

Staying out of the Weeds and Rabbit Holes: Examining Pacific Island Countries

This paper focuses on the labor migration flow from Pacific Island Countries (PICs).¹ These countries each face unique challenges but also share some similar traits. Due to their small size, they are often lumped together in research that focuses on the Pacific Island region as a whole (rather than on one specific country). The region is composed of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. The referenced studies include a range of eight to seventeen countries, with each PIC being composed of one to seventy islands.

When there is research done on one specific country, it is often topical, such as weather disasters prompting emergency action, with labor migration only as minute, barely audible background noise. In other words, one can infer that climate change or extreme weather leads to forced migration of an entire population, with some people obviously needing to work sooner or later, but dedicated academic attention to individual PICs is almost nonexistent. Additionally, this area becomes dwarfed by much larger, more populous nations, such as Indonesia or Malaysia.

As an example, one demographic study by an expert in the field of Australia-Asian migration, Graeme Hugo, elegantly gives the reader a flavor of what's to come in international migration.² The study's statistics often combine PICs with East Asian giants like Japan, China and South Korea. Hugo points to the rising number of students enrolled in tertiary education programs *in their home countries* within East Asia (i.e., no longer needing to go abroad for such).

¹ Environmentalists refer to Pacific Island Countries as Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

² Transatlantic Council on Migration. (2008). *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia and the Pacific: The Implications for International Migration*. Washington, DC: Hugo, G.

Tertiary education is directly related to labor migration because study abroad is a particularly important path to residency in, for example, Australia, where many migrants from certain PICs settle. However, by including the Pacific Islands in the statistics for all of East Asia, it's difficult to get a feel for the true nature of tertiary education solely within PICs. How many Pacific Islanders will opt to study abroad? Also, the larger, more developed countries of Australia and New Zealand are considered Pacific, possibly blurring the picture even further.

Another obstacle appears when gathering facts on each country. For example, one is able to find the youth unemployment rate for a couple countries by searching individual country links on the International Labour Organization (ILO) website. However, not all PICs are ILO members³ and, even when they are members,⁴ the statistics and news about each country varies. Additionally, some PICs have restricted access to labor markets but still manage to have high rates of migration.⁵ One report examining eight PICs (PIC8)⁶ mentioned a handful of countries for one issue (e.g., high fertility rates) and then a handful of different countries for other issues (e.g., rates of urbanization) leaving one to wonder and guess about the PICs not listed.⁷ Finally, much of the material on the area is either dated⁸ or simply can't be found.

In a nutshell, when examining PICs, it can be very difficult to see the forest for the trees and not fall down a bunny hole. Nonetheless, as stated above, some generalizations can be made

³ Or they have only just joined the ILO in February 2016, as in The Kingdom of Tonga, and its ILO webpage remains virtually empty. See <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS-455305/lang-en/index.htm>

⁴ Eight Pacific Islands Countries have joined the ILO in the past 15 years. See http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_455305/lang-en/index.htm

⁵ World Bank. (2016). *Systematic Country Diagnostic for Eight Small Pacific Island Countries: Ending Poverty and Boosting Shared Prosperity*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, p. 43.

⁶ The PIC8 identified in the World Bank Group's *Systematic Country Diagnostic* are the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palua, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

⁷ World Bank. (2014). *Well-being from Work in the Pacific Island Countries*. Washington, DC: Haque, T., & Packard, T.

⁸ The ILO sites for Tuvalu and Kiribati both link to a report entitled "Migration, employment and development in the South Pacific," which is momentarily thrilling until one notices the date – 1983.

about PICs. Although regarding these countries as a group can lead to cultural oversights of unique characteristics for each island, political power can be summoned through working together and highlighting shared features. Finally, in order to understand the migration patterns of the larger Asian region and the vital importance of labor migration to PIC economies – and to see how all of this fits within changing global labor migration – it is critical to view PICs as a group rather than as individual countries.

Generalizable “Push” Factors

Some general features of PICs can be gleaned in order to see the ‘flows’ and ‘drivers’ of immigration. The PIC8 were all former colonies (except The Kingdom of Tonga), only gaining independence from 1962 onward. They are extremely small, dispersed from one another and isolated from large economies. “Most have an average population per inhabited island of less than 5,000, with large tracts of ocean between [them].”⁹ Due to their size and dispersion, public administration and service delivery are costly. The PIC8 face budget and trade deficits, high debt levels and trade costs, and low export capability.¹⁰ “[T]here remain persistent gaps in the provision of state functions in the PICs, with some functions not performed at all or not provided to an adequate standard.”¹¹

⁹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 7. See also World Bank. (2014). *Well-being from Work in the Pacific Island Countries*. Washington, DC: Haque, T., & Packard, T., p. 30.

