Two Hundred Years of Labour Mobility in Samoa: An Overview

Kalissa Alexeyeff, [1] *Penelope Schoeffel and Malama Meleisea*

This collection of articles, titled *Labour Mobility in Samoa: Past and Present (Part 1 and Part 2),* compiled in two issues of the *Journal of Samoan Studies*, aims to contextualise the current Samoan labour mobility boom in terms of Samoa's labour history and the country's socioeconomic situation and examines the impact of labour mobility on Samoa's labour market and on families and communities in Samoa.

This collection covers two aspects of labour movement in Samoa's history. Part 1 examines inward labour migration, from the colonial era to the present day. Part 2 explores outward labour migration, both short-term and long-term, including temporary seafaring contracts, cannery work in American Samoa, the migration chain in New Zealand and the labour mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand.

Taken together, the two parts demonstrate that the Samoan economy has relied on labour mobility since colonial times. This reflects a broader trend in the Pacific and globally where outward labour mobility has been a key feature of economies in the Global South, while elsewhere labour has been imported to fill gaps.

What emerges in our investigation of this multi-directional exchange is a complex picture where individuals, families and communities benefit from the higher wages that can be earned by workers abroad, but where individuals are separated from their families and way of life, and where they have limited capacity to resist the potentially exploitative conditions abroad.

We aim in this collection to extend and deepen understanding of labour mobility schemes by focusing on the broader social context, which includes both emigration for Samoans and Samoa's importation of labour from countries such as China and Fiji. The focus on a single country's response to labour mobility provides a unique longitudinal focus to understand the

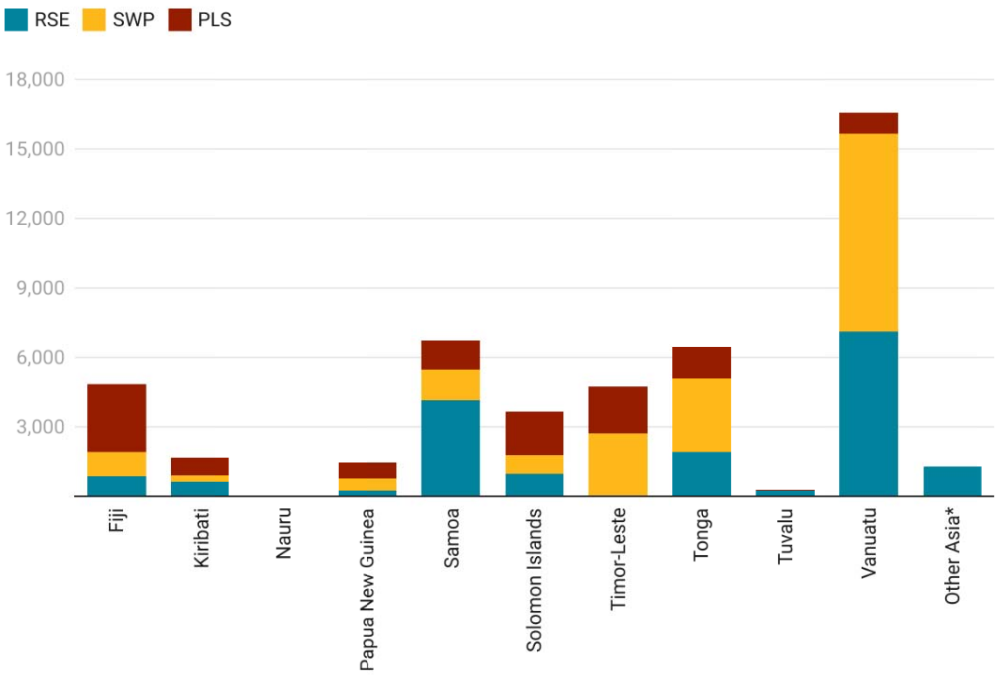
[1] A number of articles in this collection were supported by Kalissa Alexeyeff's Australian Research Council Future Fellowship grant (FT FT140100299), "New Regional Labour Circuits in the South Pacific: Gender, Culture and Transnationalism," undertaken at the University of Melbourne. Publishing support was provided by the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne.

complex amalgam of gains and losses to individuals, families, communities and the national economy.

Studies of labour mobility in the Pacific region as a whole provide useful comparative background to the articles in this collection. The focus of much of the region's literature related to labour mobility is on the impacts of Aotearoa New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme (Government of New Zealand nd) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme and their antecedents (Government of Australia nd).

