



# *Iso Iso: the first ni-Vanuatu guest workers in New Zealand*

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Vanuatu was one of the first countries to take advantage of the agricultural guest worker scheme for Pacific island states begun in New Zealand in 2007. After a pilot venture in 2007, larger numbers of workers were recruited in 2008, especially from Tanna. The recruits represented a close cross-section of the island population. This article looks at their objectives, and the successes and failures of the scheme so far.

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In the past two years, there has been keen interest in the development of schemes to bring short-term guest workers from Pacific island states to New Zealand and Australia. Most Pacific island states have experienced limited economic growth, have become increasingly dependent on remittances from overseas migrants in the Pacific Rim and have sought some kind of 'special relationship' involving migration to New Zealand and Australia. Studies have advocated short-term migration for employment in the agricultural sector, where labour shortages exist, enabling Pacific islanders to work temporarily overseas and return home after a period of less than a year (for example, ADB 2005; Maclellan and Mares 2007; World Bank 2006). The convoluted history of advocacy and Pacific island pressure on metropolitan states for

labour migration ended in 2007 when New Zealand established a Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) work scheme that provided seasonal employment in the agricultural industry (Connell 2006; Ramasamy et al. 2008). Australia will establish a similar scheme in 2009; hence lessons from the New Zealand experience have wider importance.

Priority in the RSE scheme was given to five 'kick-start' states—Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu and Kiribati—although Solomon Islands took up more positions than either Kiribati or Tuvalu. The scheme was loosely modelled on a similar scheme operating between Canada and the Caribbean islands and was strongly supported by the Pacific office of the World Bank (World Bank 2006; Luthria 2008). There were few other contemporary



precedents for the RSE scheme but rural labour migration policies—effectively ‘guest worker’ schemes—were of considerable value two decades ago to New Zealand and Fiji, ending only when New Zealand imposed political sanctions on Fiji (Levick and Bedford 1988). Precedents have been positive.

New Zealand has recently experienced a substantial shortage of agricultural labour because of rapid growth in the horticulture and viticulture sectors and relatively low national unemployment, and because potential workers choose not to be employed in agricultural work, which is regarded as too demanding, unpleasant, remote and poorly paid. Some of that work has been undertaken by the temporary workforce of backpackers, most of whom work for limited and uncertain durations, and an adequate workforce is rarely available.

A pilot version of the RSE scheme began in 2007. By July 2008, after 16 months, it had employed people from six Pacific island countries and a few from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. More than 1,720 Pacific islanders (including 961 from Vanuatu) were then employed in orchards and vineyards in several parts of the country (including Hawke’s Bay, Bay of Plenty, Nelson, Marlborough and Otago) and as many as 1,800 (including 746 from Vanuatu) had finished their contracts and returned home. It was intended to provide a maximum of 5,000 seasonal jobs and, numerically, the scheme was already successful, especially in Vanuatu. This study seeks to develop a preliminary analysis of the earliest phases of the RSE scheme for the island of Tanna, Vanuatu. Data were collected from interviews with intending and returned workers in south-east Tanna, supplemented by limited documentary material.

## Vanuatu

Vanuatu is regarded by the United Nations as a least-developed country, with a population of 225,000 people scattered across 65 populated islands. The economy of Vanuatu is uneven, it has exhibited limited growth in recent years, per capita income levels have not increased significantly (and could have decreased in the past two years), more than 40 per cent of the population lives below the poverty level and unemployment and under-employment are rising. There is no obvious indication that any of these trends can be reversed easily in the near future, despite growth in tourism (UNDP 2005; Henckel 2006; Duncan 2008). Not surprisingly, Vanuatu has sought access to overseas employment programs.