¹¹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 6.

Table 1. Basic facts¹²

Country	Population ¹³	Inhabited Islands	Avg. Pop. per Island	Remoteness*
States of Micronesia	103,718	65	1,596	10,670
Kiribati	108,544	21	11,241	11,241
Marshall Islands	52,786	24	2,199	10,815
Palau	20,919	8	2,615	10,248
Ind. State of Samoa	190,390	4	47,598	12,280
Kingdom of Tonga	105,139	36	2,921	12,857
Tuvalu	9,876	9	1,097	11,977
Rep. of Vanuatu	253,165	72	3,516	12,509

*Remoteness refers to the distance to the nearest economy.

Work

Many populations of PICs face high unemployment rates and growing population stress, which can further exacerbate problems associated with environmental damage and urbanization. Employment rates *already* fall under 50% in the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Samoa and Tuvalu, while the working-age population is *simultaneously* increasing.¹⁴ Those under the age of 25 account for an average of 57% of the population, with those aged 0-14 “substantially exceeding” those aged 14-25.¹⁵ A range of social problems are emerging among the new urban generation, with high rates of youth unemployment contributing to substance abuse, property-related crime, prostitution and teenage pregnancy. These are new challenges, to which public institutions have little experience of responding.¹⁶

The populations of some countries are increasingly moving to urban centers - not because

¹² *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 6.

¹³ There are declines in the population of 15-34 year olds in Tonga, Fiji, French Polynesia but growth in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Guan and New Caledonia. See *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia*, p. 25.

¹⁴ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 9.

¹⁵ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 13.

there is work to be found, but because life in rural areas is becoming more difficult.¹⁷ “While global trends suggest that agriculture-based livelihoods are less desirable, they may also be becoming more difficult.”¹⁸ Spread of telecommunications and mass media may also have exacerbated restlessness and dissatisfaction. Rapidly urbanizing Pacific island countries especially include Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.¹⁹ Increasing centralization in urban areas can, unless properly managed, lead to increased pressure on ecosystems and public services.

Many Pacific Islanders need to find informal work because access to regular paid work is limited (such employment is mostly confined to cities and the public sector). Most workers combine employment in agriculture, some form of subsistence for cash or barter exchange, and informal small-business activity, either as part-time employees or as business owners themselves.²⁰

Tourism – with the exception of some visitors from Australia and New Zealand to Samoa and Vanuatu (and to Tonga and Palau to an even lesser extent) – does not account for much revenue. Development assistance and publicly-financed employment (e.g., construction)²¹ accounts for some growth.²² Work within natural resource industries provides some people with jobs, but work tends to be of a short duration and only account for a small amount of private

¹⁷ Samoa, for example, “remains vulnerable due to remoteness, income volatility, limited economic diversification, susceptibility to natural disasters, environmental damage and limited institutional capacity.” See <http://www.ilo.org/suva/countries-covered/samoa/lang--en/index.htm>

¹⁸ *Well-being from Work*, p. 5.

¹⁹ See *Well-being from Work*, p. 23, “[U]rbanization occurring as a result of poor services in rural areas, conflict, food insecurity, or land shortages simply leads to congestion and urban unemployment. . . . Public investment should be prioritized toward improving urban administration and services rather than preventing urbanization from occurring.”

²⁰ *Well-being from Work*, p. 5.

²¹ Sometimes this “construction” is merely reconstruction to damaged areas after a major natural disaster.

²² *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 9.

sector employment (and thus is rarely a sustainable option).²³ Additionally, overpopulation and tourism²⁴ put pressure on natural resources and the local environment.²⁵

Climate Change and Extreme Weather

PICs are frequently hit by earthquakes, storms, floods, droughts, landslides and volcanic activity. “Between 1950 and 2011, extreme weather-related events in the Pacific islands region affected approximately 4 million people and caused 8,693 reported deaths and damage costs of around US\$3.2 billion.”²⁶ However, the situation appears to be worsening. Increased frequency and intensity of such is attributed to climate change. Entire populations must vacate their land (some must do so permanently). For example, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have been particularly affected by climate change in recent years. The highest point of Tuvalu’s eight islands is 4-5 meters, making rises in sea level particularly threatening.²⁷ In 2015, Cyclone Pam temporarily displaced 70% of Vanuatu’s population and 45% of Tuvalu’s population.²⁸

Increasing sea and land temperatures, changes in duration and frequency of rainfall, and increasing sea levels all threaten the PIC environments. Some experts predict that certain atoll islands, such as the Marshall Islands, could be completely submerged by 2100.²⁹ With the urban population in the PIC8 projected to double in the next 15 to 20 years, pressures on urban and peri-urban land are likely to increase further.³⁰

²³ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 38.

