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# **Acronyms**

ABARES Australian Bureau of MOL Ministry of Labour Agricultural and Resource MOU Memorandum of Economics and Sciences Understanding
Economics and Sciences Onderstanding
ABF Australian Border Force NFF National Farmers'
of Australia NZ New Zealand
ANZ Australia and New Zealand ODA Official Development  ATO Australian Taxation Office Assistance
, action of the control of the contr
DESE Department of Education, OECD Organisation for Economic
Skills and Employment Co-operation and
DEWR Department of Employment Development
and Workplace Relations PACER Plus Pacific Agreement on
DFAT Department of Foreign Closer Economic
Affairs and Trade Relations Plus
DHA Department of Home Affairs PALM Pacific Australia
DOLES Department of Labour and Labour Mobility
Employment Services PIC Pacific Island Country
ECP Economic Citizenship PLF Pacific Labour Facility
Program PLMAM Pacific Labour Mobility
ESU Employment Services Unit Annual Meeting
FVH Fruit, vegetable, and PLS Pacific Labour Scheme
horticultural specialty crops PNG Papua New Guinea
FWO Fair Work Ombudsman PV Port Vila
GDP gross domestic product RSE Recognised Seasonal
HNZ Horticulture New Zealand Employer
HR Human Resources SEA Seasonal Employment Act
ILO International Labour SSCO Seasonal Solutions
Organization Cooperative Limited
IMF International Monetary Fun SWP Seasonal Workers
INZ Immigration New Zealand Programme
IOM International Organization SWPAG Seasonal Worker
for Migration Programme Advisory
LMP Labour Mobility Policy Group
LMU Labour Mobility Unit VNPF Vanuatu National
LSU Labour Sending Unit Provident Fund
M&E monitoring and evaluation WHMs Working Holiday Makers
MBIE Ministry of Business,
Innovation and
Employment

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# **Executive Summary**

This report is an independent review of Vanuatu's labor mobility program. It assesses relevant policies and bilateral agreements to generate options for the Vanuatu government to consider to improve labor mobility implementation in Australia and New Zealand (ANZ).

Vanuatu was the first Pacific Island Country (PIC) in 2006–2007 to send migrant workers abroad to fill seasonal farm jobs in New Zealand and later Australia. About 16,500 ni-Vanuatu migrants were in Australia (11,000) and New Zealand (5,500) in 2023 (Sackett, 2023; Bedford, 2023), the most from any Pacific Island Country (PIC). Over 90 percent of ni-Vanuatu migrants are from four provinces: half are from Shefa province, 17 percent from Sanma, and 11 percent each from Malampa and Tafea provinces (Sackett, 2023). Over 85 percent of ni-Vanuatu migrant workers are men, including half who have been employed for several seasons in ANZ.

Personal testimonies of migrants and numerous surveys and evaluations agree that ni-Vanuatu migrants and their families benefit from earnings in ANZ that are up to 10 times higher than they would earn at home. Migrant households have higher incomes and use remittances to invest in better housing, education, and healthcare for children, as well as make contributions to local villages and churches. Multiplier effects from spending remittances benefit non-migrants and regional economies, and remittances have favorable macroeconomic effects such as increasing the share of ni-Vanuatu workers in formal sector jobs and adding to Vanuatu's foreign exchange.

Despite this, there are several concerns relating to labor mobility in Vanuatu:

- There are fears that the current recruitment system lacks effective regulation to protect ni-Vanuatu migrants
- Most women, the disadvantaged, and people who live in remote/rural areas are missing out on the opportunity to participate in labor mobility programs
- The pre-departure process, which is based in Port Vila, can be inefficient, time-consuming, and costly for workers
- There are some negative immediate and longer-term socioeconomic effects of workers going abroad for extended periods, including migrants being separated from their families for extended periods (such as divorce and 'brain drain')<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> https://devpolicy.org/brain-drain-1-a-growing-concern-20221013/

- Some migrants do not have enough protection when abroad. They face issues such as unexpected deductions from their wages, poor living conditions, and 'bad' employers, which is resulting in some ni-Vanuatu workers absconding
- There is no catalog of Vanuatu's labor mobility concerns and little systemic data to show the severity of the problems that have been identified, although several studies are ongoing.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from outlining various approaches that could help to improve Vanuatu's labor mobility system, this report aims to highlight the importance of understanding the tradeoffs at play, and how they have the potential to impact each stakeholder. For example, what the government of Vanuatu wants for society – such as a more inclusive approach to recruitment that allows women and people in remote areas to secure work in ANZ – might not always match what employers in ANZ want – such as highly-skilled and experienced employees. Ideally, any changes to the current system will take into account the wants and needs of all stakeholders, and try to create a situation where everybody 'wins'.

### **Recommendations:**

3.

Make incremental adjustments to Vanuatu's labor mobility system rather than embrace disruptive changes that could sharply reduce migrant worker deployments

# Strengthen the current system by segmenting agents and giving priority and benefits to those who adhere to regulations.

Incentives used to effectuate desired behavior should be matched with penalties, such as blacklisting recruiters and employers who violate labor mobility regulations to incentivize compliance. Association meetings could be used as a forum for regular interactions between employers, recruiters, and governments where stakeholders can identify and resolve issues related to migrants working abroad

**Use incentives and subsidies to steer recruitment to particular workers** (e.g., women) and areas (e.g., rural) rather than trying to block the exit of experienced workers or those from specific areas

<sup>2</sup> Sackett (2023) notes that some surveys find 80 percent of private sector businesses in Vanuatu reported losing employees to labor mobility over the previous 12 months.

4.

6.

Make recruitment from government work-ready pools voluntary rather than mandatory. Honest and efficient work-ready pools will prove their value to recruiters and employers, and network recruiting will ensure that, if work-ready pools include good workers, more migrants are recruited from the pool over time.<sup>3</sup> Governments can give agents and employers the option to recruit from work-ready pools and offer subsidies to recruit from the pool. Foreign employers should be encouraged to have a presence in the countries where they recruit to better screen and train workers to fill jobs. Employer investment and presence in sending countries will help to minimize poor worker-job matches and early returns or absconding **Create one-stop shops for exit procedures** – decentralize processing and visa issuance - and introduce other steps to reduce the costs and time involved in pre-departure procedures Consider changes to minimize migrant time abroad while maximizing migrant earnings, as well as protecting workers when they are in ANZ. This will ensure there are not periods of time, between seasons, where workers are not being paid but they have to spend money on food and housing. There is a need to increase the number of liaison officers based in ANZ who can support workers Establish a robust M&E system to collect data on migration and

# its effects, including:

- Surveys of returned workers to determine how many go abroad each month and year; where they are based and what commodities they farm; actual earnings abroad; deductions from wages; spending abroad; and net savings remitted to Vanuatu
- Assessment of future demand for ni-Vanuatu workers in ANZ. This could be done by examining ANZ farm labor data; exploring the potential for the mechanization of certain industries which could result in PIC workers being replaced by machines; interviewing stakeholders about the future demand for the commodities that employ PIC migrants; and monitoring the outlook for trade in the region.

Network recruiting refers to the practice of employers asking current workers to refer friends and relatives when additional workers are needed. Current workers who know the job are likely to refer only the workers who can perform the work.

### Introduction

Over 16,000 ni-Vanuatu workers are employed in Australia and New Zealand (ANZ), making Vanuatu the leading labor sender among Pacific Island Countries (PICs).<sup>4</sup> Migrant employment rebounded after COVID-19, and Vanuatu remained the leading migrant sender, accounting for about half of the migrants employed in the NZ Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and a quarter of those in the Australia Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in 2023.

### **Country Profile**

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands in the South Pacific Ocean with about 310,000 residents and a service-driven economy led by tourism and offshore finance. About three-quarters of Vanuatu's residents live in rural areas. The urban population is concentrated in the capital of Port Vila (50,000) and Luganville (20,000).

In 2020, the country moved from low-to lower-middle income status in the World Bank Country and Lending Groups Country Classification. GDP is about US\$1 billion and GDP per capita about US\$3,200 (IMF, 2023). The labor force is 135,000, including 44,000 workers who have wage and salary jobs. Some 55 percent of Vanuatu's workforce is employed in agriculture, mostly for subsistence. Farm exports include kava, copra (dried coconut), timber, beef, and cocoa.

### **Tourism**

Tourism-related industries dominate Vanuatu's private economy, accounting for one-third of pre-COVID-19 employment, one-third of GDP, and three-quarters of exports. Three-quarters of the more than 300,000 tourists who arrived each year before COVID-19 were from Australia (50 percent), New Zealand (13 percent), and New Caledonia (12 percent), and they arrived by air and cruise ship.

Vanuatu's borders reopened on July 1, 2022. The government's goal of attracting more than 300,000 tourists a year has been challenged by hotels that were weakened financially during the pandemic and a shortage of trained and skilled hospitality workers – as well as high electricity costs, low internet penetration, and limited water and sewage systems.

<sup>4.</sup> The PICs are often defined as the 14 politically independent island countries that are members of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (www.forumsec.org): the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, and include the cultural regions of Melanesia (PNG, Fiji, Solomons, and Vanuatu), Micronesia (FSM, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, and RMI), and Polynesia (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu), with labor forces of 4.6 million, 200,000, and 600,000, respectively (Hooke and Alati, 2023). The PICs with the smallest populations are most reliant on labor mobility and remittances.

Vanuatu's currency (US\$1 = VT 119 as of July 2023) is expected to appreciate as tourism rebounds, and remittances and aid help to offset the persistent deficit in goods trade.

Vanuatu is vulnerable to natural disasters. Two Category 4 cyclones impacted the Port Vila area in March 2023. The country is closely linked to ANZ by the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations-Plus (PACER-Plus). Under PACER-Plus, Vanuatu is reducing trade barriers in exchange for aid to modernize its customs administration and improve bio-and cyber-security.

### **Migrant Workers Abroad**

Ni-Vanuatu workers travel abroad to Australia to work as part of the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, which includes the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). In New Zealand, they take part in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program.

Almost 20 percent of Vanuatu's prime-aged adult male workers were employed in ANZ in 2022–2023 (Bedford, 2023). Three-quarters of ni-Vanuatu migrants in Australia are from the Efate/Port Vila area in Shefa province, and over half of the ni-Vanuatu migrants in New Zealand are from the Efate/Port Vila and Santo areas of Sanma province on the largest island of Espiritu Santo, the same areas that need hospitality workers for the tourism sector.

TABLE 1. Share of migrants among residents and males (2022–2023)

Nationality	Combined RSE+SWP	Total pop 20-59	% pop in RSE+SWP	Combined RSE+SWP males	Male pop 20-59
Samoa	5,459	84,913	6.40	5,074	44,034
Tonga	5,102	44,597	11.40	4,122	20,622
Vanuatu	15,639	135,948	11.50	13,725	67,155
Total 'Big 3'	26,200	265,458	9.90	22,921	131,811
PNG	763	4,965,680	0.02	663	2,540,970
Solomon Islands	1,784	319,190	0.60	1,476	160,600

Source: Bedford, 2023.

Vanuatu is one of 14 PICs that send migrants to ANZ, including nine that the World Bank in 2023 described as having a geography that makes economic development challenging, namely, small islands scattered over a vast expanse of ocean. Most PICs rely heavily on foreign aid, and private sector activities are dominated by tourism, fishing, and agriculture.

PICs have "high public spending, large trade deficits relative to the size of the economies, heavy reliance on external flows (such as foreign aid and or remittances) to fund the deficits, and elevated risks of debt distress due to low debt-carrying capacity" (Gould and Wai-Poi, 2023).

Wilkins (2023) notes that most PICs "are comprised of low-lying, geographically dispersed islands (which can make infrastructure development expensive and challenging), have extensive subsistence agriculture and have high amounts of informal labour." Challenges to economic development include lack of capacity, little economic diversification, and uneven connections to the international financial system – issues aggravated in some countries by high levels of government debt and threats from climate change.