Figures from 2023 show that Samoa is the second largest supplier of labour across both the RSE scheme and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) – the precursor to the PALM (see Figure 1). For both Australia and New Zealand, Vanuatu is the main supplier and Tonga the third largest supplier of labour (Bedford 2023).

Figure 1: Sources of RSE, SWP and PLS workers 2022-2023 (Bedford 2023)



** Other Asia includes: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam*

Created with Datawrapper

In common with the articles in this collection, most of the literature on the New Zealand and Australia labour mobility schemes indicates that these schemes are a mixed blessing. On one hand they provide individuals and source countries with much needed injections of cash via workers sending remittances and savings home. On the other hand, the workers and their communities are often impacted negatively. Other studies have tended to focus on the issue of exploitation of labour migrants in receiving countries. This includes restrictive working conditions, hidden salary deductions and racism (for an overview of the impacts of labour mobility schemes see for example, Petrou and Connell 2023a and 2023b; Stead and Petrou 2023; Howes, Curtain and Sharman 2022; Sharman and Howes 2022; Bedford, Bedford and Nunns 2020; Nishitani and Lee 2019; Underhill and Marsters 2017; Connell 2010). Those studies have also focused more on the overall socioeconomic trends rather than the motivations of workers and the opinions of workers and communities regarding the labour mobility schemes.

In this collection of articles, the authors record the voices of the workers who go abroad. Our privileging of these voices – the perspectives of individuals – is a significant contribution to studies in this area. Two of the articles are based on interviews with over fifty people who had been employed on labour mobility schemes.[2] The responses are, in the main, highly ambivalent. On the positive side, the interviewees enjoyed earning wages that were often at least four times as high as wages at home, which helped them to send money home and purchase goods such as cars and housing appliances that afforded them greater comfort and higher status in their families and communities. At the same time, however, most of the workers found the schemes to be highly disruptive to their family lives, with so much time away from their children and with many missed events, including, in some cases, the funerals of parents. Some workers also found the experience to be exploitative in terms of the demands made by the employers and deductions from their pay.

One of the articles in this collection, 'Impacts of Labour Mobility Schemes on Samoa's Labour Market', examines how labour mobility has affected Samoa's economy and society. One such impact is the reduced availability of skilled labour in Samoa. From interviews with employers in Samoa it appears that

[2] Rather than older Samoan and foreign researchers conducting the interviews, with potential issues of hierarchy and language, these interviews were conducted between peers and in the Samoan language (the responses were transcribed into English).

while labour mobility schemes are supposed to result in a 'brain gain', with greater levels of skill and experience flowing back to Samoa with the return of workers, the reality is the opposite. The responses by the employers indicate that the net effect of these schemes is actually a 'brain drain', with the most responsible and well-trained workers being the most likely to be successful in applying to participate in the schemes (see Curtain 2022) and with few skilled workers returning. One employer interviewed in our study pithily stated that the workers most wanted in Samoa are the ones who get chosen to go abroad.

Labour mobility over the centuries

Samoa has a long history of voyaging. The Samoan archipelago was settled several thousand years ago, and Samoans traded with nearby island groups for centuries. As Salesa (2003) wrote:

> *Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Samoans were in regular contact with neighbouring islanders. Like other Pacific Islanders they were voyagers: witness 4000 years of Pacific maritime history and the thousands of square kilometres of far-flung Pacific settlement. In a sense the Samoan present echoes this past.*

In the sixteenth century, Europeans began exploring the Pacific region, and in the eighteenth century they came in contact with Samoans. From the early nineteenth century, trader and settler communities from Europe began to influence chiefly rivalry in Samoa, resulting in recurrent civil wars. This, along with the adoption of Christianity, gradually transformed Samoa's political system.

In 1900 the Samoan archipelago was divided between the United States and Germany, with the former taking the eastern islands (American Samoa) and the latter taking the western islands (Samoa).[3] With the onset of World War II in 1914, New Zealand seized Samoa under military rule. From 1921 Samoa was governed by New Zealand under a United Nations Trusteeship. Samoans campaigned for independence from the 1920s onwards, and this struggle was eventually resolved with provisions for limited self government in the 1950s. In 1962 Samoa became the first Pacific Island nation to gain independence.

