

Pacific Workers in New Zealand's Horticulture: Comments on the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme

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Abstract: This article contributes to the current discussion about the outcomes of the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme (RSE), a special government initiative targeting unskilled and less educated Pacific workers. Since its introduction in April 2007, many different voices have commented on this scheme. Based on qualitative research among the foreign workers in New Zealand, this paper aims to compare the non-Pacific workers' notions of "exploitation" and "cheap labour import" with other opinions. The RSE scheme is found to be not necessarily exploitative, although its outcomes depend on many determinants. Among these, the approach of the employers and the profile of the workers are among the most important factors determining the success or failure of this initiative.

Key words: Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme (RSE); labour migration; labour import; New Zealand

The Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme (RSE) is aimed especially at the horticulture and viticulture industries in order to help to solve the seasonal labour shortfall (more than 7,000 positions; Schwass 2007). The workers must be offered a job in these areas: planting, maintaining, harvesting and packing. As illustrated by the pictures, typical tasks are the thinning of vines or apple picking.

About RSE

Three agencies were involved in the implementation of the scheme: the Ministry of Social Development, the Department of Labour and NZAID (New Zealand's International Aid and Development Agency); the latter of which is monitoring the outcomes of the scheme. The RSE scheme has

become a significant opportunity for economically deprived and unskilled Pacific workers who would be unlikely to be eligible to work in New Zealand under previous policies.

Citizens of several Pacific countries have preferential access because the RSE policy was introduced in order to encourage economic develop-

ment in the Pacific. Employers were expected to recruit from all Pacific Islands Forum states. Yet, Fiji was finally excluded and the majority of workers were hired from so called "Pacific kick – start states:" Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati and Tuvalu. In the 2007/08 season, 83 per cent came from these five countries (Department

Photos: R. L. Bailey

The Ni-Vanuatu are thinning vines in a Central Otago vineyard



of Labour 2009). For the 2009/2010 season, 3,554 applications were approved (Bedford et al. 2009).

The applicants can obtain their visa for a maximum of seven months (nine months for the workers from Kiribati and Tuvalu), but are allowed to return under the same scheme. New Zealand's recognised employers must have the so called "Recognised Seasonal Employer status", which means they must comply with the laws and specific requirements concerning minimum pay, airfares (employers pay half of the workers' airfare) and pastoral care. The pastoral care includes, for example, arranging suitable accommodation, transportation, provision of necessary equipment, access to banking services and opportunities for recreation as well as for religious observance.

Aid or Problem?

In the discussion about the RSE scheme, there are many voices commenting on its implementation, outcomes and possible consequences. This section will examine the advantages, but it will also follow the critical line highlighting possible disadvantages of RSE.

Temporary work arrangements are seen as important for economic development (Cunliffe 2006) and the RSE scheme was expected to become a triple win for migrants, their countries of origin and the destination countries (Ramasamy et al. 2008). Opinions on the long-term success of the temporary schemes were contradictory but in general, the advantages were emphasized. For example, Plimmer (2006: 8) argued that a well-managed temporary scheme means fewer social risks than permanent schemes or unmanaged temporary work.

Supporting development in the Pacific Islands and targeting poor Pacific Islanders was considered favourable (New Zealand Herald 2008) and RSE was prevailingly described as successful by journalists (e.g. Otago Daily Times 8/2008.; Riley 2008) as well as by the Department of Labour (2009). The RSE scheme is constantly evaluated by a research group at University of Waikato, which presented similar positive conclusions (Gibson et al. 2008, McKenzie et al 2008). Numerous benefits of the scheme were expected, such as improving the living standard of the community as well as of individual households. The work

remittances sent to the home villages were supposed to provide direct benefits like improved education, better income distribution, reducing poverty and stimulation of business activities. Other possible benefits included improving working skills, gaining language competence and the experience of living in another country.

Yet, not all authors were so optimistic and some highlighted different issues such as alleged exploitation or even slavery, high costs connected with the scheme and possible work and social problems (Otago Daily Times 7/2008). Research on the "Pacific Labour and Australian Horticulture Project" identified problems arising from a lack of engagement with unions, community sector and with Pacific communities (Maclellan 2008). The Council of Trade Unions expressed concern about importing a cheap labour force and their secretary highlighted the importance of getting New Zealand's own unemployed to fill labour shortages by offering more flexible hours, better pay and conditions (New Zealand Herald 2006).





Photos: M. Tomasova

The crops in Vanuatu and in New Zealand are different. Some of these men have never eaten an apple before; now they have to fill several 500 kg bins a day to make the minimum wage

Methodology

This paper compares the results of research on “The Foreign Workers in New Zealand’s Horticulture” with the findings published in relevant literature. The research utilized two qualitative methods – participant observation and interviews, followed by data transcription and analysis.

Conducting research among the guest workers meant entering a transient field constituted mostly by mobile backpackers and seasonal workers who follow the harvest times. In April 2009, there were almost 188,000 foreign workers in New Zealand dispersed all over the country. This research used so called “purposive,” “judgement” or “strategic” sampling, where the informants are chosen for a specific reason or purpose. The sample was created according to Angrosino’s (2007) suggestion that it should reflect the heterogeneity of the group being studied. The participants were connected through one employer, but they had previous work experience in other areas. Twenty-eight formal and about thirty informal and unstructured interviews were conducted, which included foreign workers of different nationalities and their managers.

