

Rapid analysis of family separation issues and responses in the PALM scheme - final report

*Dr Matt Withers
Macquarie University*

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Executive summary

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme streamlines Australia’s existing ‘guestworker’ migration initiatives with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and Timor-Leste: the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS).

Both initiatives provide temporary employment opportunities in rural and regional Australia, entailing placements of up to 9 months within the SWP and up to 3 years within the PLS. They also do not allow for family accompaniment, which can mean prolonged periods of transnational family separation that may place strain on social ties and familial relationships. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some workers and their families experience difficulties maintaining relationships at a distance - including instances of extramarital affairs, relationship breakdowns and challenges associated with managing childcare and other domestic responsibilities.

This scoping study examines social and programmatic issues relating to family separation from the perspective of labour sending unit (LSU) staff in PICs and Timor-Leste, who are the primary point of contact for the families of migrant workers deployed in Australia. In-depth interviews were facilitated by the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF) and conducted with LSU staff in Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu to:

- i) establish the frequency and nature of issues associated with family separation
- ii) gauge the effects of extended separation, within the PLS and in the SWP during COVID
- iii) survey existing and proposed measures to address these problems
- iv) identify stakeholders and resources required to enhance support mechanisms.

Key policy recommendations emerging from the study include:

- **comprehensively involving families in pre-departure briefings and trainings**
- **expanding or establishing family welfare support services during migration**
- **formalising support for temporary family accompaniment within the PLS**
- **strengthening monitoring and evaluation of social issues in all labour mobility initiatives**
- **limiting repeat migration within the PLS.**



Overview

The SWP and PLS are ‘guestworker’ temporary labour migration schemes with similar characteristics. They are eligible to individual participants from 9 PICs (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste; they are limited to employment in ‘low-skilled’ to ‘semi-skilled’ occupations in rural and regional Australia; and they involve non-transferrable work permits tied to approved employers that have satisfied the requirements of labour market testing (DESE 2019; DFAT 2017). They have historically had important points of difference, too, with the SWP limited to 9 months seasonal employment in agriculture and the PLS providing up to 3 years’ work in a broader range of industries, with an initial emphasis on tourism, hospitality and aged care (DESE 2019; DFAT 2017).

On 14 September 2021, the SWP and PLS were streamlined under the PALM scheme, marking a “new era of Pacific Australia labour mobility” by simplifying recruitment while broadening the size and scope of both initiatives (Payne 2021). Under the PALM scheme, seasonal workers will be able to work in a range of industries beyond agriculture and horticulture and long-term workers will be able to work in additional regional locales in which the SWP previously operated (Payne 2021). These reforms are intended to “offer more flexibility and less red tape” for prospective employers to “ensure the Pacific labour programs continue to meet critical worker shortages and remain the Australian Government’s leading workforce program into the future” (Payne 2021).

The PALM scheme’s economic value for Australia is readily apparent. Employers across a number of sectors in rural and regional areas have demonstrated a longstanding reliance on temporary migrant labour and both the SWP and PLS were designed to address the labour needs of those businesses (Ball 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified demand for low-wage labour, most notably in the agricultural sector, where the absence of working holidaymakers has greatly diminished labour supply for seasonal recruitment (Bedford 2020).

While international borders have remained closed to most international migrants during the pandemic, exceptions have been made during the restart of the SWP and PLS in September 2020, and Pacific Island and Timorese workers have made vital contributions to Australia’s economic resilience during COVID. Yet, while workers’ remittances make important contributions to national and household economies in PICs and Timor-Leste, the overall developmental benefit of the SWP and PLS is complicated by understudied social issues associated with transnational family separation.

The SWP, and particularly the extended-duration PLS, both involve significant disruptions to the care practices and personal relationships that sustain family life for migrant households. When care practices are reorganised or personal relationships break down, there can be significant adverse consequences for the wellbeing of those involved. Similarly, absconding and other behavioural issues can produce negative social outcomes from involvement in the PALM scheme. These are concerns that are frequently discussed by government and civil society stakeholders in PICs and other labour sending countries, but are rarely considered within the narrow scope of developmental outcomes measured when evaluating the impact of temporary labour migration schemes (Rose and Howes 2021).



Recognising that social issues are of increasing importance to the monitoring and evaluation of the PALM scheme, this scoping study foregrounds the value of LSU expertise in identifying specific challenges arising from family separation and potential avenues for policy redress.

Methodology

LSUs are often the main point of contact for migrant households experiencing social or family issues relating to overseas labour mobility programs, resulting in first-hand awareness of problems arising in local communities.

In June 2020 a one-page research proposal was prepared and disseminated to LSUs from all 10 countries participating in the SWP and PLS to invite their participation in the research and seek feedback on the study design. Five LSUs agreed to participate (Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu) and 3 provided design input (Fiji, Timor-Leste and Tonga). LSU feedback was incorporated to produce a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1) organised around 4 overarching research questions relating to:

- a) social and family issues
- b) effects of extended separation
- c) existing and proposed measures to address issues
- d) identification of stakeholders and support mechanisms.

A data sharing agreement (DSA) was agreed between the PLF and Macquarie University in April 2021 and human ethics approval was obtained from Macquarie University in May (Ref: 5166). Interviews were scheduled with the assistance of the PLF: 15 interviews and one focus group discussion, each between 45 and 90 minutes in duration, were conducted between May and October 2021. Four interviews were held with LSU staff in Fiji, 6 with LSU staff in Samoa, and 3 with LSU staff in Tonga. One interview was conducted with a recruitment agent in Vanuatu and one interview was held with an LSU staff member in Timor-Leste, before a COVID outbreak delayed the remaining scheduled interviews with this team - these 2 interviews have been omitted from the study findings. The focus group discussion was held with 8 members of the Vanuatu LSU in accordance with the team's preferences. For the purposes of discussing findings, the Vanuatu LSU focus group discussion transcript is treated as a single interview - i.e. n=14 is the effective sample size.