The island of Tanna has experienced limited economic development and considerable out-migration, with a significant proportion of the population of the capital, Port Vila, coming from Tanna. Tanna has a population of about 21,000 and more than 100 villages. Tourism, to the Mount Yasur volcano and a handful of ‘custom villages’, coffee production and limited market sales provide sources of income for some, but subsistence agriculture is universally crucial. Cash incomes are small and infrastructure is limited (there are no sealed roads and limited access to piped water); the 2006 *Household Income and Expenditure Survey* (HIES) of Vanuatu (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2007) showed that 63 per cent of all houses in Tanna were ‘traditional’ (made of impermanent materials), 33 per cent of houses had access to piped water (usually shared), just 1 per cent had a flush toilet and 90 per cent were without electricity. While the HIES calculated that national per capita income was 155,650 vatu (A\$1,800), Tafea Province—dominated by Tanna—had one of the lowest provincial incomes (102,924 vatu or A\$1,191) (Vanuatu



National Statistics Office 2007). South-east Tanna has an even lower per capita income since neither tourism nor coffee growing is significant there. Remittances are a significant source of income in most villages including those in south-east Tanna (Winthorpe 2004).

### The New Zealand RSE scheme

The RSE scheme allows seasonal labourers to migrate to New Zealand to work in the horticulture and viticulture industries 'if there are no New Zealanders available to work'—a constraint that is hardly binding due to New Zealand's high employment rate. The Ministry of Social Development monitors the labour market in order to declare an area a region with seasonal labour shortages when there are not enough New Zealanders to fill the vacancies. Potential employers apply to the New Zealand Department of Labour to recruit workers from the Pacific island states and are assessed by the department to ensure that the facilities provided for the migrant workers—notably, reasonably priced accommodation—are of an appropriate standard. By mid 2008, some 115 employers had been given official RSE status.

Workers can stay in New Zealand for up to seven months in an 11-month period, depending on their contract. New Zealand employers can, however, employ the same workers year after year, which provides an incentive for ni-Vanuatu workers to work hard and for New Zealand employers to establish long-term relationships and invest in training and skill development. Workers enjoy the same labour rights and protections as New Zealanders and should receive a wage no less than the statutory minimum (NZ\$12 an hour), according to particular contracts. The minimum hourly salary in New Zealand is roughly equal

to the unskilled daily wage in Port Vila. Employers are responsible for 'meeting and greeting' the workers at the airport in New Zealand, taking them to the place of work and, eventually, assisting their departure.

### The RSE scheme in Vanuatu

The Vanuatu Department of Labour licenses local employment agents to recruit for New Zealand employers. They are also responsible for pre-departure briefings for the workers (covering topics such as health insurance, trade unions and means of remitting income). Early in 2008, some 21 agents were formally registered with the Vanuatu Department of Labour. Some New Zealand employers, with prior experience of Vanuatu, have chosen to recruit directly without the assistance of agents.

Agents are expected to compile lists of 'work-ready' people who have police and medical certificates and the support of a community leader such as a chief or pastor confirming that they are of good character. In practice, in south-east Tanna, no one received a character reference but medical and police clearances were required. Difficulties were experienced with some agents who cheated some ni-Vanuatu applicants, gave unrealistic expectations or were biased towards their own family members. In Tanna, however, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), acting as an agent, gave migration opportunities to whoever wanted to put their name forward, which effectively amounted to a random selection across Tanna. Anyone, male or female, who was over the age of 21, had no police record, did not have tuberculosis or any other communicable disease and was of 'good character', could register with an agent. University graduates were excluded, as Vanuatu sought not to lose any of its relatively small pool of highly skilled workers.



In the Torres island group, the community selected potential workers on the grounds that they were reliable or that they had particular needs. Older men were usually chosen since it was anticipated that they would be most reliable and bring the most money back. In Ambrym, people were chosen who worked hard, could follow instructions and were not overly dependent on cigarettes, alcohol and kava (McKenzie, Martinez and Winters 2008:208). Communities sponsored some workers so that their income would support community needs such as a shared water tank. From place to place, the choice of worker varied between households, pastors and locals chiefs, but in Tanna it tended to be the decision of particular households. The Department of Labour sought to ensure that each departing group had a leader, usually a pastor, chief or other elder. About 20 per cent of the first group of workers were women, whose skills were preferred for activities such as grading fruit.

