

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program: Questions on Notice from public hearing – 13 November 2015

1. **Dr Ball:** Our pleasure. I would like to say that in terms of the training there is quite a lot of work that could be done across the Australian government on better coordination. DFAT and Employment coordinate. The Department of Education is not involved at all, and nor is the department of industry. So those four departments taking a whole-of-government approach is a really important—

CHAIR: If you could send us a note to that effect, that would be very helpful. (p. 40)

Additional Questions on Notice

2. I note your recommendation that the Fair Work Ombudsman provide comprehensive oversight of employment conditions for seasonal workers. Can you please elaborate on this recommendation?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this is her area of expertise and recommendation.

3. I also note the recommendation that targeted resourcing be provided for existing low participating countries. What are the benefits and challenges of providing more resources?

Many Pacific island nations are under resourced both in terms of staff and access to adequate operating systems, especially in terms of data collection. Currently the DFAT Labour Mobility Assistance Program and New Zealand's RSE strengthening Partnership program, the World Bank and ILO are working to assist labour sending countries in this area. The biggest challenge has been a lack of continuity of staff. The main benefits for providing adequate systems are: 1. It will aid in some of the current fraudulent behaviour that is enabled due to lack of systems and 2: efficient systems will aid in evaluation and monitoring which has been lacking in these programs. Having data collection systems in place will enable researchers to inform government on the mapping of workers and which countries and communities have the highest/lowest participation rates.

4. I note the recommendation that Australian industry and the Australian government work to develop a skills development and labour mobility strategy to meet current and future demand. Can you please elaborate on this recommendation?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this is her recommendation. As for skills development the Australian and New Zealand Governments are currently providing many traditional programs and pathways for Pacific SWP workers.

5. Do you think that the Australia-Pacific Technical College could provide a mechanism for seasonal workers to gain Australian qualifications that may benefit other sectors?

Most definitely. During my research in Vanuatu I have spoken with staff at the APTC whom have suggested that this should be used as a potential pathway for careers opportunities in Australia.

6. How are remittances used within the source countries?

Remittances are used in a number of ways. Through my longevity study of ni-Vanuatu workers in New Zealand, the number one priority and reason for participation was so that workers could pay for their children or another relatives schools fees. Followed by building a permanent home, customary ceremonies, then incomes financed community projects a such as building water wells, health clinics and water sanitation units, re-roofing community buildings. After two to three seasons most workers start to save enough cash for small businesses. From my sample of 22 RSE workers, 67% established businesses within this timeframe, and 32% of female spouses or mothers of this group, used workers remittances to create new businesses.

Development has very pragmatic and grounded local meanings and is associated with improvements to health and school services, infrastructure such as church buildings and community wells

7. Are you aware of how seasonal workers are made aware of and access the Programme? What are the challenges and costs to the seasonal worker?

Knowledge of seasonal worker programs is well known within the region. The challenge is access. Since the initiation of the RSE and SWP a number of scams have been created through dubious labour recruiters. From various conversations with Pacific representatives and potential candidates, many in the region find it difficult to trust government and individual labour hire agents which is something being addressed. The upfront costs are a barrier as is the ability to understand the process and paperwork that comes with the application process. For many first time workers the costs of purchasing a birth certificate, passport, medical and police checks are the main obstacle. For those who do not live near a capital city this cost is even higher once the added fee of transportation and accommodation is added on. These costs range anywhere between AU 500-1500 depending on the applicant situation.

8. Do you have a view on how to increase engagement by seasonal workers?

Increasing engagement is dependent on access to the scheme. There are many in the region that want to participate but find the initial upfront costs and the paperwork too difficult. These issues are currently being addressed by DFAT's Labour Mobility Assistance program.

9. Do you have any suggestions on enticing growers to switch from other forms of labour supply to the Programme?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this was her area of expertise. However, gauging the increase in uptake of SWP numbers for the 2015/16 season, growers are already experiencing the benefits of having SWP workers and are choosing to employ Pacific workers. For New Zealand, this was enabled by Government and industry working together to eliminate the illegal workforce. However, the gains from the RSE workforce has kept employers participating in the program.

10. The New Zealand Government has introduced a pilot 'New Zealand Seasonal Worker scheme' for local workers who are prepared to temporarily relocate to seasonal jobs. Do you have a view on whether a similar scheme would be beneficial for Australia?

Much of the information that I orally presented on this was from growers who were participating in this scheme and a couple of supervisors. I have yet to read the findings of the pilot trialled. However, I believe that a similar scheme would be beneficial to Australia as long as consideration and collaborations between government and industry take place.

11. Does direct or indirect labour mobility participation provide better outcomes? For example, would women as workers or receivers of remittances provide a better outcome for their families or communities?

As stated in earlier conversations this is an area that is currently under research. Internationally there have been mixed findings of evidence whether one is better than the other and there are many variables to take into consideration.