The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded according to research questions and emergent themes in Nvivo (qualitative data analysis software). The coded transcripts were first used to produce a word cloud (i.e., frequency analysis) to illustrate prominent themes emerging from the interviews. They were then used to produce coding matrices that reveal the intersection between social issues and associated themes (i.e., crosstabulation to quantify coding overlaps) and to produce framework matrices that thematically organise interview data (i.e., sorting qualitative excerpts according to the 4 overarching research questions).



Study findings and policy considerations were then validated and refined in consultation with participating and non-participating PLF and LSU staff - this process is documented in detail in the final section of the report.

Findings

The study revealed that social issues associated with family separation were a major concern shared by all LSUs participating in the study. A combination of exploratory (i.e., open-ended) and structured (i.e., closed-ended) questioning allowed for the identification of several cross-cutting findings:

- **extramarital affairs and relationship breakdowns are frequent, but likely under-reported**
- **misunderstandings between workers and families (e.g., concerning finances, communication or social media) can contribute to distrust and relationship breakdown**
- **cultural differences between PICs and Australia can contribute to relationship breakdown**
- **there is widespread concern for the welfare of children separated from one or both parents**
- **LSUs face significant capacity limitations in providing support to family members**
- **LSUs have a high degree of stakeholder identification, but a low degree of integration**
- **fewer social issues are associated with migration to New Zealand (e.g., Recognised Seasonal Employer or RSE scheme)**
- **extended separation (e.g., COVID and PLS) is associated with an increase in social issues**

However, the nature and severity of these social issues varied by country context. LSU reporting procedures, operational capacity and approaches to stakeholder engagement were similarly divergent. The following discussion therefore provides an overview of exploratory and structured findings in general, before examining country-specific outcomes and comparisons made between labour mobility initiatives. Policy findings and suggestions are discussed in the final section.

Exploratory findings (social issues)

The first and second sections of the interview guide asked questions that were predominantly open-ended in nature, designed to explore the nature of social issues associated with family separation in the PALM scheme.

The word cloud produced from coded interview transcripts (Figure 1) gives a visual indication of major themes emerging from the interviews: most notably a focus on the tensions (issues, problems, social, need, support) between employment within the PALM scheme (Australia, work, workers, program, PLS, SWP) and family relationships (wife, husband, family, families, children). Surrounding these major themes are a series of associated themes spanning financial issues, communication, gender differences, culture and behaviour, duration of separation and programmatic aspects of the scheme.



Another matrix coding query was run to explore thematic intersections between these major social issues and associated themes identified in the word cloud. The resulting coding matrix (Figure 3) reveals significant overlap between certain themes. For example, EMAs were frequently discussed with relation to culture and behaviour (19 cross-codes) and finances (16 cross-codes). Similarly, children and caring was frequently discussed with relation to finances (16 cross-codes), extended separation (12 cross-codes) and gender (12 cross-codes).

Figure 3: Intersections between social issues and associated themes (number of cross-coded themes)

	A : Communication	B : Culture and behaviour	C : Extended separation	D : Finances	E : Gender
1 : Absconding	0	3	1	1	0
2 : Children and caring	4	1	12	16	12
3 : Domestic violence	0	1	0	0	0
4 : EMAs	9	19	6	16	9

A series of coding queries were then run to explore interview data relating to these prominent intersections (i.e., where EMAs was cross-coded with culture and behaviour or finances and where children and Caring was cross-coded with extended separation, finances or gender). The results yielded insights into the relationship between these themes, discussed below.

Extramarital affairs

- EMAs were the most commonly identified social issue across all participating LSUs.
- EMAs were closely interrelated with financial issues.
- EMAs were also linked to ‘culture shock’ and lifestyle factors in Australia.

EMAs were by far the most commonly reported social issue (see Figure 2) and were mentioned in every interview. Asked to approximate the number of workers experiencing relationship problems for every 10 workers deployed, participants (n=8) responded with estimations that ranged from 1 to 7 (mean of 4.1). A member of the Fiji LSU described the situation as endemic:

“For every deployment that we undertake, we encounter those issues on a regular basis... Issues are relating to extramarital affairs, not sending in enough money to support the people back at home, also issue with... people back in Fiji having affairs and our workers on the other side finding out through social media platforms. It’s not an isolated case, but nearly every deployment there will be a family separation issue.”

Furthermore, it was frequently suggested (n=7) that these issues were likely under-reported due to cultural norms and reputational concerns. As one participant from the Samoa LSU observed:



“I think another part of the problem is, culturally Samoans are not encouraged to be open and speak about the difficulties they may be facing, it’s something that’s not really been encouraged at all. So the numbers could be greater than what we’re seeing, it’s just that a lot of people are not being open and comfortable enough to discuss the difficulties that they’re experiencing, not just the workers but their families as well.”