Pacific Island Countries differ from each other in population, their stocks of emigrants abroad, remittances as a share of GDP, and GDP per capita. PIC populations range from less than 15,000 to almost 10 million, and the share of persons born in the country who have lived abroad a year or more ranges from one percent to two-thirds of the resident population. The remittance share of GDP ranges from less than one percent to almost 40 percent, and per capita incomes from less than US\$2,000 to over US\$10,000 (see Table 2).

Vanuatu has a relatively small stock of emigrants abroad, remittances that were 10 percent of GDP in 2020 and rising, and a per capita income of about US\$3,000, which is nearer to the low end of the PIC spectrum.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga have higher shares of emigrant stocks abroad, remittances that are a higher share of GDP, and per capita incomes that are higher than in Vanuatu.

TABLE 2. Socioeconomic conditions across PICs

Open labour marke	Emigrant stock in OECD countries	Estimated resident population 2022	Emigrants/ resident population %	Remittances /GDP 2020%	GDP per head \$US 2020
Federated States of Micronesia	35,728	117,000	30.5	5.7	3,565
Marshall Islands	27,802	60,000	46.3	13.2	4,130
Palau	12,136	18,000	67.4	0.9	14,244

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5.</sup> PNG, the Solomon Islands, and Timor Leste are similar to Vanuatu in having small emigrant stocks abroad.

High mobility							
Fiji	200,620	909,000	22.1	7.2	5,058		
Samoa	90,533	202,000	44.8	18.7	4,068		
Tonga	53,244	108,000	49.3	37.7	4,625		
Low mobility							
Papua New Guinea	26,702	9,292,000	0.3	0.008	2,757		
Solomon Is	3,360	721,000	0.5	1.8	2,251		
Vanuatu	2,423	322,000	0.8	8.8	2,870		
Timor-Leste	15,052	1,369,000	1.1	8.7	1,443		
Climate affected a	Climate affected atolls/islands						
Kiribati	7,767	123,000	6.3	9.5	1,654		
Tuvalu	1,581	12,000	13.2	2.2	4,143		
Nauru	1,077	11,000	9.8	8.8	10,580		

Source: Curtain et al, 2022.

### **Structure and Methodology**

This report begins with a review of labor mobility in Vanuatu. It highlights important policies and then outlines the three phases of labor mobility: recruitment, employment abroad, and reintegration. Remittances and skills are examined in the context of working abroad, along with the tradeoffs and challenges currently being experienced by all stakeholders. The report then explores labor mobility programs in Australia and New Zealand – comparing the situation between the two countries, as well as discussing the future potential for expansion.

The preparation of this report began with an assessment of Vanuatu's labor mobility policies, with a special emphasis on policies related to labor mobility for NZ's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program, and Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and Seasonal Worker Program (SWP). The second step involved a compilation and analysis of the labor mobility policies and experiences of other small island states. The third step involved conducting interviews, focus groups, and workshops with a wide range of government officials, employers, agents, migrant workers, and NGOs with expertise in Vanuatu labor mobility policies and their implementation.

# Review of Labor Mobility in Vanuatu

### **Vanuatu's Migration Policies**

Vanuatu's Seasonal Employment Act (SEA) no. 23 of 2007 established a policy to send workers abroad and requires private employment agents who recruit Vanuatu workers to obtain licenses or, in the case of foreign employers, permits from the Commissioner of Labor. The SEA, which was enacted to regulate temporary labor migration to the NZ RSE, instructs agents not to recruit college graduates for seasonal work abroad unless they are jobless or have the written permission of their Vanuatu employers to work abroad.

The SEA emphasizes that recruiters should explain to migrants the need to abide by the terms of their work visas and return to Vanuatu at the end of their contracts. Recruiters are to provide worker names, copies of contracts, and worker departure and return dates to the Commissioner of Labor's Employment Services Unit (ESU) which maintains a registry of licensees and permit holders, and issues an annual report on labor mobility before March 31 each year.<sup>7</sup>

Curtain (2019) emphasized that the SEA focused on agents rather than foreign employers and migrant workers and that the ESU lacks the funding to monitor agent activities. The ESU can revoke the licenses of recruiters who violate regulations, but may not know if agents are charging migrant workers for jobs in ANZ. The ESU lists agents that are in compliance and those that are barred from recruiting workers, but has no rating system to enable employers and migrants to select the best agents. Curtain also emphasized that Vanuatu in 2019 was the only PIC with no government liaison agents abroad to help resolve issues between migrants and employers. Since then, several Vanuatu liaison officers have been appointed to serve migrants in ANZ.

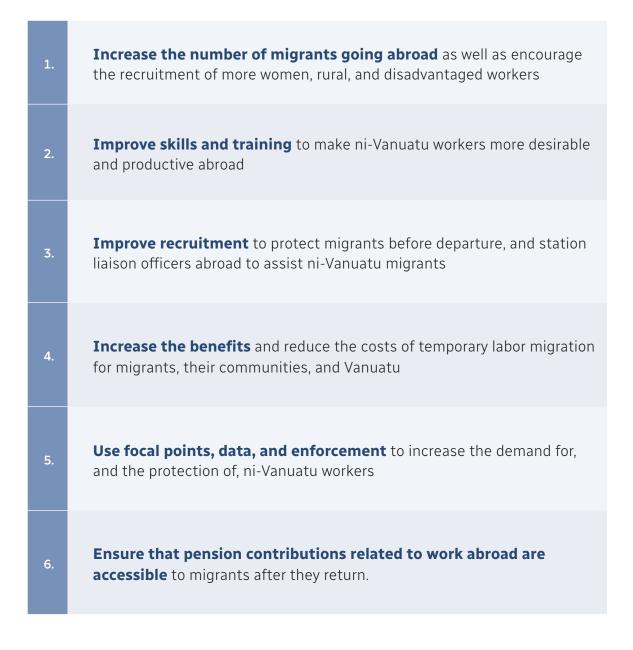
<sup>6.</sup> https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\_lang=en&p\_isn=96035&p\_country=VUT&p\_count=98

<sup>7.</sup> Vanuatu's Department of Labor is a component of the Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>8</sup> https://vqa.edu.vu/index.php/documents/general-documents/national-labour-mobility-policy/

<sup>9.</sup> The plan notes that labor mobility is a significant contributor to The National Sustainability Plan (The People's Plan) 2030, especially ECO 4.7 and ECO 4.9.

Vanuatu's 2019 Labor Mobility Policy (LMP)<sup>8</sup> aimed to improve conditions by reducing recruitment costs and ensuring that returned workers have access to pensions and other benefits that were earned abroad.<sup>9</sup> The LMP has 13 priorities organized around six pillars:



In 2023, the Vanuatu government announced:10

1.	A review of the SEA and the LMP, and consideration of policies to avoid a 'brain drain' <sup>11</sup> of skilled workers
2.	The development of policies that foster and recognize the skills of ni-Vanuatu workers
3.	Increased protections for ni-Vanuatu migrants via blacklists of foreign employers who mistreat workers
4.	An end to host-country extensions of the contracts of ni-Vanuatu migrants who are abroad in order to reunite loved ones sooner and minimize family separation issues
5.	Cooperation with host-government authorities and employers to deal with absconding migrants
6.	Plans to increase the number of liaison officers in ANZ.

The government has also announced that up to 1,500 foreign workers could be employed in Vanuatu for a year under Special Category Visas to fill jobs that employers cannot fill with ni-Vanuatu workers.<sup>12</sup>

India, the Philippines, and other Asian countries demonstrate that public and private education and training institutions can prepare citizens for employment abroad. These labor-sending countries have also pioneered policies to protect their citizens during recruitment, while they are employed abroad, and after they return.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10.</sup> https://www.dailypost.vu/news/government-s-efforts-and-measures-to-address-impacts-of-labour-mobility-in-vanuatu/article\_90f50a9c-7b65-541e-93a5-08098f431d3a.html

<sup>11.</sup> https://devpolicy.org/brain-drain-1-a-growing-concern-20221013/

<sup>12.</sup> https://www.dailypost.vu/news/gov-t-to-allow-1-500-foreign-workers-under-special-visas/article\_2bfcc574-54ec-5d9a-b565-2b88c774d932.html

<sup>13.</sup> One lesson in comparisons between the Philippines and India versus Africa in nursing and care is that private institutions emerge to finance and provide training that matches host-country requirements. Government monopolies on healthcare training, as in some African countries that train to former colonial standards and thus make graduates attractive to foreign employers, can wind up producing migrant graduates at taxpayer cost who emigrate (OECD, 2010). PICs with small populations may have more difficulty attracting private investment in facilities to train citizens for work abroad, and PIC graduates may elect to settle abroad if permitted to do so by host countries.

### **Three Phases of Labor Mobility**

### Recruitment

There are three major ways to manage recruitment: laissez faire or no regulation; regulate foreign and domestic agents and employers who recruit migrants; or have a government agency create a work-ready pool that is either a monopoly or that competes with private agents. Some countries have different policies for different types of workers, and some countries combine several approaches, such as employers relying on private agents as well as the government's work-ready pool.

Laissez faire is the policy of most industrial countries, which rarely regulate the activities of agents or employers seeking to hire their citizens. Most of the workers recruited in industrial countries are professionals who are assumed to be capable of assessing the pros and cons of working in another country. Multinationals, universities, and other employers of migrant professionals have HR and legal departments to ensure compliance with migrant worker regulations in sending and host countries.

Most of the world's 175 million migrant workers move from low-and middle-income countries to higher wage countries (World Bank, 2023). Governments from these countries tend to regulate private agents and foreign employers to protect their citizens from fraud, coercion, and exploitation during recruitment and while they are employed abroad. The need for protection arises from the fact that the low education and skill levels of migrants may limit their ability to understand that high wages abroad also involve hard work and high living costs.

The number of recruiting agents has risen to over 20 for NZ and over 50 for Australia, but key informants agreed that 10 to 20 Vanuatu agents, who deploy hundreds or sometimes thousands of migrants, account for most migrant deployments.<sup>14</sup> Many private recruiters and foreign employers recruit only in the Port Vila area, and some recruiters reportedly do not provide the workers they recruit with basic information on the skills wanted by foreign employers and their wages and deductions abroad.

Most SWP migrants in Australia are employed by labor hire firms that rely on ni-Vanuatu agents to recruit seasonal workers, while RSE employers in New Zealand often send supervisors to Vanuatu to work with local agents and returning team leaders to recruit additional workers.

<sup>14.</sup> Seasonal Solutions, a coop based on NZ's South Island, reportedly accounts for about half of Vanuatu's RSE migrants.

Governments often require recruiters to identify themselves by obtaining licenses, passing tests to ensure that they understand regulations, posting bonds, and agreeing to abide by regulations that specify what fees (if any) can be charged to workers and sometimes foreign employers for recruitment services. Many governments have legislation that reflects the ILO principle that employers should pay the recruitment costs of the migrant workers they employ (ILO, 2020). The Asia Pacific region has the highest share of policies that allow agents to charge fees to migrant workers, and most of these Asia-Pacific policies establish the maximum costs that can be paid by migrant workers.

TABLE 3. Worker-paid fee regulation across Asia-Pacific countries

Region (countries) *	No. of policies on recruitment fees and related costs	No. of policies prohibiting the charging of fees and costs to workers and jobseekers	No. of policies regulating charging of fees and costs to workers and jobseekers
Africa (15)	16	12	4
Americas (21)	21	16	5
Asia and the Pacific (22)	25	3	22
Europe (26)	28	23	5
Arab States (6)	9	9	-
Total (90)	99	63	36

<sup>- =</sup> nil; Countries with multiple policies: Belgium (2), Ethiopia (2), India (2), Malta (2), New Zealand (2), Philippines (2), United Arab Emirates (2), Qatar (3).

Source: ILO, 2020.

