

# CROSS-CULTURAL INVESTIGATION: CHALLENGES FACED BY PACIFIC SEASONAL WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

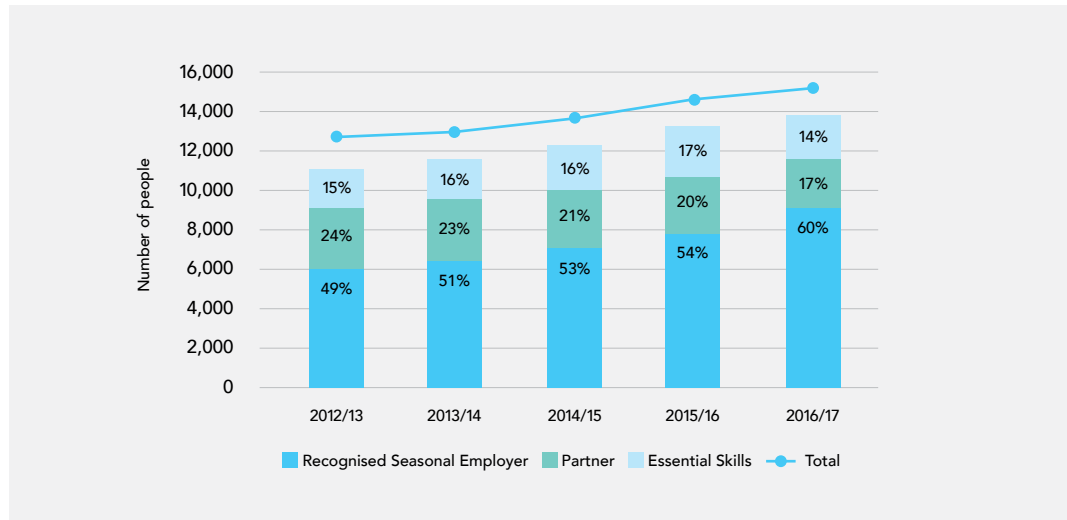
The workers under the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme of New Zealand faced many challenges due to border closures during COVID-19. However, the New Zealand Government and the Recognised Seasonal Employers have shown immense commitment to supporting and motivating Pacific workers through effective communication. This investigation found that local communities have also demonstrated their responsibilities in supporting Pacific seasonal workers. Most of these initiatives and measures align with International Labour Organisation's guidelines and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Still, improvement is required for the New Zealand Government in responding to an emergency such as COVID-19 to support Pacific Seasonal Workers. Initiatives such as offering wages higher than living wages are recommended to be competitive in attracting Pacific seasonal workers who are critical in the growth of New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture businesses.

**Keywords:** Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) workers, globalisation theories, cross-culture, COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

Under the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) of the New Zealand Government, people from the Pacific region come to New Zealand to seek employment opportunities in the viticulture and horticulture sectors (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (NZMAT), 2022). Pacific countries include Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (Horticulture New Zealand, 2022). The RSE scheme helps employers from the horticulture and viticulture sectors to meet the labour shortage and provides an opportunity for Pacific workers to learn skills and earn a higher income to support their families and communities back home (Bailey, 2020a). In short, the workers' movement benefits the Pacific region and New Zealand (NZMAT, 2022). Academics, policymakers, the public, and the media paid attention to permanent residence migration in the 1990s, this has changed in the twenty-first century, and the focus has shifted to temporary migration (Friesen, 2018). As a result, the RSE scheme was implemented in 2007 to allow the viticulture and horticulture sectors to hire seasonal workers from Pacific countries in cases of labour shortages (Curtain et al., 2018; Immigration New Zealand, 2022). Figure 1 shows that most Pacific workers approved for a temporary work visa from 2012-13 to 2016-17 are under the RSE scheme (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2018). Furthermore, almost 16% of New Zealand's horticulture workforce comes from Pacific seasonal workers (Curtain et al., 2018). This shows the importance of Pacific seasonal workers in developing the viticulture and horticulture sectors of New Zealand.