The factors contributing to relationship breakdowns and EMAs was another recurring subject. One emergent finding was that dissonance between families’ financial expectations and workers’ remitting practices were a commonly discussed (n=10) aspect of relationship problems. If workers were unable to remit as much as expected (e.g., because of misunderstandings about the extent of deductions or other financial constraints in Australia) this could arouse suspicion from spouses and other family members that money was instead being spent on a new romantic partner. Lapses in communication (e.g., during busy work periods or due to internet outages) and social media posts (e.g., featuring mixed-sex co-workers) were also mentioned as factors contributing to the anxiety of remaining partners. An informant in Tonga explained:

“A lot of the complaints that we’ve heard from families is that, you know, their partners are not sending back money, maybe they’re spending that money on other people, that they might not be committed to their families anymore. It all comes back to the remittances. I mean, also the frequency of communications, but remittances tend to come up a lot... because they don’t have any visibility over the earnings that workers get, that workers don’t earn an income on the first week of their arrival in Australia.”

On the other hand, when EMAs did occur (whether by the worker in Australia or the remaining partner in the home country) there were often serious financial consequences for remaining family members. Several participants (n=8) mentioned that workers would send less remittances, sometimes no remittances, if they or their partner became involved in a new relationship - sometimes with harmful outcomes for dependent children within the former relationship. A case in Samoa offers an example:

“When she found out that the husband was having an affair, she tried to call but the husband never answered the phone. Not only that, the husband is not sending them money. So that’s the nature of their complaint: they are suffering because they need money to pay for their kids’ school fees and pay for the lunch fees.”

The other prominent explanation for the high incidence of EMAs involved cultural differences between PIC and Australian societies. Multiple participants (n=8) observed that recently deployed workers can experience a ‘culture shock’ in Australia, sometimes resulting in behavioural issues following exposure to lifestyle factors that are misaligned with the norms and values of their home countries. Drinking, drug use and ‘partying’ were identified as gateway behaviours that could lead to EMAs. More generally, some participants (n=4) felt that workers’ separation from home communities reduced a sense of accountability for their actions and that relative ‘freedom’ in Australia could result in forging new romantic relationships without considering consequences for their families back home. One participant from the Samoa LSU remarked:

“It’s their first exposure to the Australian culture. I mean, they are away from their villages and communities back here in Samoa, where there are strict curfews and rules that everyone has to go by. I guess, now that they’re exposed to that lifestyle and are free of village curfews, I’m not sure, it’s just a matter of losing that taboo here and associating with others that are more open.”



Gendered differences were also discussed in relation to EMAs (n=7). The consensus was that LSUs received more complaints about EMAs involving male workers, but largely because considerably more men were deployed across labour mobility schemes. Multiple participants (n=5) clarified that EMAs were also committed by remaining spouses (i.e., male workers' wives) and that these complaints were more frequently handled by in-country liaison officers. Moreover, when women did participate in labour mobility, participants reflected that EMAs were as common - or more pronounced - within that cohort. A member of the Samoa LSU noted:

“It’s quite hard when we’re also encouraging the females to be deployed. So it’s also something that we came across: we thought it was only going to be the women to come in to complain, but now it’s starting to be the men as well.”

Within the Fiji LSU, 2 staff members observed an increase in EMAs among women workers, and linked gendered differences with cultural norms. One remarked:

“So once our female workers go, there’s the issue of freedom that they didn’t have here in Fiji. The freedom to express themselves, the freedom to speak, the freedom to decide what’s good and what’s best for themselves. And so, I found that, when they go, they are bolder. While we have a lesser percentage of women [participating in labour mobility], when we’re dealing with a group of women, relationship issues are 9 out of 10.”

Children and caring

- There was widespread concern about the welfare of children separated from one or both parents.
- The most prominent concern involved the financial implications of EMAs for dependent children.
- Other concerns focused on parenting relationships and care arrangements involving extended family (gender and extended separation).

The welfare of migrant workers' dependent children was another issue discussed by every participant in the study (though less extensively than EMAs). Children and caring was most often (n=5) discussed in relation to the financial consequences of EMAs in situations where migrant workers reduced or ceased remitting income to their families in PICs. With remaining spouses unable to earn a sufficient income locally, financial stress could negatively impact children's health and schooling. A member of the Fiji LSU described these situations as the main issue they had encountered with regards to the children of migrant workers:

“For most of the families that go, there is only one person working in the family - so they need to send over money to make sure that the children are fed, they are prepared for school, school fees are paid, making sure that the rent is paid so they can stay live in a good home... We’ve recently had a case where one of the wives came in and she wasn’t getting money from her husband. It was really sad because she brought her 2 kids with her, who she said were very sickly because she’d only get \$40 from her husband. And that wasn’t enough to buy anything, even food for her children. She had no other option but to come back to her parents’ place so that her children can be looked after well. That’s one of the issues that we face constantly from extramarital affairs.”



Others (n=4) spoke about financial disruptions more generally, noting that initial deductions or temporary disruptions to employment in Australia could produce significant challenges for remaining family members. A participant from the Samoa LSU reflected:

“I think it’s a very tough thing for women to handle, like for example, the husband being away, and they have had 3 kids, and they are so young, and then suddenly the money from the husband in Australia stopped temporarily because something has happened to the husband in Australia.”

Another major theme, eliciting mixed opinions, was the welfare of children left in the care of extended family - either because the remaining spouse had moved in with relatives for additional support or because both parents were participating in labour mobility schemes and children were left entirely in the care of relatives. In some cases (n=2), extended family was identified as an important source of support for the children of migrant workers, particularly for remaining male partners who might struggle to adapt to care provision. As observed by a member of the Fiji LSU:

“Those that have never looked after the kids by themselves usually have the support of their in-laws or their own mothers to help them look after the children. Especially for those that are working, working fathers generally, there’s always a support system there, their mothers or their extended family will help look after the children.”

