


RESEARCH NOTE

How many seasonal workers from the Pacific have been employed in New Zealand since the RSE scheme began?

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Abstract

This Research Note provides the first reliable figures on the numbers of seasonal workers from the Pacific Islands who participated in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme between July 2007 and June 2022. The method for deriving these figures is explained briefly before examining the frequency of return by men and women for employment in subsequent seasons from the nine participating Pacific states. Clarification of the numbers of seasonal workers involved in the scheme, as distinct from work visas issued each year for RSE employment, is timely for two reasons. Firstly, the RSE scheme is under review in March 2023 by Immigration New Zealand. Secondly, the three major sources of Pacific seasonal labour are raising questions in 2023 about the impact of the scheme on their domestic labour markets and economies. Robust data on numbers of Pacific seasonal workers during the scheme's first 15 years contributes important information in both these contexts.

KEYWORDS

gender, Pacific source countries, RSE scheme, seasonal labour migration

1 | INTRODUCTION

New Zealand's well-established Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which allows approved growers and contractors to bring in just under 19,000 temporary workers to support harvesting, packing and pruning in the horticulture and viticulture industries during 2022/2023, has been attracting a lot of media attention in its 16th year of operation. Whether it is negative comments by Dr Karina Saunoamaali'i Sumeo, the Human Rights Commission's Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner, about modern slavery conditions faced by some RSE workers (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2022), or positive stories by workers in a series of videos prepared by the Pacific Cooperation Foundation about the contributions participation in the scheme is making to the

development of families and communities in the islands (Mase, 2023), or harrowing accounts of survival in the Hawke's Bay and Tairāwhiti regions in the face of disaster during Cyclone Gabrielle (C. Bedford, 2023), the RSE scheme was never far from the public gaze during February 2023.

We have been carrying out research on the RSE scheme since its inception in April 2007 (Ramasamy et al., 2008; C. Bedford, 2013, 2014; R. Bedford et al., 2017; C. Bedford et al., 2020; C. Bedford et al., 2023). Yet despite 15 years of extensive research on the scheme in New Zealand and in the Pacific Islands, there is one very simple question that has yet to be answered. How many seasonal workers from the Pacific have been employed since the scheme began?

This Research Note provides the first reliable estimates of the numbers of people from each of the nine

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Pacific participating states who have worked for RSEs between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2022. Also provided are some summary data on the frequency of return migration for seasonal employment as well as on differences in average numbers of seasons employed for Pacific men and women who have participated in the scheme.

In addition to the intrinsic value of the data to researchers interested in one of New Zealand's major Pacific development assistance programmes, the statistics provided in this paper have direct relevance for a substantive review of the RSE scheme that is currently being undertaken by Immigration New Zealand. Knowing something about the actual numbers of Pacific people who have participated in the scheme is critically important for this review. The three major providers of RSE labour—Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga—have also recently raised concerns about the impact seasonal labour migration is having on their domestic labour markets. In all sorts of contexts, seasonal labour migration has become a 'hot topic' in 2023 in New Zealand and the Pacific.

2 | A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Information on the numbers of RSE workers arriving in New Zealand each financial year is readily available in a table on the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's (MBIE) website (<https://www.immigration.govt.nz/documents/statistics/statistics-rse-arrivals.pdf>). These data reveal that between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2022, 103,821 limited-purpose RSE visas for seasonal work in New Zealand were issued to arrivals from nine Pacific countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu). The 103,821 visa arrivals are simply the sum of the annual arrivals from these nine countries over the 15-year period. It is not a record

of the number of *people* who have participated in the scheme during the period.

It is well-known that many of the arrivals recorded each year are people returning following one or more seasons of employment with RSEs in previous years. To the best of our knowledge, there are no readily available reliable estimates of the total number of *people* from the Pacific countries who have participated in the scheme between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2022.

The method we have employed to derive our estimates is very straightforward. Each arrival in New Zealand has a unique client code that is included in the records of all their previous and subsequent movements into and out of the country. These data are collected by immigration authorities in many countries but the data that relate to the RSE arrivals have rarely been used by Immigration New Zealand to obtain reliable counts of numbers of Pacific temporary migrants whose work visa requires them to engage in regular circular migration between their island homes and New Zealand for seasonal work.