Figure 1 – Approved temporary workers from the Pacific by work visa category, 2012/13 to 2016/17 (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2018)



Source: Pacific Migrant Trends and Settlement Outcomes Report (2018)

During the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Pacific seasonal workers have faced challenges related to mental and physical exhaustion, sexual health, and pregnancy as the workers needed to stay in New Zealand longer than expected (Bedford, 2021). However, almost all research papers only describe the experiences of RSE workers during COVID-19. New Zealand Government needs to see the issue of Pacific seasonal workers from the cross-cultural management perspective and evaluate the impact of globalisation theories and United Nations Strategic Development Goals (UNSDG) in decision-making. This investigation provides insights into RSE Pacific seasonal workers' behavioural patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitates future alignment to globalisation theories and UNSDG.

This investigation evaluated the role of the government, managers, the concepts of globalisation, and UNSDG in decision-making for Pacific seasonal workers during COVID-19 in New Zealand. It also identifies the issues raised by the COVID-19 pandemic for employers and the government and evaluates how they responded to the situation regarding International Labour Organisation (ILO) guidelines. Moreover, globalisation theories were used to analyse the RSE Pacific seasonal workers' status during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, how New Zealand achieved the UNSDG through effective decision-making for Pacific seasonal workers is discussed.

## METHODOLOGY

This investigation used an exploratory research technique as it is cost-effective and gives flexibility in structuring the research. Secondary data was gathered from online resources. Online search platforms such as Google Scholar and Proquest, available from the Robertson Library (online system), were utilised to find journal articles, newspaper articles, news from government departments, specific research articles, and statistics on the RSE scheme. This was then analysed using the qualitative method of reading through many times, digging deeper into the data to find connections, responses, and behavioural patterns.

The following sections investigate how effectively the communication, motivation, and support dimensions were utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Government of New Zealand, New Zealand employers, community groups and industry groups.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication between the decision-making parties (New Zealand Government and employers) and RSE Pacific seasonal workers was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic (Beattie, 2021). Additionally, the motivation and support provided to RSE Pacific seasonal workers during these difficult times by various groups were appreciated by the global community (Bedford, 2020). Bøl (2021), while researching coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in different countries, found that clear communication and political will were critical levers in the fight against the pandemic. In this context, the New Zealand Government's communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was praised worldwide (Beattie, 2021). New Zealand's Government developed firm measures, including border closures, quarantine requirements, and social distancing (Bøl, 2021). These measures have been communicated logically, clearly, and concisely, primarily through the "1 pm briefing" and social media (Bøl, 2021). The daily media briefing of Prime Minister (PM) Jacinda Ardern and Ashley Bloomfield (Director-General of Health) was effective because the communication was consistent and able to develop unity across the nation. This was due to the PM Jacinda Arden leading the population of New Zealand, including Pacific seasonal workers, through the COVID-19 pandemic as "Team New Zealand" (Beattie, 2021). Also, these daily briefings helped the New Zealand Government establish trust within the country through honest and open communication, using motivational phrases in the speech and expressing their duty of care through empathetic and inclusive communications. For example, daily briefings consistently included where to find COVID-19-related information, case numbers, risk of the COVID-19 virus, uncertainties related to the pandemic, essential decisions, use of motivational phrases like "going hard and early", and use of empathetic and inclusive words like "team of five million" (Beattie, 2021).

On the other hand, RSE helped Pacific seasonal workers to understand the information relating to COVID-19 symptoms, hygiene, and social distancing (Bedford, 2020a). As COVID-19 can affect both physical and mental health (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020), it was evident that Pacific seasonal workers would feel anxiety, fear, and sadness because of work uncertainty, separation from their family that they would be in New Zealand for an extended period, and shifting them to new locations and jobs (Bailey, 2020). However, RSE employers have communicated and delivered the material and information on mental health to Pacific seasonal workers and encouraged them to seek medical help if they feel unwell (Bailey, 2020b). Furthermore, through media reports, local councils, RSE, and community groups raised concerns for Pacific seasonal workers about work uncertainties and financial hardship (Bedford, 2021). Also, RSE team leaders played a vital role in encouraging Pacific seasonal workers to pay attention to only official information and notices released by the Government to stop the rumours within their communities (Bailey, 2020a).

