

Labour Mobility: A Blessing and a Curse

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Over the past 17 years, labour mobility schemes, including the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, have offered a supposedly win-win opportunity for Pacific Island nations and the receiving countries (New Zealand and Australia). These schemes benefit Pacific Islanders by offering them higher pay and enabling them to live more prosperously in their own countries, while also benefiting New Zealand and Australia by providing labour to fill workforce shortages in certain industries.

There is no doubt that outward labour mobility has brought material wealth to many Samoans. These schemes allow people to earn and save large amounts of money very quickly, making them very popular in Samoa. With high expectations for what constitutes 'a better life', many Samoans believe that these schemes are the only feasible means of reaching their material goals. Since the schemes began in 2007, thousands have signed on for temporary jobs in New Zealand and Australia in fields such as fruit picking, caregiving and meatpacking. The percentage of Samoa's working age population participating in labour mobility schemes has risen significantly in recent years, reaching 6.4 per cent in 2023 (Dingwall 27 April 2024).

Labour mobility schemes were promoted as also benefiting the private sectors of sending countries. It was assumed that seasonal workers would return to their countries with new and economically advantageous skills, and that the money earned by those working overseas would be productively invested at home. However, surveys of Samoan participants in labour mobility schemes and Samoan employers (see the preceding articles in this volume) do not present much evidence of workers bringing home skills that can be applied in Samoa. Furthermore, we see little evidence of investment of the money earned by participants in labour mobility schemes in job-creation or productive ventures, and none of it is spent on infrastructure or social services. Instead, remittances are spent on living expenses, on traditional ceremonies (purchasing items for the gift-exchange economy) and on church donations. The savings brought home to Samoa are most often used to buy imported goods such as second-hand cars, furniture, home appliances and

building materials to improve or build houses for their families, as well as imported food and beverages.

The purchase of consumer goods with remittances and savings has benefited some segments of Samoa's private sector, particularly businesses selling imported goods, such as cars, appliances and building materials but, as discussed in the article titled 'Impacts of Labour Mobility Schemes on Samoa's Labour Market' (this volume), these gains have been offset by the difficulty businesses have in hiring and retaining workers. With many people attracted to the higher-paying jobs offered through labour mobility schemes, Samoa's business owners lose many employees annually and therefore lose the investment (training) that they put into those employees. This has become a serious concern for the sustainability of Samoa's businesses.

Until recently, most studies of the impacts of labour mobility schemes focused on the economic benefits for individuals and failed to consider the social impacts. One such study was that by Doan, Dornan and Edwards (2023), which collected data from a sample of 2,085 workers and 4,241 households in Tonga, Vanuatu and Kiribati. The report from this study was overwhelming positive, claiming that the labour mobility schemes produce "a net social gain" (2023:12). This claim contrasts strongly, however, with the conclusions of a study that examined the impacts of labour mobility on children left behind in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It found that the schemes have an overall negative social impact, with the mental health and well-being of children looking "quite bleak" (UNICEF et al. 2024:2). Other recent studies and analyses (see, for example, Petrou and Connell 2023; Withers 2022) likewise note numerous negative social impacts.

These studies support the findings of recent surveys of Samoan participants in labour mobility schemes (see the articles 'A Better Life?' and 'Samoa under the PALM' in this volume), which indicate that the schemes do not appear to be increasing community wellbeing. Rather, the schemes appear to have augmented and accelerated the cycle of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Returning workers construct houses and purchase imported goods, which often sparks envy among others in the community and increases their desire to build new houses and obtain consumer goods – preferably even bigger and more expensive versions. This leads to more people participating in the schemes and to the participants going away on new contracts each year in order to obtain bigger and better consumer goods.

Returning workers may be providing their families with more material goods and comfort, but the benefits of the money they bring home can only be temporary. Household incomes in Samoa are often insufficient to pay for the extra electricity needed to power home appliances or to pay for the fuel and maintenance of the cars they buy. This means that in the absence of sufficient remittances, the appliances and cars often sit idle. Thus, labour mobility schemes have increased dependence on remittances. To meet material expectations, it is necessary to continually send young people overseas so that there is always someone in the family sending remittances home.

Because Samoa does not have affordable repair facilities, when goods break they are simply discarded. Without effective policies for minimizing waste, it is likely that broken appliances and old cars will pile up in landfill, causing pollution and posing an increasing threat to groundwater quality, ecosystem health and human health.

With so many young people going to work abroad, there has been a significant loss of productive workers at home. Bedford, Bedford and Nunns, the authors of the RSE Pacific Stream report (2020), reported that:

Household and village economic and social wellbeing may be put at risk if the same productive workers sought by RSE employers (i.e. males aged 20-49) are absent from the village for periods of up to seven months every year. This depletion of labour has the potential to compromise food production and places additional burdens on those left at home to undertake routine duties required for the orderly operation of village life.

