

Reintegration for Ni-Vanuatu Migrant Workers

Assessing the reintegration context, available support and services, and the experiences of migrant workers and their families in Vanuatu.

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Abbreviations

AUD	Australian Dollar
DARD	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Vanuatu)
DoL	Department of Labour and Employment Services (Vanuatu)
ESU	Employment Services Unit (Vanuatu)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LSU	Labour Sending Unit
PACER PLUS	Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PLMAM	Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting
PLMS	Pacific Labor Mobility Survey (World Bank and Australian National University)
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme (Australia)
PSWPS	Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (Australia)
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer (New Zealand)
SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme (Australia)
VCCI	Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry
VNPF	Vanuatu National Provident Fund
VNWU	Vanuatu National Workers Union
VUV	Vanuatu Vatu

Executive Summary

Introduction

Within Vanuatu there has been an increasing focus on the ability of returning migrant workers to reintegrate into the society, as well as on the impacts of labour mobility on their families, communities and on the society.

Reintegration is a complex process, and this is also the case in the context of Vanuatu. Understanding the elements of sustainable reintegration in Vanuatu requires a contextualized approach to the specific needs and circumstances of the country. This understanding suggests that at a minimum any approach to reintegration in Vanuatu must be:

- Nuanced and sensitive to the diversity of experience and context in Vanuatu.
- Balanced and sustainable, with the ultimate goal being migration decision is a matter of choice rather than necessity.
- Holistic and based on the needs of returnees, their communities and Vanuatu's socioeconomic and governance context.
- Rights-based and involving the participation and empowerment of all parties, particularly workers, their families, and their communities.
- Based on evidence and continuous learning.
- Built on strong partnerships and coordination across all relevant stakeholders in Vanuatu and overseas.

This people-centred, evidence-based and more integrated approach will form the basis for this report and will frame the report's overall approach to reintegration in the context of Vanuatu.

Drawing on IOM's extensive experience and expertise in reintegration policy formulation, delivery, and monitoring, this report seeks to shed light on the context and experiences of labour mobility return and reintegration in Vanuatu and in particular to:

- Document the goals, experiences, and challenges of Ni-Vanuatu labour migrants, their families, and their communities after they return home from overseas work.
- Provide a preliminary mapping of services, gaps in service provision, and promising practices that might support Ni-Vanuatu labour migrants, their families, and their communities in the reintegration period.

This report is guided by IOM's comprehensive and integrated approach to reintegration which considers support at three levels (individual, community and structural) and across three dimensions (economic, social and psychosocial). These levels and dimensions are not isolated from each other and there are several cross-cutting issues and considerations including migrants rights, gender equality, the necessity of effective partnerships and collaboration, and the need for reliable data and evidence (IOM, 2019b:14).

Vanuatu was the first country in the Pacific to send seasonal workers to New Zealand (in 2007) and has remained the top three largest country of origin for migrant workers to both New Zealand and Australia. In total 16,562 Ni-Vanuatu workers participated in the 2022–2023 season (7,100 in New Zealand and 9,462 in Australia). An estimated 11.5 per cent overall, and 20.4 per cent of men in the working age population in Vanuatu (aged 20 to 59 years) are engaged in seasonal work (Bedford, 2023). These workers helped to address crucial labour shortages in destination countries, particularly in the agricultural sector but also branching out into other sectors including hospitality, meat packing, and aged care. The popularity of seasonal work is unsurprising given that workers from Vanuatu earn up to ten times more in New Zealand and Australia than they would in Vanuatu (Martin, 2023:4). Since Vanuatu began sending seasonal workers to New Zealand and Australia engagement in these schemes has been noticeably gendered, with the percentage of Ni-Vanuatu women participating in seasonal work proportionately lower than most other Pacific countries.

Within Vanuatu, reintegration is increasingly understood to include not only the workers themselves, but also their families, their communities, and the broader social, economic, and governance environment. This approach has been referred to as the "ecosystem approach" (Samuel Hall and IOM, 2017:4). The ecosystem approach includes the understanding that labour migration takes place across various phases and is not simply one directional. Within Vanuatu it is also crucial to appreciate the circular nature of labour migration, with many workers returning to seasonal work multiple times.

The ecosystem approach recognizes that seasonal work takes place across multiple locations and involves a range of stakeholders in Vanuatu, as well as in destination countries. This report, while focusing on the reintegration period, will be situated within this more holistic ecosystem approach.

IOM Vanuatu commissioned the various pieces of research that underpin this report from July to December 2023. Research was carried out through three distinct phases using research methods including interviews, surveys, focus group discussions and desk research. Limitations include a lack of coordination across the various phases, and limitations in the overall number of people who were interviewed.

As such, the findings should be treated as indicative rather than representative. To mitigate this limitation, responses have been compared to the findings of other research reports, and in particular the World Bank and Australian National University's Pacific Labor Mobility Survey (PLMS). Other structural limitations that impacted this study include the lack of reliable and consistent data, as well as the state of information, knowledge and perceptions about seasonal work in Vanuatu more broadly. In the context of these limitations, this report should be understood as a starting point for a more complex, integrated and contextualized understanding of reintegration in Vanuatu.

Background

New Zealand launched their Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007. Australia established the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (PSWPS) in 2008 and this later evolved into the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). In 2022 the SWP and the PLS were merged into the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme comprised of a short-term and a long-term stream (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b).

The vast majority of workers from Vanuatu work in the horticulture industry. Within Vanuatu, the Department of Labour and Employment Services (DOL) is responsible for supporting and overseeing labour mobility, with the Employment Services Unit (ESU) directly involved in day-to-day management. While there is some pre-departure training and orientation available, for example the Pre-Departure Briefings and the *Famili i Redi* workshops, to-date there has been limited programming or support offered to returnees and their families in Vanuatu in the reintegration period.

Despite Vanuatu's early engagement in seasonal work, the regulatory and policy environment for seasonal work in Vanuatu has remained fairly uneven until recently. The *Seasonal Employment Act No. 23 of 2007* (SEA) was enacted when Vanuatu was sending workers to New Zealand only and as a result schemes to other destination countries were not included. The SEA and subsequent regulatory interventions have focused substantially on regulating Vanuatu's unique approach to recruitment, and particularly the use of private recruitment agents (Martin, 2023:11). More recently, the *Draft National Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan (2023)* has brought some focus to issues around return and reintegration in the context of Vanuatu. Vanuatu's national planning document, *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan* launched in 2016 also includes some references to labour mobility.

Labour mobility is also governed by agreements between destination countries, particularly New Zealand and Australia, and Vanuatu at the bilateral level and by the *Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus* or PACER Plus at the regional level, as well as by a variety of international standards, instruments, and frameworks.

In order to fully understand the reintegration context in Vanuatu several issues need to be taken into consideration. This includes levels of poverty, access to education, opportunities for employment, and the experience of hardship particularly in rural areas. Vanuatu is also prone to natural disasters including having experienced six major cyclones in the past decade, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Vanuatu is also characterized by several limitations in the broader service and social support environment. While several of these contextual realities can be seen as "push factors", they also have a direct bearing on reintegration. They directly impact how migrant workers and their families use their earnings and skills. These circumstances also leave many Ni-Vanuatu returnees with limited financial resources to put into savings, pension funds and small businesses. At the same time, there are limited options for employment and limited opportunities for small business development in Vanuatu. All of these factors make remigration, at least for a few rounds, more of a necessity than a choice.

Understanding reintegration in Vanuatu: Experiences and challenges

While the following highlights of findings are separated conceptually into economic, social and psychosocial dimensions, these categories are far more integrated and co-influencing.

There are also many areas where individual, community-level and structural experiences and challenges overlap. Overall, the workers who were interviewed for this research expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction with 88 per cent of the 43 workers who were surveyed in December 2023 describing their experience as “good” and rating their reintegration experience on a scale from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent) at 8.5 out of 10. While returnees, family members and stakeholders raised several concerns and challenges in this study, it is important to keep in mind that these issues do not represent the experiences of most workers, their families and communities in Vanuatu.

Economic dimension



While there has been a shift away from seeing labour mobility solely through an economic lens, many of the benefits and challenges returnees identified during the reintegration period were focused here. In terms of benefits, most workers indicated that their remittances had primarily been used for everyday expenses, for their children’s education, and for building a house. When asked what their longer terms plans were for their earnings slightly over 50 per cent of the 52 workers interviewed expressed wanting to start a family business. Several workers said they would use the money to keep building their house or another family members house, and five workers said they planned to establish investment or rental properties. It is evident that many Ni-Vanuatu workers are using remittances to offset the cost of basic needs including education, housing, food and health care. Beyond the money they earned, workers also identified gaining new skills while they were working overseas. In the survey carried out with 43 returnees in December 2023, 87 per cent of the workers said they had gained new skills in Australia or New Zealand, 64 per cent said they had accessed support, assistance or training overseas; however, only 34 per cent indicated that they are using skills acquired overseas upon return.

In the same survey, a small number expressed facing some challenges in finding work, dealing with the pressure to migrate again, and investing and managing savings. Key areas of concern also included issues with financial literacy, particularly saving plans and the use of remittances, and understanding exchange rates. The fact that there were limited opportunities for skills development while overseas was also identified as a concern. Workers in Australia also identified significant challenges accessing their superannuation.

At the community level, Vanuatu’s Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has been proactive in addressing the needs of returnees and their families, and stakeholders identified improvements in agricultural skills and knowledge as a key benefit. Beyond some of the economic benefits derived through agriculture, some of the skills that workers gain overseas are also perceived as assets by workers’ families and communities. Vanuatu’s unique VLab programme, Yumi Growem Vanuatu, has also actively tried to ensure that the economic benefits of small business development are shared by returnees and close family members or friends. Despite such gains, several concerns at the community level were raised by stakeholders related to the impact of the absence of workers on their families and communities particularly when several members of the same community were away at the same time. One stakeholder said women faced particular challenges reviving pre-existing businesses given the lack of support from partners.

At the structural level, there are clear benefits with returnees contributing to Vanuatu’s economy by increasing economic activity and through the contribution of transferable skills and experience to Vanuatu’s productive workforce. Institutions and programmes providing economic opportunities for returnees, for example support in easing business registration, setting up cooperatives or accessing entrepreneurship loans, however, remain limited. In other research carried out by the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry, some businesses reported benefits of skills gained from seasonal work (Orozco, 2023); however, a job placement platform to connect returnees with domestic market upon their return does not exist.

Several of the challenges that were identified at the structural level are cross-cutting issues and relate not only to the economic dimension but to the social and psychosocial dimensions as well. Further to the above, these include: a lack of resources and programming specifically tailored to support returnees; a lack of information sharing, coordination and collaboration among stakeholders; and the lack of a central database, accessible data, and evidence-based research and planning. Beyond these more general structural issues, a few stakeholders also commented on the loss of skilled workers or what is often referred to as “brain drain” particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors. These concerns about brain drain need to be understood in the context of several broader challenges and concerns in Vanuatu’s hospitality and tourism sectors more generally.

Social dimension



While it is clear that labour mobility workers gain social benefits beyond the income they earn, these kinds of individual gains are harder to quantify. These include experiencing and learning new things, becoming more open minded, developing trust among family members, and better relationships due to improved financial security and stability. Particularly among women, they reported improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem through their engagement with labour mobility, even as non-migrating family members. Several workers also described contributing to community improvements.

For the group of 43 returnees surveyed in December 2023, 68 per cent said that seasonal work had a positive impact on their family relationships, and on how the family communicated. This could possibly be linked to the reduce financial pressure and stress on the households. In the interviews conducted with 52 returnees in July and August 2023, the findings were broadly similar. When asked how frequently they had experienced tensions or conflicts between themselves and their family members since their return, 62 per cent said “never” or “rarely”, 31 per cent said “sometimes” and only 7 per cent said “often” or “very often”. Although smaller in percentage (7%), it is clear that participation in seasonal work can cause tensions in some families. It is however essential to understand the issue in the broader context in Vanuatu. It is likely that Vanuatu’s high rates of domestic and gender-based violence in the population in general will also be reflected in the population of labour mobility workers more generally.

At the structural level, essential services such as health, education, and justice in Vanuatu are concentrated only in urban areas, namely Port Vila and Luganville, and often inadequate with costs attached to key services. Support for vulnerable populations is provided by various organizations, to address the limited support offers by the governmental welfare system, including civil society organizations, trade unions, United Nations agencies, International NGOs, churches and religious groups, as well as community leaders; the last few stakeholders who may not have the time, skills and capacity to respond to social issues, particularly sensitive ones, effectively.

Psychosocial dimension



While several of the stakeholders who were interviewed expressed concerns in relation to seasonal work, including reports of increased substance abuse, gambling and domestic violence, it is unclear how widespread and evidence-based these perceptions really are. In fact, the current climate of potential misinformation and/or miscommunication of the issues, could poses a risk to migrant workers and their families who may face increasing mistrust during overseas employment, as well as stigma in the reintegration period. Generally, many interviewed workers identified having had positive experiences of reintegration into Vanuatu society. In the survey completed with 43 returnees in December 2023, 85 per cent said they had felt well informed before their return. In this same survey, 95 per cent of workers said they had either experienced no challenges with reintegration (26%) or that they had been able to manage any challenges well (69%). Several expressed feeling at home upon return and described fitting into the social and cultural life of their community easily. While only two workers described experiencing challenges returning to Vanuatu, it was clear that in at least one case these issues pre-existed the experience of labour mobility.

Research focusing on worker safety and wellbeing in Australia published in 2023 also found that some Pacific women workers experience violence while they are in Australia (Kanan and Putt, 2023:2). These issues would likely benefit from more accessible support, particularly in destination countries. Unresolved issues of harassment, exploitation and violence while overseas would have a negative impact on these workers when they return to Vanuatu. Within Vanuatu an overall lack of awareness about psychosocial issues, and a lack of basic services were also raised as a concern. Mental health care offered by trained mental health professionals is very limited and only available in Port Vila.

Overview of Vanuatu's reintegration service environment

Contributors to this research, from stakeholders to labour mobility workers themselves, identified the lack of dedicated services tailored to supporting workers when they return to Vanuatu as a key concern.

When asked to identify some of the key areas for more support and services, the 43 workers who were surveyed in December 2023 identified business planning and entrepreneurship (79%), financial management and budgeting (55%) and skills development and training (49%) as their top priorities. In the same survey, 83 per cent of returnees said they would participate in reintegration training if it were offered to them. Nearly half expressed a preference that it be held during the first week after they returned, while approximately the same number said that it would be more helpful after they had been back in Vanuatu for a month.

