

Samoa's shifting seasonal work priorities

by Evie Sharman and Charlotte Bedford

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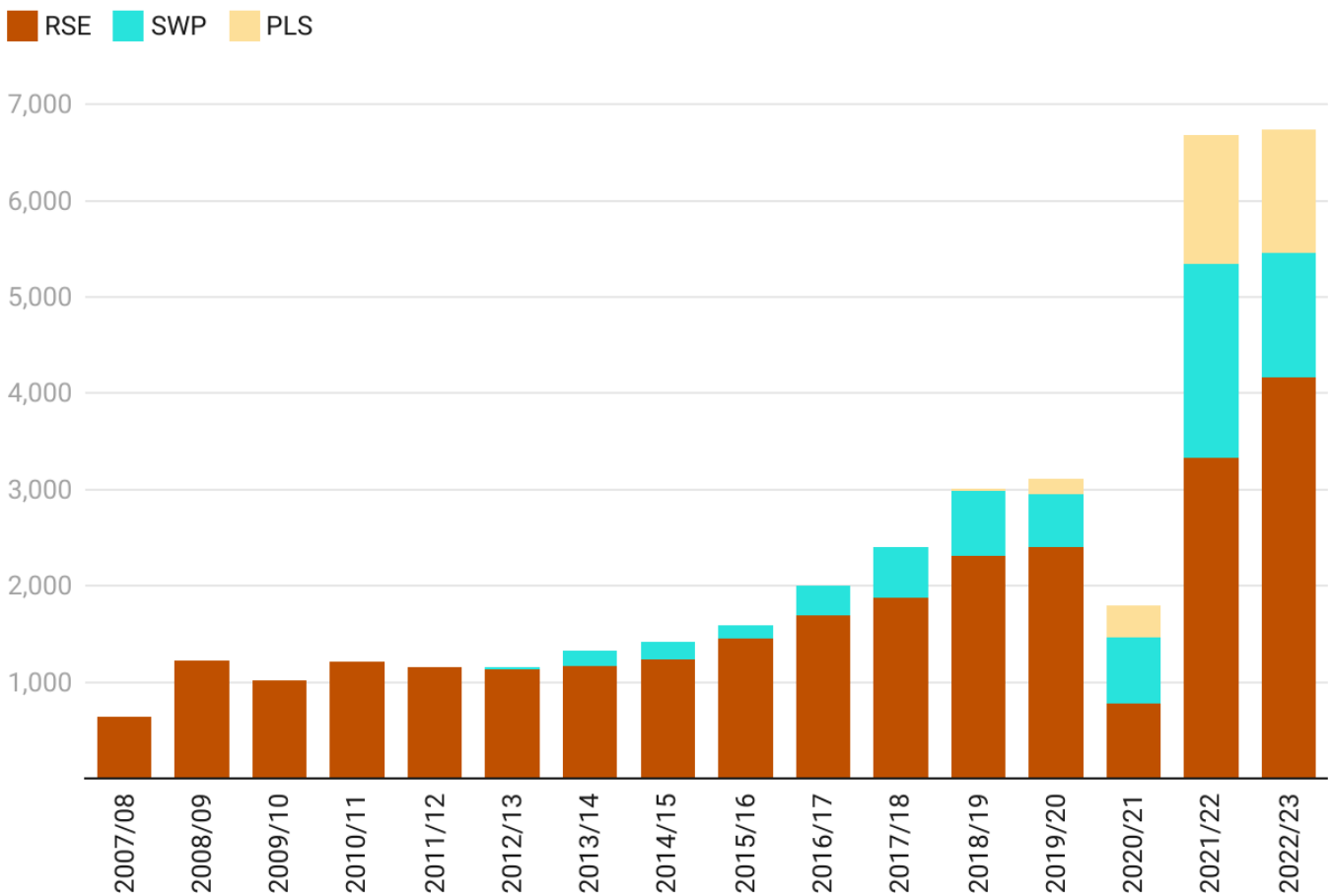
Samoa PM Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa (centre) with Samoan PALM workers in Australia earlier this year

Photo Credit: [Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme/Facebook](#)

In June 2021, hundreds of Samoans gathered outside the EFKS Youth Hall at Mulinu'u, arriving early with documents in hand hoping to register for overseas employment. As the sun rose, people surged forwards and pressed against the building's walls; in the chaos, **multiple people were injured**, some seriously, and needed hospital treatment. Taking place as Samoa's election unfolded, this particular incident set in motion a **continuing debate** about the future of seasonal work in Samoa, and prompted **critical reflections** on the conditions that make working overseas so attractive.

Samoa's participation in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme has increased significantly in the aftermath of the pandemic. In 2018-19, the last full year of recruitment pre-COVID, 3,013 Samoan citizens were mobilised for work across both countries. By 2021-22, this number had more than doubled to 6,684 workers (Figure 1). Virtually the same number (6,736) of Samoan workers were mobilised in 2022-23, despite the Samoan government's attempt to reduce the flow of workers by restricting the number of approved flights and, in the case of Australia, declining to participate in initiatives such as the **Aged Care Expansion program**.