More frequently though (n=5), care arrangements involving extended family were identified as a potential source of tension (e.g., about values and parenting roles), neglect (e.g., if children are not adequately looked after) and abuse (e.g., instances of sexual harassment). A member of the Samoa LSU observed:

“Sometimes there’ll be problems that come up, and out of concern for the welfare of the wife and children, and the husband has no other choice but to come home early. You’ll find that a lot of tensions and conflicts tend to arise once the head of family is away.”

Another theme that was mentioned in relation to children and caring were the emotional strains endured by workers and their children during periods of extended separation and the potential for these absences to damage parental relationships. An LSU member in Fiji discussed this separation in the context of the PLS:

“I would say that the children are really affected by this because they have, I would say, a one-sided love. They will only have the love from the husband and nobody else. She will grow up not knowing her mum for the whole of the three years.”

Another LSU member, from Samoa, made similar observations about the SWP and RSE:

“At the end of the day, you’ll have seasonal workers who become seasonal parents or seasonal spouses at this end”

Finally, participants also discussed how women’s increasing participation in labour mobility schemes was prompting remaining male spouses to adopt care roles that were traditionally performed by women, with some (n=4) recognising that this had resulted in shifting gender norms. The same LSU member from Samoa reflected:



“One of the interesting things is with the more mothers or women with children being away, it’s also the traditional role of men within the families, especially society at large now, we’re expecting more men to stay home and look after the children or be more active, whereas before that was what was expected of the women or the mothers.”

Structured findings (LSU reporting, capacity and stakeholder engagement)

The third and fourth sections of the interview guide asked a range of more closed-ended questions, designed to gather data on LSU reporting procedures, operational capacity, and stakeholder engagement in a structured manner. Framework matrices were created to organise responses according to 2 topics: LSU reporting and capacity and stakeholders and support mechanisms.

LSU reporting and capacity

There were significant variations in the way the 4 LSUs surveyed recorded and reported social and family issues. Two LSUs - Samoa and Tonga - have standardised operating procedures and reporting mechanisms for addressing cases involving social issues. If a family member approaches the LSU with a complaint, they are required to make a written statement, details are recorded in a database (Tonga, but not Samoa), and the case is then investigated locally (by senior LSU staff) and abroad (by liaison officers).

At the time of the study, only Samoa and Tonga had liaison officers working in Australia. Fiji and Vanuatu were both in the process of establishing equivalent appointments. Furthermore, Tonga is in the process of establishing a family welfare desk and outreach program within the LSU to provide dedicated staffing capacity to address social issues.

The Fiji LSU has a more informal and inconsistent reporting procedure: the PLF Quality, Learning and Performance Coordinator has recently developed a spreadsheet for recording issues, but there is no systematic approach to reporting or escalating cases, and it is usually up to individual officers to resolve complaints. The Vanuatu LSU has taken a different stance altogether and makes the case that there is insufficient capacity to deal with the volume of issues reported and that social issues originating in Australia are beyond their remit to resolve: “If issues arise at the workplace, they need to be dealt with by the approved employer and not by LSUs.”

In general, all 4 LSUs reported experiencing capacity constraints due to the demands associated with responding to social issues. Many participants (n=7) indicated their ability to perform their core duties was compromised by the amount of time and effort taken up by reporting and resolving complaints made by migrant workers’ family members. The Vanuatu LSU explained: “We literally can’t take up all the issues because there’s just so many.” A member of the Fiji LSU explained the likelihood of needing additional support as participation in labour mobility increases: “I think we’ll need a lot of support because, I mean, we’re only dealing with probably less than 10 cases of social issues right now [per month], but even 10 is difficult because there’s so many things that we have to consider.”



These constraints on LSU capacity appeared to be less severe in Samoa and Tonga, where liaison officers handled much of the case work relating to social issues occurring in Australia. A member of the Samoa LSU explained:

“As the stewards of mobility here in Samoa, we are obligated to try and resolve as much of these issues as we can but [this is] something that’s outside of our normal jurisdiction. So we’re not trained counsellors as well, even though we’ve been asked to carry out some of these counselling sessions, but we rely heavily as well on our liaison officers”.

Others (n=8) expressed concern about LSU staff’s lack of training or qualifications when dealing with emotionally sensitive situations, in which migrant spouses were reporting distress or threatening suicide - the latter situation was reported in 6 separate interviews. A member of the Samoa LSU reflected:

“To be honest, most of us are not trained to handle those kinds of situations. And I’m conscious of the fact that if a situation escalates, and we say something wrong, it could lead down a more destructive path like people trying to take their own lives.”

Stakeholders and support mechanisms

Across the board, the LSUs surveyed had relatively well-developed connections with informal (e.g., churches and village chieftains) and formal (e.g., government and civil society organisations) stakeholders able to assist with social issues. Though the identification of these stakeholders was thorough, the extent of engagement and the development of referral mechanisms differed by LSU and remained quite limited in some cases.

In Fiji, intragovernmental cooperation has enabled referral systems for free legal and counselling services - but uptake was low due to the lack of a formalised reporting structure and cultural apprehension about using mental health services. In Samoa, participants mentioned an extensive network of inter-ministerial stakeholders invested in labour mobility, but less engagement with civil society actors and inadequate referral systems (although a new relationship with the Samoa Victims Support Group was being developed at the time of interviews). The Vanuatu LSU had a more systematic process for complaints - in which grievances are redirected to village chiefs, recruitment agents or police depending on the issue - but referral systems for support services remain underdeveloped. Tonga had the most established network of stakeholders and support services, with a new referral system being developed at the time of interview, though there was limited data to indicate uptake for legal and counselling services due to confidentiality issues.