Overall, basic economic, social or psychosocial services in Vanuatu are mainly concentrated in the two urban areas (Port Vila on Efate and Luganville on Santo) and can be characterized as inadequate particularly in rural areas. The economic services in Vanuatu that are available in the reintegration period include the support offered by ESU to help returnees apply and access their superannuation, as well as refer them to relevant services and programmes such as DARD's commercial and semi commercial farming and VLab's Yumi Growem Vanuatu which supports returnees to establish small businesses. Low levels of financial literacy, coupled with limited access to financial service and options for employment opportunities, however, remains a challenge. Despite some businesses reported benefits of skills gained from seasonal work (Orozco, 2023), a platform to link returnees with employment opportunities in Vanuatu, however, does not exist particularly for workers who were not employed prior migration. The lack of mechanism to accredit the skills that returnees acquired overseas, particularly soft skills, on the job trainings, and micro credentials; further hinder the full potentials for Vanuatu to benefit from skills mobility.

Key social services including health, education and justice services are only available at a cost. While Vanuatu does not have a government sponsored social welfare system, several organizations provide services to support vulnerable population. This includes targeted support for women and children who experience violence, programming for youth, legal aids and counselling for vulnerable workers, and services and support for people with disabilities; which often provide by international NGOs, trade union, some departments of government, community leaders, and churches and religious groups. Mental health care offered by trained mental health professionals is extremely limited and only available in Port Vila.

The lack of livelihood opportunities contribute to several push factors for labour mobility in Vanuatu. They also directly impact the reintegration context by limiting access to employment opportunities and services and influencing how and where returnees use their earnings. The lack of services and employment opportunities in rural areas also leads many returnees to remain in urban areas for longer periods of time. The service environment in Vanuatu is also characterised by a lack of services directly targeting seasonal workers, particularly when they return from overseas work. Further, the cost of remittances and exchange rates has been raised as another structural level economic concern. While addressing the service needs of Vanuatu's labour mobility workers should be a priority in Vanuatu, this must be carried out with clear recognition of the need to improve the service delivery environment for the population as a whole, and particularly the most vulnerable.



Ni-Vanuatu workers fixing up the sea port area in Port Vila. © IOM 2023

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, labour mobility workers and their families from Vanuatu are benefiting significantly from the opportunity to work in destination countries, particularly in Australia and New Zealand.

These benefits are most evident in the economic sphere where workers can earn an income up to ten times higher than they would in Vanuatu. Returnees reported that their earnings from overseas work were primarily used to meet daily expenses, and for basic needs such as education and healthcare. Beyond the economic benefits, there is also increasing recognition that the skills and social remittances of seasonal work have significant value as well.

While a small number of workers reported challenges upon return, particularly around financial literacy, understanding exchange rates, how to minimize the cost of remittances, and the difficulties in claiming superannuation (for PALM workers); the majority of returnees expressed high levels of satisfaction with their labour mobility experience and indicated that they had not faced significant issues or challenges reintegrating into their families, communities or society. Several of the identified issues, however, have clear structural dimensions and ensuring that better processes are established at the structural level will ease the burden of navigating complicated and expensive processes and challenges for individual workers.

While there are increasing perceptions about negative social impacts including substance abuse, gambling, family breakdown and domestic violence in relation to labour mobility in Vanuatu, a more contextualized and evidence-based approach is needed. In fact, the current climate of potential misinformation and/or miscommunication of the mentioned issues, may poses a risk to migrant workers and their families who may face increasing mistrust during overseas employment, as well as stigma in the reintegration period. While specific cases should be addressed as they occur, active efforts must be made to avoid turning seasonal work into a scapegoat for a range of social concerns in Vanuatu that have much deeper and broader roots. Efforts to address these issues will be strengthened by better access to accurate data and more comprehensive research, by strengthening the service environment, and by improving coordination and collaboration. Vanuatu's approach to reintegration must be clearly based on the experiences, needs and realities of returnees, their families, their communities and Vanuatu society as a whole and requires an approach to reintegration that is people-centred, evidence-based, integrated and well contextualized.

Recommendations

Key recommendations for strengthening the reintegration ecosystem in Vanuatu are:

1. Improving the quality of data and access to basic data

The data about migrant workers departing and returning to Vanuatu and their families remains uneven. Ensuring that basic data about workers and their families is collected will allow the Government of Vanuatu and service providers to reach a greater number of workers and will support key stakeholders in developing a better understanding of some of the key dynamics of labour mobility in Vanuatu and in targeting support and additional services more effectively.

2. Supporting better research to inform and understand key areas of concern

Key areas of concern relating to labour mobility such as perceived family breakdown and domestic violence, substance abuse, and impacts on Vanuatu's tourism and hospitality sector should be informed by more comprehensive research.

3. Strengthening the service environment in Vanuatu and destination countries

The service environment and assistance in Vanuatu, particularly for returnees, is poorly resourced and social welfare services in general are largely delegated to a small number of programmatic interventions offered to vulnerable populations by civil society organizations, trade unions, United Nations agencies, NGOs, churches and religious groups, and community leaders. Improving service delivery in Vanuatu will require a long-term approach and strong commitment from government institutions. In parallel, destination countries such as New Zealand and Australia can contribute by providing more accessible and appropriately contextualized support services to workers, particularly to ensure worker safety, wellbeing and skills development, while they are working overseas and connecting this to efforts in Vanuatu.

4. Improving the approach to training and skills development across a continuum

While there have been success stories in the area of skills development and training, these efforts could be significantly strengthened and expanded. The skills training that is offered to workers should be hands on, practical, and suited to Vanuatu's context and economic viability, as well as aspirations of individuals. Skills development should span across a continuum from pre-departure to reintegration to ensure that workers are consistently supported.

Goals and needs should be identified pre-departure, with skills and training opportunities offered on a range of topics while workers are in destination countries and connected more directly to key service providers and needs within Vanuatu upon return. This should be further supplemented by efforts to recognize skills gained overseas, both technical and soft skills, and the benefits of acquiring such skills and qualifications.

5. Recognizing and harnessing the circular nature of labour mobility in Vanuatu

Programmes and services aimed at reintegration in Vanuatu should clearly recognize the circular nature of labour mobility in Vanuatu and should see pre-departure and reintegration less as discrete phases, but as opportunities to consolidate targeted learning and support over longer periods of time. The circular nature of seasonal work makes the reintegration period a fertile opportunity for setting workers up to leverage gains more effectively in subsequent seasons and consolidate learning and approaches in a more iterative way.

6. Raising awareness and enhancing access to psychosocial support networks and services

Raise awareness of labour mobility workers, their families and communities in general on the importance of psychosocial well-being. Leverage and capacitate existing social support networks, for example pastoral care and community networks, to provide community support, referral, and healthy mindset programmes for workers and their families. Expand counselling and psychosocial support outside of the capital, including explore the potential to establish a counselling hotline; as well as, offer workshops to help families understand the challenges faced by returning workers, and vice versa, to foster supportive environments and ease the transition back into community life.

7. Addressing ongoing economic issues at the structural level

There are several issues in the economic dimension, including the cost of remittances, that could be addressed more effectively at the structural level. Further, the Vanuatu and Australian governments should address the ongoing challenges for Vanuatu's labour mobility workers in accessing their superannuation payments in a more comprehensive way.

Introduction

Understanding “reintegration” in the context of Vanuatu

Return migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration. (...) Studies have focused on departure, the migration journey, arrival, settlement and ‘integration’; rarely on return. Often one finds, perhaps hidden in a footnote, the lament that ‘little is known of those who returned’.

(Samuel Hall and IOM, 2017:2)

This statement has also been true for Vanuatu, but the tides are slowly turning. Within Vanuatu there has been an increasing focus on the experiences of migrant workers when they return, as well as on the impacts of labour mobility on their families, communities and on Vanuatu society. For example, in November 2023, when the Government of Vanuatu hosted the Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting, “reintegration” was a key overarching topic. This meeting not only featured the first Pacific Regional Sustainable Reintegration Workshop, but in his opening address Vanuatu’s Prime Minister, the Honourable Charlot Salwai, highlighted Vanuatu’s current focus in relation to labour mobility:

This year’s theme of ‘harnessing the development benefits of labour mobility’ underscores the positive impact that a well-managed labour mobility program can have on participating countries. As we celebrate this collaboration, it is also timely that we reflect on our collective commitments to ensure we maximise our benefits while minimising our challenges.

(Pacer Plus, 2023)

In keeping with Prime Minister Salwai’s comments, the overarching aim of this report is to ensure that the benefits of labour mobility for workers, their families, their communities, and for Vanuatu itself are better understood and are maximized through the labour mobility cycle.

Reintegration is a complex process, however, and this is also the case in the context of Vanuatu. At a workshop held for Ni-Vanuatu workers and their families in late November 2023 when participants were asked, “What does reintegration mean to you?” it was clear that most participants were unfamiliar with the terminology itself.

One stakeholder who was interviewed for this research suggested that the level of alienation from family, community and society that the term “reintegration” implies was also not reflective of most workers’ experience of returning to Vanuatu. This perspective was supported by research carried out for this report. In a survey of 43 returnees completed in December 2023, 87 per cent expressed having few or no challenges reintegrating back into their families, communities and into Vanuatu society more generally. At the same time, however, seasonal work is increasingly associated with a range of social ills in Vanuatu from substance abuse, to “brain drain” (the loss of skilled workers within Vanuatu), and even domestic violence. Understanding the complex terrain of reintegration in Vanuatu requires a much more complex and nuanced approach.

Ultimately, successful reintegration in Vanuatu, as elsewhere, is not only about how people feel, but includes a range of considerations and factors. The IOM Glossary on Migration describes reintegration as “A process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life” (2019a:176). As a complex and multifaceted process, return and reintegration takes place at a range of levels and across several different dimensions. As such, a more integrated and nuanced approach to return and reintegration is needed. Even in Vanuatu, where most workers travel to New Zealand or Australia for periods of less than one year, and often return to work for several seasons, the experiences of returnees and the families they return to are diverse, as are their goals and challenges.

To address this complexity and nuance, IOM's integrated approach to reintegration includes several key considerations:

🔑	• Return migration takes place in a number of ways and under different conditions, which can create challenges and opportunities for the reintegration process.
🔑	• Sustainable reintegration is achieved when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.
🔑	• IOM's integrated approach to reintegration recognizes that the complex process of reintegration requires a holistic and a needs-based response at the individual, community and structural levels.
🔑	• Returnees, their families and their communities should be supported to drive and take ownership of the reintegration process, through active participation and empowerment.
🔑	• Reintegration programmes should be developed, implemented and adapted using continuous assessment and learning to understand the wider environment and build on existing initiatives, programmes or services.
🔑	• Establishing strong partnerships with key stakeholders results in more efficient and sustainable reintegration processes.

Figure 1: Key messages in IOM's integrated approach to reintegration (IOM, 2019b:5)

Translated into the context of Vanuatu, this understanding suggests that at a minimum any approach to reintegration for Vanuatu must be:

- Nuanced and sensitive to the diversity of experience and context in Vanuatu.
- Balanced and sustainable, with the ultimate goal being migration decision is a matter of choice rather than necessity.
- Holistic and based on the needs of returnees, their communities and Vanuatu's socioeconomic and governance context.
- Rights-based and involving the participation and empowerment of all parties, particularly workers, their families, and their communities.
- Based on evidence and continuous learning.
- Built on strong partnerships and coordination across all relevant stakeholders in Vanuatu and overseas.

Reports on reintegration in other contexts have critically highlighted a tendency for reintegration programming and approaches to become “disconnected from local realities and from people’s aspirations” (Majidi and Hart, 2016:36). To counter this, these authors call for an approach that is “centred on people, contexts and coordination” (Majidi and Hart, 2016:40). The people-centred, evidence-based and more integrated approach suggested by this understanding and embodied in IOM's key considerations will form the basis for this report and will frame the report's overall approach to reintegration in the context of Vanuatu.



Participants from the Famili I Kam Bak workshop held in Tanna.
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Objectives and guiding principles of this report

Objectives

Temporary labour mobility to destination countries, particularly Australia and New Zealand, has become an integral part of Vanuatu's migration landscape. To date, however, there has been a recognized gap in the availability of more comprehensive reintegration information, analysis, and support. Drawing on IOM's extensive experience and expertise in reintegration policy formulation, delivery, and monitoring, this report seeks to shed light on the context and experiences of labour mobility return and reintegration in Vanuatu. By employing IOM's reintegration sustainability model as a guiding framework, the research adopts a multifaceted approach to addressing these gaps by:

- Documenting the goals, experiences, and challenges of Ni-Vanuatu labour migrants, their families, and their communities after they return home from overseas work.
- Providing a preliminary mapping of services, gaps in service provision, and promising practices that might support Ni-Vanuatu labour migrants, their families, and their communities after they return home from overseas work.

Ultimately, the goal of this report is to enhance the understanding of reintegration in Vanuatu and to strengthen the support systems available to returning labour migrants, their families, and their communities during the return and reintegration period.

