The Seasonal Workers Program (SWP) is an Australian Government labour mobility initiative started in 2008 to meet seasonal labour shortages by recruiting workers from Timor-Leste, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu for the horticulture sector and four trial sectors: accommodation, aquaculture, cotton, and sugar cane industries. This In Brief explores Timor-Leste’s participation in the SWP and the experiences of East Timorese workers in the accommodation and horticulture sectors.

The current quota of 2,500 workers for the financial year 2013–14 is considerably smaller than New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme of 8,000. As highlighted by Doyle and Howes (2013a), the SWP should be rethought to increase employer participation within Australia. The failure to fill the quota for the new trial sectors is largely due to competition from cheaper illegal labour, backpackers on Work and Holiday Visas, and strict regulations for employers on workers’ wages and pastoral care. Employers also bear a portion of the initial cost of airfares to hire offshore workers, which can be a financial disincentive, particularly for small-holder businesses. Furthermore, the SWP has had limited outreach and promotion in Australia by government and industry (Doyle and Howes 2013a).

Due to the small pool of Australian Approved Employers, labour-sending countries in the SWP must compete to attract interest from potential employers. Timor-Leste is relatively disadvantaged due to its late entry into the program in 2012. On the other hand, the high numbers of Tongan workers in the SWP is attributed to strong migrant networks in Australia; Tongan and Samoan workers have gained reputable status through their long-term participation in New Zealand’s scheme. Recommendations to improve the program include removing incentives for backpackers to work in the horticulture sector, tackling illegal labour, placing Melanesian countries as a recruitment priority, expanding the Work and Holiday Visa to the Pacific region, and increasing recruitment quotas (Doyle and Howes 2013a; 2013b).

Timor-Leste is in need of broadening its economic base as its petroleum sovereign wealth fund worth US$14.6 billion currently provides 95 per cent of state revenues and 80 per cent of annual GDP (La’o Hamutuk 2013). With over a quarter of the population aged 15–29, approximately 15,000 youth enter the labour market each year, facing a lack of employment opportunities and a mismatch between supply and demand of skills and expertise (ILO 2010).

The 2010 Census estimates a 1.4 per cent emigration rate out of the population of 1.1 million. Remittances from overseas workers is estimated at 1.4 per cent of 2006 non-oil GDP (or US$5 million), making overseas labour second to coffee export (Shuaib 2008). This could be boosted by increased participation in the SWP, and labour mobility has the potential to be a significant livelihood option for East Timorese.

In Timor-Leste, males and females aged 21 to 45 are eligible for the scheme providing they have at least completed high school, have English language competency, and are able to work in sometimes physically and mentally demanding workplaces. Australian employers carry out final selection of candidates, and successful recruits attend four-week pre-departure training on working and living in Australia. Currently there are 35 (men and women in total) seasonal workers employed in the accommodation and horticulture sectors in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Victoria, Tropical North Queensland and the Whitsundays coast. This is set to increase to at least 50 by the end of 2013 and further increase in 2014 as result of the Timor-Leste Labour Attaché promoting the scheme to Australian employers.

East Timorese workers gain invaluable work experience, language, and other transferable skills through their participation in the SWP. Overall, they consider the program ‘well-organised and secure’ in terms of work contracts. A female worker in the accommodation sector highlighted the skills she has gained, stating: ‘I am lucky … I have a multi-hire job, so I gained experience in Food and Beverage and House Keeping. I know I have talent in both jobs. Moreover, I am able to improve my English ability. It is a good challenge!’ (Correira 2013). A male colleague echoed her sentiments: ‘I don’t see it as working. It is about learning … English, knowledge about Australian work culture, to be on time, to be focused …
and work etiquette’ (Pereira 2013). The Timorese workers’ enthusiasm for the SWP has not gone unnoticed. In particular, employers in the hospitality sector have praised their Timorese staff for excellent work performance and dedication to learning, enabling several workers to be promoted to supervisory positions.

However, SWP workers may face physical and cultural challenges in the workplace. A horticulture worker explained: ‘the challenges are bad weather, such as hail, strong winds, high temperatures (more than 33 degrees Celsius). The employer wants us to work quickly, and sometimes we are slow, so the employer got angry. But we were slow because we were tired’ (Ximenes 2013). Another worker highlighted difficulty in her cross-cultural interactions, ‘I found it difficult to understand in terms of language communication, and also some culture life in Australia is not the same as ours, and found it very difficult to adjust’ (da Costa 2013). By addressing workplace physical stress, language and cultural barriers, the SWP can ensure the wellbeing of workers, and improve their productivity.

Overseas remittances can play a key part in the economy of developing countries. In 2012–13, the Timorese SWP workers interviewed for this study each earned AUD$10,000–18,000 (or US$9,400–16,900) in their five- to six-month period in Australia. Some were able to build new houses. A young male worker redistributed his earnings to his parents and younger siblings in Dili, supported his sister’s tertiary education in Indonesia, and bought land to raise cattle on the south coast. A female worker assisted her sister and mother, both widows, to start a small family business, and pay school fees for her nephews and nieces. An older male worker, a single father, supports his daughters through university while aspiring to start a transportation business. In contrast to migrants living abroad for long periods of time, SWP participants return seasonally with savings and are able to impart new-found skills and knowledge with fellow East Timorese.

Australian employers stand to gain from harnessing the labour potential of the East Timorese, and Curtain, Davies and Howes (2013) advocate for a regional employment strategy to give Timor-Leste access to wider employment and training opportunities. With recent changes to international aid governance and the wider employment and training opportunities. With recent changes to international aid governance and the wider Pacific.

SWP could fill any potential gap in vocational-related training for the people of Timor-Leste at minimal cost to Australia. This will greatly assist Timor-Leste expand its economic base, build better ties with Australia through direct cross-cultural engagement, and fulfil Australia’s obligation to facilitate regional development throughout Melanesia and the Pacific.

References

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The State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) is one of the most vibrant units in the ANU College of Asia & the Pacific and is a recognised leading centre for multi-disciplinary research on contemporary Melanesia, Timor-Leste and the wider Pacific.