²⁴ Examples of the potential damage caused by high-end tourism and cruise ships could include irresponsible diver behavior, illegal hunting of precious species, and an overwhelming demand for locally caught fish.

²⁵ See *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 12, “Key threats...include...coastal development, destructive fishing practices, inadequate watershed management (agriculture and logging), sewage and other forms of pollution from cities, ships and industry, solid waste disposal and mining of coastal aggregates, among others.”

²⁶ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 11.

²⁷ http://www.ilo.org/asia/WCMS_410195/land--en/index.htm

²⁸ Bourk, E. (Interviewer) & McAdam, J. (Interviewee). (2017). *Millions of people displaced by environmental change: Jane McAdam* [interview transcript]. Retrieved from *The World Today* website <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2016/s4633125.htm>.

²⁹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 13.

Within some academic circles, a debate is stirring about the potential of expanding the 1951 definition of a “refugee” to include those forced to flee due to climate change.³¹ However, when interviewing Pacific Islanders about potentially being labeled as “environmental refugees” in need of assistance international human rights law, Jane McAdam, a leading figure in climate change protection, discovered strong resistance to such a suggestion.

[T]hey view refugees as victims who are reliant on handouts by the international community and what they say is: ‘We are people with skills, with know-how and resilience and we want to be seen as people who can migrate with dignity....And we can fend for ourselves and be economic contributors.’³²

Isolation

Meanwhile, the move for regional cooperation, organization, and trade agreements is increasing, such as through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation,³³ Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area (AFTA),³⁴ 119 free trade agreements, and 56 more undergoing negotiation.³⁵

PICs are an average of 12,000 km away from any large, economic center, and not one of

³¹ See Warren, Phillip Dane. “Forced Migration After Paris COP21: Evaluating the ‘Climate Change Displacement Coordination Facility’.” *Columbia Law Review* 116, no. 8 (December 2016): 2103-2144. <http://columbialawreview.org/content/forced-migration-after-paris-cop21-evaluating-the-climate-change-displacement-coordination-facility/>. See also McAdam, Jane. Introduction to *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

³² Bourk, E. (Interviewer) & McAdam, J. (Interviewee).

³³ Castles, S. & Miller, M.J. (2009). Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region. *Migration Information Source*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migration-asia-pacific-region>, “Illegal Migration” section, para. 7.

³⁴ There are ten ASEAN members: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. See Transatlantic Council on Migration. (2015). *The Southeast Asia-Australia Regional Migration System: Some Insights into the ‘New Emigration.’* Washington, DC: Hugo, G.J., Wall, J., & Young, M.

³⁵ Oishi, N. (2014). Introduction: Highly Skilled Migration in Asia and the Pacific. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 23(4), p. 365.

them is a member of ASEAN. Thus, due to this geographic isolation, the extent to which they will directly benefit from these partnerships or agreements is questionable.³⁶ The cost of remoteness is often prohibitive in the realm of international trade.³⁷

One might think that advances in technology have led to a reduction in transportation costs. However, “evidence suggests that geographic proximity remains a primary determinant of trade links...[and that] 90% of the trade that occurs over a distance of 1,000km would cease at a distance of 9,000km.”³⁸ Shipping costs have remained the same and air transportation costs have increased over the past decade. This means that the likelihood of PIC economies being included in global trade is not particularly high *and* that the cost for labor migration might remain prohibitive for some workers without government subsidies.

As labor migration within Asia increases – and even begins to attract workers to it (rather than away from it) – PICs, despite their geographic isolation, might also attract “new blood.” However, the World Bank Group authors of its Systematic Country Report for the PIC8 remain skeptical about the extent to which such a strategy should be prioritized. They recommend continued *and expanded* labor migration as the area’s primary strategy for economic survival, (given the youth bulge coupled with the unlikelihood of significant private sector growth or job creation).³⁹

³⁶ Research into each of these partnerships agreements, while potentially interesting, is beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁷ See *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 4, “For the PIC8, remoteness implies high trade cost, primarily due to their distance from major markets, small import and export volumes, geographic location away from major shipping routes, and lack of competition among few international shipping lines that do serve them. These conditions create challenges to integrate into global value chains, as critical infrastructure like freight services...largely overlook the region.”