This is backed up by the findings of studies of Samoan participants in labour mobility schemes (see the previous articles in this volume), which suggest that stress is being placed on family members in Samoa who must perform additional tasks while workers are away. It appears that the loss to labour mobility schemes of young men aged between 20 and 40 years old who are physically fit is having a major, but yet unmeasured, impact on Samoan households that depend on the informal economy.

The absence of young men in villages has disrupted some community activities, such as planting of taro (a staple food crop). Some recruiters for labour mobility schemes claim that they require young men to plant taro for their families before the men go overseas, but even if this is true, which the authors doubt, it is still necessary for others to weed and care for the taro plantations while the workers are away. The work that was once done by these young people is being taken up by others, on top of their own work. For

example, older men do the heavy work in their plantations and women engage in more subsistence cultivation work. As well as being an excessive amount of work for those left behind, this represents a major change to traditional social norms in Samoa, where older people are normally entitled to receive service (*tautua*) from young men and women, rather than engage in manual labour and undertake daily household chores.

In cases when parents participate in labour mobility schemes, the role of caring for their children is passed on to grandparents, older siblings or members of the extended family. The children left behind are in some cases not adequately cared for, a circumstance that affects the children's education and health (UNICEF et al. 2024).

For parents who seek 'a better life' through labour mobility schemes and continually return abroad on new contracts, this means that these families are almost permanently separated, with parents missing out on their children's childhoods, everyday family life and important events, while their children are raised by others and rarely see their parents, causing ongoing emotional suffering to everyone concerned.

The separation of family members for participation in these schemes appears to have led to an increase in marriage breakdown. The non-governmental organisation "Samoa Victim Support" highlights infidelity by participants in labour mobility schemes as a serious concern (Radio New Zealand 15 June 2022). In cases where husbands go overseas on labour mobility schemes and form new relationships while abroad, the former wives who live with in-laws are compelled to leave the household. These women often do not have paid employment. Children from broken families often find themselves in the care of shelters while their mothers seek work (Islands Business 15 June 2022).

It has been suggested that parents and married people who participate in labour mobility schemes take their children and spouses abroad with them (DFAT 2022). This would partially address the issue of family separation, but paying for the airfares and housing for family members in Australia or New Zealand would enormously increase the costs associated with participation in labour mobility schemes and would significantly reduce the amounts the participants could save and remit to their extended families in Samoa, including elderly parents, who depend heavily on remittances. Taking children abroad on temporary contracts would also be difficult to manage if both parents were working and were employed in different locations.

It could be argued that the accumulation of material goods in Samoa is at least reducing poverty, but a study by the Asian Development Bank of poverty in Samoa and other Pacific Islands (Abbott and Pollard 2004) concluded that poverty in these countries is mainly characterised by comparative economic hardship due to inadequate social services (e.g. primary education, public transport, water and basic health care) and poverty of opportunity.

The lack of adequate social services in Samoa is partly related to the fact that the taxes collected from workers in Samoa are insufficient to cover the costs of maintaining and improving local infrastructures such as roads, schools and hospitals. Meanwhile, the income taxes paid by Samoans while working on labour mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand benefit the populations of those countries rather than communities in Samoa.⁸⁵

With so many Samoans desirous of participating in labour mobility schemes and with insufficient information available regarding how to register and who the legitimate work agents are, many people have fallen prey to scammers who pretend to be registered seasonal work agents but simply take the money of applicants and disappear. This and other types of fraud associated with seasonal work schemes are causing significant distress in Samoa (Samoa Observer 23 October 2024).

The impacts of labour mobility schemes are also being seen in Samoan culture. While material goods accumulate, Samoa's ancient hierarchy of ancestral rank is crumbling as Samoans bestow multiple traditional *matai* titles and admiration on people who have access to money, cars and modern houses, while showing little appreciation for the people in society who remain at home to perform the tasks that maintain social stability: producing food and caring for children and the elderly.

Interdependence was once the basis of village life in Samoa when resources of all kinds were shared to maximise security. Migration has undermined the social capital of Samoan villages because, in the authors' observations, households have become less reliant on one another, leading to the erosion of small-scale mutual support and social solidarity. Labour mobility is accelerating that process so that today the major focus of communal unity are the churches, rather than village political institutions such as the

⁸⁵ Although labour mobility participants are entitled to claim superannuation from Australia or New Zealand, the process of making a claim is complicated and not everyone does so (Dingwall and Kupu 2024).

fono(governing council), *aumaga* (society of young men) and *komiti* (society of women).

Government policy and labour mobility

Samoa policy-makers once welcomed the boost that labour mobility schemes bring to the economy,⁸⁶ but in recent years opinions in Samoa have become divided, and the Government of Samoa is having second thoughts about the value of such schemes.

