

## Commentary: Labour Migration in and out of Sāmoa

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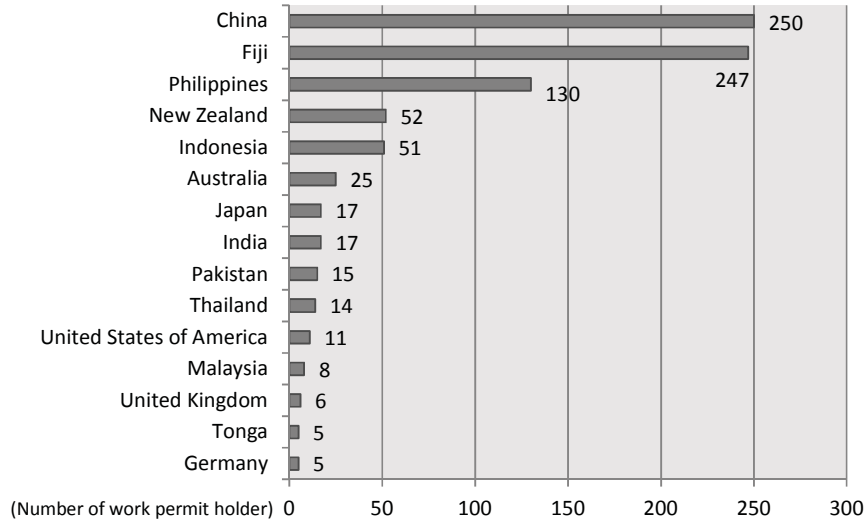
Why do people migrate? Experts tend to look for economic or political reasons to ascertain what pushes people to migrate and pulls them to particular places. Other less measurable factors include expanded opportunities, further education and the search for ‘the good life’. The world today has approximately 150.3 million labour migrants who move abroad for employment (ILO 2015a). While Sāmoa is no exception to this global trend, the contemporary flows of labour migration, especially into Sāmoa has yet to be comprehensively mapped.

Annually, approximately 2,000 Sāmoans are emigrating overseas through several avenues. In total, as of 2017, Sāmoans comprise 117,500 of migrants throughout the world (UN DESA 2017). While they have various reasons for migrating, the key driver of Sāmoans moving abroad is ‘having a better job to send money home’. In this regard, the majority of Sāmoans of working age who migrated overseas are considered international labour migrants. On a global scale the number of Sāmoan labour migrants is small; yet, the significance of their contributions to the national as well as household economies especially in the form of remittance is considerable. According to the report by Central Bank of Sāmoa (CBS 2017), Sāmoa receives about SAT\$35–40 million of private remittances per month, which is about USD\$164–187million per year. In fact, private remittances accounted 17.3 percent of GDP in 2016 (The World Bank 2017).

While some studies predicted a decline in Sāmoa’s migration-based remittances (Ahlburg 1991; Campbell 1992; Connell 1991), there is no evidence to suggest this is the case. The emigration of Sāmoans for short-term employment seems to have been growing continuously with the establishment of government-organized labour schemes that employ workers from Sāmoa. For example, from 2007 to 2012, about 6,400 Sāmoan citizens have taken a job in New Zealand in horticulture and viticulture industries under the Recognized Seasonal Employer scheme of New Zealand (ILO 2017). In July 2018, Australian government will commence the new labour scheme called the Pacific Labour Scheme that invites the citizen of Forum states to take up low and semi-skilled workers for up to three years. It will start with Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu, and will be extended to include Sāmoa in the second phase (Australian Government 2018). This scheme will help fulfill Australia’s labour shortage in areas like elderly care while it will definitely enhance the opportunity of labour emigration for Sāmoans.

The destination of Sāmoan emigration has primarily been New Zealand, Australia, and the United States with New Zealand accounting for 50 percent (ILO 2017, p106). This pattern is unlikely to change any time soon. The pattern of inward labour migration to Sāmoa, on the other hand, seems to have been changing gradually. As of 2013, Sāmoa has a stock of about 5,600 migrants in the country (UN 2014). According to a study by ILO (2017, p. 120), the majority of them are the citizens from American Sāmoa (35.3 percent), New Zealand (33.2 percent), the United States (8.2 percent), and Australia (7.4 percent). These “foreigners” include overseas born Sāmoans who returned to their genealogical homeland. However, these numbers do not necessarily reflect the diversity of foreigners working in Sāmoa today. The data based on the issuance of employment permit by Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Labour (MCIL) indicates much diverse population of labour migrants in Sāmoa in terms of their country of origin (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: Employment Permit Holders by Country of Origin (Top 15), June 2017– March 2018**



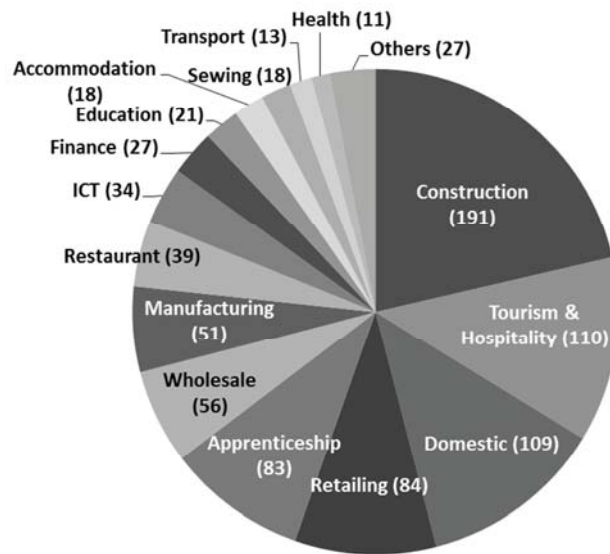
(Source: Foreign Employee Permit Issued June 2017 – March 2018, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Labour 2018).