<sup>15.</sup> ILO Employment Service Convention, 1948 (No. 88) and ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181) assert that governments should operate no-fee labor exchanges, and that workers should not be charged for job-matching services (the employer-pays principle). Article 7 of Convention No. 181 says: "Private employment agencies shall not charge directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, any fees or costs to workers." The ILO maintains a database of national laws on recruitment fees at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/fair-recruitment/publications/WCMS\_737607/lang—en/index.htm

Vanuatu's government favors the recruitment of unemployed workers on outlying islands and women, and involves local community leaders and tribal chiefs deciding who should be recruited. However, foreign employers make the final decision on who to hire and their preferences do not always align with that of locals. Crews of ni-Vanuatu workers abroad have team leaders who act as liaisons with their employers and should provide Vanuatu's ESU with a de-briefing paper after their return that, inter alia, identifies problem workers so that the ESU can block their re-deployment (Bailey, 2017). Team leaders are selected in Vanuatu, based on their status at home, but may be replaced abroad by a worker in the crew who speaks English well and can communicate effectively with the ANZ employer. Some ANZ employers recognize the importance of team leaders with additional pay or other benefits.

Vanuatu agents create work-ready pools of potential migrants. Internal travel is expensive, so many of the Port Vila-based agents wait for migrants who are seeking foreign jobs to come to them. Once a migrant is selected by a foreign employer and signs a contract, agents help them to obtain passports (VT 10,000), medical clearance (VT 12,000), and police clearance (VT 2,000), and ensure that the migrant has written permission from the village chief and the spouse (if applicable) to work abroad. With these clearances in hand, agents submit worker passports and paperwork to the appropriate embassy for visas that are usually issued within a week. Foreign employers pay visa costs and advance the cost of airfares; some of these costs are deducted from worker wages abroad. Vanuatu requires migrants to undergo a two-day pre-departure briefing in Port Vila.

Migrants can incur many costs to go abroad, including the cost of documentation, medical and other checks, and internal and foreign travel expenses. Many countries' regulations distinguish between services that benefit primarily the foreign employer, such as the cost of a work visa, and services that benefit the migrant, such as the cost of a passport. The ILO (2020) notes that ANZ seasonal worker programs are examples of cost-sharing programs.

TABLE 4. Potential costs involved in working abroad

### Workers' documentation

- 1. Passport
- 2. Police clearance
- 3. Birth certificate
- 4. School record/education credentials
- Skills certificate for job applied for/ certificate of occupational competency

#### Medical

- 6. Medical test
- Vaccinations
   Skills tests and additional training
- 8. Skills test
- 9. Language testing
- 10. Additional tests (medical or skills)

#### Pre-departure and training

- 11. Pre-departure training
- 12. Additional training, as needed

# Country of origin government requirements

- 13. Approval of foreign contracts
- 14. Contribution to welfare fund
- 15. Enrolment in social security, health and other national insurance
- 16. Miscellaneous taxes\*

### Country of destination government requirements

- 17. Visa
- 18. Work permit
- 19. Levy

### **Travel and transportation**

- 20. Internal travel and accommodation while processing
- 21. Outward international air travel
- 22. Local transport from airport to place of work

#### **Exceptional costs**

- 23. Breach of contract
- 24. Security deposits and other collateral

### Administrative and other costs

- 25. Notary, attestations and other legal fees\*\*
- 26. Photographs

#### Return

- 27. Return international air travel
- 28. Allowances for return travel

\*\*Including translation costs

Source: ILO, 2020.

Some governments create work-ready pools from which employers may or must select migrants, depending on whether these pools are monopolies or alternatives to pools created by agents or foreign employers. Government work-ready pools can protect citizens from recruiter fees, but many foreign employers are skeptical of the quality of workers in these pools – with concerns of favoritism and bribery used to select candidates.

<sup>\*</sup>Miscellaneous taxes may refer to airport tax, exit clearance, among others

Host governments normally establish minimum wages that must be paid to local workers and migrants. If migrants have particular skills, such as the ability to speak English and knowledge of how to use appliances, labor-sending governments may be able to enforce minimum wages abroad that are higher than prevailing wages. For example, the Philippines refused to allow domestic helpers to leave for work abroad after 2006 unless they were paid at least US\$400 a month (which was twice the prevailing wage for domestic helpers in the Gulf) and justified this by requiring departing Filipinas to complete pre-departure training that included learning how to operate modern household appliances (Guevarra, 2014).

#### Recruitment in PICs

No PIC has embraced laissez faire recruitment for seasonal farm workers. ANZ governments allow only approved farm employers to recruit in PIC countries, and PIC governments have several regulatory systems that govern the recruitment of their citizens for seasonal work abroad.

Table 5 shows that the PIC recruitment spectrum is framed by Tonga and Vanuatu at the regulated private agent end of the spectrum, and Timor-Leste, PNG, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Nauru at the work-ready pool end, since these countries require or encourage employers to hire from government work-ready pools. Note that all PICs operate work-ready pools.

TABLE 5. PIC recruitment models

Labor-sending country	Work-ready pool	Direct employer recruitment	Licensed agent
Vanuatu	*	X	X
Tonga	X	X	
Timor-Leste	X		
Samoa	X	X	
Fiji	X	X	
Solomon Islands	X	X	*
Kiribati	X	*	*
Papua New Guinea	X		
Tuvalu	X		
Nauru	X		

<sup>\* =</sup> not applicable

Source: Doan and Edwards, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Developing countries led by India that wanted to send more migrants abroad during GATS 4 negotiations argued that minimum wages for migrants were a form of protectionism to slow labor migration.

#### **Associations**

There are reports of ni-Vanuatu workers paying fees or offering gifts to be sent abroad. Recruiter associations may be better positioned than individual recruiters to discourage the payment of such fees.

In many countries, private recruiters form associations that develop best practice codes of conduct and certify the compliance of their member agents. These associations often invite foreign employers, government officials, and others to educate their members. They develop standardized work contracts and pre-departure briefings, and serve as a focal point for interactions with employers as well as host and foreign governments. Some associations negotiate cheaper airfares for member agents and collect and analyze data to help agents to understand the recruitment system and achieve economies of scale that reduce deployment costs. Good recruiter associations can help to squeeze out non-compliant agents who charge workers and seek a quick profit before being discovered and blacklisted.

The Vanuatu Agents Committee had six members in April 2023, including the largest agents, and wants to learn from international experience how to operate an effective association.

### **Employers**

Foreign employers set labor migration in motion by requesting permission from their governments to employ migrants. However, once employers develop an experienced migrant workforce, most want 'their migrants' to return year-after-year. If more workers are needed, employers often use network recruiting, asking current workers to sponsor or refer new workers. Network recruiting can benefit both employers and workers. Current workers know the requirements of the job and often the abilities of any new workers they bring into the crew, so they often train and integrate the workers they bring, saving employers recruitment and training costs.

Many foreign employers of seasonal migrants have long-term investments in orchards, vineyards, and cropping systems with time horizons of a decade or more, so they have an incentive to develop long-term relationships with others in the supply chain, including agents who provide farm workers.

An example of this is in the US, where the National Council of Agricultural Employers has 500 members that account for over 85 percent of the almost 400,000 H-2A jobs certified each year. The H-2A temporary agricultural program allows agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring non-immigrant foreign workers to the US to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature. Employment of a seasonal nature is tied to a certain time of year by an event or pattern, such as a short annual growing cycle, and requires labor levels above what is necessary for ongoing operations.

Employment is of a temporary nature and usually, except in extraordinary circumstances, lasts no longer than one year.<sup>17</sup> In the context of Vanuatu, this model could help to address issues of concern, such as family separation and brain drain.

Employer preferences for experienced workers may clash with government desires to 'spread out' opportunities to work abroad. The Turkish government tried to restrict the recruitment of skilled construction workers and to encourage German employers to recruit migrants in areas recovering from earthquake damage in the early 1970s. These policies largely failed because experienced Turks who knew they could find high-wage jobs in Germany left Turkey as tourists. Efforts in other countries to restrict the exit of particular types of workers often see migrants leaving without exit checks and predeparture briefings.

Instead of regulating who can go abroad and how often, governments can encourage employers to recruit particular workers by providing incentives, such as subsidizing the travel costs of migrants recruited in remote regions. Countries with national airlines often require the airline to transport migrants at the lowest fare offered on a route, even for last-minute tickets, because exit procedures may make it hard to know exactly when a worker is ready to depart. Host governments can also incentivize recruitment in particular countries, such as the US policy of providing extra H-2B visas for the oversubscribed H-2B program only to US employers who recruit in Central America.<sup>18</sup>

Vanuatu's labor mobility policy calls for licensed recruiters to charge foreign employers rather than migrants for their services, ensure that departing workers undergo predeparture briefings, and have departing migrants sign a code of conduct for work abroad. Signed contracts between foreign employers and migrants are to be submitted to the Ministry of Labour (MOL).

### **Employment Abroad**

Migrant-sending governments want to protect their citizens while they are employed abroad, even though the major responsibility for protecting migrant workers while they are employed abroad lies with foreign employers and host governments. Employers who hire migrants often join associations that educate and assist them to understand the culture and language of their migrant employees and comply with labor and other laws.

Most foreign employers have regular and ongoing relationships with particular Vanuatu agents. Stakeholders reported that few employers visit Vanuatu regularly and few Vanuatu agents visit the migrants they recruited while they are employed abroad.

<sup>17</sup> http://www.ncaeonline.org/

DHS plans to issue up to 130,716 H-2B visas in FY23, the maximum number permitted. The annual quota is 66,000, but Congress allows DHS to issue an additional 65,000 visas to foreigners who fill seasonal jobs in a variety of industries including landscaping, fisheries and tourism. Some 20,000 of the additional H-2B visas are reserved for citizens of Haiti and the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador; the other additional visas are for H-2B workers returning to their previous US employers. Some 55,000 additional H-2B visas were made available in FY22. https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/m

This lack of regular interaction between agents, employers, and migrants, as well as relatively low employer-paid fees to agents of \$A 70 to \$A 100 per worker, limits the growth of the Vanuatu recruitment industry.

The major issues that arise with employment abroad involve both employers and migrants. Problems often arise when migrants arrive and are not satisfied with their housing, transportation, and other arrangements, or are unable to perform the work to the speed and satisfaction of the employer. Many low-skilled workers are attracted to high-wage foreign jobs without realizing that they will also incur high costs abroad to earn these wages, which can result in frustration and disappointment. Unexplained wage deductions are a major complaint of migrants abroad.

Having employers select the housing and health insurance for migrants, and then deduct the cost of employer-selected items from worker wages, can result in employers making decisions that are not always in the best interest of migrants – and migrants who are dissatisfied with their situation when abroad.

The RSE and SWP set maximum migrant stays and require employers to provide a minimum number of hours of work to migrants. Farm work is often seasonal, so there may be periods when migrants are abroad but not working, which means that migrants experience family separation and incur housing and food costs without earning wages.

Seasonal farm worker programs in many countries require farm employers to pay for migrant worker transportation and housing. Such an employer-pays requirement often reduces the average duration of migrant worker contracts. For example, the US has an employer-pays-program, and the average duration of H-2A worker contracts has fallen from six to five months over the past decade. Employers who pay US\$15 to US\$30 per night to house each migrant worker have learned that, instead of recruiting for 50 workers at the beginning of the season, they can recruit 25 workers at the beginning of the season and another for 25 workers near the peak season, so that the second group of workers is abroad for a shorter period.

Migrants often perform better than local workers in low-skill jobs because their major reason for being abroad is to earn high wages and be invited to return, while local workers often accept seasonal farm jobs until they can find better jobs. Most migrant farm workers are young men who are earning far more than they would at home.

Labor-sending governments can encourage labor-hire firms to receive certification of their compliance with labor and migration laws by favoring them in recruitment, such as allowing certified employers and labor-hire firms to skip some government exit and pre-departure checks. Liaison officers abroad can visit migrants to understand the work they are performing, solicit worker feedback, and interact with employers so that work-related issues can be dealt with effectively.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Sending governments can also penalize and blacklist particular employers, as Vanuatu did with a South Australian employer in 2021. Such bans are rarely effective unless all labor-sending countries blacklist the same employer.

Regular meetings of liaison officers and employer, recruiter, and government agency staff can identify frequent issues and their resolution, with the lessons learned used to modify pre-departure and return briefings to reduce these issues in the future.

