific than of immigration in general. Combined with the relatively large shares of respondents favouring an expansion of numbers or relaxation of visa requirements, it appears that Australian governments likely have space to continue expanding Pacific migration without facing any major political blow-back.

Figure 2: Baseline immigration policy preferences for immigrants from the Pacific



Source: Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper (2025).

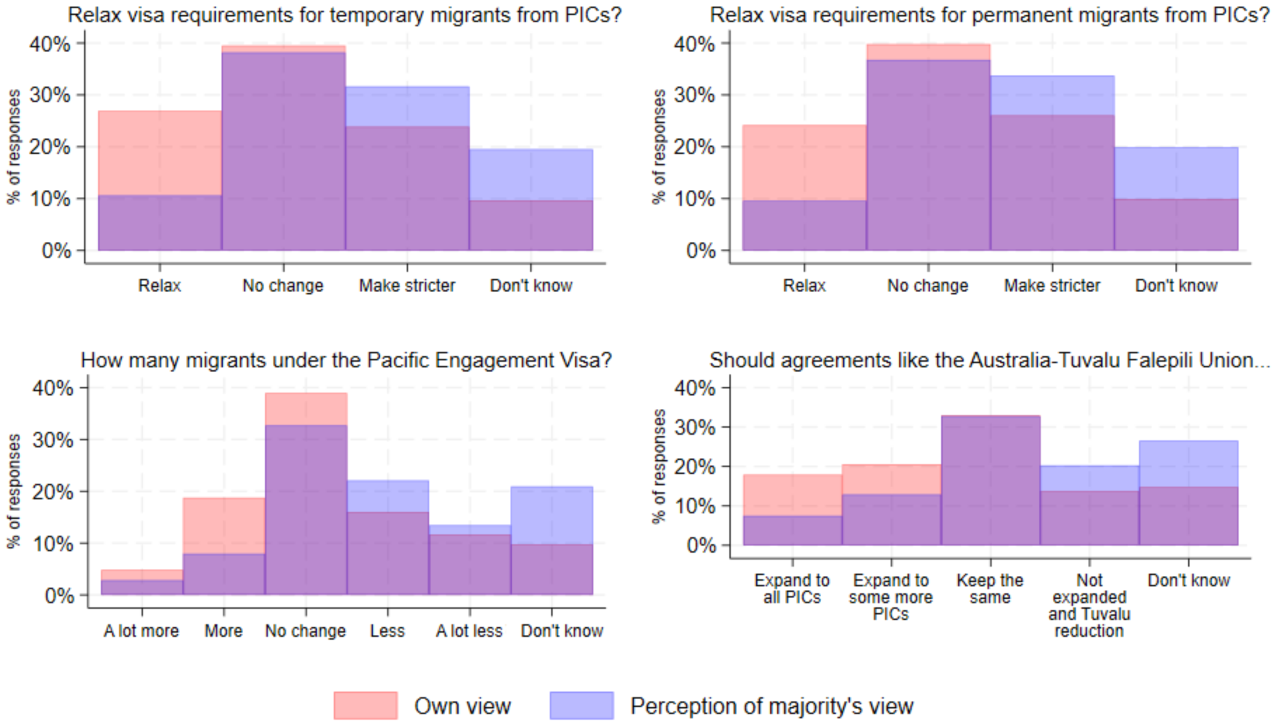
When we consider support for permanent versus temporary Pacific migration, views tend to be similar. 25-30% of people support relaxing visa requirements and tightening them, respectively, but most (around 40%) prefer no change at all.

In the specific case of the PEV, active hostility is low at this point: only about 30% of people want fewer people offered permanent places in Australia under the PEV. Almost 40% of respondents would like to see the Tuvalu agreement expanded to more countries, possibly reflecting concern about the impact that the effects of climate change may have on Pacific countries.

Our survey does however find much room for improvement in public awareness and Pacific literacy. For all these questions, the number of “don’t know” responses for the Pacific was much higher than for questions not about the Pacific, especially for the Tuvalu agreement. This suggests limited confidence in offering opinions on Pacific migration among the general public in Australia, and thus a lot of scope to improve understanding.

