

# The exception: why New Caledonians do not migrate to Metropolitan France



Noumea harbour, New Caledonia  
Photo Credit: [Flickr/MEADEN](#)

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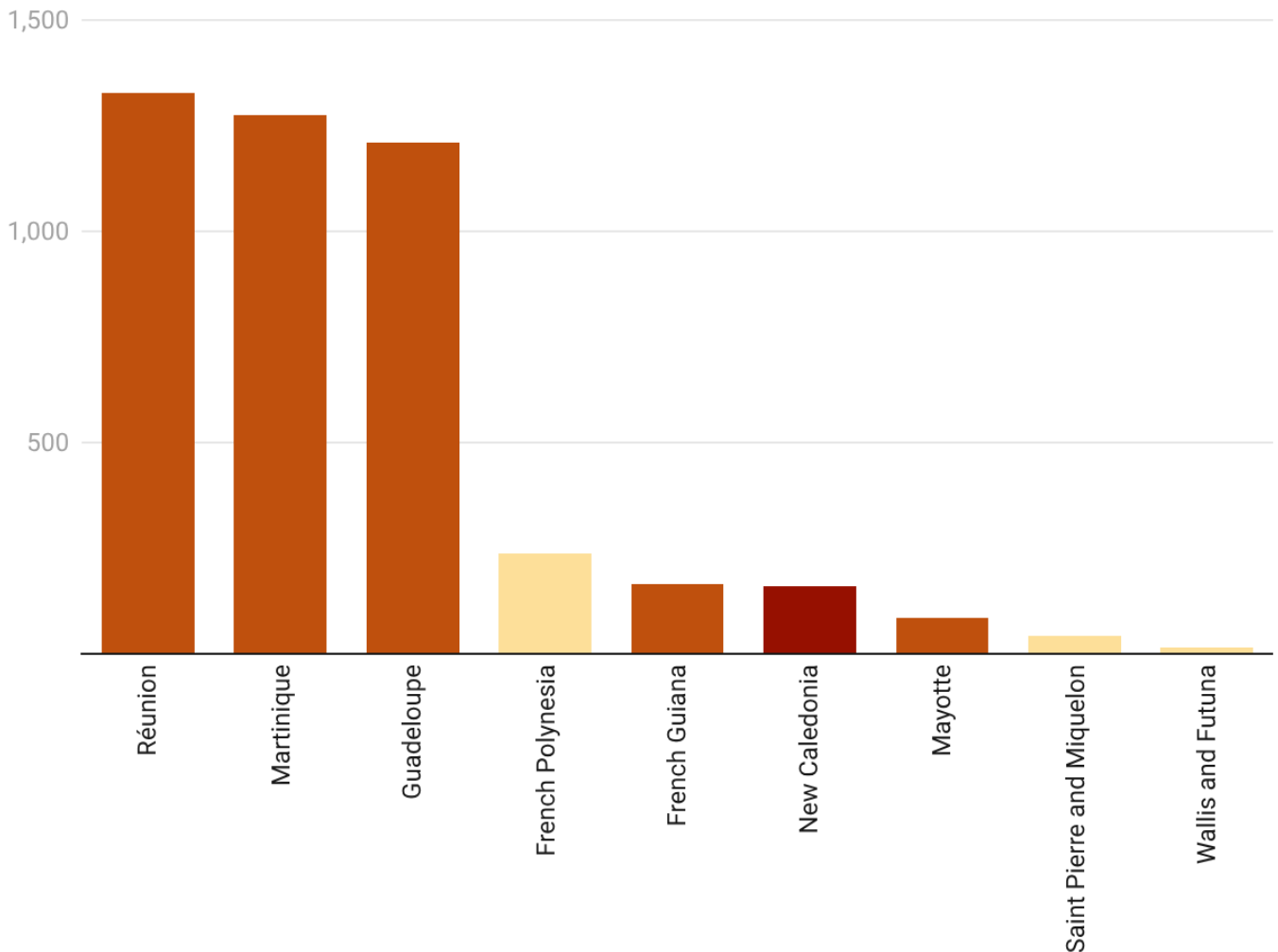
As members of a state in free association with New Zealand, Cook Islanders are afforded New Zealand citizenship by birth. The attached rights allow Cook Islanders to freely emigrate and find work in New Zealand. As a result, more than **80,000 Cook Islanders** currently live in New Zealand, a number which by far eclipses the Cook Islands' own resident population of **about 17,000**.

In many ways, New Caledonia is to France what the Cook Islands is to New Zealand: New Caledonians hold **French passports**, and can freely live and work in Metropolitan France if they so choose. They owe this ability to New Caledonia's status as a *sui generis* collectivity of France, which technically classifies the collectivity as a part of France while still allowing it to maintain a degree of autonomy. In comparing the case of New Caledonia to that of the Cook Islands, one might assume that New Caledonians would often make use of their passports to migrate to Metropolitan France.