In all countries, there were examples of engagement with informal stakeholders at the village level: either as a means of screening workers for participation in labour mobility schemes or by providing grassroots support and conflict resolution for family members. Nonetheless, several participants (n=5) expressed a desire to strengthen these ties with informal stakeholders. The quote below, from a member of the Samoa LSU, captures a sentiment expressed in many of the interviews - that labour mobility is a societal issue that requires the cooperation of multiple stakeholders across government, civil society, and community:



“One of the things that we are considering is just more concerted efforts to work with other agencies, and I mean states and non-state actors. Because this will require all the stakeholders to work together. That grass root community approach, so that way we can all work together in responding and working with the families that are affected. Especially as we see more and more groups from communities, all from one community, you’ll have a group of young men and women all go for work overseas. So you’ll have not just one family, but a lot of families within that community who are experiencing the stress of having that family member away. So that’s something that we are considering, but again it just requires a lot of manpower, and a lot of working together and sharing resources.”

Country-specific and initiative-specific findings

In addition to the exploratory and structured findings discussed above, some findings differed considerably by LSU and by labour mobility initiative (PLS, SWP or RSE). These points of comparison are outlined below.

Country-specific findings

As indicated by Figure 2, absconding is a social issue that was not raised by participants from the Fiji or Samoa LSU, but discussed extensively by participants from Tonga and (to a lesser extent) Vanuatu. Though the study sample size is too small to draw meaningful conclusions about why absconding might be more prevalent an issue for those countries, the topic did lead to interesting discussions about the role of diaspora communities in Australia. Particularly for Tongan workers, it was reported that the diaspora would often encourage and assist absconding workers, even providing accommodation and brokering alternative employment. It was reported that this was more of an issue for younger workers without families to return to. Tonga has 2 liaison officers involved in addressing absconding issues, whereas Vanuatu has yet to appoint a liaison officer - this was identified as a policy priority for this issue.

Another point of difference that emerged from the study was the way LSUs responded to EMAs. As mentioned previously, Samoa and Tonga appeared to have developed a standardised operating procedure to address EMAs, involving written testimonial and investigations. The outcomes of investigations were also systematically linked to punishments for the offending worker: they would be stood down (if possible) and subsequently blacklisted from further participation in labour mobility initiatives. In Samoa, this punishment was discussed in relation to political directives:

“In the last 2 years it was announced by our Prime Minister, the former Prime Minister, that Samoa cannot tolerate men - married men - having affairs when they go overseas under different schemes. And he also emphasised that should anything happen like that, the only solution is to return the husband back to Samoa.”

In both countries, LSU members acknowledged differing legal frameworks in PICs and Australia made it difficult to enact these policies or achieve cooperation with employers who were unwilling to suspend or terminate employers for EMAs. As a member of the Tonga LSU explained:

“Marital affairs are not a crime in Australia. Or maybe in any other country. But Tonga it really is - it is a crime. The wife or the husband can take the other partner to court, and they could face trouble. But the employers they will not punish, or they will not terminate someone who is



involved in that kind of issue. They will not be able to terminate their workers. But that is something that we needed to do.”

Meanwhile, some participants (n=3) from the Tonga and Samoa LSUs observed RSE employers in New Zealand exhibited greater cultural understanding around this issue and were more compliant with requests for workers having EMAs to be stood down. As a member of the Samoa LSU reflected:

“If I get a report from New Zealand of a guy that’s working for an employer, and I ask them can you please return this worker because I have received reports... that this guy is definitely having an affair in New Zealand, and not sending money to the wife to feed the children, then they will return him right away.”

Initiative-specific findings

In general, respondents indicated that participation in the RSE typically attracted fewer instances of social issues compared to both the SWP and PLS. Comparing the frequency of social issues per every 10 workers deployed in the SWP and RSE, a representative of the Vanuatu LSU remarked: “RSE 2 out of 10 and SWP is 6 out of 10”. They continued to explain:

“When I first started the job there was a conference with a whole lot of New Zealand employers, and some of them had a specific staff member just for worker welfare. And I don’t understand why they don’t do that with all the issues they have and the headaches they have, paying one specific staff member who has a contextual understanding about the Pacific, to look after worker welfare, would be so worth it, but they just don’t do that. The new SWP contract says they must have a name on the contract that is responsible for worker welfare, but in general it’s the farmers or the meat workers, it’s the owner, and we all know they are too busy to really focus on that... It is really interesting; the worker welfare in Australia, there is more issues than New Zealand.”

Other differences were recognised with relation to rates of absconding, with a member of the Tonga LSU remarking:

“I think the policies in New Zealand are also quite different... there are stronger penalties imposed on employers if their workers abscond. So there’s greater impetus for the employers to actually make sure that the workers are committed and employed.”

However, in most interviews the RSE was discussed interchangeably with the SWP, and the biggest point of difference was the extended separation associated with the PLS. Some participants (n=4) stressed that the PLS was too new and too small to accurately gauge whether it was creating a greater number of social issues, but others (n=7) indicated that there were more issues associated with the PLS and expressed concern about extended family separation. A member of the Samoa LSU observed:

“We’ve had a numerous amount of grievances but, yeah, it’s mostly the PLS. Because they know that they’re going away for 3 years, there’s mostly a concern that family separation would be more common in that program than the 7 to 9 months program.”

