



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## New Responses to Natural Disasters through Seasonal Labour Mobility Programs

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Natural disasters are common and becoming more frequent in the Pacific region. In response, Australia and New Zealand provide aid and assistance to Pacific island states when natural disasters occur. In addition, incomes and support from participants involved in Australia's Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme are increasingly used to assist in relief and rebuild contributions. This In Brief discusses how recent labour mobility policies can and have enabled contributions for immediate and mid- to long-term recoveries from natural disasters. We draw on three main examples of responses. First, we focus on ways in which remittances from labour mobility can benefit recovery efforts. Next, we explore how employers and host communities respond to disasters in the region. Finally, policy suggestions and responses at a government level will be outlined. If labour mobility is to continue in the region, discussions are necessary to understand the benefits that labour mobility offers workers, their families and employers to localise responses to natural disasters. It is important that Pacific labour mobility policies are also responsive to natural disasters.

### Remittances

International evidence (de Moor 2011; Le De et al. 2015; Savage and Harvey 2007) shows that remittances are an important resource during times of natural disasters. Although there should not be a reliance or expectation of workers to contribute during these times, there needs to be recognition of the various ways remittances flow into affected areas. Le De et al. (2015:1) argue that 'this people-based mechanism is largely disregarded by agencies involved in DRM [disaster relief management], who rarely take into account remittances within their relief actions and recovery programmes'.

From current research the advantages and concerns of using remittances after natural disasters include:

#### Advantages

- Remittances can be received immediately and directed to families and communities in need.

- Monies can be spent on what is needed.
- Remittances can enable faster recovery for receivers.
- Remittances are often shared within communities.

#### Disadvantages

- Difficulties in remitting money immediately after a disaster.
- Problems accessing remittances through lost identification documentation.
- Remitters tend to send more than they can afford, leaving themselves vulnerable.
- Governments should not depend on remittances alone.

Acknowledging these advantages and disadvantages prior to disasters will aid in the delivery and impact that remittances make. Remittances are important in keeping workers feeling connected and useful by contributing to relief and rebuilding efforts at home. Nonetheless, findings from Samoa indicate that 'in a disaster context remittances tend to increase or at least reproduce both the inequalities and vulnerabilities existing within the community of origin' (Le De et al. 2015:2). However, recent discussions with ni-Vanuatu RSE and SWP workers have highlighted that remittances are shared among communities. These ambiguities are in need of further research.

### Employers/Host Communities Engagement with Workers

Strong relationships and social ties between seasonal employers and host communities have contributed to relief efforts and more support for workers and their communities. For example, employers who have had long-term engagement, relationships and experience within Vanuatu communities, because of either RSE or SWP, have sent practical goods: 'It won't be blankets and teddy bears. More likely hard building materials, water sanitation pumps. The things that people really need to replace that they've lost'.<sup>1</sup> Employers have organised shipping containers to send such goods along with solar pumps, chainsaws, garden tools and basic household goods. Furthermore, SWP employer Justin Watson led a team of tradesmen to help rebuild on Epi Island, where

his workers are from (Smith 11/7/2015). Australian and New Zealand growers and communities have economic and social investments with workers and their Pacific communities and are contributing immensely to relief efforts.

### **Demands to Participate and Visas**

After Cyclone Pam there were notable increases in applications to enter Australia's and New Zealand's seasonal work schemes. The Vanuatu operations manager for Seasonal Solutions Co-operative received requests to participate in the RSE from ni-Vanuatu who had no previous interest in seasonal work.

The New Zealand government responded by making concessions with visas for those in affected areas. Visas were extended and Immigration New Zealand [waived the visa fees](#) for RSE workers. The New Zealand national coordinator for seasonal labour said that only 130 ni-Vanuatu returned home after Cyclone Pam and he was impressed by:

the level of responsibility of the workers themselves understanding that rebuilding will require funding, will require money, and therefore the vast majority has chosen to stay on and work, and we as employers really support that. (Radio New Zealand 27/3/2015)

At the time Cyclone Pam hit there were 170 ni-Vanuatu working in Australia and 2059 in New Zealand. With seasonal workers absent from Vanuatu, pressure on limited resources is relieved and they are earning money to rebuild homes and community infrastructure. Ongoing remittances are critical not only in the short term but as part of a mid- and long-term rebuild and emergency natural disasters response strategy.

Currently RSE and SWP are schemes intended to encourage economic development for Pacific island states. These schemes could develop further as possible adaptation strategies in times of natural disasters. Recently the European Union proposed [temporary labour migration as an adaptation to climate change](#). Spain currently offers Columbia such a scheme targeting vulnerable communities (De Moor 2011). The Colombian Temporary and Circular Labour Migration project could be a possible model for RSE and SWP to adopt (ibid.).

### **Conclusion**

The Pacific is susceptible and vulnerable to environmental disasters. Seasonal workers have used incomes to either build or rebuild infrastructure to withstand cyclones, earthquakes and acid rain from volcanoes (Bailey 2013). Remittances can provide immediate and long-term relief. Contributions through remittances produce both positive and negative effects on communities. The negative effects can be mitigated through

acknowledging the means in which they are used in times of disasters and constraints on their delivery.

Continuing Pacific labour schemes is vital as they provide direct aid to island countries. Seasonal employers, employees, businesses and communities have responded in positive ways to natural disasters (Bailey 2013; Bedford 2013). Australia and New Zealand have an opportunity to aid further in immediate and short-term recoveries by extending their seasonal worker programs as a temporary response to natural disasters. Policy discussions in regard to extending visas for workers affected by natural disasters (past, current and future) need to take place, as do conversations on how to support seasonal workers away from home and their employers in these situations.

### **Author Notes**

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### **Endnote**

1. TVNZ interview with James Dacey, director of Seasonal Solutions Co-operative Ltd, 15 March 2015.

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