12. How does participation in labour mobility impact contestability of household income?

Although there can be slight contestability within households (see Gibson and McKenzie in the report), the most notable evidence I found was amongst communities. Most Pacific seasonal workers have obligations to meet on a number of levels, household, community and sometimes loan agencies. There are a number of complex relationships that workers have to negotiate for the distribution of their incomes.

13. Have you undertaken any data collection or mapping of sending communities? Would that information be beneficial?

I have covered that point in number 3.

14. How could the seasonal worker and backpacker programs be reformed to better ensure a more level playing field?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this was her area of expertise.

15. The Office of the Chief Trade Advisor suggested that waiving visa fees for Pacific Island Workers would reduce costs associated with the Programme and assist both employers and workers. Do you have a view on this suggestion?

The Australian Government have made a number of initiatives to reduce costs for those participating in the Seasonal Worker Program. This is in alignment with aiding workers to take significant incomes home and to encourage economic development. I do not necessarily think that a waiver will be a consideration. However I would suggest a reduction in the visa cost, especially considering the short timeframe that workers are contracted for.

16. Your submission states that the SWP has provided 'both development benefits and increased productivity in agriculture'. Do you feel there is an appropriate balance between industry growth and development outcomes under the scheme? How could these be improved?

It is not necessary for there to be a balance between the two. My findings showed that employers do like to see mutual benefits. Workers satisfied with the results from their time, tend to work more productively for employers. Therefore employers gain from having well trained experienced returning workers adding to increased productivity levels. This will be dependent on the relationship between the worker and the employer.

17. You refer to research by SSGM on key outcomes of regional labour and seasonal worker programs, including how remittances from labour schemes are spent. What are your key findings and when will results of your research be publically available?

Researchers at SSGM have produced a number of findings of which we provided to the committee in our first hearing. We have several publications awaiting approval that should be released early in the New Year. Our researchers are involved in the World Bank Development Impact evaluation of the SWP and are also involved in longitudinal and collaborative research with the New Zealand RSE program and DFAT's Labour Mobility Assistance program. All of these projects involve interaction with workers, host communities, employers, sending communities and government agencies from all participating countries.

18. You suggest delaying expansion of the SWP into the tourism and accommodation industry at this stage. What factors need to be clarified before expansion of the scheme into new sectors? You mention potential research into productivity gains?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this was her recommendation. It is my understanding that DFAT has already commissioned a productivity study.

19. You suggest that Australia needs a skills development and labour mobility strategy to meet current and future demand, which most closely match PIC skills and education profile. How should Australia facilitate this development?

Please refer to answer in question four. Also this is currently being considered by DFAT's Labour Mobility Assistance Program and researchers at SSGM.

20. TAFE Queensland has suggested it can play in providing skills to seasonal workers through its partnership with the Australia-Pacific Technical College. How important are regional partnerships of this type for future labour mobility and industry development in the region? Could the private sector play a role?

Dr Ball will cover this question as this is her area of expertise.

21. Currently, the majority of workers benefiting from the Seasonal Workers Programme in the agriculture sector are men. To what extent would expansion of the program into the tourism and hospitality industry shift this ratio?

I would need to access the current figures for these industries from employment to analysis the current gender balance for these sectors. From general observations this may only slightly increase female participation as many men are involved in these industries in the Pacific.

22. You cite research suggesting that policy changes in both country of origin and destination are crucial to increase uptakes of women. What are the key obstacles and priorities for reform in your view?

The two key obstacles for women is the lack of demand from employers to hire women and in the Pacific many agents will either not select women or make it too difficult to pass any required training or criteria (not necessarily set by governments).

23. Women can benefit from partner's remittances incomes but you note control of these funds can be 'contested', and that seasonal labour mobility can have 'unintended impacts'. What measures can we take to offset these concerns and deliver direct benefit to women and the families back at home?

Research into these impacts for SWP is still in its initial stages. However, if the committee wants to be kept updated I am happy to do so. I observed the contestation of incomes through my longitudinal study in NZ. Much of this was between workers and their communities in regards to how incomes were redistributed. There were many unintended impacts such as length of absence from home, impacts on family, competition for places and jealousy within and between communities. Many of which are being addressed by seasonal workers themselves Dr Ball will cover this question as this was her area of expertise. For example women have developed support groups for families of workers. One of these groups have also started their own business and RSE workers are funding this business and other supportive arrangements required for the group to assist seasonal worker families in their absence.

24. You mention youth participation in the SWP is a complex issue. New Zealand's RSE participants must be 18 years and older. Under the SWP, the minimum age is 21 years. What are the benefits in providing access to the younger cohort? Do younger participants impose additional pastoral care or other obligations on employers?

Firstly, in the eight years of researching the RSE program I have seen no evidence of younger participants needing additional pastoral care. I do believe that partnered with the right groups of worker younger workers are just as successful in their employment. As it stands currently, youth are disenfranchised in employment opportunities in the Pacific. Therefore by excluding them from these opportunities is further exacerbating their worldview on employment. As many in Vanuatu told me "the good thing about the RSE is that is now gives us something to aim for".