Interestingly, however, most participants indicated that the impact of COVID-19 border closures was more significant for SWP and RSE workers - as their extended separation was unexpected and neither workers nor families were mentally prepared for that situation. A participant from the Tonga LSU noted:



“We can see that the number of cases of families with separations, and broken families, has increased with COVID-19... knowing there is no flight to send them home, they feel free to do bad things. Not only extramarital cases, but drinking alcohol - if it was the husband or wife doing the drinking, it will end up having an issue with the family.”

Policy considerations

A key objective of the study was to highlight LSU knowledge and expertise to develop policy considerations for addressing and managing issues associated with family separation within the PALM scheme. To that end, participants were asked to discuss existing and proposed policy measures - specific to pre-departure, mid-migration and reintegration stages of labour mobility initiatives - to facilitate policy learning. The outcomes of those discussions are summarised below.

Pre-departure migration policies

Overwhelmingly (n=13), the most common policy recommendation was to ensure that the families of migrant workers are included in pre-departure briefings (PDBs). This could involve participation in the existing PDB format (e.g., to enhance family understanding of the scheme and reduce potential misunderstandings) or by expanding the PDB program (e.g., to include sessions designed to prepare workers and their families for periods of separation). At present, neither Fiji nor Vanuatu² include spouses or other family members in PDBs - both LSUs mentioned that this was primarily due to a lack of space to cater for workers and their partners during large PDB sessions. Samoa and Tonga, meanwhile, have recently begun including families during PDBs via a separate one-day session for workers and families to attend together. Staff from both LSUs observed that this had immediate improvements on scheme outcomes. A member of the Samoa LSU commented:

“It really helps minimise the complaints coming in. I’ve been briefing my teams, and then I also ask them to bring their spouses in so they can actually hear how things are going to go there, face the reality of how they’re going to work there. They have to deal with the weather. They have to deal with the deductions - and it’ll be 6 to 8 weeks they’ll have to do those deductions, and they’ll only earn around 200 Australia dollars a week. So I’ve been telling the wives that, and it’s really something that’s helping us now. It really minimises the complaints coming in.”

They went on to explain:

“Instead of having complaints and conflicts later on, we manage to bring it up front. There were some of the workers that pulled themselves out [of the PLS] during those pre-departures... especially the ones with the younger kids. They were like: please put us in the 9-month program, we know we can handle that, but 3 years is really too long for us. Three years is quite a long time for us to be away from our kids and our families.”

A colleague within the same LSU mentioned that family inclusion within the PDBs was also a means of empowering family members to access support mechanisms:

² However, Vanuatu is currently trialling the Famili I Redi programme, which is designed to prepare migrant families for participation in labour mobility schemes - see details in the validation workshop section.



“There is an aspect which I personally believe has to do with empowerment, and when I say empowerment, I mean people know where to go for help, where to seek help. In the past it was something that was, for lack of a better term, brushed aside. But now when we do pre-departure briefings... we provide information on where they can come to seek help if they're experiencing problems, especially for those with children or dependents.”

Meanwhile, a participant from the Tonga LSU outlined plans to extend these PDB initiatives to further integrate families in the labour mobility process:

“But as it is, it's just a briefing. Since we have a World Bank program here in Tonga, we've been working very closely with them and are now looking at developing longer training that we can run with the families even at the registration stage, when workers are thinking about registering for labour mobility, so that they can be prepared and make, and really determine if that's what they want to do.”

Other policy considerations for the pre-departure stage related to the preferential selection of single or married workers - or couples' placements - for the extended duration PLS initiative. Participants from the Tonga LSU suggested that preliminary discussions had taken place regarding the suitability of married workers participating in the PLS, suggesting that the 3-year initiative was better suited to younger single workers without family commitments, and that married workers would be better suited to the shorter-duration SWP and RSE initiatives.

Meanwhile, members of the Tonga and Samoa LSUs expressed concern about couples' placements (where married couples are deployed together) due to the care arrangements of dependent children remaining with extended family in PICs. Conversely, the Vanuatu LSU indicated that the ~20 couples' placements they had observed were deemed to be successful and that suitability depends on individual family circumstances. One member of the Fiji LSU commented that “rare cases” of couples' placements involved adequate care arrangements with extended family.

Mid-migration policies

Policy suggestions to improve social issues during migration were more wide-ranging. In brief, they could be categorised according to family welfare support, travel arrangements and enhanced monitoring.

Family welfare support was the most discussed of these policy domains (n=8). Participants from the Fiji, Samoa and Tonga LSUs all suggested ways of increasing family welfare support mechanisms within the LSU - including additional staffing with counselling qualifications, establishing dedicated family welfare desks (enacted in Tonga and Fiji), and establishing outreach programs that facilitate communication between workers and family (also enacted in Tonga). The Vanuatu LSU, meanwhile, suggested the inclusion of a family support officer responsible for facilitating community support groups external to the LSU. Additionally, one member of the Samoa LSU mentioned a need to extend family support and awareness raising initiatives beyond the immediate family:

“The problem is right now, a lot of our efforts are concentrated on just the workers in general and their spouses, the nuclear family, but if we can run programs throughout the year, and not just pre-departure, and I mean regularly be disseminating information on the programs, their realities, and provide people with an option about where to go to seek help, and so forth.”