Workers had to pay for a medical and police certificate and an RSE visa fee, and had to have passports and birth and marriage certificates. These documents alone cost 16,000 vatu (A\$185). Workers also had to pay half of their airfare (the employers paid the other half), resulting in a total cost of as much as 80,000 vatu (A\$925)—a very large sum for most ni-Vanuatu. In some cases, these funds were provided by employers and subsequently refunded by the workers. (The Tanna non-government organisation that recruited workers from south-east Tanna for the Bay of Plenty budgeted 150,000 vatu [A\$1,750] for advance payments covering the return airfare from Port Vila to Auckland and on to the Bay of Plenty; a NZ\$170 advance on salary, some food, the first fortnight's rent, some winter clothes and an international driver's licence—since some accommodation was far from work and driving might be necessary.)

This money was organised as a loan from Westpac Bank and had to be repaid at a rate of NZ\$175 a week, which meant about 11 weeks of reduced income in New Zealand.

Relatively little information is available on those workers who were in the 2007 pilot scheme. The first group of 45 ni-Vanuatu workers in the 2007 pilot scheme worked for five months as grape and cherry pickers in Otago. By the end of the year, some 246 additional ni-Vanuatu had arrived in New Zealand under the scheme and were employed in a wider range of agricultural activities (Maclellan 2008). There is some indication that those who went in the first group were keen to return to New Zealand. Many of this early group were quickly chosen from the peri-urban area of Port Vila, including some of the most affluent villages in the country, such as Mele, rather than from more remote rural areas of need.

The rationale for participating was income generation. Intending participants in Tanna were told that they would bring back about A\$4,000 depending on how hard they worked and how they used their money. One Tannese from the pilot scheme, seeking to return for five years, stated, 'I want to build a good house for my family and put in a solar panel so my kids can have lights to study and read books. After that I want to start a small business, maybe buy a rental house in Port Vila' (quoted in McDonald 2008:4). (To ensure that income returned, some families set allowance limits for the workers of NZ\$40 a week a person, after accommodation and group food purchases, for clothes, entertainment and other goods such as a mobile phone.) At least one member of the first group brought back about A\$6,000 from strawberry picking and was embarking on a substantial house expansion; other estimates of earnings were similar, if not quite as high, with the World Bank estimating that most of the first group returned with about NZ\$3,000 each



(Maclellan 2008; *Pacnews*, 11 July 2007). As a group of Tongan workers in the first phase sent back an estimated NZ\$3–7,000 after seven months' work (Riley 2008), this might have been about the norm. Many of those involved in the first phase of the scheme were highly motivated (as might be expected from a first cohort), yet while some managed to set up small businesses on return, for some at least, the income brought home had little long-term impact and many returnees had exhausted their income within two or three months. This could have been the key reason for their later desire to return to New Zealand.

Agents were usually based in Port Vila but, because workers came from different parts of the country, recruitment also covered various regions. The Vanuatu Department of Labour sought an equitable geographical spread of recruitment. (The notion of equity is geographical rather than based on need, which is considerable on some small, densely populated islands.) Some groups have been specifically recruited from particular islands, either by agents or New Zealand employers familiar with those islands. One hundred workers recruited for one Nelson employer were all from the two small islands of Epi and Lamén (*Nelson Mail*, 19 February 2008). In Epi and Tanna, New Zealand employers have recruited directly. Because many Port Vila residents are from Tanna, there has been some bias towards that island; Tanna also has a large population with some experience of work outside the island.

The first group of more than 300 workers was recruited from all parts of Tanna early in 2008. The next section of this paper examines who these recruits were and why they wanted to work in New Zealand, with particular reference to those in and around villages in south-East Tanna and their initial experiences.