According to MCIL (2017), employment permits are considered for non-Sāmoan citizens to work in specific industries, professions, and roles that have high demand due to shortages in the local labour market. The Ministry issues roughly 450 to 500 employment permits per year since this role was transferred from Immigration Office in 2013 (MCIL 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Since Figure 1 is based on the number of employment permit issued only from June 2017 to March 2018, this data probably differs from the actual number of labour migrant per country of origin. However, it does suggest a clear pattern that People’s Republic of China (China), Fiji, and Philippines have become key source countries of labour migration to Sāmoa, sending far more labourers than the traditional partners of New Zealand and Australia.

This pattern mirrors immigration trends in other Pacific states. The recent ILO statistics (2017: 121) indicate that people from China account around 10 percent of the entire immigrant population in Solomon Islands, Palau, Marshall Islands, and Tonga. Filipinos occupy 60 percent of immigrant population in Palau, 20 percent in Marshall Islands, and about five percent in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Fijians account over 40 percent of migrants in Tonga and Tuvalu, 20 percent in Kiribati, 10 percent in Vanuatu, and 4.5 percent in Cook Islands. Figure 1 also indicates that Sāmoa now attracts labourers from the countries that have had weak diplomatic and historical ties such as Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Thailand, and Malaysia. It can be inferred that the migration of Pakistanis and Indians were flowed through Fiji where Pakistanis (15.2 percent) and Indians (10.8 percent) have relatively large ratios to the entire immigration population in Fiji (ILO 2017: 121).

Figure 2 below shows the number of foreign labourers in Sāmoa based on the industry they work. Construction has the highest number of foreign labourers, followed by tourism and hospitality, and domestic works. These figures may not reflect actual numbers of labour migrants in each industry as the data used is limited to the holders of work permit issued between June 2017 and March 2018. Nevertheless, it provides valuable information, together with Figure 1, to grasp a picture of who these foreign workers are.

**Figure 1. Work Permit Holders by Industry, June 2017 – March 2018**



(Source: Foreign Employee Permit (June 2017-March 2018), Government of Sāmoa, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Labour 2018)

From the two figures, it can be inferred that a large portion of Chinese labourers (out of 250 employment permit holders) are construction workers who are in Sāmoa as part of China’s tied-aid projects that build large infrastructures. Chinese business owners are not necessarily included in the Figure 1 since they enter the country on different types of permit than employment permits while some of them are likely to be naturalized citizens of Sāmoa. According to volunteer teachers from China working in Sāmoa (personal communication, 4 May 2018), the majority of the Chinese immigrants in Sāmoa are originally from Guangdong and Fujian provinces that have a long history of international emigration (Ling and Morooka 2004). These two Chinese provinces have established strong diplomatic relationships with Sāmoa not only through migration but also through various forms of direct aid including sending medical teams, providing medical equipment, and scholarships (MPMC 2017, 2018).

Labourers from Fiji, on the other hand, can be divided into two groups of iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) and Indo-Fijians. Anecdotal evidence suggests that quite a few iTaukei women work in Sāmoa as domestic workers such as live-in housemaids and nannies. Interestingly, there are fewer Filipino housemaids seen in town now as they seem to have been replaced by iTaukei women. Indo-Fijian men, on the other hand, are often found in the field of ICT, taking relatively high positions like the new CEO of Digicel Sāmoa. Filipino labourers are visible in industries including domestic workers, sewing, ICT, health, and restaurant businesses. In addition to labour migrants from China, Fiji, and Philippines, there are Indian automobile business owners, Pakistani restaurant owners, Indonesian Catholic bishops, to name a few.

Accordingly, as the presence of foreign workers in Sāmoa has increased and become more visible, labour migration is likely to soon be a rising policy priority of the country. In fact, the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (MPMC) has finalized a policy for labour migration in 2015 (ILO 2017) and signed an agreement with MCIL to work together to strengthen the monitoring of employment permit holders (MCIL 2017). At the same time, the influx of foreign labourers has begun

to draw more attention from the public who question the rapid growth of foreign-owned businesses which some see as a threat to local businesses (Sanerivi 2018). A recent case before the court, some Fijian domestic workers claimed mistreatment by their Sāmoan employer has signaled that Sāmoa may need to tighten up the regulations on labour migration, in order to protect both the country and the rights of foreign workers (Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu 2018).

There are few, if any, studies of issues surrounding contemporary labour migrants in Sāmoa, so many questions remain. Where are they from? Why did they migrate to Sāmoa? What do they do? Where do they work? What are their plans? Why did Sāmoan employers hire them over locals? Have they brought any benefits to Sāmoa? To answer some of these questions, Associate Professor Safua Akeli Amaama, Director of Centre for Sāmoan Studies, and I have started a project with our colleagues from National University of Sāmoa (NUS), mapping the recent flow of labour migration into Sāmoa. Our project, funded by NUS, aims to identify their characteristics and patterns of movements, and ultimately develop an original definition that describes labour migrants in Sāmoa. We are hoping to report some interesting findings by 2019.

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