We also asked respondents about the views of most Australians on these issues. The results suggest that respondents tended to think that other people wanted less Pacific immigration than they themselves did. The typical person in Australia, it would seem, sees themself as more tolerant of Pacific migration than their compatriots.

Figure 3: Perceptions of majority views on immigrants from the Pacific



Source: Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper (2025).

All in all, people in Australia don’t seem to know much about Pacific migration, and (perhaps based on this ignorance) appear largely happy for policy settings to stay the same.

This is the first part of a three part blog series published on Devpolicy Blog. In the next blog, we will discuss misperceptions and preferences around the broader migration program. The third and final blog in this series will share new experimental evidence on how the latter can be changed. ■

Further information on the method of research and information conveyed in the charts can be found in the discussion paper, Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences*, which is an open access document available for download from the Development Policy Centre website.*

Do Pacific communities in Australia earn less? Part one

Huiyuan Liu and Toan Nguyen

4 March 2025

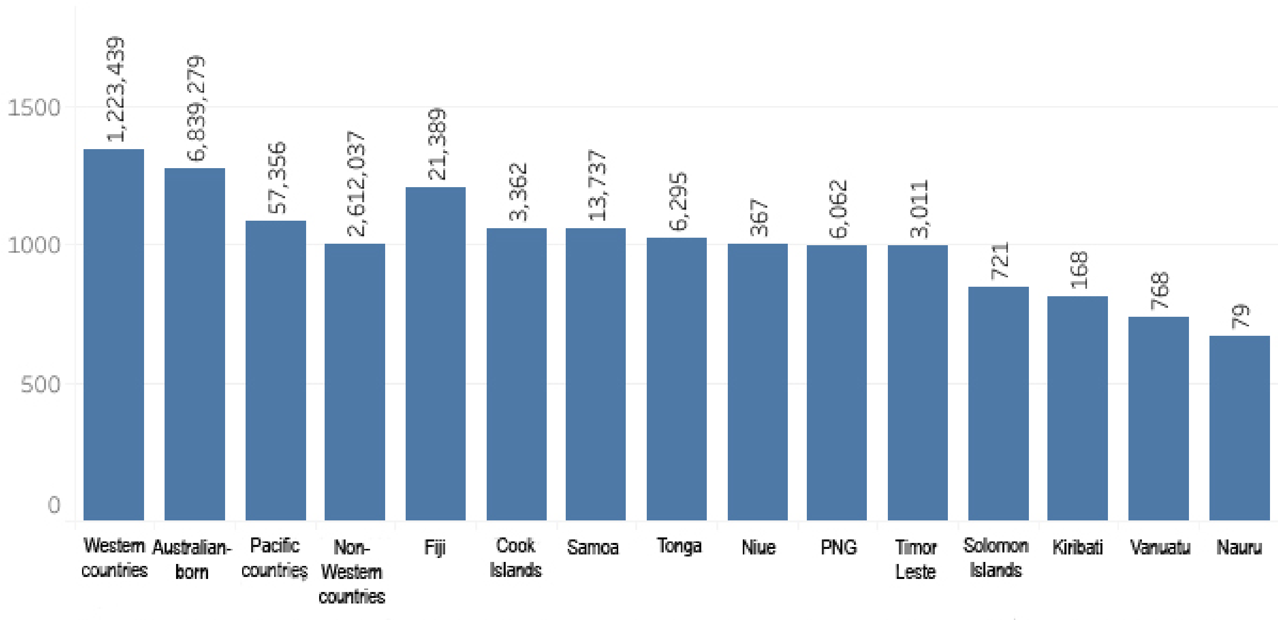
Jimmy from Solomon Islands is one of PB Agrifood and Labour Solutions' most productive and enthusiastic workers despite having a hearing impairment (Facebook/PALMscheme)

The first topic in our Understanding Pacific communities in Australia blog series was the age profiles of migrants from Pacific countries (including Timor-Leste). We compared them to those from Western and other countries in Australia. We found that the average Pacific migrant is younger than those from Western countries due to a shorter stay in Australia, but older than the typical non-Western migrant due to a longer stay.

The second topic we will examine is the labour-market outcomes of Pacific migrants in Australia. We are publishing our findings from an analysis of Australian Census data in two parts, with Part 1 covering income levels and employment status for those aged 25 to 59 years. Part 2 will focus on working hours and occupations.