Travel and accompaniment were discussed with reference to limitations on workers' ability to return home during participation in the PLS and greater support for family members to temporarily accompany workers in Australia. Several participants (n=6) noted that opportunities for workers and families to reconnect during the PLS would help re-establish bonds and commitments by affirming shared goals.

While COVID-19 was a unique situational factor preventing family members from more readily visiting their partners in Australia, participants also noted that travel costs varied dramatically across the geographic scope of PLS deployments and indicated that there could be more formal support within the initiative to facilitate temporary periods of accompaniment. Subsidies could compensate for geographical disadvantage in travel costs, special allowances for extended leave could be built into PLS workers' contracts, and special visa categories could expedite and simplify temporary family accompaniment (beyond the restrictions of the subclass 600 tourist visa).

Lastly, several participants mentioned that monitoring and evaluation procedures should be strengthened during migration - whether that involves improving existing reporting systems and databases, providing LSUs with better access to information concerning worker welfare in Australia, or facilitating regional policy workshops where PICs and Timor-Leste can share knowledge and encourage policy learning.

Reintegration policies

Reintegration policies were less readily discussed by participants (n=7), but converged upon 2 themes: substantiating existing reintegration programs and placing limits on repeat migration.

Some participants (n=6) discussed the need for existing reintegration programs to be more comprehensive - not just a one-day session on financial management, but deeper ongoing support for migrant entrepreneurship and investment to facilitate lasting skills transfers. Other participants mentioned that reintegration programs should also move beyond economic considerations to emphasise reintegration with family via counselling sessions and support for couples who have faced problems during migration.

Another key suggestion mentioned by participants (n=3) was the inclusion of limits on participation in labour mobility initiatives to prevent repeat migration, particularly in the PLS, where multiple stints of 3-year placements was expected to cause lasting damage to family relationships.

Validation workshop: Feedback on findings and policy considerations

In November 2021, a draft report of the study was submitted to PLF engagement managers and quality, learning and performance coordinators in the 4 participating countries (Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu) for internal review. It was then circulated to all participating and non-participating staff from the 4 LSUs involved in the study, and PLF engagement managers based in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. (The same PLF and LSU staff were then invited to



participate in a December 2021 workshop where the study findings and policy considerations would be presented for discussion and validation.

The validation workshop took place on December 16 and ran for 2 hours, structured around a 45-minute presentation of the study design, findings, and policy considerations followed by one hour of open discussion. PLF and LSU staff from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were present for the workshop, while a video recording of the session and a written summary of the workshop discussion was shared with those unable to attend. Validation was sought verbally, via open discussion during the workshop, and through written responses - in total, representatives of 3 LSUs commented during the workshop and one LSU issued a comprehensive written response. As detailed below, all feedback received provided broad confirmation of study findings and support for the 5 main policy considerations listed in the executive summary.

Study findings

There was general agreement concerning the study findings. Following the presentation of the study design and main findings (grouped according to exploratory, structured and comparative findings), discussion commenced with a comment from one PLF staff member that there were “no surprises among the findings” and that the extension of the PLS to a 4-year visa provoked concern. A staff member from one LSU remarked that the findings were “really reasonable and actually reflect problems faced by workers” and another staff member from a different LSU stated that the conclusions drawn were “definitely correct”. Following these remarks, participants were asked to air any objections, and none were raised.

Policy considerations

Discussion of policy considerations was structured around the 5 main recommendations of the report. Two recommendations were identified as necessitating high-level policy changes (‘formalising support for temporary family accompaniment within the PLS’ and ‘limiting repeat migration within the PLS’) and 3 were identified as having greater scope for local implementation (‘comprehensively involving families in pre-departure briefings and trainings’, ‘expanding or establishing family welfare support services during migration’ and ‘strengthening monitoring and evaluation of social issues in PALM/RSE’).

Workshop participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the tabled policy considerations, whether anything should be added or changed, which were priority areas and what challenges they foresaw in implementation. There was general agreement on, and support for, the policy considerations themselves but focus quickly shifted to the need for greater financial support for implementation: as a PLF staff member of one LSU remarked at the start of the discussion, “The recommendations are great, but we need resources... for us it’s yes, yes, yes, yes and yes - but we need support to do it”. Similarly, a staff member from another LSU commented that “expanding family welfare support - recommendation 2 - will be a step in the right direction for us... but we will have to examine it from our resources and capacity”.

PLF staff acknowledged the need for support, including potential opportunities for extra funding for family preparation as a reintegration initiative, but stressed the potential to implement local policies by working with other stakeholders in each country’s ‘migration ecosystem’. The Famili I Redi



programme - an initiative implemented by World Vision and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Vanuatu - provides family workshops to help migrating workers and one significant other family member prepare for the challenges of long-term separation. It was identified as an example of a successful stakeholder partnership that could be scaled up or replicated in other countries. Another PLF staff member said the 3 policies relating to local implementation offered a broad response to the issue of family separation by addressing ‘prevention’, ‘response’ and ‘capacity building’ - they added while some actions could commence immediately, resources and funding would be required to overcome a lack of LSU capacity to implement the full suite of measures.

One LSU requested to provide written feedback, which was received in March 2022, in the form of a comprehensive 4-page document covering each of the 5 policy considerations discussed in the workshop. The LSU agreed with each policy recommendation, commenting that “the 5 policy recommendations highlighted in the report are an excellent starting point in addressing issues that have emerged due to extended periods of family separation”. Additional information was then provided detailing how each policy consideration relates to existing practices, priorities and challenges in implementation, and future planning (the details of this response are included in Appendix 2 and de-identified at the request of the LSU).