There are some significant challenges in using these data. Simply aggregating the arrivals by client code over successive years will not produce reliable results. One of the major reasons for this is that approaches that have been adopted when recording the visas for seasonal workers have not always been consistent. In several years, more than one entry per client number was entered where approval had been granted for the seasonal workers to be employed by more than one RSE during their time in New Zealand. As a result, there are a lot of duplicates and, in some years, incomplete entries in the annual RSE data. A detailed description of these data and their use in deriving estimates of numbers of RSE workers can be found in R. Bedford (2020).

In the analysis presented here, data on 101,840 of the 103,821 RSE visa arrivals from the Pacific have been used

TABLE 1 RSE visa arrivals from the Pacific: MBIE totals and our database.

Country	RSE visa arrivals		Difference MBIE-database	Arrived July 2007–December 2007
	MBIE data	Database		
Vanuatu	48,131	47,080	−1051	322
Samoa	22,681	22,380	−301	199
Tonga	20,994	20,400	−594	297
Solomon Islands	6315	6300	−15	62
Fiji	1838	1840	2	0
Kiribati	1981	1970	−11	15
Tuvalu	970	960	−10	0
Papua New Guinea	816	815	−1	0
Nauru	95	95	0	0
Total Pacific	103,821	101,840	−1981	895

to derive the numbers of Pacific seasonal workers who have been employed by RSEs since 2007 (Table 1). The difference between the 103,821 RSE visa arrivals from the Pacific in MBIE's published statistical summary and the 101,840 visa arrivals used in our analysis is small—1981 arrivals or 1.9%. Half of the difference is due to duplicate records being removed; the other half is due to the absence of records from our database for 895 arrivals between 1 July 2007 and 31 December 2007. These data do not seem to be available in a form that is consistent with the other 101,840 records in our database.

The numbers of RSE visa arrivals during the second half of 2007, shown in the last column of Table 1, account for 66% of the missing Samoans, 50% of the missing Tongans and 30% of the missing from Vanuatu in our database. We were able to account for most of the missing 62 Solomon Islanders and 15 I-Kiribati using data we collected in Honiara and in Tarawa while undertaking field work in those countries.

3 | FROM ARRIVALS TO WORKERS: NUMBERS OF PACIFIC PARTICIPANTS IN THE RSE SCHEME

It is widely known that a significant share of the annual recruits for the RSE scheme is return workers. For the first time, we can now provide some very robust figures on both the total numbers of people from Pacific source countries and the extent of return migration during the first 15 years of the RSE scheme. The 101,840 RSE visas issued to seasonal workers from Pacific countries went to 36,675 individuals. The great majority of these recruits (87.6%) were from three countries: Vanuatu (16,250, 44.3% of the total), Samoa (8720, 23.8%) and Tonga (7150, 19.5%; Table 2).

TABLE 2 Pacific RSE workers: numbers, shares, seasons employed.

Country	2007/2008–2021/2022		Percentage of workers (%)		
	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

The remaining 4555 (12.4%) came from six countries, with Solomon Islands (2160) accounting for almost half of these (47.4%). Five of the Pacific source countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea and Nauru) have provided, between them, a total of 2395 RSE workers (6.5% of the 36,675) during the 15 years (Table 2).

Just over half (56.1%) of the Pacific participants had worked for two or more seasons for at least one of the 229 RSEs that have been accredited since 2007. This is a much smaller share of returnees than is revealed when just analysing the visa arrival data for specific years. For example, in 2019/2020, the last reasonably complete year for RSE recruitment before the borders closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, over three-quarters (77.5%) of the 1807 Tongan seasonal workers had already worked on the RSE scheme for one or more seasons in earlier years. Only 22.5% (407) of the Tongan arrivals in that year were not returnees.

When the participation of all Pacific seasonal workers is considered over the 15 years, the much higher share (43.9%) of those who have been employed for only one season becomes much more apparent. There is some variability in the percentages of one-season workers ranging from two-thirds (67%) for Nauruans to 39% for RSE workers from Kiribati and Solomon Islands (Table 2). Other countries with higher shares in the one-season category than the 43.9% for all Pacific RSE workers include: Tuvalu, Fiji, Samoa and Papua New Guinea. Vanuatu (41.8%) and Tonga (41.5%) both sit below the 43.9% share for the region's workers as a whole.

4 | HOW OFTEN DO RETURN WORKERS COME BACK?

Table 3 shows the numbers of RSE workers from each country who either worked for one season or who

worked for two or more seasons at some stage between July 2007 and June 2022, as well as the shares who returned for specified numbers of seasons.