Protecting ni-Vanuatu migrants abroad and dealing with absconders will likely require more liaison officers<sup>20</sup> – especially for first-time migrants, who may not fully understand their rights and obligations abroad. A trusted liaison officer can reduce confusion and problems between migrants and their employers before they escalate. Growing familiarity with work and life abroad can tempt some ni-Vanuatu migrants to abscond from their employers and remain abroad, especially if they believe that they can work abroad legally or illegally or if they fear that they will be unable to work abroad again.<sup>21</sup>

### Reintegration

Migrant workers fill seasonal and year-round jobs abroad. Hiring temporary workers to fill seasonal jobs is different from rotating temporary workers in and out of the country to fill year-round jobs. Seasonal jobs end, marking a natural time for migrant workers to return to their country of origin, while both employers and migrants in year-round jobs often seek to extend the stay of now-skilled workers who have adjusted to life abroad.

Personal testimonies, surveys, and evaluations find that most ni-Vanuatu migrants are satisfied with their jobs and higher earnings abroad. Migrant families in Vanuatu benefit from higher household incomes and more spending on children's healthcare and education. Many returned migrants report that they acquired time and money management skills abroad that enhanced their status and welfare after their return (Bailey, 2017; Gibson and Bailey, 2021).

The Labour Mobility Unit's (LMU) policy to increase the socioeconomic benefits of labor migration begins with instructions for recruiters to conduct interviews with returning workers about their experience abroad and to ask returning migrants how they plan to use their savings from work abroad in Vanuatu. The LMU calls on the Ministry of Labor, Department of Labour Employment Service Unit (MOL-ESU) to develop and maintain a database of recruiters and migrants and to conduct an evaluation of the effects of migration on migrants and Vanuatu, including an annual report detailing how many migrants each recruiter deployed.

Foreign employers are expected to make pension or superannuation deductions from worker earnings and forward them to the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF), where returned migrants can access the funds.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The Australian government funds liaison officers from Kiribati, Vanuatu, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Tonga: www.palmscheme.gov.au/contact

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Australia tried to discourage absconders in 2021-22 with posters in six Pacific languages warning that absconders "may bring shame to [their] family's reputation." The posters also warned that absconders and their families and communities may be banned from working again in Australia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22.</sup> Australia's superannuation or pension fund has, since the 1990s, required employers to make pension contributions on behalf of their employees; the rate is 12 percent of employee earnings in 2025.

### **Absconding or Not Fulfilling Contracts**

Some ni-Vanuatu migrants abscond before the end of their contracts and do not return to Vanuatu, especially if they can obtain bridging or other visas that allow them to stay abroad, work legally, and renew their visas. Some ni-Vanuatu migrants have applied for asylum in Australia because they know that the wait for a first decision and appeal can permit them to work legally in Australia for a year or more.

Other ni-Vanuatu migrants work illegally. Stakeholders noted that there are small labor contractors in Australia willing to hire unauthorized workers to fill jobs in Australian horticulture, and one asserted that most of the seasonal workers brought to farms by small labor contractors are unauthorized (Nishitani et al, 2023).

Some migrants who absconded reported that they left 'bad' employers and labor hire firms, including those who did not offer steady work, charged workers for substandard housing, and restricted migrant access to local communities. These absconding migrants said that, because their contracts tied them to one Australian employer, they found it necessary to abscond in order to find a better employer, even if they were then working illegally. Vanuatu has a small diaspora in Australia, but several stakeholders noted that some ni-Vanuatu who have settled in Australia help dissatisfied migrants to apply for asylum or to work in an irregular status.

### Visa Portability

Some believe there would be less absconding if migrants had visa portability, that is, the ability to change employers before the end of their contracts. Visa portability raises a raft of practical problems, including whether the migrant must find a new employer before leaving the sponsoring employer, whether the new employer must reimburse the sponsoring employer for transport and other expenses incurred, and whether the original employer has easy access to replacement migrants.

A review of Australia's migration system recommended that the government test visa portability by allowing migrants to leave their sponsoring employer and giving them up to six months in Australia to find a new employer who is registered and eligible to employ migrants (DHA, 2023). To make visa portability financially feasible, fees that are now collected up front from the sponsoring employer would be paid monthly by the worker's current employer, so that a new employer would not have to reimburse the migrant's sponsoring employer.

This visa portability proposal has the advantage of not requiring migrants to 'prove' that the sponsoring employer is 'bad'. The migrant may fall out of status after leaving an allegedly bad employer until a government agency certifies the worker's allegations and issues a new work permit that allows the migrant to work and to testify against the employer. Most employers oppose 'rewarding' migrants who complain with new work visas, arguing that such visas create incentives for migrants to make what they consider to be false allegations.

Some sending countries, in a bid to preserve opportunities for their citizens to work abroad, punish absconders if they return, preventing them from going abroad legally again or perhaps prohibiting migrant recruitment from families or in villages with absconders, which may punish those who did not abscond.<sup>23</sup> Some sending governments require departing migrants to post bonds secured by a house or land that is forfeited if the migrant absconds, but the result of such bond schemes can be migrant families that become homeless and poor if the absconding migrant forms another family abroad.

### **Remittances and Skills**

#### **Worker Profile**

Most migrant farm workers are married men who want to return to their families after working abroad, which is one reason why some host countries that fear overstays require migrants to be married men with children who want to return to them. An ILO survey of returned PIC migrants found that they had an average 2.2 children and 5.8 dependents and 10.6 years of schooling (ILO, 2022). Half of ni-Vanuatu migrants did not complete secondary school, although 40 percent had a vocational certificate, and few ni-Vanuatu migrants reported having good English skills. They earned a median VT 25,000 or \$A 300 a month before departure.

TABLE 6. Average number of children and dependents of survey participants

	Average number of children	Average number of dependents
Fiji	2.5	3.6
Women	3.3	3.0
Men	2.1	4.0
Kiribati	1.9	6.6
Women	1.9	6.3
Men	1.9	6.7
Samoa	2.0	5.8
Women	1.6	4.0
Men	2.3	6.8
Vanuatu	2.4	7.3
Women	3.1	7.0
Men	1.9	7.6
Total	2.2	5.8

**Source:** ILO, 2022

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Australia's SWP handbook distributed to migrants includes "If you break any of your visa conditions, it will not only harm your chances of returning to Australia in the next season but it may also affect other seasonal workers from your country."

**TABLE 7.** Average number of years at school of survey participants

	Average number of years at school
Fiji	10.6
Female	10.5
Male	10.7
Kiribati	11.4
Female	12.4
Male	10.8
Samoa	11.8
Female	12.3
Male	11.4
Vanuatu	8.5
Female	8.5
Male	8.4
Total	10.6

TABLE 8. Incomes of survey participants in previous jobs

		Mean income		Median incon	пе
PIC		Local currency	AUD	Local currency	AUD
Fiji	15	FJD208.13	137.37	FJD190.00	125.40
Kiribati	18	AUD100.00	100.00	AUD89.00	89.00
Samoa	24	WST249.54	134.75	WST200.00	108.00
Vanuatu	20	VUV26 700.00	320.40	VUV25 000.00	300.00

AUD = Australian dollars; FJD = Fijian dollars; WST = Samoan tālā; VUV = Vanuatu vatu.

Note: This table is based on the responses of those who had indicated that they had previously held a job or owned a business in their country. Some others who had not owned a business but had engaged in some other activity, most often subsistence farming, had still generated an income that was at times considerable. In the case of Fiji, for instance, some subsistence farmers earned some 300 Fijian dollars per week, which was more than the average of those in paid employment. For consistency between the countries, these have not been included in the calculations for this table.

### **Sending Money Home**

Remittances to low-and middle-income countries reached a record US\$626 billion in 2022, three times Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the largest financial flow from richer to poorer countries.<sup>24</sup> Surveys of PIC migrants find that at least two-thirds, and often 80 percent or more of migrants, remit some of their foreign earnings, and that many migrants return with savings and goods.

The impacts of remittances have been studied extensively. Most remittances are spent on housing, education, and healthcare, with less invested in new small businesses. Surveys of returned PIC migrants suggest that the men, who are the majority among PIC migrants, often want to invest remittance savings in durable assets such as vehicles and livestock, while migrant women are more likely to invest in their children's education and healthcare.<sup>25</sup> Many ni-Vanuatu migrants were subsistence farmers before departure, but few returned migrants invest in agriculture at home due to the shortage of land with clear title and the generally low status of farming.<sup>26</sup>

The spending of remittances in local and regional economies has multiplier effects that also benefit non-migrants, and labor mobility has favorable macroeconomic effects that include increasing formal sector employment opportunities for ni-Vanuatu workers and adding to Vanuatu's foreign exchange (IMF, 2023). Many migrant-sending governments exempt returning migrants from tariffs and other charges on some or all of the goods that they bring with them, such as items useful to build or improve housing or to launch or expand small businesses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24.</sup> https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2809

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25.</sup> https://devpolicy.org/when-a-family-member-works-overseas-20230330/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26.</sup> The World Bank (2017) offered suggestions to improve the productivity and quality of jobs in developing country agriculture by taking advantage of changes in diets as incomes rise, that is, providing more fresh produce and meat to richer urban consumers.

Interviews with ni-Vanuatu female migrants employed in the Shepparton area of Victoria found that many wanted to extend their stays or return next season to finance upward mobility at home (Stead, 2022). Many researchers report that, after spending remittances to improve housing, pay school fees, and cover other daily expenses, relatively few PIC migrants use remittances to create small businesses in their home communities. There are many reasons for this, including small markets, expensive costs to transport goods to rural communities, and customs in traditional areas that expect those with higher incomes to share with others.

Interviews with ni-Vanuatu migrants employed in NZ found that most were grateful for higher NZ earnings (Fuatai, 2023). A 16-year veteran migrant worker originally from Ambrym, who moved to Port Villa and then went to NZ in 2007–2008, emphasized that NZ earnings enabled his family to build a concrete house to withstand storms and to purchase a four-wheel drive vehicle to provide transport services. This migrant emphasized the adjustment required to work eight hours a day for seven months, and was proud that his son, who he missed growing up, is also working in NZ.

Migrant women reported that work abroad increased their confidence and ability to deal with their own families and others in their home communities (Cornish et al, 2022). A woman who left a supervisory job at the National Bank of Vanuatu and was a packing house supervisor in NZ aimed to save \$NZ 20,000 from her seasonal work.

SWP migrants increased their incomes by an average fourfold, spent more on their children's education and healthcare, and constructed housing more resistant to storms; they also reported improved time and money management skills (Petrou and Connell, 2023b). Many returned ni-Vanuatu migrants often invest in service establishments, including local stores, guest houses for tourists, and vehicles to provide transport services for people and goods (Cameron, 2011; ILO, 2022).

900 (\$ billion)
700
300
100
Portfolio debt and equity flows

**FIGURE 1.** Remittances, foreign direct investment (FDI), portfolio, and official development assistance flows to low- and middle-income countries (1990–2023)

Source: https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2809

Several PICs are among the leading recipients of remittances as a share of GDP, including Tonga, where remittances are 50 percent of GDP, and Samoa, where remittances are one-third of GDP.

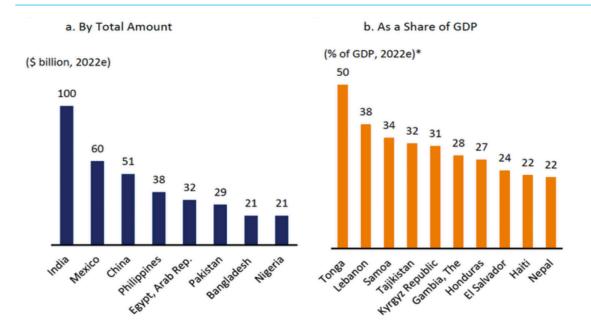


FIGURE 2. Top recipients of remittances among low- and middle-income countries (2022)

Remittances to Vanuatu were 22 percent of GDP in 2021, up from less than two percent of GDP before 2010. Remittances to Vanuatu increased from US\$11 million in 2010 to US\$50 million by 2014, were over US\$100 million by 2017, and topped US\$200 million in 2021.