## Tanna guest workers

An NGO called Nalmaluien Kape Ramar Mene (NKRM) was established in Tanna in 2007 by a Tannese man Raymond Tufler and a New Zealand woman Wendy Griffin to develop local income-generating activities. Tufler, who came from south-east Tanna, had been a schoolteacher and Griffin had worked for UNICEF in Bhutan and elsewhere. After setting up NKRM, they bought one of the agent licences and established a specific organisation for recruitment: Tankiwi. Tankiwi engaged in the bureaucratic component, such as obtaining visas. NKRM organised the labour recruitment and training and linked up with New Zealand company Big Toe, a broadly philanthropic organisation that aimed to help developing countries, which had links with New Zealand employers and had previously hired workers from Indonesia. In September 2007, representatives of Big Toe flew to Tanna to meet local leaders and NKRM, and the Tanna scheme followed.

The main New Zealand employer initially sought about 400 workers, and this number proved too difficult for Tanna alone to organise in a few months, so that about 320 workers were recruited from Tanna and 56 came from Port Vila (mainly from the Blacksands settlement on the edge of the city, where many Tannese live) to make up the numbers. Organising more than 300 workers from Tanna tested the island's capacity, as few ni-Vanuatu had birth or marriage certificates, passports or money to obtain such things. NKRM organised workshops on cultural adjustment (covering topics ranging from New Zealand customs, including rugby, to gender equality and the expectations of employers), financial responsibility, health and other issues. Participants had to attend the workshops, set up bank accounts based in Tanna (so that the income would return to Tanna),



donate NZ\$250 to a community fund (a sum that would be doubled by World Vision New Zealand) and use the group flights that would return people directly to Tanna rather than through Port Vila (where the pilot program suggested that a proportion of funds were absorbed or 'lost'). Community projects that were discussed included repainting and re-roofing primary schools and other public buildings. If they followed these conditions, and the New Zealand employers continued the scheme, the workers would be offered the option of returning in subsequent years.

NKRM recognised that by participating in the scheme many women would become somewhat independent for the first time in their lives. Although NKRM intended to develop a monthly newsletter so that news and information would travel both ways, the greatest communication links were provided by reasonably expensive mobile-to-mobile or landline phone calls (more than A\$1 a minute) and mailed photos between participants and their families. While mobile phone and Internet access was increasing dramatically, these cheaper but technologically complex forms of communication were underutilised since most workers were under-educated.

NKRM established guidelines for the selection of recruits. These guidelines were similar to processes elsewhere, although independent New Zealand recruiters used slightly different procedures (Hammond and Connell 2009). First, workers had to be married, on the assumption that married couples had clear needs and that this was a measure of stability. One partner had to stay behind. A few older couples were part of the scheme, where 'older' meant that their children had grown up. For group harmony, such couples neither worked nor lived together in New Zealand. Second, workers had to be healthy and aged over 25 and less than 55—an age spread beyond

the relatively young was intended to ensure a degree of stability. Third, it was intended that there be a roughly even divide of men and women due to the nature and needs of the work in New Zealand (with men doing more challenging work outdoors and women involved in packing). In the end, NKRM achieved only 26 per cent female participation, although that was marginally higher than the Vanuatu average of 22 per cent (McKenzie et al. 2008).

While the scheme offered an opportunity for women to be more or less independent and develop or enhance such skills as literacy, women were more likely than men to be conservative. More significantly, there was a general view, at least within NKRM, that women had the most crucial role in community life at home, especially in bringing up children. Some men were reluctant to allow their wives to participate. No significance was attached to any prior experience elsewhere and indeed few people had any relevant work experience. Village elders (chiefs or pastors) were regularly advised and consulted, as individuals put their own names forward.