³⁸ *Well-being from Work*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Well-being from Work*, p. 38. See also *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 10, “Access to labor markets abroad offers a critical development opportunity for the PICs by enabling their people to move to economic areas where productivity is higher, increasing the productivity of migrating workers and improving not only their human development outcomes but also – via the remittances they provide and by knowledge transfers – human development outcomes for their extended families back home.”

Indeed, seasonal labor migration can be a key source of jobs and a key contributor to economic growth in PICs.⁴⁰ Remittances can bring households out of poverty and balance income equality between households. For example, countries such as Samoa and Tonga, have some of the highest rates of remittances for the region and also “some of the best development outcomes in the region.”⁴¹ Continuing the long tradition of PIC temporary labor migration could provide a means for escaping extreme weather and providing remittances for reconstruction of damaged areas. However, current predictions fly in the face of simply following tradition and past practice. Instead, greater strategy and planning may be needed.

Even for those migrants who are not particularly well paid, through migration, they might foresee better educational and economic opportunities for their children. Migration has been linked to a higher level of school attendance and post-secondary educational attainment. “Remittance-receiving households benefit the broader economy through increased investment in business activity.”⁴² Finally, migrants assist PICs generally through their “knowledge transfer,” such as by providing consultations to governments, business and locals.

The Regional Immigration Picture

Many East Asian countries have recently experienced rapid economic growth and increases in productivity. Likewise, there has been an explosion of available work in the manufacturing and service sectors. This has led to export-driven structural transitions of these countries that have boosted many individuals’ standards of living and work satisfaction.⁴³

As certain Asian countries develop, the demand for low skilled, semi-skilled and highly skilled labor will increase. This, coupled with falling fertility rates and population shrinkages of

⁴⁰ http://www.ilo.org/suva/projects/WCMS_191552/lang--en/index.htm

⁴¹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 44.

⁴² *Well-being from Work*, p.15.

⁴³ *Well-being from Work*, p. 3.

certain age groups, means a possible expansion for PIC workers beyond Australia and New Zealand. The native populations of those East Asian economies are aging, “likely to decline over the coming decades...[and] face impending labor shortages that could partially be met by Pacific labor.”⁴⁴

However, it is also predicted that nationals who are already abroad will be tempted to return, that many Asians will prefer to stay closer to home (and not migrate so far), and that many workers from developed countries outside of Asia will become increasingly attracted to it.⁴⁵ As migration within Asia develops, the economic gap between individual countries may deepen. One study undertaken by demographers in 2015 regarding trends in migration patterns in Asia-Australia reveal significant changes in the paradigm of lifetime, North-South relocation.

[Now, these is] an increasing dominance of nonpermanent movement in international migration. The established paradigm of migration as a one-off shift of permanent residence between countries is increasingly outdated and should not be the basis for developing national policy. In this new age of mobility, circulation is dominant and emigration does not signal the permanent loss of the knowledge and resources of those who leave.⁴⁶

Due to the above listed generalizable push factors for PICs, migration often seems to be the most viable option for PIC workers. The reality is that, in addition to high unemployment and the need to piece together informal employment situations, jobs in PICs do not pay the same as those in larger, better integrated economies. Labor migration abroad has a long history in the Pacific. It includes seasonal migration for 4-9 months to Australia and New Zealand through

⁴⁴ *Well-being from Work*, p. 4, 14.

⁴⁵ *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia*, p. 25.

⁴⁶ *The Southeast Asia-Australia Regional Migration System*, p. 21.

government organized programs. Some Pacific Islanders work as seafarers, working up to one year abroad on foreign vessels. Some entire higher skilled occupations (e.g., as nurses, peacekeepers, accountants and teachers) and spend anywhere from a year to their entire working lives in other Pacific Island countries. Finally, some never return.⁴⁷

Attraction to Australia, New Zealand and the United States, primary destinations for PIC nationals, includes higher wages, a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and tertiary education. (Fiji and Papua New Guinea also act as gateways.)⁴⁸ For example, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau have all signed Compacts of Free Association with the U.S. However, travel costs remain prohibitive for many migrant workers. Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have access to Australia and New Zealand through the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP), the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) and the Pacific Access Category.⁴⁹

