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Pacific Island labour programmes: an aid to development?

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The New Zealand Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) programme is often perceived as a win-win for employers and migrant workers. Recent research by Dr Dennis Rockell examines the benefits of the RSE and its contribution towards development in Pacific Island communities.

Background to the RSE programme

The RSE programme was launched in 2007 to remedy labour shortages in the horticulture and viticulture industries, while enhancing the development of labour source countries, consisting mainly of small Pacific Island States. The RSE was portrayed as an example of best practice in government migrant labour programmes, and a 'win-win' for employers and workers.

Positive and negative impacts of the programme

Positive features cited include close government monitoring of worker accommodation, transparent remuneration processes, and the transfer of useful skills. Negative features included the lack of power to negotiate work conditions, failure at times to address workers' needs, social dislocation, excessive work hours at minimum wage, and an inequitable recruitment process. Under the RSE, workers do not get the opportunity to extend their visa, develop their skills, or earn a higher wage. In addition, the income generated from RSE remittances is relatively small compared to other sources of revenue for Pacific Island countries. Therefore, the overall benefits of the RSE, in terms of meaningful development outcomes, needs to be assessed.

Rationale for change

The RSE programme aims to promote economic development in the Pacific Islands. This aim aligns with the New Zealand Aid Programme's strategic plan to increase the development benefits of labour mobility in the Pacific region. The RSE also allows important prime industries in New Zealand to fill labour shortages, thus enabling them to remain competitive on the world stage.

Recommendations to improve the RSE programme

A balance needs to be found between protecting New Zealand jobs and creating greater development opportunities through the RSE programme. Easing border restrictions, providing opportunities to develop skills and earn a higher wage, and making the recruitment process more equitable would help to ensure the RSE programme benefits more migrant workers and their communities.

"There is a widespread desire to take part in the RSE and ... many disappointed people." (Dr Rockell)

For more information go to the [PRPC website](#) or contact [Litea Meo-Sewabu](#).

Key Points:

- The RSE was designed to remedy labour shortages and provide development assistance to Pacific Island States
- Often described as a 'win-win' for employers and workers; however overall economic benefits of RSE need to be assessed
- Easing visa restrictions, providing opportunities to upskill, and a more equitable recruitment process would help to improve the development outcomes of the RSE programme