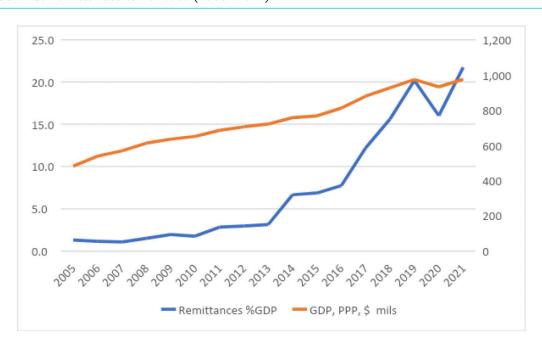


FIGURE 3. Remittances to Vanuatu (2005–2021)

Remitting funds from ANZ to PICs is relatively expensive, often 10 percent of the amount transferred, which is higher than the six percent global average cost of remitting US\$200 from one country to another.<sup>27</sup> One goal of the SDGs is to cut remittance costs in half. The Australian and New Zealand governments developed an app, SendMoneyPacific, that allows migrants to compare the costs of sending money via various money transfer services.<sup>28</sup> However, many agents and returned migrants reported that Western Union remains the preferred remittance agent for PIC migrants working in ANZ.



FIGURE 4. Remittance costs across regions (2021–2022)

### **Gaining Skills Abroad**

Many migrants learn new skills abroad, including improved time and money management that helps them to resist the urge to spend their savings on one-time festivals or events (World Bank, 2023).<sup>29</sup> Migrants who acquire skills abroad sometimes gain higher status in their home communities. Other returned migrants move to areas that offer more opportunities, which often means rural–urban migration. Labor migration accelerates urbanization if children leave rural areas for higher education and do not return or if returned migrants seek opportunities in cities.

Critics of the RSE and SWP assert that the skills acquired by migrants abroad cannot be used at home, and that many returned migrants "rest and recuperate before another strenuous season" abroad (Petrou and Connell, 2023a). However, Davila et al (2022) found that almost half of returned SWP migrants applied the knowledge and skills they acquired in Australia at home, including pruning fruit trees to obtain larger fruit, modifying irrigation techniques, and developing crop storage facilities to maintain the quality of harvested commodities, even though crops in ANZ are different from crops in most PICs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27.</sup> https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-17/vanuatu-seasonal-workers-pay-high-remittance-fees-after-cyclones/102099386

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28.</sup> https://sendmoneypacific.org/

<sup>29.</sup> In some countries, labor migration has been associated with higher dowry prices as young men return with foreign savings. In many PICs, returned migrants make contributions for village improvements or to local churches.

Many returning PIC workers, who would like to farm at home, lack the support resources, the research, input industries, cold storage, and marketing infrastructure that is required to farm and market the high-value fresh produce that they helped to produce abroad.

Some stakeholders decry the exit of employed and skilled workers to fill seasonal farm jobs in ANZ. However, there is little data or analysis of how many employed and skilled workers leave for ANZ jobs, and few studies of how Vanuatu businesses cope with competition for local workers from foreign employers. Yemoh (2022) found that some Samoan businesses added benefits and performance bonuses to retain employees who might otherwise migrate to ANZ. Samoan private businesses that have experience competing with the government for the best workers are trying to compete with ANZ employers, but some reported that, once a partner was employed in ANZ, the spouse in Samoa stops working because the family could live on the migrant's income (Yemoh, 2022).<sup>30</sup>

Some destination countries have developed training and migration skills partnerships that train workers in one country for employment in another, with the goal of achieving win-win-win outcomes for migrants, labor-short employers in destination countries, and sending countries (Wickramasekara, 2011). Skills partnerships differ from pre-departure and arrival briefings for low-skilled migrants by emphasizing the acquisition of destination-relevant skills and credentials before departure that are useful and recognized in the destination country.

Migrants who undergo months or years of training in their home country before departure benefit from higher earnings abroad, and sending countries benefit from the higher remittances made possible by higher earning skilled workers, as well as the return of skilled migrants.

The OECD (2018) laid out the requirements for sending countries to benefit from skills training at home and abroad. Sending countries benefit if skilled migrants return, their credentials are recognized, and if they make other transfers, including transferring technology and work methods that raise productivity or foster deeper trade and migration linkages.

<sup>30.</sup> Samoan employers said: "Australia and New Zealand get the best workers; the strong, able-bodied, young who are motivated by the money incentive to work...They are taking the very best of the workers from the private sector" (Yemoh, 2022).

**TABLE 9.** Examples of skills mobility partnerships

		Training is taking place mainly in the country of				
		Orig	jin	Desti	nation	
	Objective - Addressing skills needs mostly at	Origin	Destination	Origin	Destination	
	Migrant	(Not applicable)	Privately funded education for migration	Self-financing international students		
	Employer in destination country	(Not applicable)	Multinatio	nal firm global train	ee schemes	
d by	Destination country	Australian Pacific  Technical College prog. (AUS)  Blue Bird Pilot Scheme (NLD)				
Training mainly paid by	Migrant - Employer in destination country		Seafarers Nurses (e.g FIN, ITA, DEU)		Seasonal agriculture worker scheme with a training component	
Train	Migrant - Destination country		Low-skilled workers with pre-departure training (e.g. KOR)	Scholarships and youth exchange programmes		
	Destination country - Employer in destination country	Giz "triple win project" (with PHL, GEO, VNM, TUN) ITA (notably in the tourism sector)			Nurses (e.g. JPN), Trades (e.g. DEU, KOR) Traineeship prog. (e.g. CHE, JPN)	
	Conditions for the programme to be beneficial to the origin country (beyond remittances)	<ol> <li>Training for origin and destination needs according to common standards &gt; perfect transferability of skills</li> <li>Training enhances employability at origin</li> <li>Some trainees either return or never migrate - and selection is random or protects against "skimming"</li> </ol>		1. Return migration 2. Recognition of abroad upon re 3. Demand for sking at origin 4. Indirect transfice.g. trade; tech	skills acquired turn Ills acquired abroad ers	

**Source:** https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/migration-policy-debate-15.pdf

An example of a skills partnership agreement is that between Koblenz University in Germany and Mount Kenya University to train 5,000 nurses. After completing their training in Kenya, the nurses receive German healthcare assistant certificates and are eligible for three-year paid apprenticeships in Germany.<sup>31</sup> Koblenz University pays for the training – which is open to Kenyans who have completed secondary school and passed a test of basic German – and in turn receives Kenyans who work as assistants in its hospitals.<sup>32</sup> The trained healthcare assistants earn German wages and return with additional skills, benefitting Kenya.

Skills partnerships are sometimes controversial because they are often supported by foreign aid that is diverted from other projects, raising questions about whether training migrants for at least temporary employment abroad reduces the funding available for other development projects. The counterargument in favor of skills partnerships over other aid-dependent projects is that labor-sending countries can experience a brain gain via a brain drain, that is, the migrant-sending country can wind up with more healthcare workers if some of the newly trained workers do not emigrate. The prospect of earning higher foreign wages may encourage more people to get trained and, if some of them remain at home, the sending country ends up with more skilled workers (OECD, 2018).

Return and reintegration projects for ni-Vanuatu migrants are underway. ANZ is supporting V-Lab's Yumi Growem Vanuatu (Let's Build Together) program, which trained 35 returned migrants in 2021–2022 to turn ideas for small businesses into realities, including one-third of projects that involved agriculture and food. The training includes accounting and financial management, basic elements of marketing and managing risk, and coaching to help migrant businesses to succeed.<sup>33</sup>

### **Tradeoffs and Challenges**

After 15 years of sending workers abroad, questions are being raised about the effects of labor mobility on Vanuatu, including optimal recruitment strategies, the effects of workers being separated from their families, worker exploitation and absconding abroad, and the potential for a brain drain as more employed and skilled ni-Vanuatu workers seek jobs in ANZ.

There are concerns about the costs of family separation and fears that outlying islands could be dotted with rural communities that resemble nurseries and nursing homes, meaning that remaining residents are mostly children and the elderly because most prime-aged workers are abroad. The result could be less production of food in previously self-sufficient rural areas and a rising dependence on remittances to purchase food and other items.

<sup>31.</sup> https://thepienews.com/news/german-university-african-institutions/

<sup>32.</sup> https://global-skills-partnerships.de/en/about-2/

<sup>33.</sup> https://www.v-lab.org/

A rapid assessment of PALM found that PIC labor sending units (LSUs) reported more severe family separation issues for migrants and families in Australia than in New Zealand (Withers, 2022). The LSUs noted frequent extra-marital affairs by migrants who were abroad for extended periods that often resulted in the migrant remitting less to the family at home.

TABLE 10. Common social issues reported by PIC LMUs

	A: Communication	B : Culture and behaviour	C: Extended separation	D : Finances	E : Gender
1 : Absconding	0	3	1	1	0
2 : Children and caring	4	1	12	16	12
3 : Domestic	0	1	0	0	0
violence					
4: EMAs	9	19	6	16	9

Source: Withers, 2022.

Some Vanuatu officials have expressed that 'too many' skilled and employed workers are leaving Port Vila and other urban areas to work abroad, even as employers seek workers to rebuild after cyclones Judy and Kevin caused destruction in early March 2023. Some Vanuatu resorts report that they are unable to recruit enough experienced workers to serve the post-COVID-19 wave of tourists due to labor migration, and there are reports of some government employees leaving for seasonal farm jobs abroad.<sup>34</sup>

In October 2020, the government announced that it may change the recruitment system from licensed private recruiters to a system under which provincial government administrators manage recruitment (Curtain, 2020; Wade, 2020).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34.</sup> The government announced a 36 percent increase in the daily minimum wage from VT 220 to VT 300 in June 2023, and may introduce sectoral minimum wages, in part to retain skilled workers in Vanuatu. https://www.dailypost.vu/news/36-minimum-wage-increase/article\_664b55cd-bda4-549b-a985-d3a3e98892f6.html

<sup>35.</sup> Wade says that one reason for shifting away from private agent recruitment was for the government to raise money, presumably by charging foreign employers and/or workers for job recruitment and matching services.

In December 2022, Commissioner Murielle Meltenoven of the Department of Labour and Employment Services (DOLES) announced that DOLES would stop approving extensions of contracts for migrants abroad due to the social issues that arise from extended family separation.<sup>36</sup> Contracts for ni-Vanuatu migrants abroad were extended when Vanuatu closed its borders to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in March 2020, and some of the ni-Vanuatu migrants obtained bridging and other visas that allowed them to remain abroad.<sup>37</sup>

Australia's PLS program allows employers in rural or regional areas to employ PIC migrants for up to four years in meat processing, hospitality, and care services. Experience in other countries shows that it is very hard to rotate migrants in and out of year-round jobs in industrial countries. This leads to the aphorism that there is nothing more permanent than temporary workers and suggests that employers will pressure governments to allow them to continue to employ experienced migrant workers and some experienced migrants will want to settle abroad.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Samoa, which temporarily halted the deployments of migrants in January 2023,<sup>38</sup> Vanuatu wants to continue to send workers abroad but to redirect recruitment away from employed and skilled workers in the Port Vila area. One proposal would require agents and employers to include at least 30 percent first-time migrants from the government work-ready pool. The share of returning migrants in most seasonal worker programs, such as those in Canada and the US, is typically 80 to 90 percent.

There are many further questions – affecting different stakeholders when it comes to the phases of labor mobility – that require further exploration. Table 11 and Table 12 attempt to highlight these issues.