## MOTIVATION AND SUPPORT

Industry groups, government agencies, and RSE collaborated to support Pacific seasonal workers in their employment during COVID-19 (Bedford, 2020a). During alert level 4, RSE and the Ministry of Primary Industries collaborated to implement health, safety, hygiene, and social distancing measures to keep Pacific seasonal workers in their respective "bubbles" (Bailey, 2020a). The New Zealand Government extended Pacific seasonal workers' visas to give RSE flexibility to move Pacific seasonal workers between crops and regions (Bedford, 2020a). New Zealand Immigration approved many variations of conditions for visa applications for Pacific seasonal workers (Bedford, 2020a). Recognised Seasonal Employers provided Pacific seasonal workers the maximum hours possible by spreading work among their workforce even after the expiration of their original work contract (Bailey, 2020a). However, many RSE expressed their frustration as the New Zealand Government was not quick enough to respond to changing situations (Bedford, 2020a). This resulted in visa processing delays for Pacific seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability to work in different industry sectors (Bailey, 2020b).

It was difficult for RSE employers and team leaders to keep Pacific seasonal workers motivated as many were coping with the stress related to the uncertainty of when they were going home and boredom

because of low work opportunities (Bailey, 2020a). Increased incidents related to pastoral care, like consumption of alcohol, not complying with rules, and antisocial behaviour, was reported by RSE team leaders within Pacific seasonal workers who did not have enough work and wanted to return to their countries (Bedford, 2020a). However, RSE did more than expected under the RSE policy concerning the pastoral care of their contracted Pacific seasonal workers, such as contributing to the living costs of Pacific seasonal workers (Bailey, 2020b). Moreover, RSE, communities, and government agencies run fundraisers in many regions to support Pacific seasonal workers whose families were affected by a cyclone; the charity Fruit of the Pacific has raised funds to support ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers' families who were affected by "Harold" (the hurricane) (Bedford, 2020a). The government also provided Pacific seasonal workers with reduced hours to develop additional skills and knowledge through the Vakameasina programme, funded by the NZMFAT under the NZ Aid Programme (Vakameasina, 2022).

In conclusion, Pacific seasonal workers faced many challenges due to border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. While clear communication proved to be an effective tool for informing and educating Pacific seasonal workers about the COVID-19 pandemic, motivating Pacific seasonal workers during the pandemic was a real challenge. However, the government, communities, and RSE supported them as much as possible. The section below evaluates the measures discussed in this section and other decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic to support Pacific Seasonal Workers concerning theories of globalisation.

## **ANALYSING RSE PACIFIC SEASONAL WORKERS' SITUATION USING GLOBALISATION THEORIES**

### **Appadurai's Theory of Globalisation**

Appadurai (1996) has recommended a framework to explore the disjuncture among politics, economy, and culture due to globalisation to consider the relationship between ethnoscaples, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes of cultural flows in globalisation. Ethnoscapes refer to "the landscapes of people who account for the change in the world: immigrants, seasonal workers, refugees, tourists, exile, and other moving individuals and groups" (Richardson, 2021). These groups and individuals can influence the politics between (and of) nations (Appadurai, 1996). For example, the New Zealand Government allowed Pacific seasonal workers into the country during the COVID-19 pandemic through two border exemptions to support the viticulture and horticulture sectors (Bedford, 2021). These changes in policies related to the immigrant population and the development of different needs due to shifts in the international capital encourage communities to travel to another country (Appadurai, 1996). Also, the movement of communities and people from developing to developed countries promotes economic development in developing countries (Horticulture New Zealand, 2022). For example, the RSE scheme contributed over \$40 million to Pacific countries through seasonal worker migration in 2018 (Horticulture New Zealand, 2022). This is why the governments of Pacific countries want their people to work in New Zealand even during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce unemployment in their countries (Radio New Zealand (RNZ), 2021a).