Figure 1 shows that, in 2021, Pacific migrants had a median weekly income (including tax, superannuation and government support) of $1,085 (equivalent to $56,420 annually), lower than Western migrants ($1,345) and Australian-born workers ($1,275), but slightly higher than non-Western migrants ($1,005).

Figure 1: Median weekly income of migrants aged 25–59 in the 2021 Australian Census



Note: Labels indicate the number of people who report their weekly income. 4% to 15% of the population in most groups do not have income data and are excluded from our calculations of medians and ratios. For Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and non-Western countries, the shares are particularly high, about 41%, 22% and 23%. Weekly income may be understated if a person works for only part of the year.

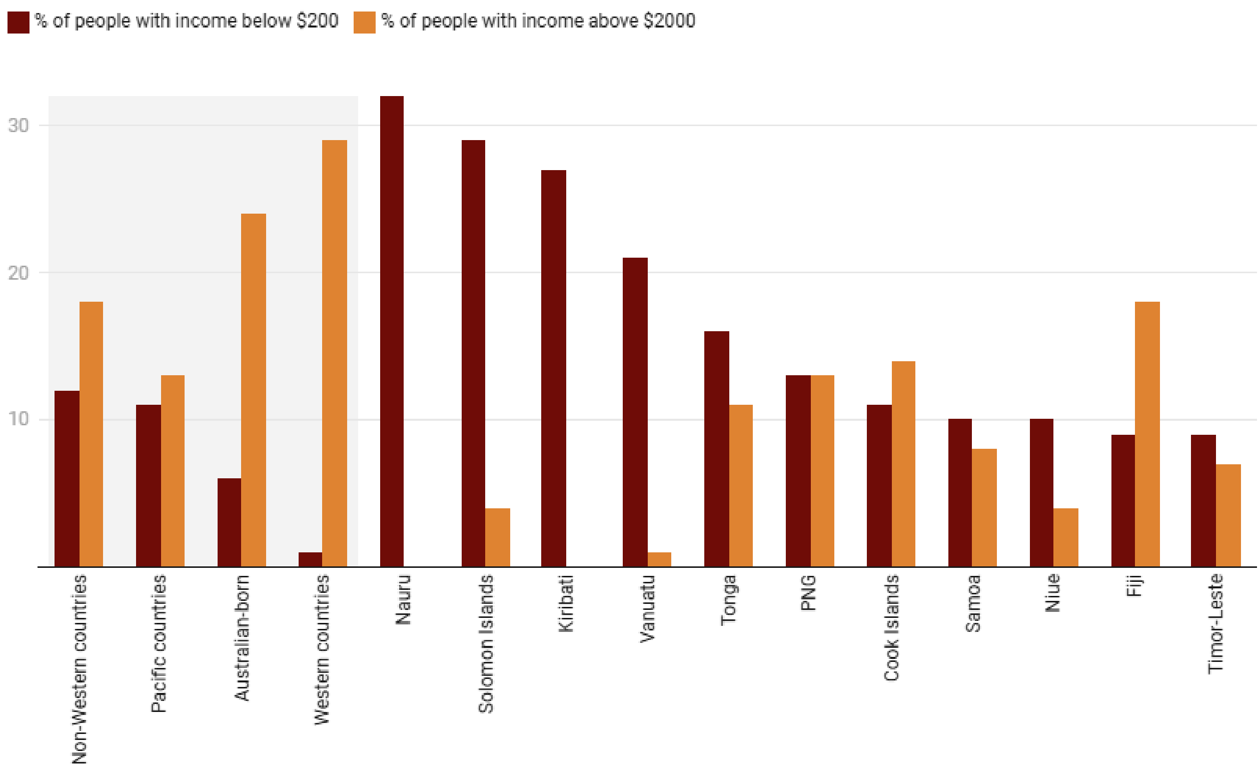
Source: Administrative data on total weekly personal income (including all sources of income, tax and superannuation) linked to 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census.