Data were obtained on more than 300 recruits leaving Tanna, but the data were incomplete for some recruits and questions. Recruits came from throughout Tanna, and were relatively evenly distributed in particular areas such as Whitesands, so there was no obvious spatial bias. This was one of the goals of NKRM, so that each community could absorb the loss of migrants without too much stress. Most were relatively young: the average age being 34.5 for women and 35.5 for men. On average, those chosen had 2.7 children, thus households were only slightly smaller than the Tafea average of 5.1.

Almost all recruits were subsistence agriculturalists, with their usual source of income being almost solely market sales of produce. Of 113 people who indicated their current work activity, some 99 (76 per cent)



listed subsistence agriculture and related marketing. A minority had wage or salary employment, such as being employed in a store or as a driver, electrician or tour guide. Incomes were correspondingly low. When asked their incomes for the previous year (a task that would have defied almost all the recruits), a significant minority (20 per cent) simply stated 10,000 vatu (A\$115), which was the single most preferred figure. Fourteen individuals (10 per cent) claimed to have received no cash income, or less than 10,000 vatu. Overall, some 73 per cent of the households had incomes of less than 50,000 vatu. Some 23 households (20 per cent) claimed incomes of more than 100,000 vatu. While a previous study across three islands suggested that the ni-Vanuatu guest workers were on average from wealthier and better-educated families (McKenzie et al. 2008), there was no evidence of this from the large Tanna sample discussed here. Indeed, in south-east Tanna, there was community acceptance that the recruits were not wealthy people and there was no resentment over their selection.

The workers' education was limited. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of the workers had never gone beyond primary school. The remainder had been to high school but might not have completed it. None had any other educational qualification. Their self-professed English-speaking ability ranged from none (45 of 321: 12 per cent) to excellent (25 of 321: 8 per cent). On balance, therefore, the recruits were poorly educated, had little facility in English and came from low-income households. This indicates that the recruits represented a reasonable cross-section of the population of Tanna (leaving out only those few with secure urban jobs, or teachers), emphasising the equity of selection.

Acquiring additional income was the key (and almost only) reason for wishing to go; Tannese aspirations thus accorded with

those of others (McKenzie et al. 2008). There is little agricultural employment in Tanna and, other than a handful of public sector jobs and distant markets, few alternative sources of income. General interest and the excitement of it all were at best secondary reasons. A degree of conservatism was also evident among the workers, with most signing on for less than the possible seven months, and only 56 per cent signing on for six months or more (McKenzie et al. 2008). Goals could become more subtle and ambitious and times extend once the scheme has become established.

Three key goals shaped the intended use of the money. Much the most important objective was to pay school fees (roughly 40,000 vatu a year, plus transport costs, for high school, and 9,000 vatu for primary school). There is a widespread perception that those who have completed high school are relatively successful, and a parallel recognition that relatively few Tannese children do complete high school because of the costs that are involved (especially when families have several children). Education offers the possibility of a job in the public service or tourism sector, and offers an opportunity to break the cycle of attachment to agriculture. Some 77 recruits (61 per cent) listed school fees as their first priority. Indeed, 10 of the 12 recruits who had never been to school listed school fees as their priority, and those who indicated other priorities usually also listed school fees.

Business (25 per cent) was the second most important category, while housing (13 per cent) came third. There was no indication of the kind of businesses people were seeking to establish, but few had ideas beyond the familiar stores. The principal material objective was house construction. Most people sought to build a house of permanent material that needed less frequent replacement, was more durable and dry in wet weather and had an iron



roof, gutters and a tank for direct access to drinking water. Two telecommunications companies were building mobile phone towers on Tanna and access to mobile phones (land lines being inaccessible and expensive to own and use) was expected to be one 'investment' by returning guest workers. Small and cheap solar panels (sold in south-east Tanna by the partner of one early guest worker) were also popular and enabled regular lighting, which was not possible with diesel generators.

