



Pacific Institute  
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# Enhancing opportunities for regional migration in the Pacific

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## Key messages:

- » Natural resources are distributed very unevenly across the Pacific, with some states being substantially under-endowed in terms of their capacity to carry their human populations.
- » Many Pacific populations continue to experience high rates of natural increase and high net growth, except where the safety valve of immigration relieves the population pressure.
- » There has been significant depletion and degradation of natural resources in some Pacific countries due to population pressures and over-exploitation.
- » Climate change and rising sea levels threaten to cast some Pacific island states as the first victims of a global problem that is not of their making.
- » The history of Pacific colonisation has been capricious and has left some Pacific islanders with liberal access to economic opportunities in developed states through migration, while others have none.
- » Preferential visa quotas and seasonal worker schemes go some way towards satisfying the needs of Pacific islanders but there is scope for expanding the channels of access to broaden the scope of Pacific migration.
- » Developed states should assist developing states of the Pacific by promoting controlled migration, not only because it is in their self interest to do so but because it is an effective means of giving development assistance and fostering stronger regional relations.

Briefing:  
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The history of the Pacific is a history of migration. Yet modern barriers to migration impede development in the Pacific island countries facing degraded resources, high rates of natural population increase, low-lying geographies, and limited opportunities for international movement through citizenship or preferred visa status. This paper examines international migration in the Pacific, and argues that there should be greater opportunities for the people of Pacific countries to migrate between their home states and the developed states of the Pacific rim. Creating more permeable borders is an important means of redressing past and current injustices, expanding opportunities for human development, and fostering stronger regional relations. Both the United States and New Zealand have been reasonably generous in facilitating migration from Micronesia and Polynesia. Australia stands out as the Pacific neighbour with the greatest possibility to develop new migration streams.

## The Pacific predicament

### *Resource roulette*

Natural resources are unevenly distributed across the globe. Within the Pacific, the countries of Melanesia are relatively well-endowed in land mass and natural resources. The 'Pacific ring of fire', caused by the collision of the earth's tectonic plates, has produced a wealth of minerals along the line of contact. For example, Papua New Guinea has copper and gold resources of world significance, while New Caledonia holds 25% of the world's known nickel resources and is the fifth ranked world producer of mined nickel (United States Geological Survey, 2007). In addition, the climate and ecology in Melanesian countries have supported substantial forestry assets. These renewable and non-renewable resources are a major source of wealth, and have the potential to provide a stream of income for future generations if appropriately managed.

The islands of Micronesia and Polynesia have generally been less fortunate. Apart from their small size - the land area of the seven Micronesian countries averages only 433 km<sup>2</sup>, compared with 108,472 km<sup>2</sup> in Melanesian countries - some countries are comprised solely of low-lying coral atolls and reef islands, which support minimal vegetation. Their capacity to support present and future populations is increasingly compromised. The limited availability of natural resources in some Pacific islands has long been a reason for trade and migration, especially between low-lying coral islands and high islands in their vicinity (D'Arcy, 2006).

1. This briefing note is an abridged version of the paper titled 'Resources, population and migration in the Pacific: Connecting islands and rim' by Brian Opeskin (Macquarie University) and Therese MacDermott (Macquarie University) first published in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 50, No. 3, December 2009 ISSN 1360-7456, pp353-373. It is presented as a means of stimulating further thought on how migration can be cultivated alongside other policies to achieve sustainable development in small island Pacific states.

## **Demography, depletion & degradation**

Added to the problems of a poor endowment of resources, the populations of many Pacific countries are growing rapidly, with high rates of natural increase that are tempered only by emigration, where this is possible. Only four Pacific countries (Cook Islands, Niue, New Caledonia and Palau) have a rate of natural increase that is below the global average of 1.2%, and some (notably Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) have rates that are among the highest in the world outside Africa (Population Reference Bureau, 2007). If these rates of natural increase were sustained over the long term, the populations of Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands and Vanuatu would double in about 27 years, placing a substantial burden on each country's resources and social infrastructure.

International migration has had a substantial impact on the net population growth of many countries. Generally, in Polynesia emigration has been a major check on population growth, resulting in only modest annual growth despite relatively high total fertility rates; in Melanesia there is effectively zero net migration from the three countries that together account for 75% of Pacific peoples (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu); while in Micronesia the situation is mixed, with several countries (Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Marshall Islands) sharing the high net emigration experience of many Polynesian countries.

Pacific states also face many common environmental challenges with respect to their limited land and marine resources. Two main concerns are the depletion of natural resources and their degradation due to population pressures and over-exploitation. Nauru is a telling example of the over-exploitation of a mineral resource. As one of the richest phosphate islands in the Pacific, it attracted the attention of developed states because phosphate is a prized ingredient in commercial fertiliser. By about 2000 the primary deposits were substantially exhausted and mining ceased. The problems in Nauru extended well beyond the depletion of phosphate rock. The mining left a majority of the land wholly unusable for any other purpose, resulting in 'near complete environmental devastation' (Gowdy and McDaniel, 1999: 333). Exhaustion of its most significant natural resource, coupled with gross mismanagement of the income derived from that resource, has left Nauru with an uncertain economic future (Connell, 2006).