Aspirant Ni-Vanuatu migrant workers and their families in Famili I Redi workshop in Port Vila. © IOM 2023



Guiding principles

This report is guided by IOM's comprehensive and integrated approach to reintegration (IOM, 2019) as illustrated in the following diagram:

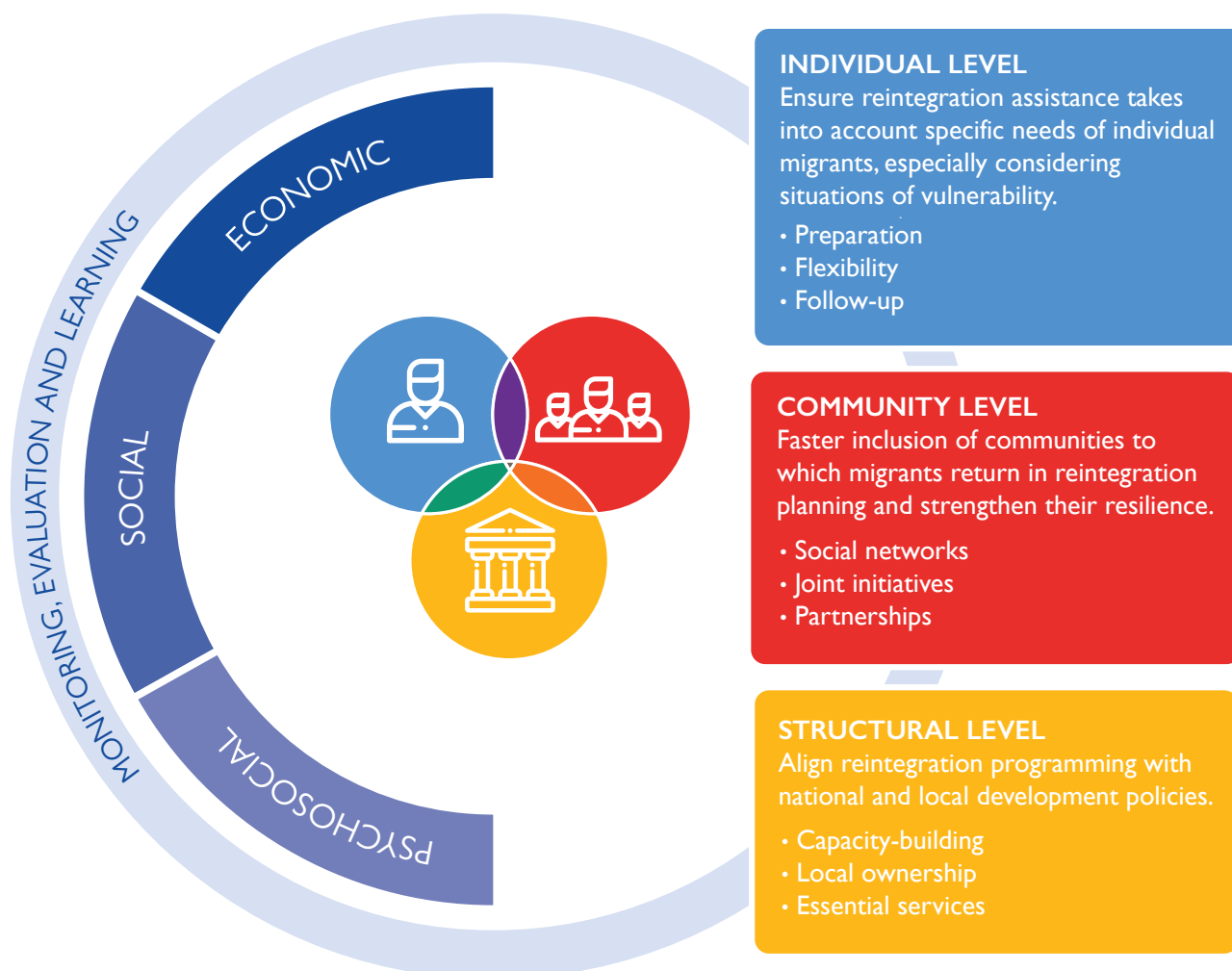


Figure 2: IOM's integrated approach to reintegration (IOM, 2019b:14)

This approach is closely aligned with Vanuatu's 2030 National Sustainable Development Goals (see section on National, regional and global policy and governance context), as well as the Government of Vanuatu's evolving approach to the governance and management of labour migration. IOM's understanding of reintegration is based on the premise that reintegration is complex and multidimensional, necessitating a holistic, well-contextualised and needs-based approach (IOM, 2019:13). Following from this understanding, IOM's integrated approach to reintegration considers support at three levels (individual, community and structural) and across three dimensions (economic, social and psychosocial). These levels and dimensions are not isolated from each other. While it may be useful to apply these categories for conceptual and analytic purposes, they are far more integrated in practice. There are also a number of fundamental cross-cutting issues, such as migrants rights and gender equality. IOM's approach highlights the necessity of effective partnerships and collaboration, and the need for reliable data and evidence (IOM, 2019b:14). These cross-cutting issues and this understanding of the interconnections across all levels will remain central in this report.

Summary of key labour migration demographics in Vanuatu

Vanuatu was the first country in the Pacific to send seasonal workers to New Zealand in 2007 and has remained the top three largest country of origin for migrant workers to both New Zealand and Australia since that time.

Despite some setbacks during the COVID pandemic, by the 2022–2023 season the number of Ni-Vanuatu workers in both countries far outstripped the number of workers from all other Pacific countries:

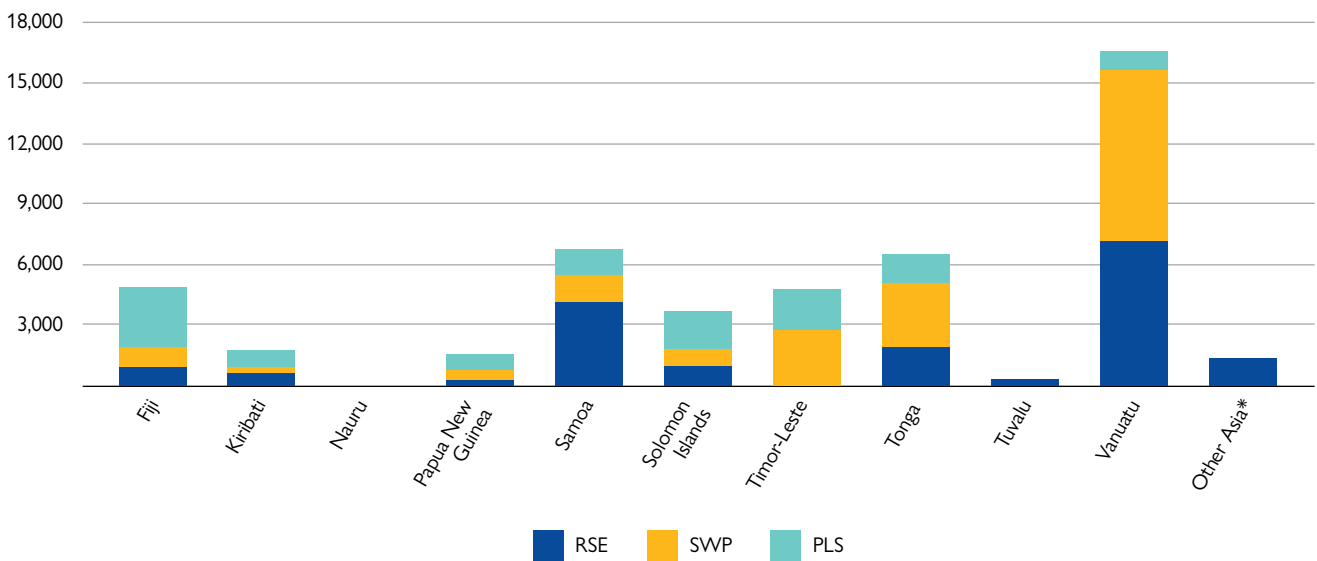


Figure 3: Number of RSE, SWP and PLS workers by country of origin in 2022-23 (Bedford, 2023)

According to recent research, there were 16,562 Ni-Vanuatu workers engaged in labour mobility in New Zealand and Australia in the 2022–2023 season, accounting for 35 per cent of the total visas issued during this period (Bedford, 2023). Of these, 7,100 Ni-Vanuatu migrant workers were based in New Zealand and 9,462 in Australia (see section on Pacific labour mobility schemes in Vanuatu). While the flow of returnees varies from month to month across the calendar year, these numbers suggest that there may be, on average, more than a thousand workers returning to Vanuatu every month.

Over the past 17 years, the steady increase in the number of Ni-Vanuatu workers participating in labour mobility opportunities is also evident in the rapid rise in the contribution of remittances, primarily derived from seasonal work in New Zealand and Australia, to Vanuatu’s GDP:

Remittances to Vanuatu were 22 percent of GDP in 2021, up from less than two percent of GDP before 2010. Remittances to Vanuatu increased from US\$11 million in 2010 to US\$50 million by 2014, were over US\$100 million by 2017, and topped US\$200 million in 2021.

(Martin, 2023:28)

The increasing popularity of seasonal work is also reflected in the number of workers who are travelling to New Zealand and Australia each year, relative to Vanuatu’s population. Recent research by Bedford estimates that the percentage of the working age population in Vanuatu (aged 20 to 59 years) who are engaged in seasonal work is now 11.5 per cent overall, and 20.4 per cent for the population of men in this age group (Bedford, 2023). The popularity of seasonal work is unsurprising given that workers from Vanuatu are earning up to ten times more in New Zealand and Australia than they would earn at home in Vanuatu (Martin, 2023:4).¹

¹ As of August 2024, minimum wage in Vanuatu is VUV 300 per hour, whereas minimum wage in Australia is AUD 24.10 (approx. VUV 1,937) and New Zealand is NZD 25.47 (approx. VUV 1,879). This means that PALM and RSE workers are earning at least 6 times more the hourly wage, excluding overtime, compares to Vanuatu.

Since Vanuatu began sending seasonal workers to New Zealand in 2007, and later to Australia, engagement in these schemes has been noticeably gendered. While the number of Ni-Vanuatu women who have participated in labour migration has varied over the years, a recent report estimates that only 13 per cent of participants in seasonal labour schemes from Vanuatu have been women (World Bank, 2023:15):

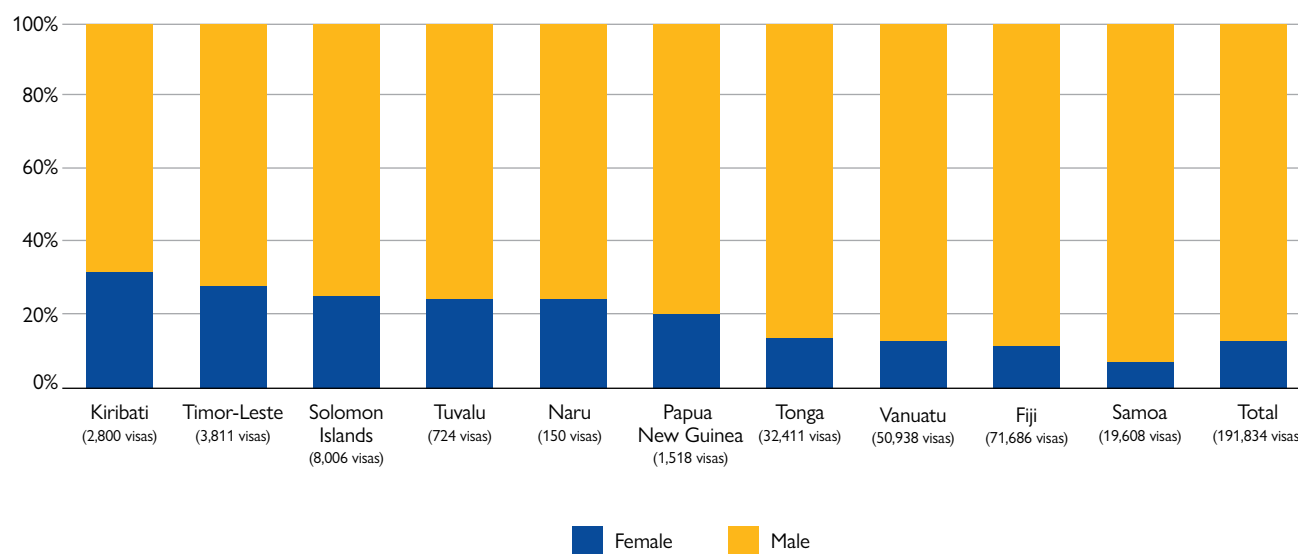


Figure 4: Women's participation in seasonal work by country of origin between 2012 and 2022 (World Bank, 2023:16)

Despite the fact that Vanuatu's participation in seasonal work to New Zealand and Australia over the past decade and a half has outstripped other countries in the Pacific, the percentage of women participating in seasonal work from Vanuatu has been proportionately lower than most other countries.

While concerns have recently been raised about the overrepresentation of certain provinces in the recruitment of seasonal workers (Gov, 2023:5) the data to support this remains limited and inconclusive (see [Annex 1](#) for more detail). Workers from Vanuatu who undertake seasonal work for multiple seasons likely also spend a significant amount of time between contracts in Vanuatu's main urban centre, Port Vila, however information about this is also unclear. What is clear is that a range of contextual and demographic factors all contribute to the reintegration context in Vanuatu, and that Vanuatu's workers represent a diverse range of experiences. This includes diversity in factors such as gender, age, marital status, educational level, whether they come from a rural or urban context (and where they plan to return to over the shorter or longer term), as well as their previous work experience. This diversity of experience and contextual factors should remain central to any initiatives seeking to support returnees and their families.

Situating the contemporary labour migration ecosystem in Vanuatu

Since 2007, workers from Vanuatu have been participating in labour mobility schemes – or what is typically referred to within Vanuatu simply as “seasonal work” – in increasingly significant numbers.

These workers travel to work in New Zealand and Australia where they have helped to address crucial labour shortages particularly in the agricultural sector but also branching out into other sectors including hospitality, meat packing, and aged care (see section on Pacific labour mobility schemes in Vanuatu). While much of the early focus in these schemes was on ensuring that employers in New Zealand and Australia were adequately prepared to host workers from Pacific countries like Vanuatu, the focus has increasingly shifted to the socioeconomic impacts in the countries of origin.

Within Vanuatu, reintegration is increasingly understood to include not only the workers themselves, but also their families, their communities, and the broader social, economic, and governance environment. This approach to considering labour migration not only at the individual level but also at the family, community and structural levels has been referred to in the literature as the “ecosystem approach” (Samuel Hall and IOM, 2017:4).

The ecosystem approach is not simply one directional, however. In the same way that returnees impact their families, communities and the broader society upon their return, the familial, community and structural context they return to also has an impact on returnees. While there has been significant focus on the economic impacts and benefits of seasonal work, the ecosystem approach necessitates that we consider the social and psychosocial aspects of labour migration as well.

The ecosystem approach also includes the understanding that the complete labour mobility ecosystem should address changing needs and circumstances over time. This includes consideration of labour migration across various phases: the time before workers leave, the time they are working in countries of destination, and the time following their return to Vanuatu. While these phases are often divided simply into pre-departure, deployment and reintegration for conceptual purposes, it is crucial to fully appreciate the circular nature of labour migration in Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu workers have predominantly travelled to work in Australia and New Zealand for periods of seven to nine months, with many workers returning to seasonal work opportunities multiple times. For this reason an ecosystem approach to reintegration suggests that labour mobility should be understood as more of a continuum, rather than as discrete periods of “pre-departure” and “reintegration”.

The ecosystem approach also recognizes that seasonal work takes place across a range of physical and governance localities and involves a range of stakeholders. In Vanuatu this includes not only labour agents, government departments, and multilateral and civil society organizations within Vanuatu, but also local employers, liaison officers, government departments and civil society organizations in destination countries such as New Zealand and Australia as well. Employing an ecosystem approach necessitates the understanding that supporting Vanuatu’s workers to reintegrate effectively involves coordination and engagement from a range of stakeholders across these various locations.

