New Migration in the Pacific Islands
By Carmen Voigt-Graf, Manoranjan Mohanty and Vijay Naidu PMRN, USP, Suva, Fiji

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Introduction

While terms such as ‘borderless world’, ‘globalisation’, and ‘age of migration’ do capture the phenomena of the global network society and the mobility of capital, goods and services, ideas and information and people, they do not adequately reflect the strictures on peoples’ movement. It is evident from Pacific islands experience that development in island states is circumscribed by forces that emanate from developed states in the region and further afield. International migration has provided both opportunities for individuals and families as well as their countries but has also posed critical development issues for island states and even their long term viability. In this age of migration and globalization are the island countries destined to be pools of labour reserve for their metropolitan neighbours and have their own development largely subordinated to the needs of the latter? Currently, major initiatives such as the Pacific Plan and Pacific ACP countries’ negotiation with the European Union on Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) centre amongst other things on ‘labour mobility’. The latter is deemed to be Mode 4 of WTO GATS, “Mode 4 – Temporary movement of natural persons (workers) across borders to provide services (e.g. executives or doctors)” (http://www.afsc.org/trade-matters/issues/GATS-Mode-4-Fact-Sheet.htm). Island states are not especially interested in exporting ‘executives and doctors’ but in finding employment for large numbers of unskilled people for whom there is no meaningful livelihood in the islands. Freeing up trade will have the immediate consequence of job losses and it is hoped that larger countries that will benefit from ‘free trade’ appreciate the need for job creation in the islands and/or promote labour migration from island states to their shores.

Migration has been significant in Pacific island development (or limited development and even underdevelopment) over the last 40 years, particularly for the smaller island states of Micronesia and Polynesia. Until the early twentieth century Melanesian countries had served as sources of labour for plantation agriculture in other parts of the Pacific but for almost a century, they ceased supplying migrants. So the primary sending countries have been those in Micronesia and Polynesia.
This has meant substantial permanent movement of island people. For some of Pacific island countries (PICs), the population ‘base’ has shifted to one or more of the Pacific Rim countries. The Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau fall into this category. Remittances have been the dominant source of foreign exchange for these countries as well as Samoa and Tonga. Recently, Fiji a Melanesia country has experienced a sizeable upsurge in remittances from security personnel and care givers on short term contracts abroad. More than twenty seven years ago the term ‘MIRAB’ was coined to describe the economy of certain PICs dependant on migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy. Recent trends confirm the Pacific islands are sending countries rather than receiving countries from the migration standpoint. There is however, some movement of people from elsewhere into PICs and this is anticipated to grow with GATS.

This paper seeks to highlight some general patterns and more recent trends in international migration in PICs.

PICs migration – response to RIM country immigration policies

There is continuing large scale emigration with several countries having their population balances outside the "home countries", largely in New Zealand. Auckland is deemed to be the largest Polynesian city in the world. Hence migration (negatively and positively) affects PICs comparatively more than countries in other regions. Overall in 2000 there were 6 million migrants (inclusive of Australia and New Zealand) in the Pacific and the annual rate of migration was 2.1 percent, amongst the highest in the world (IOM, 2005).
For the region as a whole, there have been more female than male migrants (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005, cited in Mohanty, 2006).

Five issues need to be highlighted in the context of PICs that are neighbours to the two significant immigrant countries of Australia and New Zealand. First, migrations from PICs depend on the immigration policies of migrant receiving countries such as Australia and New Zealand as well as the United States and Canada. In recent years the latter have sought skilled migrants and given less priority to ‘family reunion’ as criteria for selection. In the ‘point systems’ that have been introduced qualifications and experience in certain areas of labour market demand or ‘scarcity’ earn the top scores. Age and gender discrimination occurs because its younger able bodied and qualified people who are sought after as well as those in certain trades that favour men. However, there is a huge demand for nurses and health workers who are largely female.

Second, the number of migrants from PICs is relatively small compared to absolute numbers from other regions of the world that make up most of the 6million migrants in Oceania. However, proportionate to their home population size and limited human capital, human resource loss can be very significant. Indeed, no other region in the world has experienced such as large outflow of its population as Polynesia has experienced. Brain drain is a critical issue. The lack of opportunities for training and replacing emigrants has profound consequences for service delivery in PICs. The loss of health workers including doctors and nurses has been an on going issue for virtually all island states. In sports, the loss of some of the best rugby players abroad (who contribute to the success of national teams of Australia and New Zealand) has meant that both national and regional teams in the Pacific do not have their best representative sides (see Maclellan and Mares, 2006, 138).