The problems of resource depletion in Pacific countries are not confined to mineral resources. Over-exploitation of inshore marine resources has caused declines in coastal fish stocks, especially when combined with damaging fishing practices such as dynamiting (Cordonery, 2003). Offshore waters may also be suffering from stock depletion because the developing states of the Pacific have wholly inadequate resources for surveillance of the licensed or illegal fishing operations conducted by foreign states in their maritime zones (Hanich et al, 2007).

Depletion of natural resources has been coupled with the degradation of land and sea resources, which is most pronounced where there are growing numbers of people (Boer, 1995).

## **Climate change**

There is an emerging consensus among scientists that the world's climate system is warming, as evidenced by increases in average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising average sea levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). The principal international instrument regulating climate change - the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1992* - expressly recognises that 'low-lying and other small island countries ... are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change'. These effects include climate processes (e.g. rising sea levels, coastal erosion, salination of agricultural land) and climate events (e.g. increased incidence of extreme weather such as tropical cyclones and tidal surges) (Zurick, 1995; Moore and Smith, 1995; Brown, 2008).

Climate models suggest that global mean sea level will rise by 18–59cm by 2099 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007: 45). Atoll states such as Tokelau and Tuvalu will have the distinction of being the first Pacific Island countries to be totally inundated by a sea level rise. A one metre rise in sea level will submerge 80% of the Majuro atoll in the Marshall Islands and 12.5% of the landmass in Kiribati (Burns, 2000). Beyond the physical inundation of land, rising sea levels are likely to have a major impact on the viability of coastal populations because key economic sectors—fishing, tourism and agriculture—will all be affected (Leane, 2005). By 2050, periodic storm surges in South Tarawa, the most densely populated area in Kiribati, are predicted to cost the country 10–30% of annual GDP (Dupont and Pearman, 2006).

## **Channels of migration**

### ***Colonialism and citizenship***

Colonialism has left a complex legacy of legal and political associations in the Pacific. The partitioning of the Pacific between colonial powers created large administrative units from what had been, for the most part, small tribal groupings. The new territorial boundaries were seen as a European artefact, much as they were in Africa (Naidu, 2003). Colonisation undoubtedly placed significant restrictions on the movement of people between the islands of the Pacific. The same may be said of decolonisation, which thrust the notion of the modern state, conceived as a territorially-bounded entity, upon the newly independent states of the Pacific (Kratochwil, 1986). Yet in many cases colonialism was accompanied by new rights of citizenship, and these selectively expanded, rather than diminished, the prospects of Pacific migration. The experience of Pacific islands has not been uniform in this respect and the position in New Zealand, the United States and France must again be contrasted with that of Australia and the United Kingdom.

New Zealand fostered special relationships with Polynesia. Tokelauans, Cook Islanders and Niueans were granted New Zealand citizenship in what has been described as 'possibly one of the most generous post-colonial arrangements in modern history' (Krishnan et al, 1994).

Under the New Zealand *Bill of Rights Act 1990*, citizenship confers a right to enter and move freely within New Zealand, and thus to access the labour market, education and other governmental services. The impact has been dramatic. At the time of the 2006 census there were 265,974 people of Pacific ethnicity living in New Zealand—6.4% of the New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). Not all of them are immigrants: indeed six out of ten were born in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the impact of a liberal citizenship regime is revealed by the fact that there are 14 times as many Niueans, six times as many Tokelauans, and three times as many Cook Islanders in New Zealand than in their home islands. Australia has been indirectly affected by these policies because New Zealand citizens also have a right of access to Australia under longstanding Trans-Tasman travel arrangements, thus facilitating step-wise migration.

The United States has also facilitated migration between its affiliated Pacific Islands and the mainland. Residents of the two unincorporated territories (Guam and American Samoa) are United States citizens whose freedom of movement within the United States is constitutionally protected. Likewise, residents of Northern Mariana Islands are United States citizens under the Covenant of political union. France too adopted a generous attitude towards the citizenship of indigenous people of the Pacific. Under the 1946 Constitution of the French Republic, all inhabitants of French overseas territories were granted French citizenship, with the concomitant right to move freely among the territories, and between the territories and metropolitan France (de Deckker, 1994). In practice there has been very little migration from French Pacific territories to France. On the contrary, there has been significant net migration to New Caledonia including both 'Métros' from France and Polynesians from Wallis and Futuna, who have largely outgrown the islands' limited resources.

The approach of New Zealand, the United States and France stands in contrast to the United Kingdom and Australia, which generally gave no automatic citizenship or rights of migration to Pacific populations over which they had exercised colonial authority. For the United Kingdom, citizenship was a political impossibility: not only were its Pacific possessions numerous (including Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), but its situation was replicated in colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. These pragmatic concerns were also true of Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea, which was both proximate and highly populous: at independence in 1975, Papua New Guinea's population was 2.9 million, Australia's 13.6 million.