<sup>36</sup> https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/extension-of-contracts-disallowed-vanuatu-labour-commissioner/#:~:text=Vanuatu's%20 Department%20of%20Labour%20and,in%20New%20Zealand%20Australia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37.</sup> Canada's Agri-Food Pilot makes the transition from migrant to immigrant explicit by allowing up to 2,750 migrant workers a year in specific occupations who are employed in year-round jobs to apply for immigrant visas after one year of work in Canada and a Canadian job offer. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/agri-food-pilot/about.html

Samoa halted deployments of seasonal workers in January 2023 and expressed concern that Australia's Pacific EngagementVisa (PEV) lottery that will allow up to 3,000 PICs a year to become immigrants, similar to NZ's Pacific Access Category (PAC) resident visa available since 2002, will spur more emigration. There are more Samoans living abroad than in Samoa. https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/482934/samoa-govt-fears-labour-drain-after-canberra-offers-work-visas

**TABLE 11.** Labor mobility: Further questions for consideration

	Employer	mployer Government Questions		Note	
Recruitment: Who	Wants experienced workers	Wants to prioritize citizens who would not be employed at home: women, unemployed, disadvantaged	What is the tradeoff between who goes and the number of migrants?  Should some migrants be subsidized to increase their attractiveness?	How do migrants finance the cost of travel to Port Vila and pre-departure time?	
Recruitment: Training	Wants trained workers	Wants foreign employer to train workers who return with useful skills	Do employers who provide training pay lower wages or deduct costs from wages?  Who pays for pre-departure training?	If migrants pay for training in Vanuatu, do they recoup training costs in higher wages abroad?	
Employment abroad	Wants productive workers	Wants to protect citizens abroad and ensure demand for migrants	How can workplace disputes be anticipated and resolved	Can liaison officers win trust of migrants and employers?	
Return and reintegration	Wants best workers to return next season	Wants returned migrants to use skills at home; work for wages or launch small business	Can migrants work abroad and contribute at home?  Who decides how many seasons a migrant works abroad?	Can governments regulate how many times a migrant works abroad?	

TABLE 12. Considerations: Recruitment, employment abroad, and return

	Issue	Options	Outcomes	Notes	
Recruitment 1	Information asymmetry; employers know job requirements,	Private recruiters	Agents know local workers but perhaps not foreign job requirements	Most corridors: governments license and regulate private recruiters	
	workers know abilities	Employer direct recruitment	Employers know job requirements but may not know worker abilities	Direct employer can be efficient if employers have a local presence	
		Government work-ready pools of potential migrants	Is the pool a monopoly or a competitor with agents & employers	Are the workers in the work-ready pool desired by employers?	
Recruitment 2	Recruitment 2 Experienced versus first-time migrants		Labor mobility is demand- or employer-driven	Typical: returning migrants are 80–90 percent in seasonal farm worker programs	
		Governments may want to give more workers the opportunity to work abroad	Buyers have options to supply fresh produce: far, mechanization, hire migrants, and/ or import produce	New workers often selected via network recruiting, that is, experienced workers refer friends and relatives, and train them abroad	

	Issue	Options	Outcomes	Notes	
Employment	Goal is to educate migrants about rights and obligations  Ensure that employers and migrants are in compliance  Non- productive and absconding workers	Pre-departure and on-arrival migrant briefings  What complaint and redress mechanisms are there for migrants and employers?  Employers terminate non-productive workers and report absconders; liaison officers act as gobetweens for migrants and employers	Migrant complaints, liaisons and NGOs supplement government enforcement  Many farm jobs have an hourly guarantee and pay piece rate wages: What is the productivity standard?	What balance is there between jobs and protection?  Most migrants are men who want to work as many hours as possible  Are migrants more productive than local workers?	
Return and re-integration	Do returned migrants rest to go abroad again or invest in new businesses at home?	Rest to return most common  What incentives and assistance are available to returned migrants who want to invest?  Where do migrants want to invest?	Many migrant investments aim to create jobs for migrants and family, such as opening a store or guest house, buying a vehicle to transport goods and/or people  Migrants often perceive more opportunities in cities, so labor mobility can speed urbanization	Should returned migrants build better housing in villages that may be losing people?  What incentives can be provided to steer remittance investments?	

ANZ and the PIC labor-sending governments hold a Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting (PLMAM) to discuss how to:

- Maximize the benefits of labor mobility for employers, migrants, and sending and receiving countries
- Enhance training in sending countries and recognize the credentials of migrants
- Use labor mobility to "maximize opportunities that strengthen economic progress and improve lives throughout the Pacific."

PLMAM meetings could also deal with frequent issues that arise during the employment of migrant workers and compare effective policies to resolve them.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39.</sup> The next PLMAM meeting is scheduled for 6–10 November 2023, in Vanuatu.

# Agriculture and Labor Demand in Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand are net exporters of farm commodities – sending farm goods abroad that are worth more than the farm goods each country imports. Australia's leading farm commodities by value are beef and wheat, which are also Australia's leading farm exports.<sup>40</sup> Over 70 percent of Australia's farm production by value is exported, including one-third of the fruits and nuts produced in Australia.

New Zealand's leading farm commodities by value are dairy products and meat, which are also the leading farm exports, accounting for two-thirds of the \$NZ 53 billion in farm exports in 2021–2022. NZ exports horticultural products worth \$NZ 7 billion, led by kiwi, wine, and apples.

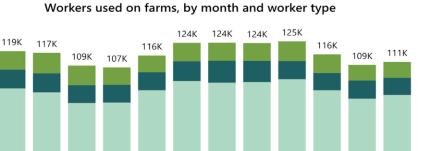
#### **Australia**

Australia's 9,800 horticultural farms employed a peak 124,000 workers in 2021–2022, including 51,000 hired or contract Australian workers, 26,000 family workers, 22,000 permanent workers, 15,000 PALM guest workers, and 14,000 other contract overseas workers, mostly Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) – making PALM workers one-eighth of the peak horticultural workforce. If PALM workers replace all WHMs and the horticulture workforce remains stable, the PALM workforce would double to 30,000.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40.</sup> https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2829

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Then PM John Howard, under pressure from farmers complaining of labor shortages, allowed WHMs beginning in 2006 who completed 88 days of farm work in their first year in Australia to work a second year in any Australian job. Howard reportedly resisted creating a program for adult farm guest workers. The number of WHMs who did sufficient farm work to qualify for second-year visas topped 40,000 by 2015 and prompted inquiries that found that, since WHMs were more interested in second-year visas rather than whether their Australian employers complied with labor laws, WHMs were subject to abuse and exploitation. Since 2019, WHMs who do six months of work in regional Australia during their second year can stay and work in Australia a third year. https://devpolicy.org/will-seasonal-workers-be-prioritised-over-backpackers-20211109/

FIGURE 5. Workers used on farms by month and worker type



OK

Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec Jan Feb Mar Apr May

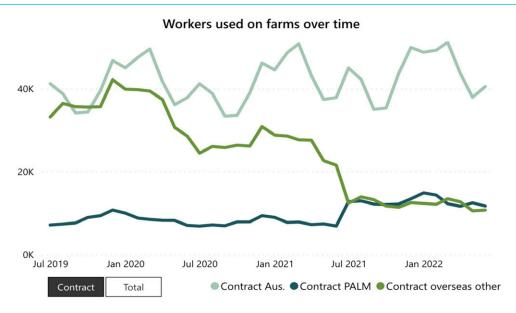
Family Permanent Contract Aus. Contract PALM Contract overseas other

Source: https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour

FIGURE 6. PALM worker rates (2019-2022)

100K

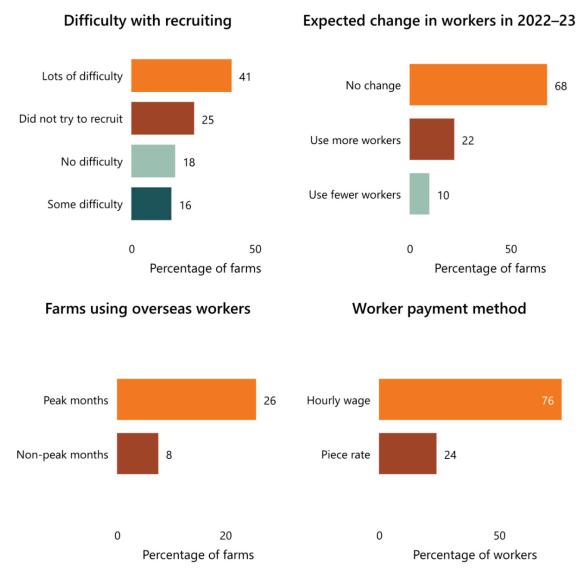
50K



Source: https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour

Horticultural farms reported that labor was an average 35 percent of their operating or variable costs, and 40 percent of horticultural farms reported adopting machines to reduce their demand for labor.

FIGURE 7. Issues affecting horticultural farms employing migrants



Source: https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/labour

Australia's 55,000 broadacre or field crop and livestock farms hired almost 200,000 workers in 2021–2022, and dairy farms employed another 22,000 workers – few were migrants (Downham and Litchfield, 2022).

#### **Migrant Worker Programs**

Australia launched its Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme in 2008, and the pilot was replaced by the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) in 2012. The Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), added in 2018, was also preceded by a pilot. The SWP and PLS were combined into the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in April 2022, with the SWP (403 visa) for Australian jobs that employ migrants for up to nine months and the PLS (403 visa) for Australian jobs that employ migrants in rural and regional Australia from one to four years. A Pacific Engagement Visa that grants up to 3,000 immigrant visas a year to Pacific Islanders began in July 2023.

When borders were closed during COVID-19, a 408 bridging visa was introduced to allow temporary workers in critical sectors (including agriculture) to remain in Australia for an additional 12 months; non-critical workers could stay for an additional three months.<sup>43</sup> These bridging visas extended family separation for migrant workers and prompted concern in Vanuatu and other PICs about the effects of long absences on migrant families.<sup>44</sup>

PALM is the major program to bring temporary low-skilled workers to Australia. As the DHA noted (2023): "with the exception of the PALM scheme, which is primarily designed to strengthen ties with our Pacific neighbors, Australia does not have an explicit low skilled labor visa program." It is not yet clear how PALM will interact with the new Pacific Engagement Visa that allows the immigration of 3,000 Pacific Islanders a year selected by lottery to Australia.

Australian employment of PALM workers has increased rapidly, to over 37,700 in March 2023, when the government announced that the administration of the PALM scheme would move to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and that additional funding would be granted to agencies involved in PALM, including the Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), the Department of Home Affairs, and the Australian Border Force (ABF).<sup>45</sup> The Australian government also announced that it would help 1,000 PALM workers to attain formal qualifications over four years.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42.</sup> PALM workers may be employed in horticulture, food-related nonfarm industries such as meatpacking, and hospitality and elder care. https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup>. An estimated 10,000 SWP migrants in Australia received 408 bridging visas, while about 1,400 returned to PICs during COVID-19 (ILO, 2022).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Some academics say that PIC government policies changed due to the climate change policies of the previous coalition government and border closures during COVID-19. Deputy PM Michael McCormack in 2019 said that the PICs would survive "because of large aid assistance from Australia...and because many of their workers come here and pick our fruit...But the fact is we're not going to be hijacked into doing something that will shut down an industry...and I'm only talking coal, let alone all our other resources." PIC governments during COVID-19 became more assertive to protect the rights of their citizens who were employed in Australia, as when Vanuatu blacklisted a South Australian labor recruiter in 2021 (Petrou and Connell, 2023b).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45.</sup> https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/budget-2023-24-reforming-palm-scheme

About two-thirds of PALM migrants are employed in horticulture; some employers believe that the PALM horticultural workforce of 23,000 could double as PALM workers substitute for WHMs. Australia's horticultural workforce is shrinking rapidly, from 146,200 in 2019–2020 to 116,900 in 2021–2022, as the share of PALM workers among contract workers in Australian horticulture rose from less than 60 percent to over 80 percent in three years (ABARES, 2023).

Australian employers say that PALM migrants are, on average, 20 percent more productive than WHMs, and that returning PALM migrants are 15 percent more productive than first-time PALM migrants (ABARES, 2023). However, Australian employers complain about the rising obligations and costs of employing PALM migrants as the Australian government reacts to media coverage and FWO investigations exposing poor working and housing conditions on some horticultural farms. Some supermarkets require their farm suppliers to have third-party auditors certify their compliance with labor laws (Curtain and Howes, 2020).

SWP migrants pay for their housing and food while they are in Australia and have deductions taken from their wages to cover part of the cost of their travel to and from Australia, the cost of mandatory health insurance, and to repay any advances provided by employers or agents for the pre-departure medical, police, and other checks required to obtain visas and contracts. Australia requires all employers, including employers of SWP migrants, to pay 12 percent of worker earnings into Australia's superannuation or pension fund after 2025, although SWP migrants can obtain refunds minus administrative and other costs of employer super contributions in their countries of origin.