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Section A - Social and family issues

- How often do you encounter reports of social or family issues relating to the PLS, SWP or RSE?
- How common do you believe these issues to be? How large is the cohort of families raising these issues relative to the pool of workers?
- What kinds of issues are most frequently reported?
- How do these challenges and issues differ between families with male or female migrant workers?
- Do you have any particular concerns regarding the welfare of children and their care requirements?

Section B - Effects of extended separation

- Are social and family issues more common or severe when families are separated for longer periods?
- For SWP and RSE workers, do these issues increase when workers participate for multiple years?
- Have you observed any increase in these issues for PLS workers, given the longer contract length?
- What about SWP/RSE workers who have remained overseas for longer because of COVID?

Section C - Existing and proposed measures to address issues

- How does the LSU currently record or report social and family issues?
- Are complaints categorised according to individual schemes - i.e., SWP, RSE and PLS?
- Has the LSU adopted any strategies to manage these issues?
- What measures could be considered to address these issues:
 - pre-departure in home country?
 - during migration, in home country?
 - during migration, in host country?
 - upon return to home country?

Section D - Identification of stakeholders and support mechanisms

- What support mechanisms already exist for migrant families - either formal (e.g., counselling, financial and legal services) or informal (e.g., extended family, community, church, women's committees)?
- Have other members of the community expressed concern about the absence of overseas migrant workers impacting social and family life?
- Does the LSU currently work with any local stakeholders to provide access to these support mechanisms?
- Are there additional stakeholders that LSUs could work with to help manage these issues?
- What resources do LSUs need to work with stakeholders and/or improve support mechanisms for migrant families?

Appendix 2: Written LSU response to study findings and policy considerations

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	POLICY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS		
	Do you agree/disagree with each of the policy considerations? Should any be added, removed or changed?	What do these recommendations mean to you - what are you already doing, which ones will you implement, and how? i.e., what existing or future partnerships, systems, processes and activities are needed to achieve them?	What are your priority areas for progression and next steps?
<p>Comprehensively involving families in PDBs and trainings</p>	<p>Yes, agree with the policy recommendation.</p>	<p>The 5 policy recommendations highlighted in the report are an excellent starting point in addressing issues that have emerged due to extended periods of family separation.</p> <p>The recommended involvement of families in PDBs is very relevant especially with increasing numbers of mobilisations.</p> <p>Family participation is encouraged to reduce misunderstandings within families. As suggested in the study, it would be viable to include families in family-focused sessions, noting the COVID restrictions.</p> <p>Apart from PDBs, families could also be included from registration stage or during offer letter signing sessions to manage expectations and that families are aware of deductions. However, this may require additional resourcing in terms of staffing and financing of venues and travel.</p>	<p>For next steps, the priority areas would be as highlighted in the recommendations that is: involving families in PDBs and/or trainings; expanding or establishing family welfare support services during migration and strengthening M&E of social issues in PALM/RSE.</p> <p>Identifying stakeholders and key areas of collaboration will be explored by the team. In addition, developing an action plan with realistic timelines, goals and expectations of parties involved will be vital to further progress this policy recommendation.</p>
<p>Expanding or establishing family welfare support services during migration</p>	<p>Yes, agree with the policy recommendation.</p>	<p>Having holistic support mechanisms in place before and during the employment duration is vital in providing workers and their families with the support they require and reassures them that family welfare</p>	<p>Identifying stakeholders and key areas of collaboration will be explored by the team. In addition, developing an action plan with realistic timelines, goals and</p>



		<p>is a priority in labour mobility programs.</p> <p>However, more work and specialised support is required in this area to fully meet the needs of workers and their families and for the resolution of complex social issues.</p> <p>This will require a more coordinated approach with ministerial stakeholders, civil society organisations and NGOs.</p>	<p>expectations of parties involved will be vital to further progress this policy recommendation.</p> <p>Accessing services and information currently available that can support family welfare - mentally, physically and spiritually. E.g., counselling, mental & sexual health awareness programs, financial literacy services, etc.</p> <p>Work with stakeholders to develop a referral and monitoring system of cases.</p>
<p>Formalising support for temporary family accompaniment within the PLS</p>	<p>Yes, agree with the policy recommendation.</p>	<p>As for couple placements, lessons learnt from other PICs should be taken into account when considering this as part of the solution to family separation issues like EMAs and leaving children behind, especially younger children.</p>	<p>Identify the strengths and challenges of this policy recommendation.</p>
<p>Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of social issues in all labour mobility initiatives</p>	<p>Yes, agree with the policy recommendation.</p>	<p>This recommendation is very important and needs to be implemented without delay, as this will provide the necessary information needed to make more informed decisions during the formulation and implementation of family welfare policies.</p>	<p>Progress discussions on an M&E framework/policy.</p> <p>Conduct M&E survey for returning cohorts.</p>



<p>Limiting repeat migration within the PLS</p>	<p>Yes, agree with the policy recommendation.</p>	<p>The views of employers, workers' families and the LSU need to be considered before repeat migration of workers are implemented.</p> <p>Repeat migration should be based on the ability of workers to perform consistently well at work and outside of work and ability to meet their families and employers and LSU expectations, as our workers are our ambassadors in the labour mobility programs.</p> <p>Additionally, limiting repeat migration has its strengths and challenges. Both aspects need to be considered before implementation.</p>	<p>Identify the strengths and challenges limiting repeat migration within the PLS.</p> <p>Enforcement of one-year stand-down period before being considered for repeat migration.</p>
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