The intentions of most guest workers could be summarised in the words of one 32-year-old man, who had three children: '[W]e are going because life here is hard. It is hard to pay for school fees and it is hard to earn cash. I want to go to work, to earn some small money and pay for school fees and a [modern] house for me.' A 25-year-old woman with one son said, 'I want to build a house for my son and family: a house with an iron roof to catch water. The money I earn can pay for the building materials that we cannot afford if I do not go.' One older man was relatively unusual in expressing business aspirations: 'I am going to build a water tank [an underground, concrete one] and a bungalow for tourism. We have to carry water a long way from the ocean every day. If I had water then I could advertise the bungalow and more tourists would come. If the money is good then I will also get a loan for a truck.' He also expressed one other, more general perspective: 'If the work is good then I will come back after six months' work and rest for six months and then go back again. But if the work is no good or it is too hard then I will stay here.'

None expressed any interest in developing more extensive agricultural schemes, despite the significance of coffee in Tanna, which reflects land shortages, a limited focus on agricultural development, some disdain for agriculture and limited initial expectations. For all the recruits,

their goals were straightforward, centred on immediate basic needs; what might be earned seemed an impossible dream; none had any experience of large sums of money; and few had business aspirations.

At various meetings before departure, guest workers discussed their anticipated lives in New Zealand. The discussions covered expectations that they would behave properly overseas, for their own good and to safeguard the status of the scheme. Some groups drew up codes of conduct, covering issues such as the consumption of alcohol (Hammond and Connell 2009). The final departure of the group was accompanied by a degree of sadness, tears and uncertainty. For virtually the first time, New Zealand began to take on its name in the south-east Tanna language: *Iso Iso* (far, far away). Women, especially, realised that they would miss their children and other kin and, recognising what was entailed, were beginning to have second thoughts.

## Early days in New Zealand

As the scheme progressed through 2008, it became evident that certain problems had not been foreseen. Farmers had not necessarily estimated effectively how much labour would be required to harvest crops, since that was largely impossible. Kiwi-fruit farming was particularly unpredictable, since a wet season reduced production and most farmers overestimated their needs. Farmers sought to reduce their expenditure by giving only the bare minimum of hours to the workers and hence reducing their likelihood of saving. More spare time also meant more pressure to spend money on recreational activities such as drinking. (A rather different problem was that some men on return to Vanuatu were claiming that their work had been reduced to explain their lack of income, which they had already





spent unproductively). Unusually cold weather, in the South Island especially, made work challenging and unpleasant for many workers. While the year posed seasonal climatic problems, however, it was not an unusually difficult year for agriculture.

Some ni-Vanuatu were therefore unemployed for significant periods and others were rarely employed long enough to cover their weekly living costs of NZ\$220 plus their loan interest payments of NZ\$55. For some workers, it took three months before they had paid off their start-up loan. This meant negligible savings for workers who returned after just three to four months. For many workers, this was the first time they had access to significant amounts of cash and reconciling earnings with savings was challenging. One participant observed that 'this is the first bank account in my family and since I did not go to [high] school it is hard to use [cards] and [bank books]'.

Nevertheless, in both phases, workers gained incomes. Limited available evidence from the pilot phase suggests that in most cases ni-Vanuatu workers remitted money and brought back significant sums of money. Even before leaving Tanna, they had made a contribution to the economy through doctors' and police fees, and taxi fares in visiting town to organise such things. Some discovered that many things, such as showers in caravan parks, cost money and warm clothes had to be bought. While some wages were spent on short-term personal goals in New Zealand, this was expected. Some significant expenditure was highly productive, such as one village group combining to ship home a crate of chainsaws and other high-cost equipment. A significant proportion of wages returned to Vanuatu.