This report, while focusing on the reintegration period, will be situated within this more holistic ecosystem approach. As such, it will proceed on the basis that, “Understanding the multi-dimensional and multi-level nature of the reintegration process that accompanies return migration is necessary for developing and implementing successful reintegration assistance” (IOM, 2019:7). This more holistic ecosystem approach to seasonal work in Vanuatu, and specifically to the return and reintegration of Ni-Vanuatu workers into their families, communities and Vanuatu society, will need to be practical, nuanced, balanced and evidence-based. It will also need to be directly relevant to the context of Vanuatu and based on the experiences, realities, needs and challenges of workers, their families and their communities within this particular labour mobility ecosystem.

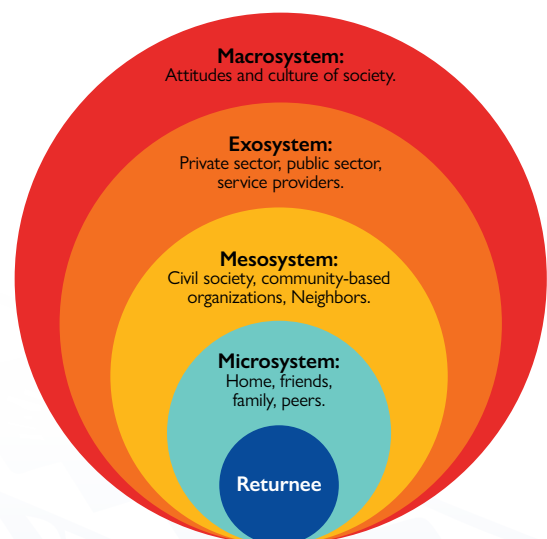


Figure 5: The ecosystem approach (IOM, 2019:101)

Methodology and limitations

Methodology

IOM Vanuatu commissioned the various pieces of research that underpin this report from July to December 2023. In early 2024 an independent consultant was hired to provide supplementary desk research and analysis, and to draft the final report. As a result, the research was carried out through three distinct phases using a variety of research methods. These included conducting interviews and surveys with returnees, convening focus group discussions and interviews with key stakeholders, and carrying out informational interviews with a variety of service providers. In addition, substantial desk research was completed to contextualize and triangulate findings and results. The methodology across the three phases consisted of:

Phase 1

(July to August 2023)

An IOM representative conducted informational interviews with a range of stakeholders and individuals to document their engagement with various aspects of seasonal work and reintegration (while the majority were based in Port Vila, a number of stakeholders on the island of Tanna were also consulted).

A focus group was conducted in one community outside of Port Vila (9 men).

Ni-Vanuatu enumerators carried out interviews with 52 returnees (16 women and 36 men). Of these 35 had returned from work in Australia (9 women and 26 men) and 17 had returned from work in New Zealand (7 women and 10 men).

Phase 2

(November to December 2023)

A full day consultation was held with 38 returned RSE and SWP workers and some of their family members on 27 November 2023 (17 women and 21 men).

Intensive consultations were carried out with stakeholders from 4 to 8 December 2023 (14 people representing seven organizations).

A half day consultation was held with stakeholders on 8 December 2023 (18 people representing 16 stakeholder organizations).

An online Reintegration Experiences Survey was completed with 43 workers (7 women and 36 men) in December 2023.

Phase 3

(February to March 2024)

An independent consultant carried out further desk research, assessed, collated, and consolidated findings, conducted a limited number of supplementary interviews with key stakeholders, and drafted the final report.

Returnees were asked for their consent to participate in interviews and surveys, and confidentiality was protected throughout the process. In several cases workers opted to be identified by a pseudonym only.

Limitations

As in any research process, this study has several limitations. A key limitation relates to the fact that the various components and phases of the research were carried out by different enumerators and individuals, resulting in a lack of consistency in how questions were asked, and how responses were documented. There was also limited coordination between each of the phases of research. This meant that the two survey instruments – the interviews carried out with 52 returnees in July and August 2023 and the surveys completed with 43 returnees in December 2023 – addressed related issues but used different questions and approaches. To mitigate this limitation, results from each of these surveys are treated separately in the analysis. Where there were significant concerns about research integrity as a result of these circumstances the responses and findings were not used.

Another limitation relates to the representativeness of the survey findings. In total approximately 130 returnees were interviewed through three modalities (a focus group, interviews, and independently completed online surveys). Given that there were approximately 16,500 workers from Vanuatu participating in the 2022–2023 season, this suggests that less than one per cent of Vanuatu’s returnees were contacted in this research. In order to have a more representative sample (at even 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level), approximately 375 workers should ideally have been interviewed at a minimum. Given this limitation, the findings from the surveys and interviews with returnees should be treated as indicative rather than representative.

In order to mitigate this limitation, responses have been compared to the findings of other research reports. In particular, a suite of more comprehensive reports associated with the World Bank and Australian National University’s Pacific Labor Mobility Survey (PLMS) were used to contextualize the findings (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b; World Bank, 2023; Martin, 2023). Conducted between November 2021 and March 2023, and published in November 2023, this research represents, “the first major collection of data since the introduction of the Pacific Labor Scheme, covering 2,085 migrant workers...and 4,241 households in Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu” (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023a). Where it was relevant and helpful, findings from the PLMS relating specifically to Vanuatu were used to corroborate and contextualize the findings from this study.

Other structural limitations that impacted this study include the lack of reliable and consistent data within Vanuatu more broadly, as well as the absence of a reliable and comprehensive central registry to identify and track returnees when they return to Vanuatu. This poses a significant limitation to research of this nature and represents a significant obstacle to obtaining a holistic understanding of the returnee population, their demographic profile, and their needs. The geographic and telecommunications environment in Vanuatu also impacts the depth and breadth of data collection, and contributes to the potential for selection bias, given that not all returnees are equally accessible. Many workers in Vanuatu return to rural contexts where they may be difficult to contact, even by phone.

Another important limitation relates to the state of information, knowledge and perceptions about seasonal work in Vanuatu. Popular perceptions often oversimplify complex circumstances and are not necessarily supported by an evidence base. The research literature on seasonal work in Vanuatu and the Pacific more broadly has also been marked by some unevenness and significant debate. Many authors grapple with the difficulty of representing complexities and challenges in a way that is balanced and does not also overshadow the benefits. As Petrou and Connell comment in one such recent debate, “[While it is true] workers and their communities generally agree that the positives of guestwork outweigh the negatives...this does not mean that the negatives are trivial”. These authors go on to point out that “unfortunately success stories are rarely documented” and “there remain huge gaps in what we know and don’t know” about seasonal work (2023a).

While several of these more structural and contextual limitations are addressed throughout this report, they engender a level of complexity that must be taken into active consideration. In the context of these limitations, this report should be understood as a starting point for a more complex, integrated and contextualized understanding of reintegration in Vanuatu. As such, it is hoped that it will provide some of the necessary background, analysis, information and preliminary evidence to support improved decision-making and to bolster efforts to strengthen reintegration experiences and services for the benefit of Vanuatu’s workers, their families, their communities and for Vanuatu society as a whole.

Background

Pacific labour mobility schemes in Vanuatu

Since the mid-2000s, labour migrants from Vanuatu have been travelling to work in either New Zealand or Australia, where they have participated primarily in seasonal (agricultural) labour schemes.

New Zealand launched their Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in 2007. Under this scheme workers from Vanuatu may stay in New Zealand up to seven months in any 11-month period and may be re-employed in subsequent years. New Zealand's RSE scheme has grown from an annual cap of 5,000 when the scheme began in 2007 to 19,000 workers in the 2022–2023 season (New Zealand Immigration, nd). This cap applies to all workers from across the Pacific.

In 2008, Australia established the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (PSWPS), which later became the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in 2012. While this scheme was established with a cap of 2,500 workers, it has remained uncapped since 2015. Under this scheme workers may stay in Australia up to nine months in any 12-month period and may be re-employed in subsequent years. Starting in 2016, Australia piloted a scheme for non-seasonal roles which later became the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) in 2018. In 2022 the SWP and the PLS were merged into the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b). This scheme is now understood to be comprised of effectively two streams: a short-term stream that allows workers to access a multi-year visa for placements of up to nine months each year for a period of four years, and a long-term stream for placements between one and four years. Most workers from Vanuatu currently participate in the short-term stream.

The vast majority of workers from Vanuatu travel to New Zealand and Australia to work in the horticulture industry. This involves pruning trees and picking, weighing, sorting and packing fruits including apples, bananas, citrus fruits, grapes, strawberries, mangoes, kiwis and berries, and vegetables such as capsicum, chilies, broccoli, spinach, cabbage, mushrooms, tomatoes and others. Typically, pruning and picking is done by male workers, while many female workers have been employed in the packhouse where they weigh, sort and pack fruits and vegetables. Some workers have also been employed as forklift drivers. Apart from the horticultural industry, workers from Vanuatu may also be employed in meat processing, in the hospitality or tourism sector, or in caregiving industries.

In 2022, the Government of New Zealand announced further plans to expand access to adventure tourism roles and building trades (2022), although it is unclear when and if these opportunities will be open to workers from Vanuatu.

Within Vanuatu, the Department of Labour and Employment Services (DoL) is the central government agency responsible for supporting and overseeing labour mobility. Within the DoL, the Employment Services Unit (ESU) is directly involved in the day-to-day management of labour mobility processes and support. Vanuatu's Commissioner of Labour is responsible for general oversight of labour mobility and for granting, suspending and cancelling the licences of recruitment agents (Seasonal Employment Act 2007). The use of licenced agents is a unique feature of Vanuatu's labour mobility arrangement, with agents responsible for the majority of the recruitment and support for seasonal workers in this context (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023:27). The approved list of recruiting agents for 2022 included more than 50 licenced agents for SWP, and an additional 16 for the RSE ².

While *Vanuatu's Seasonal Employment Act (2007)* requires licenced agents to provide a two-day pre-departure briefing to workers, covering arrangements for travel, accommodation, and medical and banking services among other topics, this support is currently offered by the ESU through the mandatory Pre-Departure Briefings. Agents are also required to discuss workers' letters of offer and explain contracts to workers before they are signed. Since 2020, pre-departure training for workers and their families has been significantly strengthened by the provision of a training programme called *Famili i Redi*, developed by IOM and World Vision Vanuatu. This five-day training programme includes modules about what to expect from overseas work, how to maintain healthy relationships, gender-based violence prevention, as well as family budgeting and financial management. While there is some discussion of workers' plans and goals upon return to Vanuatu in *Famili i Redi*, to-date there has been very limited programming or support offered to returnees in Vanuatu in the reintegration period.

2 The list of approved agents for 2022 is available on Vanuatu's Department of Labour and Employment Services website at: <https://dol.gov.vu/index.php/about-us/employment-services-unit> (accessed on 15 March 2024).

National, regional and global policy and governance context

Despite Vanuatu's early engagement in seasonal work, the regulatory and policy environment for seasonal work in Vanuatu has remained fairly uneven until recently.

The *Seasonal Employment Act No. 23 of 2007* (SEA) was enacted at a time when Vanuatu was sending workers to New Zealand only. As a result, subsequent schemes to other destination countries, particularly Australia (SWP, PLS and PALM), were not included under this legislation. Beyond the requirement that agents ensure their workers understand that they are obligated to return to Vanuatu at the end of their seasonal employment contract, and the requirement for agents to keep records of the departure and return dates of workers, the return and reintegration period and support services is not addressed in this legislation

As other authors have pointed out, the SEA and subsequent regulatory interventions in Vanuatu have focused substantially on regulating Vanuatu's unique approach to recruitment, and particularly the use of private recruitment agents (Martin, 2023:11). More recently, however, this has begun to change. The *Draft National Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan* (2023), currently under review and approval in Vanuatu³, has brought some focus to issues around return and reintegration in the context of Vanuatu, with sustainable and integrated reintegration listed as a key goal.

In the area of reintegration this draft policy strives to:

Enable Ni-Vanuatu workers, their families and communities to set and achieve their development goals through increased opportunities to access support within each step in the circular mobility process and improve reintegration success.

(GoV, 2023:8)

Under Pillar 3, "Labour Mobility Supply Management and Reintegration Strategy", the draft policy emphasizes Vanuatu's goal to "increase decent work opportunities, skills transfer and reintegration success" (GoV, 2023:12). By placing emphasis on reintegration along with labour mobility supply management and support for workers in New Zealand and Australia, the policy seeks to create a balanced and mutually beneficial approach to labour mobility that mitigates some of the challenges while maximizing the benefits for Vanuatu's citizens and the nation as a whole.

3 While the final version of this policy has not yet been approved and endorsed by the Government of Vanuatu, a draft version is available on the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry website at: <https://vcci.vu/consultation-on-national-labour-mobility-policy/>. This draft version is dated 15 May 2023.



Vanuatu's national planning document, *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan* launched in 2016, also informs the policy context for reintegration in Vanuatu. Vanuatu's approach to national development is comprised of three pillars representing the Government of Vanuatu's National Sustainable Development Goals:

SOCIETY PILLAR		ENVIRONMENT PILLAR		ECONOMY PILLAR	
SOC 1	Vibrant cultural identity	ENV 1	Food and Nutrition Security	ECO 1	Stable and Equitable Growth
SOC 2	Quality Education	ENV 2	Blue-Green Economic Growth	ECO 2	Improve Infrastructure
SOC 3	Quality Health Care	ENV 3	Climate and Disaster Resilience	ECO 3	Strengthen Rural Communities
SOC 4	Social Inclusion	ENV 4	Natural Resource Management	ECO 4	Create jobs and business opportunities
SOC 5	Security, Peace and Justice	ENV 5	Ecosystems and Biodiversity		
SOC 6	Strong and Effective Institutions				

Figure 6: Vanuatu's National Sustainable Development Goals 2016 to 2030 (GoV, 2016)

Under the economy pillar, the Government of Vanuatu's commitment to "Increase labour mobility nationally and internationally" as a key policy objective is clearly stated (GoV, 2016:18). More broadly all three pillars contain goals that are directly relevant to Vanuatu's overall objectives around sustainable, effective and well-managed reintegration.

