



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Labour Mobility Support Networks – ‘It’s Not Just a Seasonal Thing’

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This In Brief highlights local ni-Vanuatu support structures initiated through workers’ participation in Australia’s Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE). It draws on recent interviews with workers, families, recruiters, leaders, chiefs and a support group in Vanuatu. In May 2016, more than 600 RSE workers and 64 SWP workers returned to Vanuatu.¹ During a field trip in April 2016, just before their return, stakeholders insisted RSE and SWP were detrimentally affecting family structures. The social impacts of seasonal labour mobility schemes are described in various academic works; however, they are yet to be investigated in detail.

Although ni-Vanuatu now work in different programs, the social and economic circumstances driving their participation in these schemes, and the consequences arising from them, are similar. The focus of this In Brief is the Strengthening Seasonal Workers Family Program (SSWFP), which was established in 2011–12 by Regina and Peter Bumseng to support families of RSE seasonal workers. This support group seeks to directly respond to the concerns of seasonal workers with spouses at home. Knowing their families are being supported gives workers confidence, allowing for not only a better working environment but also supporting their spiritual and material wellbeing while they are away from home.² SSWFP has expanded significantly since its establishment, and now includes SWP workers.

Strengthening Seasonal Workers Family Program

Initially the support group started with five women and the main activities were monthly meetings at Regina’s house, with Regina regularly checking on workers’ spouses to ensure they had support during the absence of a partner. When issues arose or the women did not answer their phones, Peter as team leader requested that Regina visit houses and check on families. The group also provided childcare and assisted families of seasonal workers. For spouses left behind, the

management of younger children in the absence of a partner is often difficult (Bailey 2014).

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, workers established The Vines, a Christian reggae band, to raise funds for the support group through a series of concerts. SSWFP began with the idea of being a seasonal support system; however, as workers are travelling all year round, it has become a year-long activity. When workers return to Vanuatu, they continue fundraising for the group and involve their wives and partners, through singing or selling goods.³

New Initiatives 2013

The success of SSWFP has seen it evolve into a more comprehensive support program. Besides using funds from the workers while in New Zealand, in 2013 SSWFP began fundraising for families. It did this through selling food, producing wallets and paintings, and sewing items for tourist and local markets. With the proceeds, SSWFP initiated a rotation of money scheme. Through its fortnightly meetings, it gives VT15,000 (AUD189) per household. This money contributes to household expenses. Another new initiative is assistance to workers and their families with loans for newly established businesses and financial services.

Using skills from the RSE’s Vakameasina program and adapting it for local use has been an asset for SSWFP, which has also extended its marketing reach to selling T-shirts and jandals that advertise The Vines band. In recognition of what SSWFP does, workers each contributed NZD100 to the group during the 2015–16 season. They consider the program a valuable resource for themselves and their families.

Current Status of the Group

SSWFP now has a 15-member committee in Port Vila overseeing the program. The committee holds monthly fundraisers which bring families together to support each other and share their experiences. The committee also organises and delivers three new programs to members,

focusing on social, educational and spiritual ideologies. These are all important aspects of life in Vanuatu and the balance of these is fundamental to assisting workers and their families cope with the separation.

More recently, SSWFP has provided counselling programs for both workers and spouses. Several issues regarding marriages and finances have come about and, in recognition of this, additional support processes are now included in the program. For example, some workers were encouraged by team leaders to stay at home during the 2015–16 season to work on their relationships and restore the necessary work-life balance before participating again. Local chiefs and recruiters in particular shared stories of extramarital affairs and the alleged misuse of monies remitted. Some felt that workers' wives are now being targeted for extramarital affairs.⁴

Mitigating the negative social impacts arising from seasonal work has become an important issue for chiefs. Many acknowledge that localised forms of support have proven beneficial. Nonetheless, one noted a need for capacity building of chiefs, especially in terms of mediation, resolution and understanding of the programs. He advocated for training about the social changes workers and families face in regard to RSE and SWP with 'different languages and intersecting cultures'. Chiefs have also complained they are 'taking care of issues coming from these programs with little support from churches'.⁵

Despite tensions between the church and local leaders about how to best support families through 'periods of crisis',⁶ our research shows both groups are making a valuable contribution. Both groups are critically important as they not only provide localised support but also regulate access to the schemes through the letters of approval they provide.

Where Are We Going?

Due to the success of SSWFP, we now plan to roll out the program to neighbouring islands, starting with Ambrym Island, Malampa province, in October 2016. If successful, the program will be scaled up to include other islands. We hope it will one day become a model for other Pacific islands.

Conclusion

It is important to recognise how participation in seasonal worker policies affects households and communities from the sending nations. Recent fieldwork in Vanuatu demonstrates the growing importance of groups such as SSWFP. Reports from chiefs, recruiters, workers and family members highlighted the importance of such support schemes, noting both opportunities they provide for families, and their success

addressing the negative social impacts of seasonal work. Localised support programs benefit not only workers and their families but also employers in receiving countries who are responsible for workers' care. One team leader noted, 'If we know our families are happy at home, then we can provide a good working environment while away'. Given participation in both SWP and RSE is increasing, and we are now witnessing the emergence of autochthonous support programs, there is fruitful ground upon which to investigate the social challenges associated with seasonal work and the mitigation thereof.

Author Notes

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Peter Bumseng and Regina Bumseng are the co-founders of SSWFP.

Endnotes

1. Vanuatu Employment Services Unit, 7 June 2016, personal communication.
2. While discussing reintegration programs with 63 seasonal workers, the majority stated that they would rather see funding available for supporting their families while they were absent, as they thought this would be more useful.
3. Spouses (who are at this stage all women) of seasonal workers manage the support group.
4. This can also apply to men; however, female participants were highlighted during interviews.
5. Village chief, 29 May 2016, personal communication.
6. A term used by one chief, 29 May 2016.

Reference

Bailey, R. 2014. Working the Vines: Seasonal Migration, Money and Development in New Zealand and Ambrym, Vanuatu. PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Otago.

