On 30 June 2017, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (now Department of Pacific Affairs) at the Australian National University hosted the Team Leaders’ Workshop in Port Vila for ni-Vanuatu participating in Australia’s Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE). This was the first time that team leaders from both programs, agents, employers, the Vanuatu Employment Service Unit (ESU), and representatives from the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions had come together for this purpose. The workshop provided an opportunity for the various groups to understand the opportunities, challenges, and expectations of team leaders, and for leaders themselves to share their experiences. It also explored support and training options for existing and future team leaders.

The key themes raised by all groups attending the workshop were: the importance of protecting Vanuatu’s place in the schemes; the need to recognise the role of team leaders, addressing employers’ expectations, identifying and training upcoming leaders; and issues regarding the consumption of alcohol. As noted in a previous In Brief, team leaders are often not rewarded, and their roles are often misunderstood by various stakeholders or not even discussed or negotiated at all (Bailey 2017). The workshop gave an opportunity for all groups to voice their concerns; this In Brief highlights those concerns and the suggested ways to address them.

Awareness of Responsibilities

For many stakeholders, this was the first time they had been informed about the roles and expectations of team leaders and what happens ‘in the field’. Team leaders have many responsibilities in these seasonal employment schemes, and are always the first point of communication for employers, workers, government representatives, agents, and, in many cases, community members (Bailey 2017). Unlike most seasonal workers, team leaders do not necessarily get to ‘clock off’ after work. For example, one team leader said ‘sometimes we finish work at 7pm, but I don’t get to sit down and eat my dinner until maybe 10pm, because I am counselling workers, or doing paperwork for my employer’.

By including employers, pastoral care hosts, and ESU staff as participants in the forum, team leaders were able to discuss their roles with different stakeholder groups and consider ways to improve them. According to one ESU representative, being a team leader involves: mediating disputes between employers and workers; providing employers and the ESU with a debriefing paper on the work of a team; assisting workers with any challenges that may arise, monitoring behaviour, and managing compliance; and facilitating workers’ settling in to their work and accommodation environment. One ESU staff member raised the fact that team leaders were not submitting their debriefing forms. This is problematic for the ESU as there are cases where workers’ inappropriate conduct is not reported and the workers continue to be employed as seasonal workers — either moving to a new employer or switching seasonal work schemes.

Selection and Training of Team Leaders

Discussions revealed that the selection of team leaders is ad hoc at best. In the early years of the RSE, most team leaders were selected because of their status in their local communities (Bailey 2009). However, when agents were asked how they select their team leaders, their responses varied. ESU staff and agents noted that often a group of workers make the decision and select the leader by group consensus. Current team leaders also choose their own successors, although they stated that this is not always something that can be decided in Port Vila, but ‘in the field over a number of seasons’, where they can watch a worker earn the right to be a team leader.

Training and identifying potential leaders in the field is a sensible choice as it provides experienced workers an opportunity to demonstrate their ability and their potential for promotion. It is more difficult for groups led by those without previous experience, highlighting the need for specific training. Employers and the ESU expect team leaders to have a working
knowledge of the programs and local employment laws, as well as being competent at mediating between various groups such as the agent, contractor, supervisor, and farmer/grower. Negotiating skills are vital. Using trained, experienced team leaders to conduct training would be optimal. At the workshop, there was no agreement on training courses that would be made available for team leaders, but there was agreement that the matter needs further discussion among all stakeholders. The types of training emphasised were: understanding the government policy of seasonal worker programs, local laws, the operational management of employer’s enterprises, negotiation with employers and workers, and courses on leadership skills.

**Gendering of Team Leaders**

Due to a lack of research in this area, there is no data available on the numbers of female team leaders employed across the RSE and SWP schemes. However, of the 20 team leaders in attendance at the Team Leaders’ Workshop, six were female. The percentage of Pacific women in SWPs in 2015/16 was 13.9% (Sherrell 2017), and for RSEs it was 12.5%. Whether this translates into more female team leaders in the SWP is unknown, but it is an area that requires further investigation. Female team leaders speaking at the workshop and during previous fieldwork have often argued that either their status as a woman or their age has affected how they operate as team leaders. All team leaders agreed that age, gender, or ranking in society at home would often work against them.

**Support Networks**

An agreed outcome of the workshop was the need for improved support networks for team leaders in both countries. The New Zealand team leader pilot project was a model that most agreed upon. However, this requires access to an internet-connected phone or computer, which could be difficult for some. It has been proven to be a valuable investment tool for team leaders seeking advice. Though, like the RSE model, it would also have to be conducted in a manner in which the confidentiality and anonymity of workers or growers is upheld.

**Conclusion**

To gain a broader understanding of team leader relationships, there is a need for further study on how all countries involved in seasonal work schemes are managing their team leaders. Even though this workshop was conducted in Vanuatu, important lessons learned can be shared throughout the region. SWP and RSE workers showed that although they may work in different countries and with various crops, they face similar challenges. Sharing knowledge on how to overcome these — instead of working in isolation as many do — can only benefit both them and the schemes more generally. Rather than suggesting a ‘one size fits all’ model for team leader support and training, there is a need to encourage dialogue among stakeholders to ensure that the important work performed by team leaders is recognised. If the seasonal worker schemes are to continue delivering favourable outcomes to all stakeholders, providing the appropriate training and support to current and future team leaders is essential. Australia’s Labour Mobility Assistance Program and New Zealand’s Strengthening Pacific Partnership capacity-building initiatives could work with labour-sending countries and their team leaders. This could begin with examining existing models, such as the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Vakameasina program with which employers and workers are currently engaged.

**Author Notes**

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**Endnotes**

1. Ni-Vanuatu team leaders from the RSE have regular meetings (see Bailey 2017).
2. Six days prior to the workshop, three ni-Vanuatu lost their lives in an accident in which it was suspected alcohol was a contributing factor.
3. Team leaders usually refer to their work in Australia and New Zealand as being ‘in the field’.
5. ‘ESU’s Perspective on Team Leaders Role’ presented by Patrice Kuautonga, Team Leaders Workshop 30/6/2017.
7. Initiated by team leaders, this pilot was a closed Facebook page where leaders discuss issues from seasonal worker programs and offer support to each other.

**References**


Bailey, R. 2017. The Role of Ni-Vanuatu Team Leaders in Seasonal Worker Programs. SSGM In Brief 2017/17. Canberra: ANU.