Of the 20,580 returnees, 54% had worked for two or three seasons, and there was a high level of consistency in the shares in this category in seven of the nine Pacific countries. The percentages for the consistent seven ranged from 52.1% in Vanuatu to 56.2% in Papua New Guinea with Tonga, Solomon Islands and Kiribati all having 54% of their returnees only coming back to work for two or three seasons (Table 3). The two exceptions—Fiji and Nauru—began providing RSE workers much later than the other seven for different reasons but with a similar result that 70% of their returnees had only been back twice or three times.

The biggest differences between the Pacific source countries were in the shares of their workers who had been back six or more times. These percentages were much lower than is generally recognised by many stakeholders who have become used to hearing about workers who have been back for numerous seasons. This finding, in combination with the higher-than-expected shares of one-season workers from all participating countries (Table 2), challenges the notion that widespread dependence on RSE employment by particular individuals, reflected in repeated recruitment by the same workers every year, is becoming a major problem for Pacific families seeking sustainable livelihoods in the islands.

That said, there is increasing concern in the three key sources of RSE seasonal labour that the numbers of their citizens being recruited for employment in the scheme, as well as in the Seasonal Worker Program in Australia, which is modelled on the RSE, and in Australia's more recent Pacific Labour Scheme introduced in 2018, are posing challenges for local businesses which cannot obtain the labour they need. This concern is evident in

restrictions the Samoan Government placed on recruitment for the labour mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand late in 2022, and in the Tongan Government's consideration of a Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy. The Government of Vanuatu is also raising concerns about the impact of overseas labour migration on the country's village economy which continues to underpin the livelihoods of the great majority of ni-Vanuatu families.

5 | THE GENDER DIMENSION TO PACIFIC PARTICIPATION IN THE RSE SCHEME

From the outset, there has been a strong gender bias in favour of males in recruitment for seasonal work in the horticulture and viticulture industries. Part of the reason for this is because of restrictions on the recruitment of overseas labour to assist with packing fruit and vegetables. Much of the latter work is done by women, and jobs in packhouses have tended to be reserved for New Zealanders. This has reduced the range of opportunities for women from Pacific countries to gain seasonal work in New Zealand.

The dominance of men in the RSE seasonal workforce is evident in Table 4. Under 5000 (12.4%) of the 36,675 Pacific participants in the scheme have been women. At the country level there is considerable variation in the percentage of women recruited for seasonal work. In the small RSE workforces from Kiribati and Tuvalu, over a third of the recruits have been women. By contrast, in Samoa, the second major source of RSE labour, women have comprised only 4.9% of the 8720 workers recruited since 2007.

The average number of seasons the 4555 women have worked (2.70) is slightly lower than the average for the

TABLE 3 Pacific RSE return workers: frequency of re-engagement, 2007/2008—2021/2022.

Country	Total recruits		Percentages of returnees (%)			
	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

TABLE 4 Gender dimensions of recruitment: numbers and average seasons worked.

Country	Recruits 2007/2008–2021/2022			Percent Women (%)	Average seasons worked		
	Men	Women	Total		Men	Women	Total
Vanuatu	14,040	2210	16,250	13.6	2.95	2.58	2.90
Samoa	8290	430	8720	4.9	2.60	1.90	2.57
Tonga	6360	790	7150	11.0	2.84	2.95	2.85
Solomon Islands	1550	610	2160	28.2	2.27	3.24	2.92
Fiji	885	60	945	6.3	1.95	1.93	1.94
Kiribati	405	235	640	36.7	2.83	3.45	3.06
Tuvalu	260	145	405	35.8	2.51	2.15	2.38
Papua New Guinea	280	65	345	18.8	2.26	2.78	2.36
Nauru	50	10	60	16.7	1.58	1.50	1.57
Total Pacific	32,120	4555	36,675	12.4	2.79	2.70	2.78

TABLE 5 A gender perspective on return workers: numbers and average seasons worked.

Country	Returnees, 2007/2008–2021/2022			Percent Women	Average seasons worked		
	Men	Women	Total		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

32,125 men (2.79). In four of the nine Pacific sources (Tonga, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Papua New Guinea), women have higher averages for seasons worked than men.