Table 2. Population Living Abroad

Origin Country	Australia	New Zealand	United States
States of Micronesia	18	15	4,658
Kiribati	600	1,569	185
Marshall Islands	34	21	19,841
Palau	23	9	4,581
Ind. State of Samoa	19,093	51,681	109,637
Kingdom of Tonga	9,210	23,430	41,219
Tuvalu	122	1,479	-
Rep. of Vanuatu	1,107	1,779	227,574

Australia and New Zealand

Australia has a population of over 20 million, with nearly 25% foreign-born and 19% having at least one foreign-born parent⁵⁰ About 110,000 are from the Pacific Islands, with

⁴⁷ International Labour Organization. (2014). *Decent Work and Social Justice in Pacific Small Island Developing States: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Responses*. Suva, Fiji: ILO Office for Pacific Island Countries, p. 22.

⁴⁸ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ English, C. (2004). Australia's Continuing Transformation. *Migration Information Source*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/australias-continuing-transformation>, para. 3.

30,000 coming from one of the PICs. In 2013, New Zealand's population was 4.25 million⁵¹ with 140,000 coming from PICs.⁵² Since a certain number of Australians and New Zealanders are Pacific-born or have a Pacific-born parent, PIC descendants can benefit from the Trans-Tasman Travel Agreement, which permits citizens to live and work in either country. However, these numbers seem pretty negligible. For example, although in 2015, 28.5% (6.9 million) of Australia's population was born overseas, the overwhelming majority of those individuals did not come from PICs.⁵³ International students (many of whom are Asian but not necessarily from PICs)⁵⁴ who qualify to study in Australia can remain for up to two years after graduation in order to secure employment.

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand why Pacific Islanders choose to migrate to New Zealand instead of Australia, is to examine Australia's history and current migration schemes. Australia has limited special labor access for Pacific Islanders. In 1901, Australia passed the Immigration Restriction Act (a.k.a. the "White Australia policy"), which remained formal law until 1975 with the passage of the Racial Discrimination Act.⁵⁵ Additionally, the Pacific Island Labourers Act of 1901 banned recruitment from PICs in 1903 and authorized deportation beginning in 1906.

Moreover, "backpackers" from Europe are allowed to come on "working holidays." Initiated in the 1970s, the working holiday scheme was originally intended as a "reciprocal

⁵¹ <http://www.stats.govt.nz/StatsMaps/Home/People%20and%20households/2013-census-population-dwelling-map.aspx>

⁵² *Well-being from Work*, p. 4.

⁵³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2015). *3412.0-Migration, Australia, 2015-16 (latest)* [Summary]. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3412.0Main%20Features12015-16?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3412.0&issue=2015-16&num=&view=>

⁵⁴ *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ See Foulkes, C.D. (2012). Australia's Boat People: Asylum Challenges and Two Decades of Policy Experimentation. *Migration Information Source*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/australias-boat-people-asylum-challenges-and-two-decades-policy-experimentation>.

pathways for affluent Australians and affluent Europeans to swap their homes for a year and do the gap year in another place in the world.”⁵⁶ For those workers in this category, they are granted an extension for another year when they take jobs considered to fall within fields of agriculture, mining and construction. In other words, Australia, despite being regarded in some ways as a “nation of immigrants,” has historically made certain racial and ethnic groups feel especially unwelcome.

Sections of Australia’s population often demonstrates all of the usual concerns about migration – sometimes masking racism and a preference for certain immigrants – with added arguments about the area’s environmental sustainability in the face of global climate change.⁵⁷ Consequently, despite Australia’s much larger population and economy, three times more Pacific Islanders migrated to New Zealand than to Australia between 2003 and 2007.⁵⁸ Many of Australia’s PIC-born workers first gained citizenship in New Zealand and then traveled to Australia by way of the Trans-Tasman Travel Agreement that links the two countries.

New Zealand began “opening up” in the 1950s. Today, it maintains special citizenship relationships with the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau. The populations of those countries have full citizenships rights with all attendant work permissions. The Pacific Access Category sets quotas each year for Tonga, Kiribati and Tuvalu, whose citizens are eligible for residency, along with their partners and dependent children. They must demonstrate English proficiency and prove an offer of employment that meets minimum salary requirements. Finally, New Zealand operates a Samoan Quota; only about 6% of Samoans who register are chosen.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Hall, E. (Interviewer) & Howe, J. (Interviewee). (2016). *Unsustainable reliance on backpacker labour, research finds* [interview transcript]. Retrieved from *The World Today* website <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2016/s4585151.htm>

⁵⁷ Australia’s Continuing Transformation, “Immigration and Politics” section, para. 2.