Third, larger returns for labour abroad have resulted in significant earnings in the islands from remittances. These come in both cash and kind through ‘direct delivery’ by visiting relatives and friends, by bank transfers and in the mail. Two concerns have emerged in the literature which involve the extent to which remittances have been used ‘productively’ and not only for consumption, and whether there will be ‘remittance decay’. This refers to the likelihood of declining remittances as migrants settle in their adopted country and begin to raise their own families. Related to this it is surmised that those born in the host country will have less commitment to relatives in the ‘homeland’. Helen Lee has expressed this concern very well in the case of Tonga, including the concern expressed earlier about host nations’ restrictive immigration policies:

“Tonga’s economic future is precarious, and heavily reliant on the expectation of continued high levels of remittances. If the second generation does not maintain these remittances at these high levels, and alternative sources of income are unlikely to be found, the obvious solution would appear to be an increased flow of new migrants. The solution is impossible without changes to the immigration policies of the main host nations—the USA, New Zealand and Australia—which have tightened in recent years and made it more difficult for Tongans to migrate” (2006, 131).
This far with the possible exception of Niue, remittances have continued to be significant for sending countries. There is anxiety though on how long this will be maintained.

The scarcity of employment opportunities in the atoll states of Kiribati and Tuvalu led to their promotion of seafaring in European merchant ships especially for young men. Both countries prioritized the training of merchant seamen and secured agreements with large cargo shipping companies for the employment of I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan seamen. Regular and stable employment of these seamen has contributed significantly to the material wellbeing of their families.

More recently, Fiji has joined the ranks of PICs reliant on remittances. This augments the debate on the sustainability of MIRAB economies, especially in present times. PICs have not been doing well economically and with limited expansion of their labour markets, employment generation is a major issue. A related factor that has contributed to the economic downturn is the closure of garment factories and the decline in the sugar industry as globalization and compliance with WTO rules take hold. The non-renewal of agricultural land leases has affected sugar cane farming families. Significant numbers of such families have moved to urban and peri-urban areas in search of alternative livelihoods.

Economists and international financial institutions have been concerned about the negative consequences of remittances largely spent on non-productive consumption and giving rise to expectations of higher wages in largely agrarian societies. More recently, the realization that growing populations, particularly the youth bulge in small island states constitute a major challenge. There is a need to have meaningful livelihoods which are not available in the islands. This has fueled a rethink on migration and remittance nexus as a way forward for PICs. A recent World Bank’s study advocates migration including short term migration and remittances as a strategy to tackle employment and development challenges in PICs.

While economic opportunities and the lure of better wages have been primary pull factors in Pacific islander migration to rim countries, Fiji’s situation has been somewhat different. Political instability, ethnic divisions, institutionalized racism and military coups have been the main ‘push’ factors in the emigration of citizens of non-ethnic Fijian origins, particularly Indo-Fijians. There has been an increasing number of indigenous Fijians who have migrated as well. It is estimated that more than 130,000 Fiji citizens have migrated since 1987 when the Fiji Labour Party led government was overthrown. Authoritarian rule and political instability in Tonga and the Solomon Islands will reinforce search for migration opportunities in these countries. The Solomon Islands has already experienced since 2000 an outflow from its very small pool of skilled and professional people.

Fifth, the loss of human capital from PICs has meant that in several critical areas the quality of services in island states’ has been affected. It has also compromised development initiatives. Education and health services especially have declined but other areas such as the construction industry, tourism management, judiciary and a range of
professional services have reduced capacity. Island countries have sought to attract personnel in these areas from other countries with mixed success. There has been some mobility of skilled islanders between PICs themselves.

New Migration

In the 1990s care giving has become an important source of employment for Fijians seeking opportunities abroad. Since much of the work revolves around ‘illegal migration’ as in people taking up employment on ‘visitors’ visas’, the number involved is unclear. This is particularly the case of migrants in the United States. Smaller numbers of care givers from Fiji are to be found in Australia and New Zealand. The feminization of migration also includes the immigration of professionally qualified nurses. They tend to move to Australia and New Zealand but recruiting agencies from far a field as the United Kingdom have sought to recruit in the country. Opportunities for young women (and men) to migrate from PICs have increased with growing diasporas of island people in Pacific Rim countries and the upsurge of marriages among those in the islands and those abroad.

Another significantly new, albeit dangerous form of employment abroad is ‘security work’. Since the ‘first Iraq war’, opportunities for employment in private military companies have expanded considerably. Previously, Fiji soldiers and policemen had served as peacekeepers in various UN missions. This experience and the reputation gained from it made them a preferred group for ‘security work’ in Kuwait and later in Iraq itself. It is estimated that there are near 3,000 Fijians employed as truck drivers, body guards, and convoy guards, watchmen for warehouses and storage facilities and private military personnel in Iraq, Kuwait and other Middle Eastern countries. Fijian soldiers have also been engaged by the UN to provide security to its personnel in Iraq.

