



SUMMARY REPORT / Philip Martin

Rapid Assessment of Labor Mobility Policy Implementation Arrangements in Vanuatu

The new *Rapid Assessment of Labor Mobility Policy Implementation Arrangements in Vanuatu* is an independent report that reviews Vanuatu's labor mobility policies and bilateral agreements, to highlight potential improvements for the government to consider.

Vanuatu was the first Pacific Island country to send migrant workers 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, the most from any Pacific nation.

Personal testimonies from workers and numerous surveys show that ni-Vanuatu migrants and their families benefit from earnings abroad that are up to 10 times higher than at home. Migrant households use remittances to invest in better housing, education, and healthcare – as well as to make contributions to local villages and churches. This spending benefits non-migrants and regional economies.

Concerns relating to labor mobility identified in the report:

- 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 effects of workers going abroad for extended periods, including migrants being separated from their families and 'brain drain'
- 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, encouraging some ni-Vanuatu workers to break their contracts
- 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.

Apart from outlining potential improvements to Vanuatu's labor mobility system, the report highlights the importance of understanding the tradeoffs at play, and how they have the potential to impact each stakeholder. For example, while

the government of Vanuatu may want a more inclusive approach to recruitment that allows women and people in remote areas to secure work – that might not match what employers 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 improvements for all who benefit from Vanuatu labor mobility.

Recommendations:

1. **Make incremental adjustments to Vanuatu's labor mobility system** rather than disruptive changes that could sharply reduce migrant worker deployment
2. **Strengthen the current system by giving priority and benefits to those who adhere to regulations.** Incentives to meet regulations should be matched with penalties, such as blacklisting recruiters and employers who violate labor mobility regulations. Association meetings could be used as a forum for employers, recruiters, and governments to identify and resolve issues
3. **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 specific workers
4. **Make recruitment from government work-ready pools voluntary rather than mandatory.** Governments can give agents and employers the option of recruiting from work-ready pools and offer subsidies for doing so. Foreign employers should be encouraged to have a presence in the countries where they recruit to better screen and train workers to fill jobs
5. **Create one-stop shops for exit procedures** to decentralize processing and visa issuance. 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 providing protection when they are abroad
7. **Establish a robust M&E system to collect data on migration and its effects,** including surveys of returned workers. There should also be an assessment conducted of future demand for ni-Vanuatu workers in Australia and New Zealand.