



Kiribati and Climate Displacement: How the Pacific Engagement Visa can help

Akka Rimon

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The introduction of Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) represents a new era for Pacific migration. [Announced](#) in May 2022, the PEV will provide a new climate security pathway for small islands. However, it is not clear how the new visas will be allocated across the Pacific, or whether preferential access will be given to smaller island nations like Kiribati, which are more vulnerable to rising sea levels. This In Brief explores the potential opportunities the PEV could provide Kiribati given that there are no international laws or other mechanisms to protect climate-displaced persons (McAdam 2012). I-Kiribati see the new visa as an expression of *te utu* (family) values, in particular the obligation of families to assist each other in times of needs. By helping populations most affected by climate change, Australia is showing regional leadership.

As part of the first permanent migration scheme for workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste, the PEV is modelled on New Zealand's [Pacific Access Category](#), which began in 2001. Commencing in mid-2023, the visa will allow for 3000 workers to come to Australia annually. In contrast to the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility program (PALM) – which includes the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and the associated Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and which allow only for temporary work – the PEV offers the opportunity for permanent residency, including for family members. Visas will be allocated via ballot, although how many will be allocated to each country remains unknown. The Labor government initially announced a pro rata selection formula that offered higher quotas for countries with larger populations but, similar to Howes (22/7/2022) and Curtain et al. (13/10/2022), this In Brief argues that the formula be strategically weighted in favour of countries that are most affected by climate change and that have less access to Australia. Ideally, the visa should benefit the countries most impacted by economic and climate security factors (Howes 22/7/2022). For, as Curtain et al. (2022:2) insist, 'it is time for a new regional compact', and for Australia to address international mobility, rapid population growth and climate change in the region.

What does the Pacific Engagement Visa mean for Kiribati?

Kiribati is located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, halfway between Australia and Hawai'i. Its total land area of 811 square kilometres is dispersed over 3.5 million kilometres of ocean, which is approximately the size of the Indian subcontinent. It is the only country in the world to straddle all four hemispheres. Although usually labelled a small island country, Kiribati is essentially a big ocean state and, as it stands not more than three metres above sea level, it is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Donner and Webber 2014). Its meagre land mass, thin water table and the vast surrounding ocean pose existential threats that make competition and conflict over resources a day-to-day reality. Given the limited options for adaptation to these pressures, the PEV provides a promise of renewed hope. While other Pacific Island countries may regard the visa as an opportunity to move to greener economic pastures, for Kiribati it offers a lifeline in the face of climate displacement.

While Kiribati's participation in PALM has been limited, the new PEV program could offer significant value. The [economy](#) of Kiribati is small, and its prospects for growth are limited by its rapidly growing population of nearly 120,000 people, its remoteness, both externally – being distant from major trading routes – and internally, as a dispersed country. With a miniscule private sector, the government is under immense pressure to deal with challenges related to population growth, high youth unemployment and climate change. The over-burdened government is in dire need of [economic revenue expansion](#) and access to markets, including access by its people to international labour markets (Government of Kiribati 2022). The PEV is in accordance with the 'migration with dignity' policy of the former Tong government, which empowers people to migrate with skills, should they wish to do so. The current Maamau administration promotes on-shore resilience, including labour mobility. In addition to New Zealand, which takes 75 I-Kiribati each year, the PEV now provides a second alternative home.

The role of remittances

Jobs and economic opportunities in other nations are returned to Kiribati in the form of remittances, which create economic growth. For a developing economy like Kiribati's, remittances are among the largest sources of foreign income. Since 1968, men from Kiribati have worked on international merchant boats and sent home their earnings as remittances, which now represent a vital income earner for the country (Dung et al. 2022). Remittances serve as a form of informal social protection as they bolster family finances and support economic resilience against climate impacts. According to Doan and Petrou (24/2/2022), the households of 91 per cent of Pacific migrant workers who come to Australia and New Zealand (including from Kiribati), rely heavily on remittances. Contrary to the brain-drain discourse often found in discussions of migration, it is younger I-Kiribati who are migrating for low and semi-skilled jobs. Furthermore, the growing incapacity of Kiribati's government to provide employment and build the population's economic wellbeing against climate impacts leaves people with little alternative.

Promotion of the Kiribati concept of *te utu*

Te utu (family) is of central importance to the culture of Kiribati (and the Pacific more generally). Through the PEV program, the Australian Albanese government has demonstrated its commitment to the Pacific family. This is a good expression of *te utu* values as it ensures members of the Pacific family can share in the resources owned by it, and are protected within its networks. Importantly, the PEV provides an opportunity for Australia to bolster its 'people to people' relations with Pacific countries. This new partnership affirms that Australia will not 'throw its weight around' but will uphold its climate commitment, notably through its re-engagement with the [Pacific family](#). The number of I-Kiribati workers in Australia has grown markedly since the 2006 introduction of the [Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative](#). This was followed by the introduction of the SWP in 2012 and the PLS in 2018. This growth has reinforced continued demand for the skills of I-Kiribati workers by Australian employers, and demonstrates their value to the Australian economy and society. It also validates the Kiribati training and recruiting systems. The result is a win-win relationship in which I-Kiribati workers meet skills needed in Australia whilst building their economic resilience and, via remittances, support families at home.

Regional action on climate change

To maximise benefits for low-lying islands, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) could examine how to integrate the aims of the [Boe Declaration](#) into PEV-style migration programs. This could help the PIF determine its position on the PEV program, and address the emerging

concerns of some member states about the impacts of brain drain and the climate crisis (Curtain 13/10/2022). Simultaneously, this assures Australia of a fully utilised program. However, given its withdrawal from the PIF, Kiribati may need to pursue this bilaterally with Australia. Another element for the PIF to consider is the recent passing of Australia's [Climate Change Act 2022](#). While this is a welcome move, affected islands may ask if the promised 43 per cent cut in emissions is adequate for a country that is the third-largest exporter of coal and gas. Is it enough to stop sea levels from rising? Will it compensate for loss and damage to the islands, and how can this climate policy incorporate (not contravene) the Boe Declaration?

Conclusion

The introduction of the PEV reinforces Australia's links with Pacific Island countries and its regional climate leadership. It will no doubt have a significant impact on the region, notably on low-lying island states that will utilise this pathway as a climate security option. Careful thought on the distribution of the ballot is therefore pivotal. This paper proposes that Australia considers granting smaller island states preferential access to the visa, as an economic adaptation to climate change.

Author notes

Akka Rimon is a PhD candidate at the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs and a recipient of an Australian Pacific Security College PhD Award.

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