In the days when Samoa had no contact with cultures beyond the Pacific Islands, there was no concept of paid employment; people worked for their

[3] A map of the Independent State of Samoa can be found at World Atlas: https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/samoa

families and families for their chiefs, and their tasks depended on their sex, social status and age. Labour was exchanged reciprocally between families for major tasks, but workers did not receive individual rewards. As seen in the articles in this collection, work was, and to some extent still is, perceived as service (*tautua*) and was seen both as a moral value and a pathway to future authority, as expressed in the Samoan proverb: "*O le ala 'i le pule o le tautua*" (the way to leadership is through service).

The first Samoans to undertake wage labour as individuals were probably those who, from the 1820s onwards, joined the crews of whaling and trading ships. It is unknown how many did this, but one famous individual was Siovili (also known as Joe Gimlet). In the 1820s he travelled to Tonga and then on to Tahiti with a trading ship (Robson 2009). He became well-known because he founded a short-lived syncretic Samoan/Christian religion on his return, which was conceived from his own religious beliefs and his encounter with Christian missionary teaching in Tahiti (see Freeman 1959). It is unknown how many Samoans continued to travel abroad for work on ships over the following century, but it is likely that many did. Others worked for payment for the growing number of foreign settlers in Samoa as a means of obtaining imported goods (such as tinned food, clothing and tobacco) for family use and for church offerings.

In all likelihood, few Samoans worked abroad in the period between 1900 and the end of World War II, although on several occasions Germans took Samoan performing groups to tour Germany until 1914 (Arora 2014; Salesa 2003).

Samoa's modern labour history began during colonial times when, as Stewart Firth explains in the first article of this collection, the German governors had to decide what kind of colony Samoa would be. Was it to be a colony of white settlement – like New Zealand, New Caledonia or Australia for instance – where white immigrants would drive the Samoans from their land, making them a 'rural proletariat' as the settlers demanded, or would white settlement be discouraged and the Samoan way of life be protected? The governors chose to do what was in the interests of a large German plantation corporation operating in Samoa. It had already acquired most of Samoa's prime agricultural land (Ward and Ashcroft 1998) and was able to recruit the labour it needed from other German colonies in the Pacific and, eventually, also hire Chinese labourers. The complaints made by Chinese labourers at this time included long working hours, wage deductions and unpaid sick days:

complaints that are echoed today by Samoa's labour migrants abroad. The first article in this collection also describes the Chinese government's measures to protect their citizens. This active intervention of the Chinese government offers a salutary example to labour-sending countries today.

In the second article, Malama Meleisea recounts the experiences of four Melanesian men from the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago (today part of Papua New Guinea) who worked in the colonial plantations in Samoa in the early 1900s. They sought this work because they desired to see the world beyond their island homes and to acquire goods that would raise their status in their home communities. It is striking how similar their motives were for signing on for plantation work to those of Samoan workers who sign on to work on temporary contracts in New Zealand, Australia, American Samoa and on ships today.

Ming Leung Wai's account, in the third article, of the waves of Chinese who came to Samoa, the so-called 'coolies',[4] illustrates how labour mobility by Chinese and their assimilation into Samoan life have contributed to Samoa over the years.

Under the New Zealand administration (1914-1962), Samoans were increasingly recruited for plantation work. The German plantations appropriated by New Zealand after World War I were transferred to Samoa in 1962 by New Zealand, but they never recovered their early prosperity; this was partly due to a lack of cheap labour.

In the fourth article, Masami Tsujita presents the voices of recent immigrants who have come to Samoa from elsewhere in the Global South in search of opportunities not available to them in their homelands.

In the post-colonial era, migration and international aid combined to form Samoa's MIRAB (Migration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy) economy, discussed by Penelope Schoeffel in the article titled 'The Socioeconomic Context of the New Samoan Exodus: 2007–2023'. As noted in that article, the forces of migration and remittances impacted village life, amplifying traditional cultural practices, with significant amounts of money flowing in that was spent on larger-scale traditional gift exchange ceremonies and church-related activities. And with these remittances Samoans also built houses with imported materials and acquired consumer goods. Giving large

[4] The term 'coolie' was used between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries to refer to Asian low-wage labourers.

and expensive gifts and building family houses in a 'European' style allowed families to assert status beyond that accorded them in traditional hierarchies.

From the 1950s, Samoans began to go abroad in search of adventure and higher wages. Most of the early Samoan labour migrants went to New Zealand, as documented by Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson in the sixth article of this collection, and to American Samoa, as discussed by Brian Alofaituli in the seventh article.