The Gulf States of the Middle East have also attracted more highly skilled migrants from Fiji. Airline pilots have been drawn in relatively large numbers because of much better terms and conditions of employment. Fiji’s national airlines, Air Pacific has suffered from periodic shortages of pilots because of this. As a consequence, Air Pacific and other local airline companies have become more reliant on expatriate pilots in recent times. In addition to pilots, there are smaller numbers of other Fijian professionals in these states.

Employment in security in recent years has included recruitment into regular military forces. A large number of young men have been recruited into the British military as a result of recruitment missions from the UK or individuals going to the UK to take their chances in being selected to join the British army. It is estimated that close to 3000 Fijians have joined the British military since the mid 1990s.

In the broad realm of security engagement, besides being recruited into primate military services in the Middle East, former Fijian soldiers have become mercenaries in that region as well as in Papua New Guinea. A handful of them were recruited with of promises of fairly large payments of money by a local warlord to train his private militia in Bougainville in the last 3 years.
There has been increased intra-PICs labour migration in more legitimate areas as well. Fijians have taken up employment opportunities in the Cook Islands, particularly in the thriving tourism sector. They have also been recruited to work in providing health services in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and in Kiribati. Nurses from Fiji are drawn to the relatively higher wages paid in US dollar.

As a strategy to expand employment opportunities for young men and women, PIC governments have been engaged in a campaign to secure arrangements for short term unskilled migrants into Australia and New Zealand. Both these countries are centres of economic growth in the region and are perceived as the main beneficiaries of trade and development in PICs. The island governments lobbying has had some success. New Zealand has agreed to formulate and introduce a limited seasonal agricultural labour scheme for 5000 islanders each year. This is an extremely small number and is applied selectively. But it is a step forward from PICs’ stand point.

The Australian Government however has been firmly opposed to short term labour migration schemes for unskilled labour from its neighbouring island countries. Instead it has proposed to establish the Australia Pacific Technical College in which Pacific islanders will be trained in a number of areas that will allow them to migrate to Australia permanently under existing schemes. Needless to say these areas are those in demand in Australia. There is an issue here of training people in the islands only to take them out –permanently.

As mentioned earlier, there is a shortage of skilled people in PICs in a range of areas. This has fueled immigration into island states. Expatriate professionals and tradesmen come from a range of countries. These include Australia, New Zealand, China and India and other Asian countries. In Fiji, South Korean and Filipino workers are increasingly ubiquitous in the country’s construction industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Stock of migrants / expatriate workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauru</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonga</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is likely that the number of immigrants into PICs would increase in the future as GATS and EPA compliance takes place. There has also been a relatively large but yet under-researched immigration of Chinese workers and business people. Significant numbers of Chinese workers were recruited by the garment factories that sprung up in several Pacific island states, including Fiji and Palau. With the loss of preferential access to Australasian and United States markets, garment factories are closing down and with this trend, there is a significant drop in Chinese workers.

Small Chinese traders and market gardeners have migrated to Fiji and other PICs. They have generally contributed to economic development but have been perceived negatively by certain elements in PICs societies. Hostility towards them has flared into anti-Chinese protests and riots in some PICs. Xenophobia and the competition from these new migrants appear to be primary factors in these overt and sometimes violent protests.

Finally, with increasing possibility of global warming, it is anticipated that sea level will continue to rise. This will pose insurmountable difficulties for atoll countries whose elevations are usually less than a metre or so above sea level. In the foreseeable future there is a likelihood of environmental refugees from these atoll states. This will be in some ways reminiscent of the ‘nuclear nomads’ in Micronesia who were displaced by atmospheric nuclear tests conducted in the vicinity of their islands.

Conclusion

Migration in PICs has been a response to the immigration policies of neighbouring ‘Rim countries’ of Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. Despite an increasingly restrictive immigration context, islanders continue to migrate for economic opportunities not available in their home countries. The focus on skilled immigrants by the wealthier migrant receiving countries has creamed-off the limited skilled and professional people from the islands, leaving a large category of unskilled workers with little prospects for employment. Expatriates have been sought to fill the gaps left by the emigration of skilled islanders. Negotiations on short term seasonal labour migration have born fruit with New Zealand’s introduction of a seasonal migration policy. Australia, on the other hand has opted for a longer term training scheme to extract permanent migrants from PICs.

New forms of migration have emerged with respect to security personnel, care givers and intra PICs migration as well as the grim prospects of environmental refugees from the atoll countries. The implications and consequences of these require further research.
Selected Bibliography


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