⁵⁸ *Well-being from Work*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ International Labour Organization. (2014). *Compendium of Legislation and Institutional Arrangements for Labour Migration in Pacific Island Countries*. Suva, Fiji: ILO Office for Pacific Island Countries, p. 39. *See also*

Low-Skilled Migration

At this point, for many metropolitan countries in the Pacific region, preference is increasingly moving toward high-skilled labor. Within Australia, 68% of its total migration program is now composed of highly skilled workers.⁶⁰ The only opportunities for low-skilled migration from PICs are limited to the SWP and to family-based immigration. Likewise, in New Zealand, the RSE, Samoan Quota and Pacific Access Category provide important options for low-skilled workers, but the spaces available are limited.⁶¹

Despite the trend toward higher skilled migration, the most specific information regarding labor migration revolves around the SWP and RSE schemes for low-skilled workers. According to the ILO, “Other than seasonal workers, little is known about the scale and nature of other types of migration of Pacific Islands...a fact that severely impacts on the ability of countries to design appropriate migration strategies.”⁶² The information on domestic legislation and institutional agreements for labor migration comes from the University of South Pacific’s School of Law in Fiji. It states that the Compendium of Legislation and Institutional Arrangements for Labour Migration in the Pacific Island Countries is “the most comprehensive

World Bank. (2014). *Well-being from Work*, p. 14. See Castles, S. & Miller, Asian Migration to...Oceania” section, para. 11-12. Fiji and Samoa are within the top nine birthplaces of foreigners in New Zealand – 144,138 of New Zealand’s residents identify with Samoan ancestry.

⁶⁰ Australia also offers visa incentive programs for investors. Thus, it is possible that some PIC investors benefit and that they employ PIC workers. See Hooper, K. & Papademetriou, D.G. (2015). Top 10 of 2015 – Issue #10: Shine Wears Off Investor Programs as Questions about Economic Benefits and Fraud Lead to Reforms. *Migration Information Source*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-10-2015-%E2%80%93-issue-10-shine-wears-investor-visa-programs-questions-about-economic-benefits>.

⁶¹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 44.

⁶² *Decent Work and Social Justice*, p. 22. See <http://www.ilo.org/suva/areas-of-work/labour-migration/lang-en/index.htm>, which states that the “ILO is working with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to carry out labour market assessments for the negotiation of a Temporary Movement of Natural Persons Scheme in the Pacific.” See also Oishi, p. 367. One study about high-skilled labor migration to Australia notes that academics only recently began to turn their attention to migration patterns within Asia and the Pacific in the early 2000s. This was due, in part, to these countries beginning to adopt policies attempting to reverse brain drain through return migration of nationals who had left and to attract new workers from other Asian countries. Australia, as one of the three largest economies in the region (along with China and Japan) has adopted the Temporary Work (Skilled) Program. (Of the 110,000 and 86,000 family members, however, it is not clear how many actually hailed from PICs.)

on-line collection of regional legislation.” It also notes that “subsidiary legislation (regulations) relevant to entry, stay and employment of migrant workers is often *not available* [my emphasis].”⁶³

Despite the difficulty in pulling together matching details for all PICs, a few quick generalizations can be made about the five SWP and RSE participants in 2013. Some PICs handled recruitment entirely through own their governments (e.g., Kiribati and Tuvalu). Others allowed for direct hire by employers (e.g., Samoa) or with the help of PIC residents abroad (e.g., Tongans in New Zealand). Only Vanuatu, with its Seasonal Employment Act of 2007, had legislation specifically governing employment abroad. Indeed, it boasted the largest number of RSE participants, and almost twice that of Tonga. It could be argued that crafting such legislation indicates seriousness, organization and dedication on the part of the government to secure labor agreements and to protect its workers.