Figure 1: Samoa’s participation in Australian and New Zealand labour schemes, 2007 to 2023



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The Samoan government has been grappling with how best to manage the rapid growth in numbers seeking work offshore, **amid concerns** about the loss of productive working age men and women from the country’s domestic labour force. The government commissioned a review in mid-2022, the outcomes of which were released in August 2023.

The government’s new **policy for temporary labour migration** aims to better strike a balance between the benefits and costs of labour mobility participation for the country as a whole.

The main concerns for the Samoan government are the impacts of the withdrawal of labour on domestic industries and village economies, including the impacts of this withdrawal on Samoan society; the reportedly narrow base of households that benefit from labour mobility opportunities; increasing reports of rights violations; and the need for more transparent and fair processes.

To address these concerns, the government has identified four priority areas: a pro-

poor focus to recruitment and selection (prioritising those without formal employment); enhancing worker welfare; supporting reintegration and circularity (which includes enforcing a mandatory stand down period for returning Samoan workers); and improving labour mobility governance.

In practice, the biggest change will be to recruitment which, historically, has been largely left to employers. Newly established district constituency committees are the proposed vehicle to enable equal distribution of work opportunities for newly recruited workers. These committees will essentially build the work-ready pool, aiming to prioritise the unemployed, and each will have to enter into MOUs with the Government of Samoa.

These committees will be closely involved in the vetting and selection of new workers, hosting visiting employers in-country, as well as supporting employers with worker issues, in what is being coined the “constituency engagement model”. This approach could be considered as a government-led decentralisation model, similar to how recruitment works in Papua New Guinea.

As Malama Meleisea has [previously pointed out](#), constituency committees are “only slowly becoming effective”. There remain questions on whether having the selection process essentially chaired by the local member of parliament will naturally lead to a more equal distribution of opportunities, or introduce new political influences in selection processes.

Direct employer recruitment will be curtailed. The policy is explicit in that it “will limit the involvement of ... overseas Employers in the recruitment and selection process for the mobilising of workers”. This is part of a broader effort by some Pacific governments to have greater control over who gets recruited to better reflect their preferences. However, employers will still have the final say over which workers get hired, which may limit attempts to diversify recruitment. For example, the Samoan government’s pilot of the new recruitment model found that employers reported “lower levels of English further from the capital”, a potential barrier to employment for more remote constituencies.

For return workers, there is a much simpler process. Constituency endorsement will be sought “where possible” before visas are lodged. This is likely to further reinforce employment opportunities for return workers and will benefit pre-existing employers, which conflicts with the intended aim of the policy to equalise opportunities between communities.

The policy proposes regulating private recruiters through a licensing system intended to avoid excessive fees being charged to workers and other unethical

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practices. Private recruiters will have to pay a 10,000 tala (A\$5,555) licensing fee every 12 months for renewal. This fee is significantly higher than the **agent registration fee** in Vanuatu (20,000 vatu/A\$253 as of 2019). While the policy doesn't spell the end of private recruitment altogether, it is unlikely to be worthwhile for many, and will likely lead to more costs being passed on to workers. Private recruiters will also have to gain approval from constituencies before being able to recruit, showing further preference for use of government selection processes. So far, these changes have **received a "mixed reaction"** from agents.

Australian and New Zealand employers will have to become accredited by the Samoan government too, including payment of a 1,000 tala annual fee. While the details of this process are yet to be released, it seems unlikely that most employers will be willing to go through this process if it is particularly onerous. Instead, employers may look to other source countries for their Pacific labour.

Samoa proposes a cap of 6,000 workers per year, per country to both Australia and New Zealand, allowing for a total of 12,000 annual deployments. This is significant as Samoa is now the first sending country to impose its own cap. While the idea of a worker cap might generate some anxiety for overseas employers, if filled, it would be a significant increase – roughly doubling current worker numbers, with most spaces available to Australia (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Samoa’s current (2022-23) participation levels as a percentage of proposed 6,000 cap



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This increase seems at odds with some of the key aims of the policy, but it is evidence of the difficult position the Samoan government is in; limiting offshore employment opportunities would not be popular. Around 14% of working-age **Samoan men participate** in the Australian and New Zealand schemes, and last year, **remittances accounted for 33.6%** of GDP. In a **recent survey**, 73% of Samoans were either “fairly willing” or “very willing” to temporarily work in another country. While the **draft policy proposed** ending mobilisation under the longer term Pacific Labour Scheme, this does not seem to have made the final cut.

With implementation from mid-2024, it remains to be seen whether the policy will achieve its intended aims of strengthening the pro-poor focus and equalising employment opportunities, or whether the planned measures will create some new and unforeseen challenges for the government to grapple with.

Disclosures:

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