The arrangements for labour mobility are also governed by bilateral agreements between New Zealand and Australia as key countries of destination and Vanuatu as a country of origin (ILO, 2022:4). Reintegration has recently gained prominence at the bilateral level in Australia as the result of consultations that took place in 2022. In the area of reintegration these consultations outlined the following concerns:

Pacific governments emphasised the need to focus more on reintegration, including for affected families, as this is an area that has received less attention than worker preparedness and deployment ... LSUs [labour sending units] suggested more emphasis and support to connect returning workers to employment opportunities at home, to set up pathways to entrepreneurship...Pacific governments also noted the need for alignment of skills developed in Australia to those easily transferrable back to sending countries so they can be reintegrated into the domestic economy, including soft skills.

(Government of Australia, 2022:15-16)

A study carried out in 2020 to assess the impact of New Zealand's RSE for Pacific countries also considers the "potential effects of the RSE scheme on participating communities" and identifies this as something that "was missing from the original policy thinking" around RSE in New Zealand (Bedford, Bedford and Nunns, 2020:106).

At the regional level, reintegration concerns and issues are also gaining prominence. Within the Pacific Islands Forum, labour mobility is a standing item at the Forum Trade Ministers Meeting (PIFS, 2022:9). The important role of labour mobility in the region is also addressed in the *Pacific Aid for Trade Strategy 2020-2025* endorsed in February 2020. Highlighting the potential development opportunities and benefits, this regional strategy states that "Labour mobility is particularly important as it creates employment opportunities for Pacific workers and enables Members to bring back skills and resources which are essential for social and economic development" (PIFS, 2020:6). At their November 2023 meeting, PIF leaders noted that ongoing consultations were underway to provide a comprehensive assessment of the social and economic impacts of labour mobility for countries of origin in the region, and also noted a proposal to develop Pacific Regional Labour Mobility Principles (PIF, 2023:7).

The regional trade policy for the Pacific, the *Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus* or PACER Plus also "recognises labour mobility as a vital trade initiative between Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island countries, delivering shared economic benefits across the region" (PACER Plus Implementation Unit, nd). The associated *Arrangement on Labour Mobility* forms a non-binding regional framework for labour mobility cooperation by maximizing development benefits, providing support for regional cooperation and learning through the establishment of the Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting (PLMAM), and by strengthening the legislative, regulatory and institutional framework in participating countries (PACER Plus Implementation Unit, nd). In the Sustainable Reintegration Workshop held as part of the PLMAM in November 2023 in Port Vila, participants discussed the planned development of a regional set of guidelines to govern sustainable reintegration (PACER Plus, 2023:7).

In addition to the national and regional policy and regulatory environment there are also several international standards, instruments, and frameworks that govern labour mobility arrangements in Vanuatu. These include (but are not limited to): the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*; the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*; the *Migration for Employment Recommendation* (revised), 1949 (No.86); and the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families* (see Annex 2 for more detail).

Contextual issues impacting labour mobility and reintegration in Vanuatu

In order to fully understand the reintegration environment for labour mobility workers in Vanuatu several contextual issues should be taken into active consideration.

Research conducted by the Vanuatu National Statistics Office just before the COVID pandemic (VNSO, 2021) highlights several complexities that returnees from Vanuatu and their families are dealing with. Some of the key findings of this report include:

The number of people living below the National Poverty Line in Vanuatu

was estimated at 15.8 per cent of the population, with 96.7 per cent of people experiencing hardship living in rural areas.

There is a large drop off rate for enrolment in school

children aged 14 to 18, with only 15.4 per cent of this age group enrolled in school.

Less than half of working age adults

in Vanuatu (51% of men and 34% of women) were actively working outside of the home.

People living in hardship in Vanuatu,



and more generally people living in rural areas, were less likely to be connected to essential services including access to water and electricity (VNSO, 2021:8).

This study noted that in 2020 the impact of Tropical Cyclone Harold in April and the COVID-19 global pandemic significantly impacted subsistence agriculture and the tourism sector, and “likely led to an increase in hardship” after the baseline survey was completed (VNSO, 2023:10). Many families, communities and businesses in Vanuatu are still recovering from a series of major disasters over the past decade starting with cyclone Pam in 2015, at least five additional Category 4 or 5 cyclones (Lola, Kevin and Judy in 2023; Harold in 2020; and Donna in 2017), in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A related study on food security in Vanuatu based on the same baseline survey from 2020 found that one in ten people in Vanuatu were undernourished, 20.9 per cent of the population experienced moderate levels of food insecurity, and 28.5 per cent of children under the age of five experienced stunting (VNSO, 2020).



As detailed below (see section on Preliminary mapping of Vanuatu’s reintegration services and [Annex 3](#) for more detail) these contextual issues are linked to – and exacerbated by – several realities in the broader service and social support environment in Vanuatu including:

-  Limited access to secondary and tertiary education, and the relatively high cost of education, particularly at the upper levels.
-  Relatively high rates of functional illiteracy as a result of limited access to education and quality of education.
-  Limited access to quality health care and allied services (including dental care) and the relatively high cost of basic health services where they are available.
-  Limited access to justice, legal and policing services, particularly in rural areas.
-  Poor telecommunications services in some rural and remote areas, and a lack of affordable and reliable transportation and shipping options within Vanuatu.
-  Limited access to financial services, low levels of financial literacy, and a significant proportion of the population that is effectively “unbanked”.
-  Very limited (and often high cost) access to formal credit and to legitimate microfinance or small-scale lending, leading to the use of irregular, unsecured and often high-cost and high risk lending schemes.
-  Limited options for skills training, employment opportunities, and limited resources available to support small businesses, in a highly volatile economic environment.
-  Lack of social housing services, and for many households in rural areas in particular, lack of access to clean water, or to water sources and electricity in general.
-  Extremely limited mental health and psychosocial support and counselling services (beyond services targeting women and children who experience violence, and people with disabilities).

In an environment like Vanuatu that is also highly prone to natural disasters, and where many communities are experiencing the ongoing effects of climate change, this lack of basic service delivery is even more impactful.

While several of these contextual realities can be seen as “push factors” that influence the decision of labour mobility workers to go overseas in the first place, they also have a direct bearing on the reintegration period. For example, all of these factors directly impact how labour mobility workers and their families use their earnings. Many of the financial benefits of seasonal work are mobilized by workers and their families to address gaps in basic service delivery for themselves and for their extended family members, as well as their communities. Over the past decade, earnings have also been mobilised to purchase food when crops have been damaged by cyclones, to rebuild schools and buildings and to fill gaps in potential employment and income for themselves and their family members. These circumstances leave many workers who return to Vanuatu with limited financial resources to put into savings, pension funds and small businesses. At the same time, there are limited options for employment and limited opportunities for small business development within Vanuatu. All of these factors also make remigration more of a necessity than a choice in this context.

Understanding reintegration in Vanuatu: Experiences and challenges

Introduction: Experiences and challenges of reintegration

The following section contains the consolidated findings of the research that was carried out with returnees, their families, and key labour mobility stakeholders in Vanuatu.

These findings are contextualized and supplemented by the findings of desk research where appropriate. While the findings are separated for conceptual purposes into economic, social and psychosocial dimensions, these categories are often far more integrated and co-influencing. For example, a recent report titled *Improving Outcomes for Pacific Labor Mobility for Women, Families, and Communities* demonstrates how economic and social benefits are often directly linked. Citing it as a “key overall conclusion”, this study illuminates this connection by demonstrating that:

...women’s labor migration experience increased access to and control of financial resources and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills – e.g., farming techniques, organizational skills, financial management, and English language proficiency – which can help with future employability and new productive enterprises. Many female participants reported increased self-esteem, confidence, financial independence, and ambitious future aspirations, as well as increased collaborative decision-making between women and their spouses.

(World Bank, 2023:62)

Where relevant, these kinds of connections and overlap have been identified in the presentation of findings below.

In the same way that the various economic, social and psychosocial dimensions often overlap, there are also many areas where individual, community-level and structural experiences and challenges also overlap. As IOM’s significant experience in reintegration suggests:

The reintegration process is not linear and the integrated approach to reintegration reflects the dynamism of the reintegration context. Therefore, reintegration programmes should aim to address the individual, community and structural levels simultaneously and take into account how each level can affect the others.

(IOM, 2019b:15)

While individual, community-level and structural findings have been separated out in relation to the economic dimension in the presentation of findings that follow – both for analytic purposes and given the volume of information in this dimension – key areas of overlap are identified. In the social and psychosocial dimensions, the individual, community-level and structural experiences have been grouped together, as have the challenges. The Discussion and Conclusion section seeks to synthesize and consolidate the findings from all levels and dimensions.



DOL officials at the Famili I Redi Stakeholder Forum in Port Vila. © IOM 2024

Overall, the workers who were interviewed for this research expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction in several areas. For example, when asked to rate their seasonal work experience in general – a factor that has some bearing on reintegration – 88 per cent of the 43 workers who were surveyed in December 2023 described their experience as “good”. Similarly, when these workers were asked to rate their reintegration experience on a scale from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent), the average rating was 8.5 out of 10. In a workshop held with workers and their family members in December 2023 the following opportunities and benefits from participation in seasonal work were identified:

- Being able to change the lifestyle and become more responsible
- Having the opportunity to gain additional skills
- Being given the possibility to start own business
- Learning more about financial investment
- Making new friends
- Improving the family's welfare
- Being able to establish a sustainable income
- Experiencing a new atmosphere

While returnees, family members and stakeholders raised several concerns and challenges in this study, it is important to keep in mind that these issues do not represent the experiences of most workers, their families and their communities in Vanuatu.

These findings are broadly consistent with research findings for the Pacific. For example, the PLMS – which surveyed more than 1,000 workers from Vanuatu from December 2022 to March 2023 – found generally high rates of satisfaction among workers. For example, in the PLMS Ni-Vanuatu workers rated their experience in each of the schemes (on a scale from one to ten, with ten representing a positive experience) at: 8.4 for SWP, 8.1 for RSE and 8.2 for PLS (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b:19). The PLMS also found that both sending and non-sending households expressed generally favourable views about labour mobility and its impacts on families and communities (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b:75,76). While there is always room to strengthen the experiences of workers, their families and Vanuatu's communities in the reintegration period, it is also important to keep these broadly positive overall findings in mind.

Economic dimension: Experiences and challenges of reintegration

Economic dimension: Experiences and challenges at the individual level

Economic dimension: Experiences at the individual level

While there has been a shift away from seeing labour mobility solely through an economic lens, many of the benefits and challenges returnees identified during the reintegration period were focused on these aspects. In a survey completed in July and August 2023 with 52 returnees, most workers indicated that their remittances had primarily been used for everyday expenses and for their children’s education while they were in Australia and New Zealand. When asked about how they had used their money immediately upon return to Vanuatu, however, 70 per cent of workers said they had spent it on building a house. One 46-year-old woman who had worked in New Zealand for three seasons said:

As a single mother I have been able to build a house from the money earned from seasonal work. Labour mobility is beneficial for all whether you are single or a single mother or a married woman. It will change and improve our living standards. Upon returning, we return to the culture where people or relatives will start asking money from you because they know that you have just returned, and you must be careful of your spending then. Seasonal work, though, is helpful to many families.

The next most common response after building a house was children’s education, followed by contributing funds to community or church activities. Only one worker said that they had used the money they earned to buy a truck. One 28-year-old male worker said they had put their money into a long-term deposit and another 39-year-old male worker said his money was still in a savings account.

When asked what their longer terms plans were for the money they had earned doing seasonal work slightly over 50 per cent of the 52 workers interviewed expressed wanting to start a family business. Several workers said they would use the money to keep building their house or another family members house, and five workers (9%) said they planned to establish investment or rental properties. These findings are broadly consistent with the findings of the PLMS:

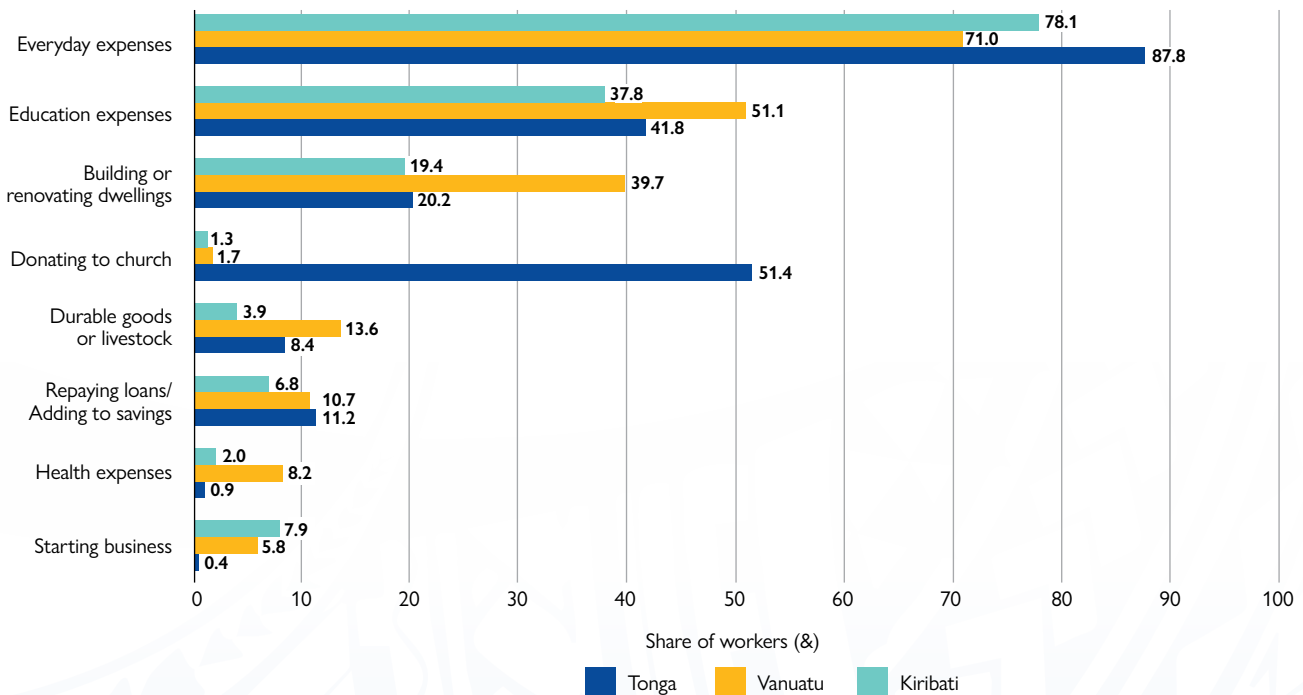


Figure 7: Remittance use by nationality of migrant workers (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b:52)

In fact, it is evident from this study and the PLMS that many Ni-Vanuatu workers are using remittances to offset the cost of basic needs, including using their earnings to pay for everyday expenses, to pay for their children's education, and to build or improve their homes.