Table 3. Participants for the five PICS participating in both the SWP and RSE in 2013

	Kiribati	Samoa	Tonga	Tuvalu	Vanuatu
Participants in SWP (2013)	34	22	1,199	0 ⁶⁴	119
Participants in RSE (2013)	138	1,137	1,575	56	2,829

Australia’s Seasonal Worker Program became permanent in 2012 after a three-year pilot program. A Memorandum of Understanding links Australia with nine PICS.⁶⁵ Workers may enter Australia in order to work in its agriculture sector for fourteen weeks to six months. Still, PIC participation rates are quite low. SWP’s precursor, the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot

⁶³ *Compendium of Legislation*, “Methodology” section, pp.iv-v, for more information on the challenges associated with collecting this data.

⁶⁴ Tuvalu did not enter into an agreement with Australia to send workers until 2013. The first workers to leave were scheduled for 2014.

⁶⁵ Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. See http://www.ilo.org/suva/projects/WCMS_226281/lang--en/index.htm

Scheme (PSWPS) only met 65% of its total numerical cap of 2,500. The government increased the cap to 12,000 over 2012-2016 and now includes four more sectors aside from agriculture,⁶⁶ but employer demand for PIC workers is still weak.

In fact, although the number of participating workers increased to a little over 2,000 in 2014, this amount pales in comparison to the 75,000-175,000 agriculture workers employed annually. Australia's horticulture industry relies instead on "backpackers"⁶⁷ and "illegal workers."⁶⁸ In fact, some contend this program is has become a "low skilled pathway" for young workers, particularly from low wage countries.

The SWP has been criticized as not adequately being marketed to potential employers in Australia.⁶⁹ Additionally, Approved Employers must comply with additional SWP administrative requirements and costs that do not apply when hiring other workers. These include 50% of airfare costs, visa fees, private health insurance, a guarantee of work at least 14 weeks and cooperation with the Fair Work Ombudsman.⁷⁰

New Zealand started its Recognized Seasonal Employer work policy in 2006, setting a cap of 5,000 workers to work for 7 months over an 11-month period in the horticulture and viticulture industries. (It is now set to 9,000.)⁷¹ An Interagency Understanding agreement between New Zealand and relevant PIC ministries governs the program. It was originally

⁶⁶ Accommodation, Aquaculture, Cotton and Sugar Cane - still on a trial basis

⁶⁷ Hall, E. (Interviewer) & Howe, J. (Interviewee). (2016). *Unsustainable reliance on backpacker labour, research finds* [interview transcript]. Retrieved from *The World Today* website <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2016/s4585151.htm>

⁶⁸ World Bank. (2015). *Australia's Seasonal Worker Program: Demand-side Constraints and Suggested Reforms*. Washington, DC: Doyle, J., & Howes, S., p.1. Backpacker and "the prevalence of illegal workers" are listed as the main reason for the lack of employer participation in the SWP. What constitutes illegal or how an employee becomes such is not explained in the report.

⁶⁹ See http://www.ilo.org/suva/projects/WCMS_226281/lang--en/index.htm

⁷⁰ See *Australia's Seasonal Worker Program*, p.6-7 for the additional costs and requirements for Approved Employers.

⁷¹ *Australia's Seasonal Worker Program*, p. 9-10.

confined to workers from Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu (but is now open to all Pacific Island Forum⁷² members except Fiji). Employers must offer available positions to native New Zealanders first through advertisement with government agencies responsible for social welfare, but employer demand is still high with the number of available jobs outpacing the number of native workers available. Pacific Islanders can either be hired directly by employers or their agents or through government agencies operating pre-screened “work-ready pools.”⁷³ Despite the fact that there has been uneven country participation in the RSE,⁷⁴ employers generally seem to feel that the PIC workforce is enthusiastic, reliable and productive.⁷⁵

Still, up-front costs for migrants can be overwhelming and therefore act as a barrier despite the initial lure of high wages.⁷⁶ In order to even begin work in the destination country, migrants often have to travel first to the capital island to secure employment.⁷⁷ “While seasonal worker schemes adopt cost-sharing models, these high costs make workers from such remote islands less attractive to employers.”⁷⁸ Approved employers *do* partially subsidize some of the costs, but according to the World Bank Group, the extent of governmental assistance is insufficient.⁷⁹

Additionally, there are social costs that come with migration. “This is particularly [a damaging] issue with the circular seasonal migration schemes.... Temporary circular migration can increase the risk of eroding family structures and relationships, causing fragmentation of

⁷² The Pacific Island Forum is composed of 16 states with offices throughout the region and a permanent delegation within the WTO. See <http://www.forumsec.org/pages.cfm/about-us/?printerfriendly=true>.

⁷³ *Well-being from Work*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Most workers come from Tonga and Vanuatu.