In 2021, immediately after a church hall in Apia was overrun by people eager to register for seasonal work abroad, the Minister-elect for Works, Transport and Infrastructure, Olo Fiti Va'ai, called for seasonal work schemes to be abolished (Sanerivi 23 June 2021).

In 2022, the Government of Samoa began to re-evaluate the schemes and consider policy responses to concerns raised about the way seasonal workers are treated overseas, the effects of separation on families, the impact of the schemes on village economies and the fact that trained and relatively well-off employees were leaving their jobs in Samoa for temporary contracts abroad.

It has become clear that as well as losing unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the private sector, Samoa is also losing skilled and highly educated public sector workers, including police officers, nurses, teachers, technicians and clerical staff. In January 2023 Samoa's Acting Prime Minister, Tuala Iosefo Ponifasio, expressed concern about Australia offering up to 3,000 work visas for Pacific Islanders, saying that this was likely to further drain Samoa of skilled workers (Radio New Zealand 23 January 2023).

In early 2023, the Samoan government put an abrupt temporary stop to the labour mobility schemes after complaints that many of those recruited for seasonal work and other labour mobility schemes were not unemployed, as the scheme originally envisioned. It then undertook a review of the impact of labour mobility schemes on the local economy (Radio New Zealand 31 August 2023).

Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa raised concerns in August 2023 about the exodus of workers, particularly workers going to Australia on longer-term contracts, and said that she was worried about Pacific nations being seen as

⁸⁶For example, in early 2021 Radio New Zealand News (24 February 2021) quoted Samoa's Minister for Labour saying with satisfaction that 3,400 Samoan seasonal workers were engaged overseas at that time, and that in 2019/2020 nearly US\$80 million had been earned by seasonal workers.

nothing more than “outposts where we grow people” to work abroad (Dziedzic, Voloder and Raela 31 August 2023; ABC News 1 September 2023).

In the hope of addressing the issue of labour shortages in Samoa, the Chamber of Commerce and other private sector organisations made representations to government to ensure only the deployment of genuinely unemployed people. In response, the government held a consultation on labour mobility schemes. The outcome of this consultation was a policy paper on the labour mobility schemes (Government of Samoa 2023).

The policy paper lists the following key areas of concern:

- The loss of workers by private sector employers, the public sector and the village economy, due to the current operations of the labour mobility schemes.
- The social and cultural impacts of the labour mobility schemes.
- The narrow base of beneficiaries because of the recurrent employment abroad of the same workers.
- The violation of labour rights and human rights of workers by employers abroad.
- The need for a transparent and fair process.

As part of the new policy, the government plans to set a cap on the number of workers mobilised annually at a maximum of 12,000, with New Zealand and Australia getting 6,000 workers each (Government of Samoa 2023). In addition, the government will charge an administration fee for workers, a participation fee for Constituency Committees and fees for the accreditation of employers and regulation of third parties and private recruiters.

With regard to equitable labour mobilisation, the policy paper proposes that district committees⁸⁷ engage in vetting candidates that are shortlisted by the Labour Employment Export Programmes Division (LEEP) of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour (MCIL). Each district will have its own quota, based on population data, to ensure equity of access. New rules will reinforce the authority of the LEEP to manage an improved interface between recruitment and deployment overseas. However, it is not clear from the

⁸⁷One of the major initiatives of Samoa’s new government, elected in 2021, has been to fund district committees to prepare district development plans. This proposal existed previously but was not funded. Each electoral district of Samoa has been given WST1 million to establish an office, appoint support staff and begin the planning process. It is expected that this process will lead to implementation of needs-based projects that benefit each village in a district, as well as shared district facilities and services.

policy how the district committee vetting process will work if private recruiters do not meet the new licensing criteria. Moreover, some labour mobility operators have expressed reservations about district committees being involved in the schemes as they feel it could lead to issues such as biases in the selection process (Keresoma 6 November 2023).

There are several other potential flaws in the government's proposed new policy. First, the district committees are only slowly becoming effective. Most of them are chaired by their local member of parliament and comprise a representative nominated by each village council in the district. Many have not yet fully perceived the advantages of having district planning in their own hands instead of the hands of centralised public servants and aid donors. Second, in electoral districts where the local member belongs to an opposition political party, there are perverse incentives to undermine the committees and make the government look bad when developments do not eventuate.