Despite announcing a policy of "Free Education" for all primary students in Vanuatu, the government has since clarified that this refers to a series of grants only (MOET, 2018). Vanuatu's Ministry of Education and Training's website explains that: "*Unfortunately there are currently no free public schools in Vanuatu*"⁴, and the cost of education and fees can range from approximately VUV 6,000 (AUD 75) for primary school to VUV 120,000 (AUD 1,500) for secondary school tuition and fees (MOET, 2018). As a result, seasonal workers may spend up to VUV 120,000 (AUD 1,500) per year to keep their child in secondary school, amounting to approximately 12 per cent of their total earnings, per child education, after deductions in Australia, and 11 per cent for New Zealand⁵. One 37-year-old worker with two children who had only participated in seasonal work one time described being able to cover his children's educational costs:

We have been able to improve on our budgeting skills and we were able to pay off our children's school fees. All of our children are in secondary school, so school fees are expensive compared to primary school.

Several returnees who were interviewed for this study also reported that their earnings had been used to pay for their own or a family members' medical expenses. In fact, the cost of basic services including healthcare, education and a place to live were higher overall for workers from Vanuatu in the PLMS findings (see Figure 7 above), suggesting that many seasonal workers are using their earnings to address significant gaps in basic services in Vanuatu.

Beyond the money they earned, Ni-Vanuatu workers also identified gaining new skills while they were working overseas. In the survey carried out with 43 returnees in December 2023, 87 per cent of the workers said they had gained new skills in Australia or New Zealand, and 64 per cent said they had accessed support, assistance or training overseas. In the same survey, 34 per cent of the workers indicated that they are using skills acquired overseas upon return. Many of these skills were in the economic sector. Describing the new skills he had developed, one 30-year-old male worker said:

This is my experience: I learned how to wake up early and to work to a schedule overseas. If you practiced that in the village in your own farm or garden, you could become just like the farmers that you are working for overseas, and you would be able to see the fruits of your own labour.

One 46-year-old worker said she had found a sewing centre while in New Zealand and had upskilled herself by taking some sewing courses. Upon her return to Vanuatu, she used the money she had earned abroad to finance a small sewing business. When another 39-year-old returnee was asked about the skills he had developed during his period of seasonal work he said simply, "*It helped me to become a more productive worker than I was before.*"

Several of the workers who had returned from New Zealand mentioned their participation in the Vakameasina programme specifically. One 42-year-old male worker commented that "*Vakameasina helps by improving workers in different aspects of life*". Two other male workers said they had completed carpentry and electrical training through Vakameasina. As Box 1 details, New Zealand's Vakameasina approach has assisted many workers from Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific in developing transferable skills while they are overseas.

4 Government of Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, Help/FAQ available at: <https://education.gov.vu/index.php?id=faqs> (access on 1 March 2024).

5 Calculation is based on Table 5.9 Workers' total earnings before and after deductions in Australia and New Zealand (in AUD), ILO Seasonal worker schemes in the Pacific through the lens of international human rights and labour standards available at: <https://ilo.org/media/373206/download> (access on 6 June 2024).

Box 1: New Zealand's Vakameasina: Building transferable skills

The Vakameasina programme (www.vakameasina.co.nz) was first piloted in 2011. Through this programme, seasonal workers in New Zealand have access to a range of diverse and practical skills training courses. The current course selection includes topics from learning how to drive and cook, to entrepreneurship, climate change and disaster resilience, understanding solar power systems, small engine maintenance and hands on building trades. Vakameasina is offered through a New Zealand-based company, Fruition Horticulture, that also offers seasonal workers training opportunities in the area of horticulture.

Funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Vakameasina is free to all workers who wish to participate. The programme aims to support seasonal workers in the RSE scheme to improve English language literacy and numeracy, and to develop knowledge and skills that will assist them in New Zealand and also at home in Vanuatu. Each course is typically taught face-to-face in 20 one-hour segments that take place over ten weeks. Short courses offered over eight hours are also available. Planning is currently under way to support an e-learning component through the development of a Vakameasina app. Funding has been announced for another five years, with hopes of expanding the program to more workers.

On Vakameasina's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/vakameasina) Ni-Vanuatu learners are featured prominently. A post from 18 February 2024 highlights a recent Money Matters course for workers in Marlborough who were described as working diligently on developing plans for their savings once they returned home. Another post from 8 December 2023 features a hands-on workshop on small engine repair and maintenance. In 2022, 619 Ni-Vanuatu workers participated in Vakameasina courses (32 women and 587 men). In 2023 this number had increased to 758 (100 women and 658 men). Given that there were reportedly 7100 workers from Vanuatu in New Zealand for the 2022–2034 season (Bedford, 2023), this suggests that just over 10 per cent of Ni-Vanuatu RSE workers are currently taking advantage of this opportunity.

While Australia also offers a Skills Development programme, one informed stakeholder commented that it had fairly low uptake compared to the Vakameasina programme. This stakeholder also remarked that workers from Vanuatu *“often say that the New Zealand program is more accessible, [and] more employers are on board and allow time for workers to access it”*. Recent research on worker safety and wellbeing in Australia also supported this view. This research found that there was little awareness of the programme among workers in Australia and determined that *“there has been limited uptake, potentially because the onus is on the employer to make the arrangements and it is not a priority for many employers”* (Kanan and Putt, 2023:1).

When asked about their training needs in the reintegration period, the 52 workers who were surveyed in July and August 2023 primarily identified skills in the economic realm, with 58 per cent saying they needed support with financial planning and budgeting and another 34 per cent saying they needed support with exchange rates and remitting money. Returnees who were surveyed also expressed an interest in understanding the terms and conditions of their contracts (26%). These responses clearly reflect the economic focus for many workers from Vanuatu, as well as the circular nature of seasonal work in this context where many workers plan to return to work overseas several times.

Economic dimension:

Challenges at the individual level

Of the small number of workers who expressed that they had faced some challenges returning to Vanuatu, several of the challenges identified were also in the economic realm. For the 43 returnees surveyed in December 2023, finding work, dealing with the pressure to migrate again, and investing and managing savings were listed as the top issues. Some of the other concerns that were identified in meetings with stakeholders as well as in the research with returnees in December 2023 related to ongoing issues with financial literacy, understanding exchange rates and how best to remit money. The fact that there were limited opportunities for skills development for workers while overseas, particularly to participate, was also identified as an issue. Other concerns included significant challenges accessing superannuation for workers in Australia, and uneven uptake of Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) membership in Vanuatu.

The cost of remittances, and the complexity of exchange rates and understanding how to minimize the cost of bringing their earnings back to Vanuatu has remained an ongoing issue for workers. Representatives of a major bank in Vanuatu expressed the following concerns in an interview:

Workers don't know how to send money, they don't understand exchange rates, they don't know how to use internet banking, and they generally have poor financial literacy and technical literacy (as well as lower levels of literacy overall). These all impact their ability to manage finances, and also to start and run a business.

This same stakeholder also said that while financial literacy training was available in Vanuatu, it was often not tailored to the seasonal work context. Despite being a good start, unfortunately these kinds of deficits will likely not be overcome by the provision of one-off training sessions. Beyond ensuring that support provided to returnees is suited to their needs and capacities, any training in this area should also be supported by changes at the structural level (see below), where regularizing remittance pathways and addressing financial inclusion concerns more broadly in Vanuatu will likely be of significant benefit to individual returnees.

Claiming superannuation for work completed in Australia has also remained a substantial challenge for workers from Vanuatu. Superannuation is Australia's retirement savings plan and is typically set at a rate of 11.5 per cent of earnings to be paid by employers in addition to normal pay.⁶ Workers from Vanuatu are technically eligible to claim their "super" when they leave Australia (and once they no longer hold a current visa). The super has some bearing on the reintegration period as it potentially represents "an additional large windfall" of

money for workers after they complete work in Australia (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023b:58). It is also a matter of workers' rights that Ni-Vanuatu workers are able to access these funds in a relatively straightforward and efficient manner.

In the survey of returnees that took place in July and August 2023, however, 66 per cent of the 35 workers who had returned from Australia reported that they still had not received their superannuation. In several cases workers reported that they had applied for it, but it had not come through. One worker who had been to Australia twice said that he had claimed it both times but had never received it. Despite the Australian government offering a free online process for claiming superannuation, and Vanuatu's Department of Labour and Employment Services providing free support to workers through their Superannuation Claim Kiosks on a regular basis, this issue remains a significant challenge for many Ni-Vanuatu workers returning from Australia.

In this study, workers identified a range of challenges in claiming their super. Two workers said their passports had expired, which made claiming their superannuation difficult (workers are required to have current passports to lodge their claims). Renewing their Vanuatu passport not only requires the payment of a fee but has been characterized by delays of up to a year in Vanuatu (Willie, 2024). For one 34-year-old worker who said he *had* received his superannuation, he reported that the amount he had received did not seem correct. Despite working in Australia for four seasons and claiming his super each time, he felt the amount he received did not reflect what he should have been paid for all four contracts. Superannuation is also taxable at a rate of 35 to 45 per cent, which may not be well understood by some workers (PALM, nd:2). Two workers who had each been to Australia for several trips said they had actually paid someone to assist them in lodging their claims for superannuation, but they still had not received the payment after six months.

While workers departing from Vanuatu are not required to be members of Vanuatu's own pension fund, the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF), stakeholders who participated in a reintegration workshop in December 2023 felt that all seasonal workers from Vanuatu should be VNPF members. While workers in New Zealand do not benefit from a superannuation payment, the New Zealand government has recently run a pilot scheme to support workers in joining, remitting and contributing to their pension scheme in Vanuatu. This approach not only addresses and eases the cost of remittances but helps to address the issue of pension fund membership for seasonal workers in Vanuatu.

⁶ From 1 July 2024, superannuation is paid at a minimum rate of 11.5 per cent of ordinary time earnings or salary. This rate will increase by 0.5 per cent each year until it reaches 12 per cent in 2025.

Box 2: Simplifying remittances and encouraging pension fund membership

In 2020 the Government of New Zealand introduced a pilot program that was later launched as the Seasonal Worker Superannuation Administration Service (SWSAS). While RSE workers in New Zealand comprise a special category of worker and are not eligible to participate in New Zealand's KiwiSaver retirement scheme this program provides an alternative. This optional program allows workers, through weekly deductions from their salaries, to remit funds to their member account at the VNPF, and/or to remit even very small amounts of money to a nominated bank account in Vanuatu. Any end of contract payments and holiday pay of eight per cent that workers in New Zealand are entitled to can also be remitted in this way. As remittances are aggregated through this service, this option offers low transaction costs to workers, more favourable exchange rates, and several additional benefits. The SWSAS effectively offers a secure and transparent portal for bringing funds back to Vanuatu (Bedford, 2021b) and may also support workers in planning for their retirement from seasonal work. Bedford also suggests that "RSE employers could be incentivised to make co-contributions", particularly to loyal, long-term workers (2021a).

Among the small number of workers who expressed challenges or dissatisfaction upon return to Vanuatu, deductions from pay were also mentioned a few times. One worker who had completed only one period of work in Australia said that he had received only AUD 150 (approximately VUV 11,500) per week after deductions. As mentioned above, among the 52 workers who were surveyed in July and August 2023, 26 per cent had expressed an interest in learning more about how to interpret the terms and conditions of their contracts, as well as their legal rights and entitlements in destination countries including salary deductions. There are also structural issues at play in this area as well, with a recent report stating that, "*a stronger system of penalties needs to be created in the event of unreasonable deductions being made by an employer*" in destination countries (ILO, 2022:32).

Aspirant migrant workers and their families in Famili I Redi workshop in Port Vila. © IOM 2023



Economic dimension: Experiences and challenges at the community level

Economic dimension: Experiences at the community level

At the community level, several of the economic benefits from seasonal work seem to revolve around agriculture. There have been reports of seasonal workers setting up their own small-scale agricultural initiatives after they return from working in Australia or New Zealand, and several stakeholders who took part in the research felt that many workers returned to subsistence agriculture in the reintegration period. One stakeholder commented, however, that making the move from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture required capital investment that was not yet readily available in Vanuatu. To address this gap, the National Bank of Vanuatu has introduced a new commercial agricultural lending product that they plan to market to seasonal workers in the future.

Vanuatu's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has also been proactive in addressing the needs of returnees, their families and their communities. DARD was one of the first entities in Vanuatu to employ a dedicated Reintegration Officer to focus directly on supporting returning seasonal workers. DARD's Family Farm Business Pilot Program also teaches financial literacy and family-oriented business

development skills, along with agricultural skills, to returnees and their families. In part, this program aims to support the running of family agricultural plots while the seasonal worker is away. DARD also supports individuals and families in registering as a commercial farm to enable them to apply for low interest loans. DARD expressed an interest in being "*more involved in assisting workers to move from subsistence farming to commercial and semi commercial production*" in the future.

Beyond some of the economic benefits derived through agriculture, individual benefits in other economic areas also have substantial benefits for returnees' families and communities. Family and community members also play a role in helping to support individual workers in realizing some of the economic benefits of seasonal work, including while they are overseas. In the survey that was completed with 43 returnees in December 2023, one married man in his 30s said that his family and friends had helped him to build his house while he was away. Another returned worker who was single and in his 20s said that his parents had supported him in starting his small business. Some of the skills that workers gain overseas are also perceived as assets by workers' families and communities. Vanuatu's unique VLab programme, Yumi Growem Vanuatu, has also actively tried to ensure that the economic benefits of small business development are shared by returnees with their partners or close family members as well.

Box 3: Harnessing the entrepreneurial potential of returnees and their families through VLab

VLab (www.v-lab.org), advertised as Vanuatu's first business and idea incubator, was established in 2019. Starting in 2021 VLab partnered with the Vanuatu Department of Labour and Employment Services to offer its first programme aimed directly at supporting the reintegration of returned seasonal workers. Billed as the Yumi Growem Vanuatu programme, the first intake brought together 40 returned seasonal workers from Australia and New Zealand. The programme took place over nine months, and each participant was required to bring along an accompanying spouse, family member or friend who joined them in learning about how to plan and develop their business venture.