Reported incomes varied considerably. One worker from the pilot scheme returned to Tanna with a reported A\$4,000, much

of which was spent on building materials. Another estimated a final sum of A\$4,200. These figures accord with other early estimates (McKenzie et al. 2008:223). A group of 40 workers in the South Island received gross incomes of up to NZ\$10,000 in just 14 weeks; but, after living costs and loan repayments, savings of only NZ\$1,500–2,800 were taken back to Vanuatu. A larger group of 120 ni-Vanuatu returnees in October 2008 was estimated to have brought back about US\$3,000 each, with the most successful workers saving US\$5,000 and the least successful about 150,000 vatu (about US\$1,200) (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 31 October 2008). In contrast, a later group of about 70 workers from the Lenakel area reputedly returned with no savings. Some workers were frustrated with unanticipated deductions from wages for things that were poorly understood, including taxation.

In Whitesands, more permanent houses, or houses with iron roofs, were being built. One returnee was constructing a small store for his daughter to operate and was planning on returning to New Zealand for a second season to get more cash to invest in the store. Since there are already three stores within a 100-metre radius, the limitations to much small-scale business development are evident. Others were seeking to build brick houses and purchase water tanks. One worker had invested in vanilla and kava production in his home island of Ambrym (Logan 2008). Returning workers from Lolihor (Ambrym) contributed 904,000 vatu to the local development association and 500,000 vatu to the Weweran Microfinance Scheme (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 2 July 2008). In other words, returnees were doing what they had initially intended to do, while there was some benefit to community projects. Use of overseas income was fitting into a familiar pattern of remittance use in the island Pacific: initially on education and consumption and then on welfare gains



(such as improved housing), eventually followed by investment in small-scale enterprises (Connell and Brown 2005). Vanuatu's Interior Minister estimated that workers had brought back about 600 million vatu (A\$8 million) by May 2008 (Maclellan 2008), representing the largest component of Vanuatu's gross domestic product (GDP) after tourism.

Some Tannese from the pilot scheme stayed to advise the next wave on 'how to buy food and use electric stuff' (quoted in McDonald 2008). Guest workers kept in touch with Tanna by phone, perhaps once every two weeks, but found this expensive. Beyond personal details, the topics discussed included the long work hours, the cold and the distance between workplaces, friends and town. There were a few minor car accidents and one woman was badly injured when she was hit by a car and her husband flew to New Zealand to be with her and help her return home. Accommodation was sometimes overcrowded, leaky and cold, and local churches had to intervene on the workers' behalf and provide food and accommodation (Logan 2008:40). In Tanna, those who remained at home absorbed extra domestic and agricultural work without obvious problems or rancour (although this was only for one crop-planting season), as they attached considerable importance to the scheme. One family dispute thus ended with the argument that 'your father is not working hard in New Zealand for you to neglect your school [studies]'. Village residents thus made their own contribution to the scheme's outcome.

Unlike some Polynesian and i-Kiribati groups, with the ni-Vanuatu there was no overstaying. Among other things, unfamiliarity and the lack of an established ni-Vanuatu population in New Zealand have discouraged that, whereas Polynesian workers have urban relatives to stay with and are able to compare their circumstances

with more onerous rural life. The onus for preventing overstaying has been placed on the employers, who may be fined by the Department of Immigration. About 10 workers were sent back after minor problems (such as getting drunk and not turning up for work). A couple of workers became involved in problematic emotional entanglements.

Ni-Vanuatu workers acquired some new skills while working in New Zealand, although these were largely limited to the agricultural sector and the nature of agricultural work in New Zealand limited transferability to Vanuatu. Some workers could gain related skills such as work discipline, and some were given impromptu training in computers and welding. Some New Zealand employers have valued the emerging availability of such skilled workers within Vanuatu and have already sought to invest in agriculture in Vanuatu and set up joint ventures with returned workers. If this occurs, it will counter any urban bias in the use of remittances and the experience of the returnees.

Of a very small group of Whitesands villagers, four of the seven wished to return to New Zealand. Overall, many Tannese wished to return, while some of those who found the work hard considered that younger men or their sons should go in future. Women particularly seemed to have found the work, and being away from their families, hard but there was enough interest in the community for these empty spots to be filled in the next year. Some of the more successful workers welcomed the future challenge of working in Australia.