The policy paper also proposes that recruitment procedures be tightened to ensure that only unemployed Samoans are recruited for seasonal work abroad. It is assumed that it is easier to find work in urban districts than in rural districts, and that 'unemployment' is a greater issue in rural areas; therefore, urban districts of Samoa will have smaller quotas for workers than rural districts. However, although there may be proportionately more 'unemployed' young people in the rural districts (in the sense that these people lack cash income), young people in rural areas at least have a subsistence livelihood available to them by planting, fishing and small-scale trading. This is seldom the case for those who are unemployed in the urban districts (see the article titled 'The Socioeconomic Context of the New Samoan Exodus: 2007–2023' in this volume). Unemployment for urban people can mean serious hardship, because they have no means of feeding and housing themselves adequately. These are the people whose children walk around the streets of Apia in the sun and rain to sell cheap items such as air fresheners and hairpins, and goods such as taro chips, *lavalava* (sarongs) and fans. They are the young people and persons with disabilities who beg outside fast-food outlets in Apia after dark.

The government's new policy may succeed in ensuring that only those who are genuinely unemployed (in the sense that they have no paid work) are recruited, but such restrictions are likely to be very unpopular.

There is no doubt that most Samoans have seen labour migration as the key to 'a better life' for many decades (see the previous articles in this

volume). How are Samoans going to accept proposed restrictions if they think this will affect their chances to work overseas? Restrictions may be deeply resented.

The other risk is that, by imposing more restrictive policies Samoa will have less access to labour mobility opportunities than it wants, especially if the government agrees to suggestions such as those of Howes, Curtain and Sharman (2022), that receiving countries shift recruitment towards Pacific Island countries with lower participation in the schemes, such as the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

It has become increasingly clear that dependence on labour mobility should be avoided. If labour mobility schemes became politically unpopular in either of the main host countries, it is unlikely that the interests of Pacific Island states would be considered, despite the dependence of their economies on labour mobility.

As Malama Meleisea commented, in a keynote address to the 2023 ANU Pacific Update on the theme of labour mobility:

... the government can be said to be 'between a rock and a hard place'. In other words, Samoa wants prosperity without losing its most capable people, but at the same time it wants prosperity that cannot be afforded by working in Samoa. Or, as the Samoan proverbial expressions put it, "we want the trees in the forest but are afraid of their spirits" (E mana'o I le vao ae o lo'omamalumai le aitu I le aoa), or "we want yams but we are afraid of the work of digging up stones so we can plant them" (E mana'o e le ufi ae fefe I le papa) (Meleisea 2023).

Can the issues be overcome?

Since banning seasonal worker schemes would be unpopular, an alternative solution is necessary. With regard to the labour market, what seems to be required is a way of ensuring that the formal market is more aligned with Samoa's 'hybrid economy' (see the article titled 'The Socioeconomic Context of the New Samoan Exodus: 2007–2023' in this volume). That is, ensure that the local formal labour market allows Samoans to continue to meet their cultural obligations and continue to benefit from participation in community life, while also allowing workers opportunities to earn enough to afford to buy imported goods.

The labour mobility schemes have demonstrated that, in general, young Samoans will not remain long in local employment if they can find means of livelihood elsewhere that offer more flexibility (i.e. regular time off to fulfil family, village and church obligations) and that offer higher incomes.

Retaining staff in the long term may therefore require that employers acknowledge the cultural context in which their businesses operate: the fact that the gift-exchange economy still exists and that employees (especially young people) need to take leave from time to time for *tautua* (service) and for *fa'alavelave* (events such as funerals, weddings, etc.). Employers may also need to accept that many young Samoans want to participate in labour mobility schemes abroad from time to time (for the adventure and to allow them to afford to buy imported goods). Employers could consider planning for the inevitable departure of some employees and, subsequently, for the reintegration of workers returning from overseas.

In terms of mitigating the social impacts of the labour mobility schemes, it may be necessary for returnees to reconsider what they spend their hard-earned wages on. Rather than focusing their spending on consumer goods, they could consider investing their savings in training (e.g. courses in business management, tutoring, repair-work, etc) and local small businesses. It appears that many incoming migrant workers in Samoa have invested in their own training and have started small businesses successfully (see the article titled 'Voices of South-South Migrant Workers in Samoa' by Masami Tsujita in this volume).

Another matter that participants in labour mobility schemes could consider is how much they give to the Church. With the amounts donated to the Church increasing each year, the amounts left over for the maintenance and support of children and the elderly are sometimes insufficient (ABC News 19 April 2024; Radio New Zealand 6 October 2017). It may be wise for more Samoans to do what some have already begun doing: give only what they can afford (Raela 19 April 2024). For this to happen, however, it would require that church leaders recognise the damage that excessive donations to the Church can cause to families and communities, and that church leaders encourage parishioners to spend their incomes in a way that ensures that families are healthy and well cared for.

The proposed government policy changes are unlikely to reduce demand for overseas employment among Samoans or fulfil the wish expressed by Prime Minister Fiame Mata'afa: "I want Samoa to be a place where our people want to live" (Meleisea 2023). For that to happen, Samoans would have to have material desires proportionate to what their country can sustainably provide and would need to invest in their nation and its future.

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