VLab's unique approach involves supporting small-scale entrepreneurs with ideation (coming up with ideas) and incubation (helping you to get through the first year). Each returnee in Yumi Growem Vanuatu who completed the programme was offered a VUV 200,000 voucher to support their small business upon completion of the programme. They were also provided with ongoing coaching and mentorship from successful local businesspeople. Coaching is key to the success of the programme and supports the development of not only hard business and financial management skills but also soft skills around decision-making, problem-solving and being more confident. Coaches are trained to support the entrepreneurs in building and benefiting from a network of supports and resources.

Funded by both New Zealand and Australia, Yumi Growem Vanuatu is now in its third season. In the second year ten participating pairs (ten seasonal workers and their ten partners) from the island of Santo were added to the 40 participating pairs from Vanuatu's main island of Efate. This model has continued into the third season and there are hopes to slowly expand the programme to other islands. As is the case with most small business programmes, some participants drop out each year. There have also been several success stories, however. Donors have committed to an additional five years of funding, and the programme hopes to expand by providing more support to workers before they leave for seasonal work, and potentially linking up with skills training initiatives in New Zealand and Australia.

One stakeholder who recognized the success of programmes like VLab's Yumi Growem Vanuatu also cautioned, however, that not every returned worker could or should be channelled into becoming an entrepreneur. They elaborated that programmes like VLab are not only highly labour and financial intensive, but not every returnee is interested in or well-suited to becoming a small business owner. This stakeholder stressed that returnees were coming back to Vanuatu with transferable skills and should be welcomed back and given the freedom to choose what they would like to do. They stressed that while programmes to support small business and entrepreneurship should be on offer for any returnees who have an interest, this model should not be imposed on returnees in any way.

Economic dimension:

Challenges at the community level

The key economic challenges at the community level raised by interviewed stakeholders related to the impact of the absence of workers on their families and village communities, particularly when several members of the same community participated in seasonal work at the same time. One stakeholder working in the agricultural sector commented that when workers from rural communities failed to return to their home villages during the time between seasonal work *“this places a huge responsibility on remaining family members to maintain the subsistence farm.”* Another stakeholder commented that women in particular faced challenges returning from seasonal work. This stakeholder said that women can struggle to revive existing businesses after their return, commenting, *“Sometimes there is no support by partners for female seasonal workers to run a business.”*

Economic dimension: Experiences and challenges at the structural level

Economic dimension:

Experiences at the structural level

As detailed in section 1.3 above, remittances from seasonal work were estimated to make up slightly more than 20 per cent of Vanuatu's GDP in 2021 (Martin, 2023:28). As such, there are also macroeconomic benefits for Vanuatu as a whole from seasonal work, with inward remittances driving economic growth as well as foreign exchange reserve accumulation (IMF, 2023:73). As the authors of the report on the findings of the PLMS suggest:

At the macroeconomic level, migration (both temporary and permanent) helps support macroeconomic growth and stability through foreign exchange and has become an increasingly important pillar of bilateral and regional relationships.

(Doan, Dornan, and Edwards, 2023:10)

In this way, returnees contribute directly to Vanuatu's economy by increasing economic activity within Vanuatu. Other areas where labour mobility has an economic impact at the structural level included the provision of transferable skills and experience to Vanuatu's productive workforce and the availability of funds and goods to start small businesses or engage in skilled trades. The lack of mechanism to accredit the skills that returnees acquired overseas, particularly soft skills, on the job trainings and micro credentials; coupled with the absence of programme that links skills gaps in the country with educational and training opportunities in destination countries, however, hinder the full potentials for Vanuatu to benefit from skills mobility.

While some concerns were expressed by several stakeholders about the absence of skilled workers from Vanuatu's workforce (see section on Economic dimension: Experiences and challenges at the community level), some businesses also reported benefits from seasonal work. For example, a recent survey conducted on behalf of Vanuatu's Chamber of Commerce and Industry that examined skills shortages in the context of Vanuatu reported that:

Forty percent of enterprises...reported benefits from returning staff who had participated from labour mobility programs. These enterprises highlighted the improvement in skills, confidence, and work experience of returning participants to labour mobility programs. Some skills that enterprises reported improvements in include communication, work ethic, time management, and customer service skills. Enterprises also saw benefits in knowledge sharing, as returning staff being better able to transfer skills knowledge to other team members at their workplace.

(Orozco, 2023:13)

In the above survey it was also evident that several enterprises (60%) had found a way to accommodate seasonal workers who had left their employment, by ensuring that they could return to that same job when they had completed their overseas contract. Another 55 per cent of employers said these workers also retained holiday pay and severance accrual while these positions were held open (Orozco, 2023:13). It is however noticeable that these employment opportunities are likely more open for returnees who were employed prior departure, whereas support and services to link returnees, particularly with their skills acquired, with jobs in Vanuatu remains limited.

Economic dimension:

Challenges at the structural level

Several of the challenges that were identified at the structural level are cross-cutting issues and relate not only to the economic dimension but to the social and psychosocial dimensions as well. The majority of structural issues that were raised in the interviews and meetings with stakeholders included the following key concerns:

- Lack of resources and programming specifically tailored to support returnees
- Lack of information sharing, coordination and collaboration among stakeholders
- Lack of a central database, accessible data, and evidence-based research and planning

In relation to the lack of tailored resources and programming to support returnees, one stakeholder described existing programmes as “ad hoc, with no coordinated assistance”. While the lack of employment-related services for returnees was also mentioned by two stakeholders, the situation is more complex. A key push factor for seasonal work in Vanuatu has been the lack of formal employment opportunities especially in rural areas, and particularly for workers who are considered “unskilled”. Poor conditions of work within Vanuatu, including low wages for many workers who are employed in the formal sector are also contributing factors. These issues reflect structural economic circumstances and challenges that will not be addressed simply by the provision of job boards and employment programmes. One stakeholder suggested that the government should develop a more comprehensive employment strategy tailored to Vanuatu’s context that could include the needs of returnees as well.

Another cross-cutting structural challenge had to do with the lack of services and resources tailored to returnees. It was clear in interviews that several stakeholders were not offering services directly to returnees, and that engagement with returnees was often happening on an ad hoc basis. For example, the National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV) did have some returnees currently accessing their Isi Haos loan product, however, the target was to promote Isi Haos and a new commercial agricultural lending product directly to seasonal workers in the future. Isi Haos allows people from across Vanuatu to access loans to build affordable housing that is designed to withstand cyclones, earthquakes and volcanic ash. When asked about their programmes focusing on returning workers another major national organization working directly in the area of skills development in Vanuatu responded that they had none.

For the majority of stakeholders who participated in this research a lack of collaboration and coordination was identified as a significant cross-cutting structural concern. For example, one stakeholder commented that despite the Government of Vanuatu’s interest in developing agribusiness there was limited coordination and collaboration in this sector. While Vanuatu’s Labour Mobility Working Group (LMWG) was established in late 2020 to address some of these concerns, several stakeholders commented that collaboration and coordination did not happen outside of this body. Another stakeholder commented that this was particularly an issue in relation to how different stakeholders engaged with each other, commenting, “They don’t communicate, they don’t share information, there is no strategic planning, and no data”. Another stakeholder who is based in rural Vanuatu said these issues were even more acute outside of Port Vila, saying “Everybody is running their own program and there is no information sharing.” These concerns about a disjointed approach with poor visibility around who is doing what were identified as a challenge by most stakeholders.

In relation to the lack of a central database and accessible and reliable information, one stakeholder commented that their efforts were “*limited by a lack of data about who is departing and returning*”. Another stakeholder commented that the opportunity for returnees to share their knowledge and experience with community members was also “*limited by the inability to identify and track seasonal workers*”. A rural stakeholder commented that while they knew generally how many workers were returning from seasonal work in their area, they did not have any information about their specific needs. Several stakeholders also commented that the information that was available about seasonal work and returnees in Vanuatu was mostly anecdotal at the moment. This concern about the quality of research and information about returnees was shared by another stakeholder who said, “*There are issues with sample size and validity of the research*”. This stakeholder commented that there needed to be better data collection, better tracking of workers, and better research.

Beyond these more general structural issues, a few stakeholders also commented on the loss of skilled workers or what is often referred to as “brain drain”. This seemed to be a concern particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors in Vanuatu with one stakeholder saying that skilled workers were leaving to participate in seasonal work, creating an inexperienced workforce in these sectors.

Another stakeholder commented on the same concerns in the hospitality and tourism sectors saying:

People consistently leave these industries to undertake seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand. These individuals often don't notify the employer that they are leaving, and employers only find this out when they don't turn up for work. This creates an issue often with staff shortages. Businesses are required to employ and train new inexperienced staff in these sectors. Using inexperienced staff often creates an issue with quality of work and service delivery while new staff learn a new role.

The impact of seasonal work on Vanuatu's tourism and hospitality sector was also supported by the findings of the VCCI report cited above. Among the businesses that reported having staff leave to go on seasonal work in the past 12-month period a quarter were in the hospitality sector (Orozco, 2023: 13). These concerns about brain drain in Vanuatu's hospitality and tourism sectors need to be understood in the context of several other challenges (discussed in Box 4 below).

Beyond managing the impacts of the loss of skilled workers, another structural level economic concern that was raised in this research had to do with the cost of remittances and exchange rates.

For example, one 39-year-old male worker who otherwise described his reintegration experience as without problems, commented on this broader area of concern:

The exchange rate for New Zealand is not good in Vanuatu. I think that is the main concern for a lot of us who work in New Zealand. It's worse here than it is with Western Union in New Zealand, which means that it is better for us to exchange our money in New Zealand than it is to do it here at home.

While this concern may be improved with training and information at the individual level, this is also a structural issue. This is an area where Vanuatu's financial sector could work together with host countries to develop more regularized and lower cost channels for remittances, much like the pilot approach in New Zealand described in Box 3 on page 32. As well, with an estimated 32 per cent of adults in Vanuatu effectively “unbanked” or excluded from both formal and informal financial services (UNCDF, 2023), it could be possible for a worker to have a bank account in New Zealand or Australia, but no corresponding banking arrangement within Vanuatu. As a result, these workers are likely carrying back cash to Vanuatu, which is not only less secure, but also results in significantly higher exchange rates when they try to exchange their Australian or New Zealand dollars in Vanuatu.

Box 4: Contextualizing “brain drain” in the tourism and hospitality sector in Vanuatu

In the context of Vanuatu, it is important to understand that the struggle within the tourism and hospitality sectors has been ongoing for several years and has been deeply impacted by a range of other factors that have nothing to do with seasonal work. Land dispute and poorly managed development are some of the key issues leading to failed tourism businesses, to name a few.

Over the past several years, Vanuatu's tourism sector has also been deeply impacted by a series of natural disasters. Cyclone Pam in March 2015 resulted in the closure of most of Vanuatu's major resorts for a period of several months. The global COVID-19 pandemic followed a few years later, with one researcher commenting, “The aftermath of Cyclone Pam has exposed the volatility of employment opportunities in the tourism sector. Yet the post-cyclone impacts have been dwarfed by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic that brought the tourism sector in Vanuatu to a near-complete standstill” (Neef, 2021). Vanuatu's tourism sector did not reopen to vaccinated travellers until the middle of 2022.

These disasters have resulted in failed businesses and put enormous stress on a sector that is already plagued by relatively low wages and in some cases less than ideal working conditions. These issues have been compounded recently by ongoing issues with Vanuatu's domestic and international carrier, Air Vanuatu, that has left unprecedented numbers of tourists stranded in Vanuatu or grappling with the abrupt cancellation of flights impacting holiday plans. This issue has significantly impacted the tourism industry and Vanuatu's reputation as a tourism destination.

While Vanuatu should be working together with Australia and New Zealand, and with local employers in Vanuatu, to improve the management of the labour mobility cycle and to increase the number of skilled workers, it is important to appreciate the broader context for issues like “brain drain”. In relation to the tourism and hospitality sectors, understanding and addressing a host of contributing factors that are within Vanuatu's control, from land disputes to the reliability of Vanuatu's national carrier, along with pay and working conditions in Vanuatu itself, will also be essential.

Social dimension: Experiences and challenges of reintegration

Social dimension: Experiences

Social dimension:

Experiences at the individual, community and structural level

It is important to remember that workers gain experience and social benefits beyond the income they earn in seasonal work. This reality is reflected in a comment made by Ni-Vanuatu worker, Peter Bumseng, who has returned to work in New Zealand for 15 seasons. In a recent documentary short film series titled *Voices of the Pacific* Bumseng comments: *“I always say this to the workers – that it’s good to have the money, but the ideas and the knowledge that they get here will stay forever”* (Mase, 2023). While these kinds of gains are hard to quantify and may take a back seat to the more immediate financial benefits of labour migration, it is clear that a significant level of personal development also takes place, not only through their work opportunities but also through the relationships they build with employers, co-workers and people they meet in Australia and New Zealand.

Some of this personal development has particularly gendered aspects. For example, in the survey completed with 43 returnees in December 2023 two male workers said they had taken cooking courses through Vakameasina. One of these workers who was 27 years old said that during his time participating in seasonal work *“I learned to do things on my own, without depending on my mother or my wife to do this work for me, for example cooking and laundry.”* One returnee who was surveyed in December 2023 – a 44-year-old female worker, who had been to New Zealand seven times – said:

[Seasonal work had a] positive impact on my family relationships. My family trusted me, and I trusted them back home. The positive impacts on my relationship with my family and my husband were very concrete, and we had no quarrels.

Another 40-year-old woman who also commented that seasonal work had a positive impact on her family, explained that they had experienced *“Less stress due to better financial security”*. Given the socioeconomic context in Vanuatu, and the economic hardship and stress many families experience, this is not an insignificant factor.

For the group of 43 returnees who were surveyed in December 2023, 39 workers (90%) said that seasonal work had resulted in no changes (22%) or had a positive impact (68%) on their family relationships, with many indicating that how the family spoke with and understood each other had improved. For example, a 39-year-old man who had gone on seasonal work for two seasons said that his time away from family had been mostly positive, in large part because of good communication:

When I was in New Zealand I was always in touch with my family, so I didn’t see too many changes. While I noticed a few small changes with my children, they also understand that Daddy has to travel to work in order to earn good money.

A 37-year-old woman who had completed four seasons described how the experience of seasonal work had made her more open-minded saying, *“My thinking became clear, and the impact was positive. It was very helpful in terms of helping my family with good advice.”* In the interviews conducted with 52 returnees in July and August 2023, the findings were broadly similar. When asked how frequently they had experienced tensions or conflicts between themselves and their family members since their return, 62 per cent said “never” or “rarely”, 31 per cent said “sometimes” and only 7 per cent said “often” or “very often”.