The problems in the early phases were partly unavoidable and partly due to inadequate pastoral care for inexperienced workers unfamiliar with New Zealand. Such problems were not confined to ni-Vanuatu guest workers, and no scheme could exclude unscrupulous employers (or poor workers),



at least in the first round. The fact, however, that Cook Islanders working on six-month agricultural contracts in 2006 were left in remote valleys without transport, were overworked and paid belatedly, lacked warm blankets and food supplies at times, but had 'no choice but to take on contracts they knew were exploitative' (Alexeyeff 2008:144) indicated that certain problems could recur without careful monitoring.

## Conclusion

Evidence from the Vanuatu experience and elsewhere, limited though it is, suggests that agricultural guest worker schemes, despite diverse concerns, do benefit countries, businesses and the workers. They can serve the needs of the poor more effectively than many forms of aid. Thirty years ago, the Fijian Minister of Labour argued that the provision of overseas employment was 'the greatest form of overseas aid any government can offer' (quoted in *Fiji Times*, 19 December 1977). This could now be true for Vanuatu. Thus far, the RSE scheme has been largely positive for New Zealand and for Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu workers have proved to be a reliable source of labour, so reducing training times and costs. Migrant workers have filled vacancies in the agricultural sector, have not displaced local workers, made some contribution to local society and returned to Vanuatu at or before the end of the contract period. Somewhat contentiously, the New Zealand Deputy High Commissioner has described them as a 'most presentable good quality product'. New Zealand employers have welcomed and accepted the scheme, in some cases being able to meet seasonal labour needs for the first time in years (Riley 2008), and have sought its continuation and expansion. There has been some discussion of extending the scheme into other areas

of labour shortage including home care, tourism and construction.

While the evidence for Vanuatu remains more speculative, there have been significant income gains. Ni-Vanuatu have brought back variable amounts of income but have rarely returned empty-handed. While that income has benefited welfare goals, notably in housing and education, it is unlikely to have any long-term economic effects at the village level. Ironically, for many years, villagers in south-east Tanna have aspired to establish village enterprises as a means of moving away from internal labour migration (Bastin 1985). There is no reason to suppose that future incomes from the RSE scheme will fall.

At least a majority of workers have been chosen (or have chosen themselves) according to perceived needs; thus the scheme makes a contribution to local and regional equity, despite earlier concerns (McKenzie, Martinez and Winters 2008), as it has done in Tonga (Gibson, McKenzie and Rohorua 2008). While most workers have come from a few large islands, notably Tanna, the Vanuatu Department of Labour is seeking to ensure that more workers come from outer islands in subsequent years (Nadkarni 2008). The RSE scheme was more equitable than the established Pacific Access Category (PAC), in which workers from four island states had access to employment in New Zealand as long as they had job offers (Gibson and McKenzie 2007). The availability of contract renewal suggests that equity might be less well served in future if the same workers return repeatedly in subsequent years. Return migration reduces training costs and, presumably, allows those best suited to the scheme—in their own perceptions or those of employers—to be most involved. If future numbers remain limited, however, New Zealand selectivity will ensure that only the best workers will be chosen.



The role of one particular NGO, NKRM, has been crucial to establishing the scheme successfully in Tanna, particularly in linking workers with employers, ensuring that prospective workers have the appropriate documents and providing some preliminary workshops to reduce the extent of culture shock. In future years, this could be less necessary but the role of agents, or some intermediaries, will be crucial in establishing, maintaining and supporting links and enabling some degree of equity. NKRM has also considered issues such as the level of remittances that will stimulate new patterns of high school attendance and hospital use, and if limits need to be imposed to prevent too many people of working age leaving villages. The RSE scheme and such debates are in their infancy. After less than two years, it has largely been a success, providing a model that informs the future Australian scheme.

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