Appadurai considers "technoscapes as the movement of information and mechanical technology at a very high speed worldwide" (Appadurai, 1996). Appadurai also argues that the technological trend is not driven by market rationality, political influence, or market expansion but because of the complicated relationship between the flow of money (financescapes), political possibilities, and the availability of skilled and unskilled labour (Richardson, 2021). This explains the movement of low-skilled seasonal workers from Pacific countries to New Zealand under the RSE scheme. Moreover, the availability of the internet and social media platforms expanded the social possibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic for Pacific seasonal workers. For example, Pacific seasonal workers mainly used social media platforms to connect with their family and friends during COVID-19 (Bailey, 2020b).

Moreover, technoscapes, "especially the movement of information, are also connected with ideoscapes and mediascapes" (Richardson, 2021). In his theory, Appadurai mentioned television, film studios,

magazines, and newspapers as mediums of information exchange (Appadurai, 1996). He could not have predicted the internet's dominance in the future while writing his thesis. For example, digital media played a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in spreading information using visual data, promoting public health through social media campaigns, and using mobile applications to harmonies medicinal resources (Bao et al., 2020). Even Pacific seasonal workers were encouraged by their RSE to use social media platforms and official websites to educate themselves about COVID-19 (Bailey, 2020a).

### **World System Theory of Immanuel Wallerstein**

Wallerstein's world-system theory divided a singular capitalist economy into four categories: core, periphery, semi-periphery, and external (Hopkins, 1982). Wallerstein claimed that core nations have the advantages of having high technology, wages, and profit margin economies with diverse production systems, while peripheral nations have precisely the opposite economies to core nations, but semi-peripheral countries have characteristics of both periphery and core nations (Griffiths & Imre, 2013; Hopkins, 1982; Kampmark et al., 2019). That is why one of the essential characteristics of Wallerstein's world-system theory is that Wallerstein has included a concept of semi-periphery territory, which is a more practical approach than Galtung's binary idea of centre-periphery (Moon, 2015). The practicality of the semi-periphery model can be seen when applied to the relationship between Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific countries. For example, New Zealand has higher wages than Pacific countries (RNZ, 2021) but has lower salaries and a higher cost of living than Australia (Bedford et al., 2021a; Stuff New Zealand, 2022). That is why New Zealand, being semi-periphery to Australia, faced a challenge in attracting Pacific seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more Pacific seasonal workers chose Australia over New Zealand for employment opportunities (Bedford, 2021a).

Through the RSE scheme, New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture sectors benefited from improved productivity and stability (Bedford et al., 2017). On the other side, Pacific countries depended on the RSE scheme for their economic development (Bedford et al., 2017). That is the reason why governments of Pacific countries were keen to send as many workers as possible to New Zealand during COVID-19 to survive the economic difficulties (RNZ, 2021a). Therefore, the New Zealand Government allowed 4,400 Pacific seasonal workers to enter the country through two border exemptions (Bedford, 2021b) to help Pacific countries (peripheral countries) survive the COVID-19 pandemic. This was considered a humanitarian and ethical act by the New Zealand Government as this helped Pacific countries to survive through difficult times.

The following section discusses the ethical practices of the New Zealand Government and RSE to support Pacific seasonal workers concerning the UNSDG and the ILO.

### **UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABILITY DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

The United Nations adopted seventeen goals for sustainable development in 2015 (United Nations, 2022a). It provides a plan for prosperity and peace for the planet and people, the present and future (United Nations, 2022b). The New Zealand Government's decision to allow Pacific seasonal workers to come into the country for work during the COVID-19 pandemic through two border exemptions was in line with goal 1 (Bedford, 2021a). This decision also aligns with goal 8 of ensuring decent economic growth and recovery for New Zealand even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns have been raised in the past regarding the earnings of Pacific seasonal workers through their employment under the RSE scheme. (Bedford et al., 2017). However, the New Zealand Government took measures to increase Pacific seasonal workers' compensation from the minimum to the living wage (Bedford, 2021a).