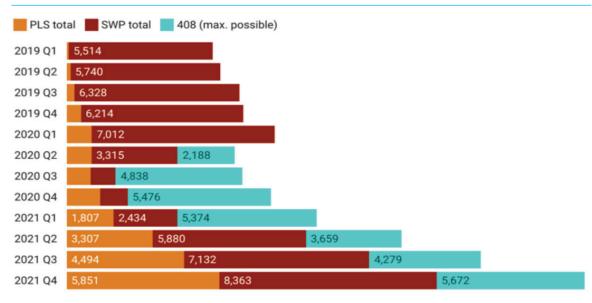


FIGURE 8. Pacific seasonal and temporary workers in Australia (2020–2021)

Australian stakeholders emphasized that there has been a proliferation of small laborhire firms in the past few years that sometimes violate labor and immigration laws. Some 125 employers were approved to hire 51,000 SWP migrants between July 2012 and February 2020, and 30 percent of all employers employed 36,500 or 70 percent of the migrants (Curtain and Howes, 2020).<sup>46</sup>

The process of employing PIC migrants begins with Australian employers who sign deeds with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), which assesses the materials submitted by employers and decides whether to approve or deed them to hire migrants. Labor law enforcement is the responsibility of the FWO, but the federal government provided funding in 2020 for Pacific Labour Mobility Officers in areas with PIC migrants to "undertake additional welfare, monitoring, compliance and accommodation checks." The DESE can withdraw approval to hire migrants from employers who violate regulations, including in some cases suspending an employer from the PALM before complaints are fully resolved (Curtain and Howes, 2020).

PIC migrants require more paperwork and costs than WHMs or backpackers who obtain their own visas, pay their own transport costs to Australia, and arrange their own housing and transport in Australia. WHMs are free agents in the Australian labor market, and the primary goal of most WHMs is to complete 88 days of farm work so that they are eligible for visas that allow them to stay a second year in Australia and work in any job, typically a nonfarm job in major Australian cities. Since the primary goal of WHMs is to have an employer certify that they did 88 days of farm work, WHMs are vulnerable to underpayment of wages and overcharges for housing and transport.<sup>47</sup> DHA recommends (2023) that the WHM program be limited to one year in Australia and to stop requiring WHMs do to farm work to obtain an extended visa that permits nonfarm work in Australia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> The largest 30 approved employers, 25 percent, accounted for 70 percent of the jobs. Queensland had almost 40 percent of approved SWP jobs, Victoria almost 20 percent, and NSW and SA each about 12 percent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47.</sup> See Chapter 3 of A National Disgrace: The Exploitation of Temporary Work Visa Holders. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education\_and\_Employment/temporary\_work\_visa/Report

TABLE 13. Employer requirements for PIC migrants and backpackers (WHMs)

Condition	Seasonal worker	Backpacker
Employer required to meet contribution to air fare?	Yes (\$300)	No
Employer required to make advance payment of travel	Yes (amount above \$300	No
costs for each worker?	recouped from worker)	NO
Employer sponsorship required for worker to obtain visa?	Yes	No
Government approval required to be eligible to hire?	Yes	No
Employer required to submit to labour market testing?	Yes	No
Government approval required on an ongoing basis for each recruitment application by an approved employer including contingency plans?	Yes	No
Employer required to notify Australian Government in case of worker leaving job?	Yes (regarded as a visa violation)	No
Employer obliged to report to Australian Government post-employment?	Yes	No
Employer obliged to arrange accommodation and transport?	Yes	No
Employer obliged to provide welfare and wellbeing support?	Yes	No
Employer obliged to provide correct industry required (award) wage rate to worker?	Yes	No
Employer obliged to provide an average of 30 hours work per week over the duration of the job?	Yes	No
Requirement to invite the Fair Work Ombudsman and a relevant union to meet with employees at the arrival briefing or within seven calendar days of arrival in Australia.	Yes	No

Source: Curtain and Howes, 2020.

The non-wage costs of PIC migrants, an average \$A 1,600 in 2015–2016 versus \$A 135 for WHMs, where much higher, but PIC-WHM cost differences are narrowed because PIC migrants work more hours and provide labor insurance or reliability to employers because they cannot change Australian employers, while WHMs can move on to other farms. The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) found that some growers considered PIC migrants to be the core of their seasonal workforce and WHMs to be supplemental workers who are hired as needed.<sup>48</sup>

Australian employers say that most first-time PIC migrants need more than the two weeks of training specified in the horticultural award, and that six to eight weeks of training is required to make most first-time PIC migrants proficient farm workers. PIC migrants are often in their late 20s or early 30s when they first come to Australia, and most employers expect them to return for a decade or more. PIC migrants in Australia are about 70 percent men.

<sup>48</sup> Seasonal workers formed the core of the workforce and working holiday makers were employed casually as needed, particularly during peak labour periods." https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/productivity/productivity-drivers/seasonal-workersreport#growers-consider-other-factors-in-labour-decisions

The Australian Fair Work Commission established a minimum hourly wage for casual adult level one horticultural workers of \$A 26.73 after July 1, 2022 (\$A 27.10 in wine), which represents the \$A 21.38 minimum wage plus 25 percent loading. The FWO requires that wages be set so that the average worker can earn 15 percent more than the minimum hourly wage for piece rate workers of \$A 26.73, effectively \$A 30.74 (US\$20.39) an hour (Barry and Gould, 2022).

Few other countries specify a special minimum wage for piece rate workers. The purpose of piece rate wages is to make the cost of getting work done predictable and to motivate workers to work fast without close supervision, especially when it is easier to determine worker output rather than input. Traveling salespeople, fruit pickers, and others who would be hard to monitor while they work are often guaranteed a minimum wage, but encouraged to work fast by piece rate wages that enable them to earn 15 to 25 percent more than the minimum wage. The major management challenge in piece rate farm work is to ensure the quality of the work done, that is, to ensure that there is not too much debris in bins of picked fruit.

The PLS component of the PALM is potentially a game changer for Australia and the PICs because it aims to rotate semi-skilled workers in and out of year-round Australian jobs. The PLS limits sponsoring employers to those in rural or regional Australia in selected industries including food processing (meatpacking), healthcare, social assistance, and non-seasonal agriculture, forestry, and fishing jobs.<sup>49</sup> PLS migrants may stay in Australia up to four years, after which they are expected to return to their countries of origin for at least nine months. If their Australian employers agree, PLS migrants may bring their families, and family members may work in Australia.

Justifications for opening year-round regional jobs to PLS migrants include labor shortages and a desire to raise the share of women among PIC migrant workers. Chand et al (2021) argued that Australia should introduce a Pacific Skills Visa that helps PICs to train accountants and chefs, and guarantee graduates of accredited skill-training institutions in PIC countries access to Australian jobs. They also argue that training in the PICs could be financed by students taking out loans that are repaid only by the graduates who move abroad. Migrants would have loan repayments deducted from their Australian wages, while graduates who remained at home would not have to repay their loans, which should increase the stock of human capital in PICs.

<sup>49.</sup> European guest worker programs were initially mostly in manufacturing, construction, and mining, although employment in services increased as migrants settled and united or formed families.

The PLS aims to provide more flexibility to Australian employers and migrants, but there could be unintended consequences. For example, employers are more likely to provide training to workers who commit to four years of work, and employers may hope that the family members of PLS migrants also fill jobs in meatpacking or tourism. However, the family members of PLS migrants receive open work permits that allow them to work in any Australian job. This means that some could move away from regional Australia for higher-wage jobs in cities, leading to family separation while migrants are abroad.

#### **New Zealand**

NZ is one of the few rich countries where farm commodities are the majority of exports, reflecting the country's comparative advantage of sun, wind, and rain that allows for the production and export of dairy products, meat, horticultural, forestry, and seafood commodities. NZ exports over \$NZ 50 billion a year worth of farm commodities.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Migrant Worker Program**

The World Bank supported a pilot project that brought ni-Vanuatu migrant workers to Central Otago in 2006–2007, prompting NZ's cabinet to approve the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) program and allow up to 5,000 migrants from six PIC countries to fill seasonal jobs in NZ horticulture (McKenzie et al, 2016). Since then, the RSE expanded to nine PIC countries and the cap was raised to 19,000 for 2022–2023.<sup>52</sup> The average employment of hired workers in NZ agriculture has been about 80,000 over the past decade, including local workers, WHMs, and RSE migrants.

The peak number of workers employed in NZ horticulture is about 40,000, including a peak 23,000 workers who are employed to harvest NZ kiwi, the most valuable and labor-intensive horticultural crop (Rural Migration News Blog 317).<sup>53</sup> The other major horticultural commodities that employ migrant workers are apples and wine, which are also labor-intensive.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Curtain and Howes (2020) argue that meatpackers who employ PLS migrants directly rather than through labor-hire firms could obtain Temporary Skill Shortage visas for PIC migrants who obtain skills and learn English via the Meat Industry Labour Agreements that were in effect with 45 meatpackers in 2022. https://www.dailypost.vu/news/a-pathway-to-permanency-for-pacific-meat-workers/article\_b37eb04c-b2b9-5635-9e0f-0bda53ce5271.html

 $<sup>^{51.} \</sup>quad https://www.mpi.govt.nz/resources-and-forms/economic-intelligence/situation-and-outlook-for-primary-industries/situation-and-outlook-for-primary-$ 

<sup>52</sup> The nine countries are: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu. https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/research-and-statistics/research-reports/recognised-seasonal-employer-rse-scheme#:~:text=The%20Recognised%20 Seasonal%20Employer%20(RSE,not%20enough%20New%20Zealand%20workers.

<sup>53.</sup> https://www.hortnz.co.nz/people-jobs-and-labour/#:~:text=What%20can%20start%20out%20as,employs%20more%20than%20 40%2C000%20people.

The process for employing RSE migrants begins with NZ employers who seek accreditation from Immigration New Zealand (INZ) to obtain visas for the migrant workers they recruit. INZ conducts a job check to ensure that workers in NZ are not available to fill the jobs for which the employer is recruiting migrants, and the NZ employer is then free to recruit in any PIC.<sup>54</sup> Most NZ employers rely on agents based in PIC countries to recruit migrants, who can stay in NZ seven to nine months depending on their PIC of origin. Most PIC migrants are in NZ for less than six months (Gibson and Bailey, 2021).

Over 100,000 RSE migrants arrived between 2007–2008 and 2022–2023 (Bedford and Bedford, 2023), including many who returned year-after-year, so that fewer than 37,000 unique PIC workers participated in the RSE, including 16,200 or about 40 percent from Vanuatu and about 20 percent each from Samoa (8,700) and Tonga (7,200). About 55 percent of the 100,000 RSE migrants worked at least two seasons in NZ, while 44 percent were employed for only one season (Bedford and Bedford, 2023).

TABLE 14. PIC workers in RSE jobs over a 16-year period

	2007/2008-2021/2022		Percentage of workers (%)		
Country	RSE visas	People	Country	1 season	2+ seasons
Vanuatu	47,080	16,250	44.3	41.8	58.2
Samoa	22,380	8720	23.8	49.6	50.4
Tonga	20,400	7150	19.5	41.5	58.5
Solomon Islands	6300	2160	5.9	39.0	61.0
Fiji	1840	945	2.6	49.7	50.3
Kiribati	1970	640	1.7	39.1	60.9
Tuvalu	960	405	1.1	56.9	43.1
Papua New Guinea	815	345	0.9	48.6	51.4
Nauru	95	60	0.2	66.7	33.3
Total Pacific	101,840	36,675	100.0	43.9	56.1

Source: Bedford and Bedford, 2023.