In fact, however, by recent estimation, only **17,575 New Caledonian natives** were living in Metropolitan France in 2020, a small fraction of the almost 300,000 resident New Caledonians. In 1999, France's National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) conducted a study of the number of people living in Metropolitan France who were native to one of France's overseas departments or collectivities (or the DROM-COMs), and found that only 0.016% of the surveyed population was born in New Caledonia. DROM-COMs like Reunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe recorded a much greater presence in the Metropole. Reunion, for example, recorded eight times more migrants than New Caledonia, despite having only three times the population.

**Figure 1: Number of people living in Metropolitan France in 1999 who were born in DROM-COMs**

Orange - COM, Yellow - DROM, Red - New Caledonia.



Notes: Study surveyed a representative sample of 1,031,328 people.

Source: INED Family History Study. Distributed by DPROGEDO-ADISP doi:10.13144/lil-0173. • Created with Datawrapper

There are problems with the migration estimates, which are mostly based on old data or small surveys. It is particularly difficult, if not impossible, to study indigenous Kanak external migration patterns, as French statistical institutions are **widely prohibited from recording ethnic or racial data**. New Caledonia is exempted from this rule; but their Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (ISEE-NC) has little way of knowing where Kanaks go if they do leave the country. Kanaks make up around **40% of New Caledonia's population**, while Europeans make up around 30%.

Despite these challenges, the available data quite clearly indicates that there is a low rate of migration from New Caledonia to Metropolitan France. Why is New Caledonia different from not only the Cook Islands, but also from the many Pacific Island countries where migration is becoming a way of life?

Multiple factors are at work.

Part of the answer has been known for some time. In 1994, **Bernard Poirine** noted that a booming public or private sector (thanks to large transfers from France and the collectivity's nickel extraction industry) could disincentivise emigration even for the unemployed, diverging from the model of other Pacific Island countries. In New Caledonia, the guaranteed minimum wage amounts to **over 70%** of the Metropolitan minimum wage, while civil servants' wages **are significantly higher than the Metropolitan average**. Until recently, the **nickel industry** has also provided a large boost to average income. This means that the Metropolitan "overseas wage" expected by emigrants often does not sufficiently exceed the local wage, particularly in the public sector, making emigration less attractive.

This principle applies in particular to "unskilled workers". **Less than 10%** of the Kanak population possessed a bachelor's degree or equivalent as of the 2019 census. Meanwhile, labour demand in France is currently largely concentrated in skilled sectors like IT and healthcare. Prospects are therefore limited for New Caledonian migrants lacking in in-demand skills, and their predicted Metropolitan wage is unlikely to surpass their potential local one.

Travel costs further diminish the value of the "overseas wage". The geographic distance between New Caledonia and the Metropole is a significant barrier, rendering migration more difficult for disadvantaged populations. The French government has sought to remove this barrier for some through the **Education Mobility Passport (PME)** scheme, which aids to alleviate the costs of studying in the Metropole for New Caledonian students. However, it has had a limited impact for longer-term residence after the attainment of a degree.

**Low consumption, low competitiveness, low purchasing power and limited access to services**, particularly within the largely Kanak Northern Province and Loyalty Islands, might continue to prompt some New Caledonians to search for better economic prospects elsewhere. However, most do so via internal migration, **towards the Southern Province** and its well-off capital, Nouméa.

Other DROM-COMs like Martinique, Guadeloupe and Reunion have high rates of emigration despite also having relatively high local wages. **This deviation has been linked** to cultural patterns of family solidarity and remittance, as well as a heterogeneity in Metropolitan "overseas wage" expectations. However, other historical factors also play a role.

In the 1960s, France encouraged "low-skilled" labour migration to the Metropole by establishing **initiatives for DROM-COM nationals** to migrate towards mainland

France. This initiative did not include New Caledonia; instead, it was targeted at Reunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe, establishing historic diasporas. The lack of an established diaspora represents another key barrier for New Caledonians. For them, this lack equates to fewer opportunities for cultural networking and social and economic support upon arrival in Metropolitan France.

The continued impact of colonialism plays a key role in potentially discouraging migration by increasing its psychological costs. In Metropolitan France, Kanak New Caledonians continue to face an increased risk of **racial discrimination and unique forms of disadvantage**, for example relative to the specific experiences of French Polynesians. In New Caledonia, the scar of colonialism is still fresh, and antipathy towards France as a colonial power is not only common, but continues to grow.

The 2024 New Caledonian riots have further complicated the migratory situation, with some experts estimating that more than **10,000 people** have fled New Caledonia as a result of the political turmoil. However, with a lack of precise data, these departures serve simply to raise more questions as to where migrants are going, and when, if ever, they will return to New Caledonia.

As the nickel industry weakens due to the riots and **volatile global prices**, the relative fall in local wages could shift migration trends in New Caledonia, perhaps incentivising increased emigration.

For a small island, having unlimited migration rights to a much bigger country should be a benefit, as it is for the Cook Islands and several other small Pacific states. But New Caledonia teaches us that that benefit is less, perhaps much less, if there are barriers in the way of exercising the right to migrate, and if there are incentives for internal migration or immobility. Hence the New Caledonian exception.

*This blog is based on the author's **Australian National Internships Program research report**.*

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