Self-Assessment

Despite the prevailing opinion about mutual advantages of the scheme expressed by many authors, the interviewed non-Pacific workers were sceptical of these perceptions and they articulated the possible negative aspects. The main concern was the possibility that the RSE might damage the traditio-

nal culture of their Ni-Vanuatu co-workers, coming from remote villages. This assumption is difficult to prove and, at present, it is possible only to estimate the extent of possible changes. Further, Pacific workers were viewed as cheap labour, imported to New Zealand because of easy exploitability. Pacific Islanders were depicted as easy to control and misuse because they were perceived as reluctant to complain. This was considered as being due to fear of losing their jobs; they receive significantly higher earnings than on their islands. This concern was partly confirmed by the interviewed Ni-Vanuatu men, who indicated they did not want to complain and risk possible dismissal or other problems.

There was a dichotomy in the description of Pacific workers. One picture drawn by some journalists, by the Department of Labour and by the employers participating in the research tends to depict a satisfied Pacific worker, who was given a possibility to earn money, with which he or she could invest into improving his or her family’s living standard and education. In the view of some non-Pacific workers, there is a seemingly happy Islander, who is in reality taken advantage of and who unknowingly loses a part of his or her culture and identity.

Voices against the notion of “exploited labour”

The picture of Pacific Islanders as exploited victims, maintained by some non-Pacific workers and journalists, is not acceptable as a whole. The RSE scheme is not a cheap alternative to

employing New Zealanders – the employers must pay market rates, half of the airfare and meet other requirements. The RSE places a great amount of responsibility and accountability on employers and is not about making the work easier or cheaper. The viticulturists, initially complaining about the high costs and “mothering” of the workers, changed their opinion in 2009. The workers’ developing skills were appreciated, as well as the elimination of the chronic labour shortages. The orchardists noticed a significant difference in the quality of the produce, which could be harvested at the right times. In brief, the RSE scheme has proved to be a win-win strategy, although the industry’s “win” has dominated during the first year of the policy (Department of Labour 2009).

There are many reasons why the RSE scheme should continue. Managed temporary labour schemes can have many benefits, such as reduction of unemployment, diminishing irregular movement and the “brain drain,” upgrade of skills and possibilities for the families to invest in education and training. Until 2007 and prior to the RSE, the permanent skilled labour movement from the islands predominated, which was the worst-case scenario for Pacific Island countries (Voigt-Graf 2006). Labour migration is often selective of the more talented and ambitious whose loss might have a negative impact. In contrast, the RSE focused on unskilled workers with low income. Unlike the existing scheme, the Pacific Access Category, which attracts more educated applicants, the

RSE opened the ways for poorer workers with less education.

Research results

The results of this research correspond to the findings of the above mentioned authors and indicate that Pacific workers coming under the RSE scheme should not be viewed as a cheap and necessarily exploited labour force. There are many possible benefits for the Pacific countries involved in the program, but possible disadvantages and weak points should be taken into account.

During the first season, there were limited opportunities for women and also limited possibilities to change the employers. The interviews were conducted at a time when the RSE workers could be transferred to another employer when the first one had no more work available or under other specific conditions. Imposing this rule led to a significant dependence of the workers on their first employers. This could create a suitable environment for controversial treatment. Although the interviewed Ni-Vanuatu could not be considered disadvantaged in respect of working hours or the system of payment, the notion of mistreated workers might be partially true. This concerned predominantly the personal approach of some employers, whose behaviour could sometimes be described as controversial. Some of these employers seem to hold stereotypical views of the Pacific workers as naïve, unintelligent and dependent labourers, who need to be approached and managed in a paternalistic way.

The non-Pacific workers' assumption about the possibly spoiled traditional culture of the Ni-Vanuatu is problematic because it does not take into account that this culture has been altered and modernized. The understanding of the "traditional" life in Vanuatu was slightly romantic, simplistic and idealistic. This view resembled the early ethnographic writings describing the alleged timeless, closed and unchanging world of the islanders, but not taking into account the dramatic transformations caused by trading, missionary activities and co-

lonial influences. This opinion seemed to connect the missing showers and electricity with unchanged way of life untouched by the outer world; however the non-Pacific workers did not realize that the "traditional" life has been transformed.

Even if the comments about the spoiled traditional culture are debatable, the informants' scepticism concerning the transferability of Pacific workers' skills might be correct. The Ni-Vanuatu interviewees admitted that most of the skills which they gained in New Zealand will be hardly transferable into their villages because of different crops and other limitations. These skills might provide benefits only if the workers can find employment in their islands.

Conclusion

Work under the RSE scheme limits the freedom of the workers, but it cannot be viewed primarily as exploitation. The workers are controlled by regulations and legal employment conditions. Yet, several issues concerning regulation, labour rights and social impacts need to be addressed, if the seasonal work schemes for Pacific Islanders are to be successful.

Making a viable guest worker program work is not only a challenge for the governments, but also for many other actors who need to cooperate on solving the problematic issues connected with these policies. For example, the governments' main role includes responding to the needs of the labour market, determining the rules of the program in cooperation with the employers and acting as the inspection body (especially in controlling the delivery of pastoral care and its improvement if applicable). The employers' role is crucial and primarily focuses on delivering pastoral care, advocating for the workers within the community, helping them to adjust to a different environment, encouraging workers' involvement into the community and creating constructive recreational activities. The success of the scheme also depends on community willingness to accept Pacific workers and on the islanders themselves, for instance on

their work ethic, on their readiness to learn and on their ability to adapt to different conditions.

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