Vanuatu had a slightly lower-than-average return rate in the RSE. Some 52 percent of ni-Vanuatu workers were employed in NZ for two or more seasons, slightly below the 54 percent return rate of all PIC workers. About 5 percent of ni-Vanuatu and 5 percent of all PIC migrants had 10 or more years of experience in the RSE.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54.</sup> https://www.immigration.govt.nz/opsmanual/#77100.htm

TABLE 15. Return rates of PIC RSE workers

	Total recruits		Percentages of			
Country	1 season	2+ seasons	2–3 times	4–5 times	6–9 times	10+ times
Vanuatu	6800	9450	52.1	23.1	19.4	5.4
Samoa	4330	4390	55.3	23.7	15.7	5.4
Tonga	2970	4180	54.2	22.0	18.6	5.2
Solomon Islands	840	1320	54.4	22.0	19.4	4.2
Fiji	470	475	76.8	21.7	1.5	0.0
Kiribati	250	390	54.0	17.1	23.0	5.9
Tuvalu	235	175	53.7	20.6	21.1	2.0
Papua New Guinea	160	180	56.2	28.1	15.7	0.0
Nauru	40	20	75.0	25.0	0.0	0.0
Total Pacific	16,095	20,580	54.0	22.8	18.1	5.1

Source: Bedford and Bedford, 2023.

Women are about 12 percent of PIC migrants in the RSE, and they had about the same return rate as men, an average 2.7 seasons for women versus 2.8 for men. Among RSE migrants who worked two or more seasons, the average number of seasons worked was 4.2 for both men and women.

TABLE 16. PIC RSE men versus women workers

Country	Returnees, 2007/2008-2021/2022			Percent	Average	Average seasons worked		
	Men	Women	Total	Women	Men	Women	Total	
Vanuatu	8360	1090	9450	11.5	4.27	4.21	4.26	
Samoa	4235	155	4390	3.5	4.14	3.46	4.11	
Tonga	3720	460	4180	11.0	4.15	4.33	4.17	
Solomon Islands	915	405	1320	30.7	4.01	4.44	4.14	
Fiji	445	30	475	6.3	2.88	2.83	2.88	
Kiribati	230	160	390	41.0	4.25	4.57	4.38	
Tuvalu	130	45	175	25.7	4.05	4.65	4.21	
Papua New Guinea	135	45	180	25.0	3.65	3.58	3.63	
Nauru	15	5	20	25.0	2.87	2.20	2.70	
Total Pacific	18,185	2395	20,580	11.6	4.22	4.16	4.17	

Source: Bedford and Bedford, 2023.

# **Comparing Programs**

Australia has a far larger agricultural sector that produces food for almost 30 million residents, while NZ's sector produces for six million residents. Both countries are net exporters of farm commodities, but NZ exports more labor-intensive horticultural commodities (such as kiwis, wine, and apples) than Australia, whose labor-intensive exports include oranges and table grapes. Many NZ farms are audited for compliance with national and international labor, environmental, and other standards.

PIC migrant workers play a relatively larger role in the more export-oriented horticultural sector of NZ than in Australia's horticultural sector, filling half or more of the seasonal jobs in apples, kiwis, and wine grapes. However, the larger Australian horticultural sector employs more farm workers, including more PIC migrants since 2018. Australia does not cap the number of PIC migrant farm workers, while NZ has been raising the migrant cap every two years.

NZ farm employers are more involved in the design and administration of the RSE than Australian farmers are with the SWP, which has more of a top-down character that involves the government issuing regulations that it expects employers to obey. Managers of the RSE take a collaborative rather than a punitive approach to resolve migrant worker issues, which makes NZ employers more likely to recruit and employ PIC migrants (Curtain and Howes, 2020). Most migrants in the RSE are recruited by employer associations or cooperatives rather than labor-hire firms, the largest employers of migrants in the SWP.

14,000 12,000 10,000 8,000 6,000 4,000 2,000 0 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | 2014/15 | 2015/16 | 2016/17 2017/18 2018/19 SWP 56 2,014 12,200 67 423 1,066 1,474 3,177 4,490 6,166 8,457 4,658 6,187 RSE 3.556 5.323 5.440 5.615 6,524 7.099 7.863 9.038 9.673 11,168

■SWP ■RSE

FIGURE 9. Comparing SWP and RSE labor mobility programs

Source: Curtain and Howes, 2020

## **Future Expansion of Labor Mobility Programs**

Most migrant worker policies, including those in ANZ, require local workers to be hired if they are available, so that migrant workers supplement rather than substitute for local workers. The share of foreign guest workers among seasonal farm workers ranges from 10 percent to 20 percent in most industrial countries, that is, most farm workers are local residents. If PIC migrants became 20 percent of seasonal farm workers in ANZ, their number could increase from the current 50,000 to 100,000 or more as migrants replace WHM, foreign students, and other temporary foreigners in ANZ.55

This means that the employment of ni-Vanuatu migrants in ANZ agriculture could rise from the current 16,000 – to 20,000 or 25,000 or more – in a Vanuatu labor force of 135,000. The number of ni-Vanuatu migrants could rise even more if NZ also opens year-round farm and nonfarm jobs to PIC migrants.

The movement of Pacific Islanders to ANZ to fill seasonal farm jobs has been studied extensively, in part because it initially arose from global efforts to have labor mobility spur development in labor-sending countries while filling jobs in ANZ (Petrou and Connell, 2023a).

Australia first described seasonal labor mobility as a form of foreign aid, but has since come to see labor mobility as an economic tool that benefits both host and sending countries and reduces the need for aid. Labor mobility can achieve four 'wins' for: ANZ employers who are able to fill vacant jobs; migrants who earn higher wages in ANZ; sending governments that receive both remittances and returned workers with new skills; and ANZ governments that help to speed up development in migrant-sending countries (Petrou and Connell, 2023a).

Curtain and Howes (2020) estimate that PIC countries could provide up to six times more than the 24,000 migrants they provided in 2018–2019, that is, up to 150,000 migrants, and that PNG alone could provide another 400,000 migrants.

Despite predictions that demand is likely to increase in the coming years, it is important to understand that, in the longer term, this demand is likely to decline.

The demand for migrants to fill seasonal farm jobs in ANZ may be approaching a peak. Some 40,000 PIC migrants fill seasonal farm jobs in ANZ. The number of PIC migrants may double before 2030, before decreasing for several reasons:

<sup>55.</sup> See https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2832 and https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2829

ANZ policies require that PIC migrants supplement local workers, which means that migrants can be hired only after ANZ farm employers try and fail to recruit local workers

2.

Most PIC migrants are employed on the farms that dominate the production of labor-intensive fruit, vegetable, and horticultural specialty (FVH) commodities such as plants, trees, and flowers. Some of these farms may mechanize hand harvesting tasks now performed by migrants due to advances in robotics and portable electronics. Biological innovations and changes in farm management systems are also likely to enable farms to replace hand labor with machines. There are machines used in development, and sometimes used commercially, to harvest commodities ranging from apples and oranges to lettuce and strawberries (Calvin et al, 2022)

The diffusion of agricultural machines normally has an S-shape, rising rapidly after early adopters prove that machines can replace hand workers at the same or lower cost and levelling off at less than 100 percent, that is, some employers will continue to employ hand workers even after most producers adopt machines. However, farm machines are typically adopted for 90 percent or more of total production, sharply reducing employment.

It is also worth considering that there are far more nonfarm than farm jobs, so an expanding PLS could quickly shift the focus of labor mobility from seasonal agriculture to nonfarm food-related and service sectors that offer year-round jobs, with consequences for migrants and their countries of origin. Migrants whose families accompany them to Australia for several years are likely to remit less and may be reluctant to return to their countries of origin permanently, especially if their Australian employers sponsor them for immigrant visas, as in Canada. Despite Australian government intentions that migrants return home after four years, experience shows that employers and migrants are often able to prolong stays longer than originally planned.

If more migrants are employed in year-round jobs, the focus of labor mobility policies may shift from how to organize the recruitment of seasonal workers to how to train Pacific Island citizens to fill nonfarm jobs abroad. Training more Pacific Islanders could benefit both local and foreign employers, since not all of the workers who are trained actually go abroad.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56.</sup> https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/agri-food-pilot/about.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57.</sup> Countries such as India and the Philippines have many private training institutions that train citizens for year-round jobs abroad in fields ranging from healthcare to seafaring.

# Conclusion

Vanuatu should prepare for the likely shift in the nature of the foreign demand for workers, from jobs in seasonal agriculture to more demand for migrants to fill year-round nonfarm jobs. After more than 15 years of seasonal labor migration, ever more ni-Vanuatu are aware of high wages abroad and eager to migrate, including some who are skilled and already employed in Vanuatu. If more ni-Vanuatu are employed in nonfarm jobs abroad, Vanuatu may want to adjust its education and training system to train more workers to provide them with the skills needed at home and abroad.

Some current labor mobility concerns may fade as borders reopen and economies and labor markets adjust in the post-COVID-19 era, especially if the employment of migrant workers in the ANZ agriculture industry stabilizes at current levels.<sup>58</sup> Others believe that some Vanuatu government concerns reflect the potential growth of employment opportunities for ni-Vanuatu migrants to fill nonfarm jobs in food processing and care services in Australia. If ni-Vanuatu migrants take their families with them to Australia, and if migrant family members work or go to school in Australia for up to four years, some families may settle abroad rather than return despite expectations that they will return.

The major lesson from international experience is that governments should adjust labor mobility policies slowly, making step-by-step changes to complex migration management systems and examining the effects of these changes rather than attempting to radically change migration policies. This will ensure an improvement in efficacy without destabilizing a system that delivers measurable benefits to migrants and Vanuatu. Unilateral and major changes to the current recruitment system could reduce outflows of experienced seasonal migrants and adversely affect future migrant flows, especially if ANZ employers shift their recruitment efforts to other PIC countries.

<sup>58.</sup> The growth in demand for RSE/SWP migrants in seasonal agriculture may be limited once PIC migrants replace more WHMs and local seasonal workers. However, the demand for PIC migrants could increase if ANZ allow PIC migrants to work in year-round farming jobs in nurseries and animal agriculture or if PIC migrants are allowed in nonfarm food-sector jobs that range from food packing and processing to distribution and hospitality. Australian stakeholders suggested that up to 20 percent of SWP migrants are employed in nurseries and greenhouses that often employ some workers year-round.

### **Recommendations**

Make incremental adjustments to Vanuatu's labor mobility system rather than embrace disruptive changes that could sharply reduce migrant worker deployments Strengthen the current system by segmenting agents and giving priority and benefits to those who adhere to regulations. Incentives used to effectuate desired behavior should be matched with penalties, such as blacklisting recruiters and employers who violate 2. labor mobility regulations to incentivize compliance. Association meetings could be used as a forum for regular interactions between employers, recruiters, and governments where stakeholders can identify and resolve issues related to migrants working abroad Use incentives and subsidies to steer recruitment to particular 3. workers (e.g., women) and areas (e.g., rural) rather than trying to block the exit of experienced workers or those from specific areas Make recruitment from government work-ready pools voluntary rather than mandatory. Honest and efficient work-ready pools will prove their value to recruiters and employers, and network recruiting will ensure that, if work-ready pools include good workers, more migrants are recruited from the pool over time. 59 Governments can give agents and employers the 4. option to recruit from work-ready pools and offer subsidies to recruit from the pool. Foreign employers should be encouraged to have a presence in the countries where they recruit to better screen and train workers to fill jobs. Employer investment and presence in sending countries will help to minimize poor worker-job matches and early returns or absconding

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59.</sup> Network recruiting refers to the practice of employers asking current workers to refer friends and relatives when additional workers are needed. Current workers who know the job are likely to refer only the workers who can perform the work.

5.

**Create one-stop shops for exit procedures** – decentralize processing and visa issuance – and introduce other steps to reduce the costs and time involved in pre-departure procedures

6.

Consider changes to minimize migrant time abroad while maximizing migrant earnings, as well as protecting workers when they are in ANZ. This will ensure there are not periods of time, between seasons, where workers are not being paid but they have to spend money on food and housing. There is a need to increase the number of liaison officers based in ANZ who can support workers

# Establish a robust M&E system to collect data on migration and its effects, including:

 Surveys of returned workers to determine how many go abroad each month and year; where they are based and what commodities they farm; actual earnings abroad; deductions from wages; spending abroad; and net savings remitted to Vanuatu

7

Assessment of future demand for ni-Vanuatu workers in ANZ. This
could be done by examining ANZ farm labor data; exploring the
potential for the mechanization of certain industries which could
result in PIC workers being replaced by machines; interviewing
stakeholders about the future demand for the commodities
that employ PIC migrants; and monitoring the outlook for
trade in the region.

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