However, income levels vary significantly among Pacific migrant groups. Fijians earn the highest median weekly income at $1,205. Fiji's large share of Pacific migrants raises the overall Pacific median; excluding Fiji, the figure drops to slightly above $1,000, aligning with non-Western migrants. Nauru, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon Islands report the lowest median incomes, with Nauru's median nearly half that of Fijians.

When restricting the population to those with Australian citizenship (to exclude temporary migrants), the median weekly income increases — by 8% for Pacific migrants, 7% for Western migrants and 18% for non-Western migrants. While the income gap between Pacific migrants (including Fijians) and the Australian-born population narrows, Pacific migrants still earn the least among the four groups.

A key driver of the income gap is the lower share of high earners among Pacific migrants. Only 13% of Pacific migrants earn over $2,000 per week ($104,000 annually), half the rate of Australian-born individuals and Western migrants, and lower than non-Western migrants (18%). Meanwhile, 11% of Pacific migrants earn less than $200 per week (just over $10,000 annually) — a level often regarded as insufficient for living in Australia (see Figure 2). In contrast, only 6% of Australian-born individuals and 1% of Western migrants fall into this category. Non-Western migrants have a slightly higher share in this category (12%), but this group also has a larger proportion of students compared to Pacific migrants (13% vs 8%).

Figure 2: Percentage of people with weekly income below $200 vs above $2000 (2021 Australian Census)



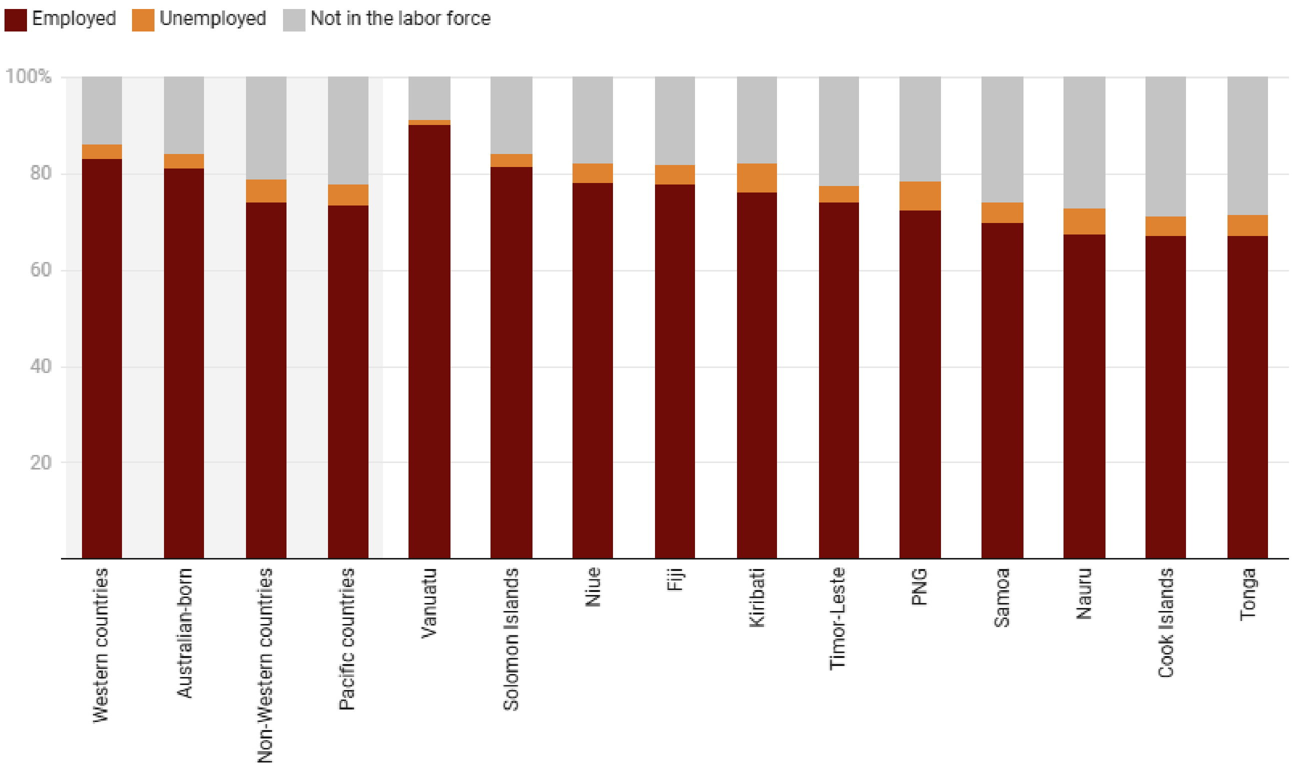
Note: Administrative data on total weekly personal income (including all sources of income, tax, and superannuation). Weekly income may be understated if a person works for only part of the year.