For both genders, these averages are strongly impacted by the high percentages of workers from all countries who have only worked for one season. The two countries where female RSE workers averaged more than three seasons of RSE employment (Solomon Islands and Kiribati) also happened to have the lowest percentages of one-season workers (Table 2). The numbers of men and women who returned for two or more seasons of employment by RSEs are shown in Table 5, along with the average number of seasons they worked.

It is not possible to make very general statements about the shares of women in RSE workforces from the nine Pacific countries other than noting that men have outnumbered women both as single-season employees

as well as return workers from all countries. The average number of seasons worked by returnee women (4.16) is marginally smaller (0.06 of a season) than the average for men (4.22 seasons). The differences between men and women who had worked for two or more seasons between 2007/2008 and 2021/2022 were greater than half a season in only three cases: Samoa (men 4.14, women 3.48, difference 0.68 of a season), Nauru (men 2.87, women 2.20, difference 0.67 of a season) and Kiribati (men 4.05, women 4.65, difference 0.60 of a season) (Table 5).

A clearer picture of differences between men and women returnees in terms of the frequency of their re-recruiting, emerges in the percentages shown in Table 6. Over 50% of both the men and the women had returned for just two or three seasons but there was more variability in the shares of women in this category than the men.

TABLE 6 Seasons worked by returnee men and women, 2007/2008–2021/2022 (percentages).

Country	2–3 seasons		4–5 seasons		6–9 seasons		10+ seasons	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Vanuatu	51.8	54.4	23.4	20.2	19.3	19.8	5.4	5.7
Samoa	54.9	66.5	23.8	19.4	15.8	12.9	5.5	1.3
Tonga	54.1	54.6	21.9	22.4	18.2	21.3	5.2	5.2
Solomon Islands	56.7	49.3	21.9	22.4	17.9	22.6	3.5	5.7
Fiji	76.6	80.0	21.8	20.0	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Kiribati	58.3	47.8	14.8	20.5	19.1	28.6	7.8	3.1
Tuvalu	55.8	47.8	22.5	15.2	17.1	32.6	4.7	4.3
Papua New Guinea	55.6	57.8	28.6	26.7	15.8	15.6	0.0	0.0
Nauru	66.7	100.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total Pacific	54.1	53.6	23.0	20.9	17.7	20.6	5.1	4.9

There was also a lot of similarity in the shares of men (23.0%) and women (20.9%) returning for four or five seasons. Kiribati and Tuvalu had the largest differences in this category with higher percentages for women in Kiribati, and for men in Tuvalu. The biggest difference between the men (17.7) and the women (20.6) is in the 6–9 season category. In five of the countries (Vanuatu, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu) the share of women returning 6–9 times was greater than the respective share for men. In the case of those returning for 10 or more seasons, the highest shares for women were recorded for recruits from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands (5.7% each), while the largest percentage for either men or women in the 10+ category was recorded for I-Kiribati men at 7.8%.

While generalisation is difficult, it is evident from Table 6 that higher shares of women than men have returned six or more times. This applies in the case of Vanuatu, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and for all Pacific participants. Although the number of women recruited for two or more seasons is very small (2395) by comparison with the number of men (18,185), the women have tended to be a more stable component of the RSE workforce if stability is defined by numbers of seasons worked. This suggests that a lot more Pacific women might have been recruited for the RSE scheme if there had been no restrictions on the employment of Pacific seasonal workers in the packhouse.

6 | A CONCLUDING COMMENT

Reliable evidence regarding the numbers of seasonal workers who have been recruited at some stage from participating Pacific countries, and some summary statistics

on the extent to which they return for work in subsequent seasons, is timely given the current concerns about aspects of the scheme in New Zealand, as well as about some of its impacts on the labour markets of three source countries. The information on the incidence and frequency of return migration that is provided in this Research Note should allay some of the concerns that have been expressed at times about undue dependence of RSE recruits on seasonal work for their livelihoods.

New Zealand's seasonal work scheme remains focussed on delivering wins for three key groups of stakeholders: employers in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries; village residents in Pacific countries who seek seasonal work to further their livelihoods in the islands; and communities in both New Zealand and the Pacific which benefit from the contributions Pacific seasonal workers make to their economies and societies. Although the scheme has received some bad press during 2022 and 2023 following 3 years of significant disruption during the pandemic, we remain confident that the wins for all three groups of primary stakeholders remain real. Our extensive inquiry into the impacts of the RSE scheme in New Zealand and Pacific communities during 2019 certainly demonstrated this (Nunns et al., 2019, 2020; C. Bedford et al., 2020).

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