A Treaty of Friendship established between New Zealand and Samoa in 1962 allowed a quota of 1,100 visas[5] to be issued each year to Samoans who were of working age and good character and who had found guaranteed and suitably renumerated jobs in New Zealand. Each year, Samoans wanting to migrate to New Zealand under the quota must enter a visa 'lottery', which many do, most unsuccessfully.

Unlike citizens of other New Zealand territories inherited from Britain (Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau), Samoans were not given the right to live and work in New Zealand (Brookfield 1981). This was challenged under the British Nationality and New Zealand Citizenship Act 1948, which provided that British subjects and their male heirs who had been born in Western Samoa would become New Zealand citizens. The Act was intended to enable the New Zealand naturalization of non-Samoans resident in Samoa, not native Samoans, but when the New Zealand government sought to deport a Samoan woman, Falema'i Lesa, from New Zealand, her lawyers successfully appealed to the British Privy Council in 1982 for her right to New Zealand citizenship under the 1948 Act. Dismayed, the governments of New Zealand and Samoa hastily and controversially revoked any such legal provision, thus depriving Samoans born between 1924 and 1948 and their children of New Zealand citizenship rights, although Samoans who were in New Zealand at that time automatically gained New Zealand citizenship.

In the 1970s, Samoans began receiving training for work on international cruise and cargo container ships, and such work opportunities have expanded since then, as explored by Malama Meleisea and Penelope Schoeffel in the article, 'Samoans at Sea: Seasonal Work on Ships'.

Labour migration in the post-colonial era meant that by the 1990s virtually all Samoan families had close kin living in New Zealand, Australia and/or the United States or even further afield.

[5] In 2023 this was increased to 1,650 (Government of Samoa 1 August 2023).

With the introduction of labour mobility schemes in the early years of the twenty-first century, Samoa's migration patterns changed, with more people working abroad on temporary contracts rather than permanently migrating. The first labour mobility initiative was the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which began in 2007, recruiting Samoans and other Pacific Islanders to the horticulture and viticulture industries in New Zealand for seasonal work. In the period from 2007 to 2023, Samoa sent 22,681 RSE workers to New Zealand (Bedford and Bedford 2023:40).

Launched in 2012, Australia's Seasonal Work Programme (SWP), like the New Zealand RSE, allowed temporary employment of Pacific Islanders, mainly in the horticultural sector. The Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), initiated in 2018, offered longer work visas for work in sectors such as meatpacking, aged care and hospitality. The two Australian schemes were merged under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in 2022. As of April 2023 there were 4,673 Samoan workers in Australia under the PALM scheme (DFAT nd).

The ninth and tenth articles in this collection present the findings of research by teams from the Centre for Samoan Studies of the National University of Samoa, which interviewed Samoans about their motivations for going abroad under the labour mobility schemes and their experiences while abroad.

While outward labour migration of Samoans has brought benefits to Samoa, it has also created issues, particularly for the local labour market, as discussed by Penelope Schoeffel, Masami Tsujita and Michael Yemoh in the article titled 'Impacts of Labour Mobility Schemes on Samoa's Labour Market'. Labour mobility has also contributed to a number of social issues, including family breakups, and has impacted Samoa's culture and way of life in various ways. These issues and impacts are touched upon in the various articles and are explored further in the article titled 'Labour Mobility: A Blessing and a Curse', which also discusses government policy measures that aim to tackle some of the issues.

Samoa currently has a population of approximately 230,000, a diaspora of more than 300,000 and an economy that is highly dependent on labour mobility, remittances and foreign aid.

We aren't labour, we're people

Pacific labour mobility is taking place against of backdrop of increased international interest in the region. The dominance of Australia, New Zealand and the United States has been challenged by China's expanding role in Pacific infrastructure and finance. In response, Western countries are increasing diplomatic presence, aid and security, among other initiatives (Sora, Collins and Keen 2024). This geopolitical competition means that Pacific countries have greater scope to negotiate the terms of aid and trade. Pacific labour schemes are one area where Pacific governments have questioned the 'rules' of engagement. Pacific leaders are leveraging their new geopolitical influence by questioning the impacts of these schemes on national economies, cultural values and societies. One of our study participants astutely critiqued the potentially dehumanising aspects of labour schemes by emphasising: "we aren't labour, we're people". *Labour Mobility in Samoa: Past and Present* tells the story of people – their interests, motivations and aspirations – with the aim of amplifying voices and supporting the social and political agency of all Pacific peoples.