Source: 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data • Get the data • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Among Pacific migrants, low-income rates are highest for migrants from Nauru (32%), Solomon Islands (29%), Kiribati (27%) and Vanuatu (21%). Even for Fijian migrants, over 9% earn below the low-income threshold, highlighting the financial challenges many Pacific migrants face in Australia.

The share of the population who are unemployed is similar across migrant groups, at around 4%. Low labour-force participation is a key barrier to Pacific migrants' income performance, with 21% not working (either unemployed or not in the labour force) — higher than for Australian-born and Western migrants (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Employment status by place of birth for people aged 25-59 (2021 Australian Census)



Note: 1% to 4% of the population in most groups fail to report labour force status and are excluded from our calculations of ratios. For non-western countries, 18% do not have data.

Source: 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data • Get the data • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Over 25% of migrants from Tonga, Cook Islands, Nauru and Samoa are not participating in the labour force: they are neither working nor seeking work. Many of them rely on government support — 21% of Nauruans, 20% of Cook Islanders, 19% of Samoans and 16% of Tongans — all above the 14% average for Pacific migrants and Australians.

In contrast, migrants from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have high employment rates but lower wages. Most rely on wages and salaries, with nearly all earning below $200 per week while engaged in agricultural work.

In summary, Pacific migrants in Australia generally earn less than Australian-born individuals and migrants from Western countries, with Fiji being a notable exception. They have a higher share of low earners, so are underrepresented in high-income groups. This is driven by low labour-force participation and lower wages in occupations where Pacific workers are concentrated. Part 2 will explore these occupations in more detail. ■

This blog is part of a two-part series.

Read the Understanding Pacific communities in Australia blog series on Devpolicy Blog. The series draws on the 2021 Australian Census data to look at the age of migrants, how much they earn and where they live.

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Glossary

ACLA – Aged Care Labour Agreement

ADB – Asian Development Bank

APTC – Australia Pacific Training Coalition

DFAT – Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

EEZs – Exclusive economic zones

IOM – International Organization for Migration

LMU – Labour mobility unit

LSU – Labour sending unit

MBIE – New Zealand Government Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

MICL – Samoan Ministry of Commerce, Industy and Labour

PAC – Pacific Access Category

PALM – Pacific Australia Labour Mobility

PEV – Pacific Engagement Visa

PIF – Pacific Island Forum

PICs – Pacific Island countries

PLMAM – Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting

PLS – Pacific Labour Scheme

RSE – Recognised Seasonal Employer

RPW – Remittance Prices Worldwide website

SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

ST PALM – Short-term Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (scheme workers)

SWP – Seasonal Worker Programme

TSS – Temporary Skills Shortage

TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training

WRP – Work Ready Pool

Development Policy Centre

The Development Policy Centre is a think tank for aid and development serving Australia, the region, and the global development community. We undertake independent research and promote practical initiatives to improve the effectiveness of Australian aid, to support the development of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands region, and to contribute to better global development policy.

The Centre was established in September 2010 and is based at the Crawford School of Public Policy in the College of Law, Governance and Policy at the Australian National University.

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Pacific Research Program

The Development Policy Centre's work on Pacific migration is part of the Pacific Research Program (PRP), a consortium with the Department of Pacific Affairs (ANU) and The Lowy Institute. PRP is an independent Pacific-focussed research program that supports evidence-based policy-making in the Pacific and collaborative research relationships across the region. Its research covers geopolitics, regionalism, governance, economic resilience, gender, social inclusion and migration. The Program is co-funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the consortium partners' parent bodies.

Website bellschool.anu.edu.au/dpa/engagement-dpa/pacific-research-program