⁷⁵ *Well-being from Work*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ E.g., A seasonal worker from Tonga, who normally earns NZ\$1,400 at home, could instead earn NZ\$12,000 in New Zealand.

⁷⁷ Investment in connective infrastructure might reduce some of these costs, but it remains to be seen the extent to which such will occur.

⁷⁸ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 45.

⁷⁹ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 47.

social networks and psychosocial stress.”⁸⁰ Still, temporary labor migration can function as a planned response to climate change and weather disasters by providing predictable income and remittances, thereby helping communities to maintain cultural and geographic integrity. Many people do not want to leave their ancestral homes (nor should they be expected to do so, short of a permanent emergency). In the meantime, migrants can form strong social and professional networks abroad in order to potentially build relationships and strengthen future economic growth.

Some experts feel that regardless of how successful seasonal schemes are, they are limited in the extent to which they can truly mitigate economic disparities between PICs and larger economies. In their opinion, such temporary migration must be seen by policymakers as merely *supplemental* to permanent migration.⁸¹ Additionally, seasonal programs contain a certain amount of risk and require significant, continuous administrative organization and financing. “Policy action is also needed from governments in sending countries. Within Pacific island countries, continued investment is needed to build human capital through both health and education, so that working-age Pacific Islanders have the capacity to take advantage of the overseas opportunities that are available.”⁸²

Securing long-term agreements for more temporary labor migration schemes and expanding permanent immigration are critical. Beyond that, it is vitally important that PIC8 workers be included in larger immigration routes beyond Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. – *and* that they be encouraged to transition into higher paying, higher skilled jobs with the

⁸⁰ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 45.

⁸¹ *Well-being from Work*, pp. 17-18.

⁸² *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 7.

potential to remain for longer periods abroad if necessary.⁸³

Conclusion

If migration indeed increases throughout the region, it is *possible* that greater global public acceptance of immigration could *theoretically* open doors for PIC migrants, allowing them to come and go with an ease that fosters PIC social cohesion while expanding international inclusion. The emigration of workers does not have to mean that the origin country's economy loses those workers' contributions. The possible positive effects include increased remittances, higher foreign direct investment, and information and knowledge transfers.

Many migrants return home – permanently, temporarily and virtually.⁸⁴ Asian governments “are changing their immigration and integration policies. They increasingly see migration as a long-term structural element in their economies rather than an unfortunate, temporary necessity.”⁸⁵ Rather than focusing so much on “brain *drain*,” some scholars hope to turn greater attention to how states can facilitate “brain *circulation*.”⁸⁶ Setting a place at the global table for PICs could also prove especially critical down the road for any climate change induced migration that they experience.⁸⁷

It is critical for PICS to be permitted to “play ball” now within the region and to develop sane, organized strategies to encourage the exit *and* the return of workers – to nurture a

⁸³ *Systematic Country Diagnostic*, p. 47, “This is a particular priority for...[the] many migrants [from the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau who] arrive in the U.S. and struggle to find work. Without a safety net in place, these migrants either end up homeless or return to Compact [of Free Association] countries prematurely.”

⁸⁴ *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia*, p. 25.

⁸⁵ *Emerging Demographic Trends in Asia*, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Castles, S. & Miller, M.J., “Highly Qualified” section, para. 2.

⁸⁷ *Well-being from Work*, p. 23, “International assistance is needed to support the policy and institutional improvements required for increased international mobility of Pacific Islanders. Institutions with responsibility for negotiating international labor arrangements need to be strengthened. Financial and technical support continues to be needed for agencies facilitating the participation of workers in regional or global schemes, such as divisions within PIC foreign ministries responsible for selecting workers for participation in Australia's and New Zealand's seasonal worker schemes.”

continuing relationship with their societies rather than to have to bid them a permanent farewell. This is a crucial time for the entry of PICs onto the scene. The Pacific Islands region seems to be an area of the world that is on the front lines of a fight for environmental survival in the face of so many climate change deniers (or those with sights set on larger countries). From an ecological standpoint, it is literally a case of sink or swim.

To that end, in formulating strategy, while it is certainly important to understand the global picture and to situate PICs within it, to create more bilateral agreements and to improve domestic labor frameworks, it is critically important to seize hold of youth vigor – to involve young people as productive, vital members of society. A youth bulge with its attendant enthusiasm and energy, coupled with increasing regional unification, might allow PICs to do more than to simply stay afloat in a global economy – instead, this unique region could thrive!

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