References

Arora HT (ed) (2014) From Samoa with Love? Samoan Travellers in Germany 1895-1911: Retracing the Footsteps, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich.

Bedford C, Bedford R and Nunns H (2020) RSE Impact Study: Pacific Stream Report, 12 May 2020, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Wellington.

Bedford C (2023) 'Pacific labour mobility over the last year: continued growth', DevPolicyBlog, accessed 7 July 2024. https://devpolicy.org/pacific-labour-mobility-over-the-last-year-continued-growth-20230808/

Bedford R and Bedford C (2023) 'How Many Seasonal Workers from the Pacific Have Been Employed in New Zealand since the RSE Scheme Began?', New Zealand Geographer, 79(1):39-45.

Brookfield FM (1981) 'New Zealand Citizenship and Western Samoa: A Legacy of the Mandate', Otago Law Review, 5(3):367-396.

Connell J (2010) 'From blackbirds to guestworkers in the South Pacific. Plus ça change…?' The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 20(2):111-121.

Curtain R (13 October 2022) 'Brain Drain 1: A Growing Concern', DevPolicyBlog, accessed 2 September 2024. https://devpolicy.org/brain-drain-1-a-growing-concern-20221013/Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (nd) Samoa Country Brief, accessed 1 March 2024. https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/samoa/samoa-country-brief

Freeman JD (1959) 'The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult: an episode in the religious history of early Samoa' in Freeman JD and Geddes WR (eds) Anthropology in the South Seas: Essays Presented to H.D. Skinner, Thomas Avery & Sons Limited, New Plymouth.

Government of Australia (nd) Welcome to the PALM scheme, accessed 2 September 2024. https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/

Government of New Zealand (nd) Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme research, New Zealand Immigration, accessed 2 September 2024. https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/research-and-statistics/research-reports/recognised-seasonal-employer-rse-scheme

Government of Samoa (1 August 2023) Samoa Quota Increase by 550 More & On-application Mandated, accessed 1 March 2024. https://www.samoagovt.ws/2023/08/samoa-quota-increase-by-550-more-on-application-mandated/

Howes S, Curtain R and Sharman E (10 October 2022) 'Labour mobility in the Pacific: Transformational and/or negligible?' DevPolicyBlog, accessed 19 July 2024. https://devpolicy.org/labour-mobility-in-the-pacific-transformational-and-or-negligible-20221010/

Nishitani M and Lee H (2019) 'Becoming "Overstayers": The Coloniality of Citizenship and the Resilience of Pacific Farm Workers' in Stead V and Altman J (eds) Labour Lines and Colonial Power: Indigenous and Pacific Islander Labour Mobility in Australia, ANU Press, Canberra.

Petrou K and Connell J (2023a) Pacific Islands Guestworkers in Australia: The New Blackbirds? Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

Petrou K and Connell J (2023b) 'Our "Pacific family": Heroes, guests, workers or a precariat?' Australian Geographer, 54(2):125-135.

Robson AE (2009) 'Malietoa, Williams and Samoa's Embrace of Christianity', The Journal of Pacific History, 44(1):21-39.

Salesa TD (2000) 'Half-Castes between the Wars: Colonial Categories in New Zealand and Samoa', New Zealand Journal of History, 34(1):98-116.

Salesa TDI (2003) '"Travel-Happy" Samoa: Colonialism, Samoan Migration and a "Brown Pacific"', New Zealand Journal of History, 37(2):171-188.

Sharman E and Howes S (6 May 2022) 'Pacific labour mobility growth: Winners and losers', Devpolicyblog, accessed 2 September 2024. https://devpolicy.org/pacific-labour-mobility-growth-winners-and-losers-20220506/

Sora M, Collins J and Keen M (2024) The Great Game in the Pacific Islands, Lowy Institute, Sydney.
Stead V and Petrou K (2023) 'Beyond the "Triple Win": Pacific Islander farmworkers' use of social media to navigate labour mobility costs and possibilities through the COVID-19 pandemic', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49(9):2194-2212.
Underhill Y and Marsters E (2017) Labour Mobility in the Pacific: A Systematic Literature Review of Development Impacts, New Zealand Institute of Pacific Research.
Ward RG and Ashcroft P (1998) Samoa: Mapping the Diversity, University of the South Pacific and National University of Samoa, Suva and Apia.