Moreover, Red Cross New Zealand, with the help of the Internal Affairs Department, launched a programme for migrant workers (including Pacific seasonal workers) to support them in covering basic costs like rent, food, and utility bills (Bedford, 2020a). Also, RSE contributed to Pacific seasonal workers' living costs by providing additional hours to cover their essential needs even after the expiration of their contracts during

the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey, 2020b). These measures were aimed at achieving goal 1 of no poverty. To achieve the goal of zero hunger (goal 2), civil defence and local communities have run fundraisers to provide Pacific seasonal workers with food packages during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bedford, 2020a). Also, RSE helped Pacific seasonal workers shop online since most were unaware of the online shopping practices during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns in New Zealand (Bailey, 2020a). Moreover, banking institutions, community groups, and employers have helped educate Pacific seasonal workers to send money through official institutions to support their families at home (Bailey, 2020b). To maintain the excellent health and well-being (goal 3) of Pacific seasonal workers, RSE have performed beyond their obligations under the employment agreement to provide pastoral care to workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bedford, 2020a). Also, Pacific seasonal workers were encouraged to seek medical help and informed about recognising COVID-19-related symptoms and practicing hygiene and social distancing (Bailey, 2020a).

## **ROLES OF ILO**

The ILO is one of the specialist agencies of the United Nations (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Enterprise New Zealand (MBIE), 2022). Its principal aims include promoting work rights, encouraging employment opportunities, enhancing protection around social well-being, setting standards for international labour, and strengthening cooperation on issues related to the workplace (ILO, 2022b). Being a founding member of the ILO, New Zealand has maintained a strong bond with ILO from the beginning (MBIE, 2022). The ILO membership requires forming partnerships between employers, workers, and governments to include the views of these partners in shaping programmes, labour standards, and policies (ILO, 2022b). The RSE scheme is an example of the New Zealand Government's commitment toward a tripartite partnership where the New Zealand Government, employers and business organisations, and Pacific seasonal workers come together to contribute to the development and progress of Pacific countries (ILO, 2010). New Zealand's RSE scheme has been recognised internationally as the best practice for labour migration programmes (ILO, 2022a). The main features of the RSE scheme are improved selection and recruitment, social welfare and protection of Pacific seasonal workers, and re-integration of Pacific seasonal workers into their communities at home (Bedford et al., 2017).

The RSE scheme can be criticised as it restricts the freedom of Pacific seasonal workers to select the duration of their employment and conditions of their job and to change employers to improve their conditions and wages. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the New Zealand Government took measures to provide flexible working arrangements, including extending visas and allowing Pacific seasonal workers to participate in jobs other than viticulture and horticulture (Bedford, 2020a). Moreover, during COVID-19 border closures, the New Zealand Government also helped Pacific seasonal workers return to their homes with the help of Pacific governments, RSE, and industry groups (Bedford, 2020b). This aligns with the ILO's guidelines on helping Pacific seasonal workers reintegrate into their home communities.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In summary, stranded RSE Pacific seasonal workers in New Zealand experienced many challenges due to border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the New Zealand Government, RSE, and local community groups took initiatives to support Pacific seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic by considering them as part of their communities (Bailey, 2020b) and supporting the initiatives as articulated in the UNSDG, ILO guidelines and local laws. However, the New Zealand Government responded quickly by changing the conditions of Pacific seasonal workers' visas to give flexibility to RSE in shifting Pacific seasonal workers between the viticulture and horticulture sectors and regions. Globalisation theories suggest that the availability of social media platforms and the internet have effectively helped in the movement of information and expanded the social possibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically for RSE Pacific seasonal workers. However, being a semi-peripheral country, New Zealand faced difficulties attracting RSE Pacific seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is recommended that

Pacific seasonal workers should be offered wages higher than living wages in their employment contracts; this will help New Zealand's Government compete against Australia in attracting more Pacific seasonal workers.

Further research is recommended using primary data to validate this information. Descriptive analysis can be used to investigate the collected preliminary data further. The qualitative method can help interpret RSE Pacific seasonal workers' social structures, behaviours, beliefs, and decisions related to cross-cultural management by RSE and the New Zealand Government. Large sample data is recommended to arrive at a more generalised conclusion.

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