### ***Pacific preference and seasonal solutions***

Australia prides itself on immigration that is 'selective, skilled and tightly managed', and designed for nation-building rather than alleviating temporary shortages (Millbank, 2006). Pacific islanders are entitled to migrate to Australia only because they satisfy standard immigration criteria or because they are New Zealanders who enjoy the Trans-Tasman concessions. Over the past 20 years

a range of public inquiries in Australia has recommended special migration status for Pacific Islanders for a variety of reasons, including enhancing the effectiveness of overseas aid, safeguarding national security, and improving regional foreign relations (Millbank, 2006). So far these recommendations have not been adopted. Even the 2008 *Port Moresby Declaration*, proclaiming 'a new era of cooperation with the island nations of the Pacific' is notably silent on the migration question.

New Zealand has taken a very different approach based on a self-acknowledged 'special relationship' with Pacific island states, especially in Polynesia (Bedford et al, 2007). In addition to the grant of citizenship to residents of Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, a number of other Pacific island countries have preferential visa access to New Zealand. The first of these followed in the spirit of the *Treaty of Friendship* that accompanied the independence of Samoa from New Zealand in 1962. In 2002 New Zealand established a new visa class—the Pacific Access Category—for other Pacific countries with which New Zealand had close cultural and historic ties. The annual quota of 400 places is currently allocated between Tonga (250), Tuvalu (75) and Kiribati (75). From 2003 Fiji was also included in the scheme with an annual allocation of 250 places, but participation was suspended following the 2006 coup.

The Pacific has a long history of migration of unskilled labourers to fill the needs of neighbouring countries in industries such as agriculture and mining. A recent incarnation is New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which commenced in April 2007 and replaced country-specific work permit arrangements. The RSE scheme allows up to 8,000 overseas workers to be given limited purpose visas each year to work in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries for up to nine months. In August 2008, the Australian government announced a similar pilot seasonal worker scheme. The proposal is to allow up to 2,500 seasonal workers (from Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga and Papua New Guinea) into Australia over a three year period to work for up to seven months each year in the horticulture industry. To date the scheme has made only a modest start.

## **Towards more permeable borders**

Migration from Pacific islands to the Pacific rim can be a powerful tool for promoting human development in the region. A recent report of the United Nations Development Programme documents substantial evidence that human mobility is strongly linked to, and has the potential to significantly reduce, spatial and national differences in well-being. Conversely, restrictions on human movement appear to be strongly related to disparities in human development (UNDP 2009: 7). The gains from migration come not only in the form of higher incomes but in better health, education and empowerment, and are greatest for those who move from poorest to wealthiest countries.

On what basis should developed states of the Pacific rim accept the notion that responsibility for further migration is theirs given the sizeable international community

that now numbers more than 190 states? First, there are circumstances in which states owe obligations to correct injustices that arise from past or present wrongs. Colonial exploitation (phosphate mining, forced labour) and environmentally degrading practices (nuclear testing, excessive greenhouse gas emissions) are pertinent Pacific examples. Second, obligations of humanity and distributive justice provide an ethical foundation for giving international development assistance to alleviate human suffering and poverty (Opeskin, 1996). The United States, New Zealand, Australia and France fall far short of meeting the United Nations target of giving 0.7% of annual national income in official foreign aid. Yet labour migration can provide an effective alternative means of assisting Pacific peoples to develop sustainable livelihoods. A third consideration underpinning the desirability of greater Pacific mobility is the self-interest of developed states. Demographic data support the view that migration has provided a safety valve for 'social and economic discontents' in some Pacific microstates (Ware, 2005: 451). This has reduced the potential for internal conflict in Polynesia, where persistent high rates of natural population increase would otherwise have resulted in a 'youth bulge', with few economic prospects, competing for limited resources. But the emigration safety valve has not been available uniformly across the Pacific. In Melanesia, where there are very limited rights of access to neighbouring developed states, political instability has been common, giving rise to the region's soubriquet as the 'arc of instability' (Rumley et al, 2006).

The arguments for more permeable borders do not affect all Pacific countries equally. The greatest priority should be to enhance labour mobility for countries facing a combination of ills that makes their circumstances especially challenging. Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru have a particular need for a migration safety value. Melanesian countries are also deserving of heightened opportunities: their resource limitations are less severe but they have large populations with very high rates of population growth and a near-complete absence of other migration channels.

Nor do the arguments for more permeable borders affect all Pacific rim countries equally. Both New Zealand and the United States have been reasonably generous in granting citizenship or preferential visa status to countries within Polynesia and Micronesia, respectively. More can still be done to extend the scope of their Pacific migration policies. New Zealand has commenced this process by including many Micronesian and Melanesian countries in its seasonal employment scheme. It is Australia that stands out as the Pacific neighbour with the greatest capacity to develop new migration streams that recognise Australia's history as a colonising power, its self-interest in promoting regional security, and the special needs of some Pacific island countries. The seasonal worker scheme announced in 2008 takes a small but valuable step along this path.

Finally, it would be naïve to suggest that all problems faced by Pacific countries can be addressed by opening the borders of neighbouring states. Migration is one avenue for improving the position of Pacific islanders, but must be considered alongside other policy initiatives.

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