In commenting on what had changed in their family while they were away, several workers described positive impacts, including that their “family living had become good and stable”, and that other family members had become more independent. One worker said that now that their school fees were always paid, his children were happy and were excelling in school. Several returnees in this study also described how they had provided support for building, repairing or improving schools and churches in their communities particularly following natural disasters. For example, one 44-year-old female worker who had participated in two seasons of work overseas said that she had *“sent funds to my family and my partner’s family to aid in cyclone recovery.”*

Several workers also talked about how they (or in one case the farm they worked for in New Zealand) had contributed to improving the water system for their community. One man who was in his 50s and who said he had been to work in New Zealand 16 times described completing a water project for his community. Another worker in his 30s who had returned six times commented that the conditions in his community had improved overall, saying, *“Our standard of living has gone up and everyone is living well after having had a chance to join the scheme.”* These findings are consistent with the findings of the PLMS that concluded that most sending households from Vanuatu had reported a positive or very positive view of labour mobility’s impacts on their communities:

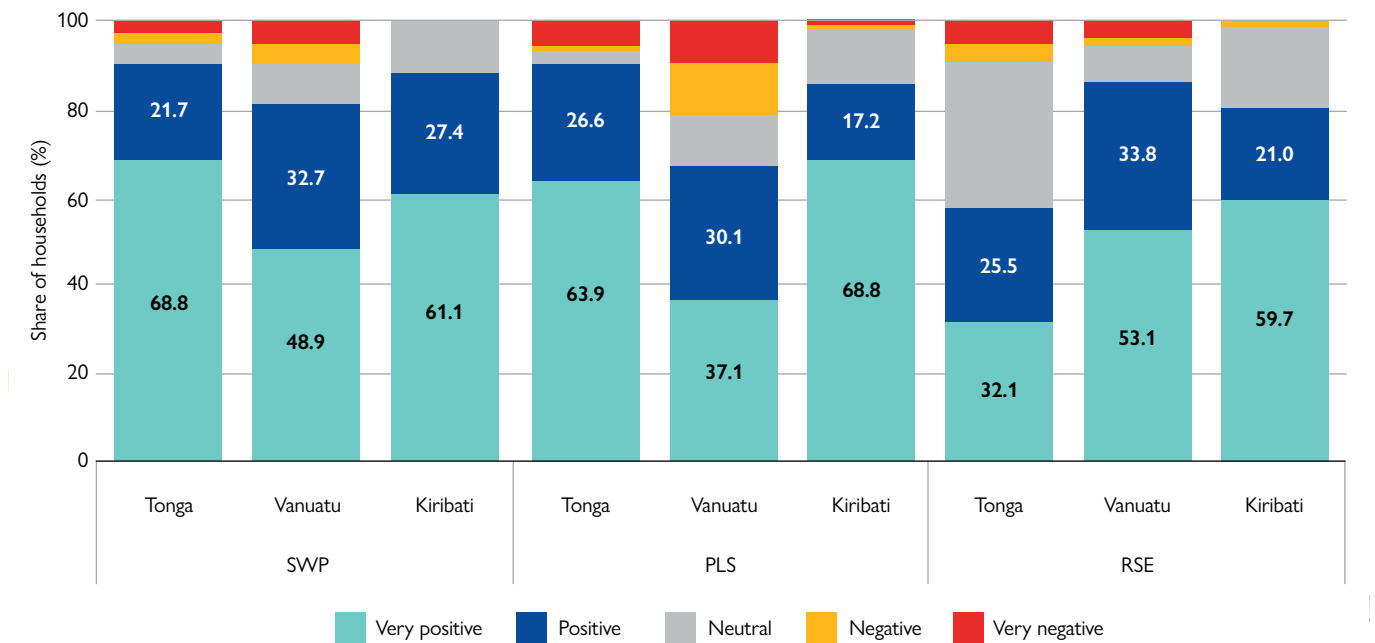


Figure 8: Perceived impact of labour mobility on communities by sending households (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023:76)

The reasons provided for the generally positive impression of seasonal work in the PLMS (after higher household income) were “better relationships among household members, improved educational outcomes for children, and greater contributions to local churches”. The PLMS also reports that the reasons given were similar for both labour sending and non-labour sending households (Doan, Dornan, and Edwards, 2023:75).

Several returnees who were interviewed for this study also commented on how the experience of seasonal work had improved their communication with their friends and family. In the survey that was carried out with 43 returnees in December 2023, 60 per cent of workers said that communication within their family had improved since going to work overseas. A 37-year-old woman who reported that she had experienced some challenges communicating with her partner initially described how they had found a way to overcome this:

Sometimes, the network coverage here in Vila is not good and then I am not able to talk with him and so he will think I was lying about the poor network coverage. So, my partner and I made changes on how we communicate when he is overseas. We set up a time for us to video call and discuss how much money he will be sending to us every month. We also discuss how much money we need to save, to help us achieve our goals.

A similar comment was made in a focus group with workers and their family members about how the experience of seasonal work could also contribute to positive relationships as workers and their families learned to communicate more effectively while they were apart. In a workshop held with stakeholders, several individuals commented on the need to ensure that reliable channels were available for workers to stay in regular contact with their families. Ensuring effective communication between workers and their family members while they are overseas will have a direct bearing on family relationships in the reintegration period.

Several positive findings in the social dimension, particularly for women, were also reported. In this research, the overall findings in relation to women's experiences of seasonal work, either as workers or as the spouse who stayed behind in Vanuatu, were generally positive. In the PLMS women reported improvements in "self-confidence, self-determination, and self-esteem" with the researchers commenting that this mirrored the findings of previous studies (World Bank, 2023:68).

This report goes on to highlight how:

A greater sense of financial independence and decision-making agency was also evident among many women returnees. Most female workers said their aspirations and plans for the future had changed for the better since participating in seasonal work, and they had the financial means to achieve these...There were also reports that participation in seasonal work had catalyzed shifts in how women wanted to live their lives. The broader perspectives they gained while overseas were a key contributor. Most household members of female seasonal workers also reported that the returned worker now has greater self-confidence. Women that had participated in seasonal work reported becoming stronger, more independent, being able to make their own decisions, and taking risks such as setting up and running their own businesses.

(World Bank, 2023:68)

While concerns continue to be raised in relation to the limited number of women who currently participate in labour mobility opportunities in Vanuatu – which is primarily a function of recruitment practices and Vanuatu's social context (World Bank, 2023:38,47) – these social benefits or "social remittances" for returnees in general and for women returnees in particular cannot be underestimated.

Box 5: Understanding the value and potential of social remittances

The IOM Glossary on Migration defines social remittances as "The transfer of ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital from migrants to their communities of origin" (2019a:203). Often the linkages between material and social benefits are poorly understood. Bailey highlights these connections in the context of Vanuatu when she says, "Other than housing, I argue that the most significant transformation occurs in the sector of education. The opportunity to attend school, to finish high school, and for some children, to finish tertiary studies would not have occurred without the RSE and SWP (2023:328). Social remittances are also about transformations in how people feel and experience themselves. One stakeholder interviewed for this research talked about how a staff member who was part of the LGBTQI+ community in Vanuatu experienced a sense of freedom and acceptance while on seasonal work. As Jolly and Reeves describe, these kinds of experiences can also shift local norms: "Women, men and transgender people who migrate to escape gender discrimination and constraining gender norms may bring back new ideas on social development and gender equality" (2005:24). As Bailey argues, it is timely to consider these other aspects of seasonal work, as they "have the potential to contribute to individual growth and development" (2022:1) and will also contribute to Vanuatu's broader social development goals.

Social dimension: Challenges

Social dimension:

Challenges at the individual, community and structural level

Some stakeholders expressed concerns about broken homes, households with no responsible guardians to look after children, and issues around the proper supervision of children, and the impacts of these issues on families after workers return to Vanuatu. While these social issues may be exacerbated by labour mobility, and indeed experienced by some migrant households; research suggested that in the early 2000s, before labour mobility schemes were established, concerns around promiscuous women, unplanned pregnancies, and drunk “SPR” – young men with nothing to do except cause trouble (Cummings, 2023: 392) – did exist in Vanuatu.

While only a few (7%) of the 52 returnees who were interviewed in July and August 2023 described the frequency of tensions or conflicts between themselves and their family members following their return as “often” or “very often”, it is clear that participation in seasonal work can cause tensions in some families. One 39-year-old male worker who had been overseas for work seven times described having experienced tension upon returning home because, according to him, his wife had been “*drinking alcohol and kava, going to nightclubs and wasting remittances*” while he was away. In a focus group held with workers and their families in December 2023, some of the women whose husbands had gone to work overseas described having faced difficulties parenting teenagers while their spouse was away. In this same focus group, the comment that domestic violence⁷ and other marital issues had increased was also noted. Specifically on gender-based violence (GBV), one stakeholder who is a member of Vanuatu’s Labour Mobility Working Group shared that the Vanuatu Women’s Centre (VWC) had recently started to track cases relating to participation in labour mobility. As a result, their initial findings suggest that there had been more than 250 cases of “domestic violence” tracked by the VWC that had some connection to labour mobility over a recent six-month period in Shefa province.

While incidents of domestic or sexual violence in Vanuatu are deeply concerning and require active intervention, it is important to consider the broader circumstances (described in Box 6 on page 40) when addressing these issues. Further, one stakeholder who was interviewed for this study mentioned that in their view there had been an increase in issues of GBV in online social media platforms, particularly aimed at women from Vanuatu who participated in seasonal work. This stakeholder commented that many of these women did not know how to access services in Australia or New Zealand, nor in Vanuatu, to help them to address these kinds of issues.

At the structural level, several of the factors that were identified in the economic dimension as cross-cutting issues also come into play in relation to the social dimension. Basic services in Vanuatu remain concentrated in the two urban areas (Port Vila on Efate and Luganville on Santo) and can be characterized as inadequate particularly in rural areas. In the online survey completed with 43 workers in December 2023, three workers mentioned a lack of support systems in Vanuatu, and two workers identified limited access to health care and health services in Vanuatu as a problem. Further, as highlighted in the Economic dimension section, key social services such as health, education and justice services are only available at a cost. While Vanuatu does not have a government sponsored social welfare system, several organizations provide services to support vulnerable population; however, remains limited in capacity, size and outreach to the wider communities. To effectively address social issues in Vanuatu, it is important to firstly ensure that support and services exist to address these issues, generally, as well as made available for returnees and their families. Further, the lack of evidence-based and appropriately contextualized information has a direct bearing on community perceptions. It is therefore of significance for claims, concerns and challenges to be supported by evidence and situated within the broader context of Vanuatu society; to avoid generalization and extrapolation of the issues, while able to resolve pre-existing issues with other root causes and contributing factors.

7 Domestic violence encompasses various forms of abusive behaviour that occur within a domestic setting, typically involving intimate partners or family members. It is important to recognize that domestic violence is not limited to physical violence; it can manifest in various ways including verbal, psychological, emotional, sexual, financial and digital/technological abuse.

Box 6: Contextualizing domestic violence in relation to labour mobility

Women and girls experience very high rates of sexual and domestic violence in Vanuatu. Research carried out by the VWC in collaboration with Vanuatu's National Statistics Office found that "Almost 1 in 3 women (30%) were sexually abused before the age of 15 years" and describes the rate of sexual abuse against girls under 15 as "one of the very highest in the world" (VWC, 2011:17). This research also found that 60 per cent of women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, and 44 per cent of all women in Vanuatu had suffered from either or both of these types of violence in the previous 12-month period (VWC, 2011:56). It is important to note that only nine respondents out of the 2,311 who were interviewed for the VWC research in 2011 (less than 1%) identified "seasonal work overseas" as their household source of income (VWC, 2022:53). As such, the findings reflect the realities of Vanuatu society independent of seasonal work.

Given these statistics, it is foreseeable that these same issues would be prevalent at the same levels in the population of seasonal workers in Vanuatu and have now become more noticeable as these schemes have grown. For example, if the number of workers travelling to New Zealand or Australia each year has reached more than 16,500 individuals, given the prevalence rates above (44%), it would be reasonable to assume that more than 7,200 seasonal workers and/or their family members each year might have perpetrated (or experienced) physical or sexual violence in the past year. If approximately 35 per cent of workers from Vanuatu come from Shefa province, this number would be around 2,500. The rates reported by VWC of 250 cases in Shefa province would actually be broadly in line with the number of reported cases you might expect to see in this population in any given year.

This is not to say that seasonal work does not place additional stress on some families and relationships which might result in violence, or that these issues should not be actively researched and assessed. The rates of domestic and sexual violence in Vanuatu, however, independent of seasonal work are grievously high and this is where the focus should be. Criticizing labour mobility alone for these circumstances is not only inaccurate, but it also causes significant confusion and distracts from the actual issues and the root problem. In fact, as recent research has suggested, "There is some evidence from Vanuatu that participation in temporary migration schemes has enabled female returnees to leave unhappy or abusive relationships" (Doan, Dornan and Edwards, 2023:73). Labour mobility may also be positively correlated with alleviating some of the factors that contribute to conflict and violence in some families. More research is needed.

Psychosocial dimension: Experiences and challenges of reintegration

Social dimension: Experiences

Psychosocial dimension:

Experiences at the individual, community and structural level

Many workers identified having had positive experiences of reintegration into Vanuatu society. In the survey completed with 43 returnees in December 2023, 85 per cent said they had felt well informed before their return. In this same survey, 95 per cent of workers said they had either experienced no challenges with reintegration (26%) or that they had been able to manage any challenges well (69%). In the words of one 27-year-old man, *“There weren’t any challenges. I felt at home when I arrived back to my house.”* In terms of fitting back into the social and cultural life of the community one worker described their experience as “fine and normal” and another said, *“I was just myself”*. One man in his 20s who had worked overseas twice said, *“It wasn’t hard coming back to Vanuatu because seven months can’t change the roots of what I grew up with.”*

Despite the general positive perception and reintegration experiences, in the research carried out in November and December 2023, returnees, their family members, and stakeholders identified several goals and objectives that relate directly to the psychosocial wellbeing of workers and their family members, including:

- The need to foster and maintain a positive and healthy mindset among workers and their family members.
- The need to have counselling or mental health support available for workers and/or their family members who are experiencing difficulties.
- The potential benefit of support groups where returnees and their family members can share experiences and provide emotional support to one another.
- The need to develop and maintain a follow-up system to monitor the wellbeing of returnees and their family members and provide ongoing assistance as needed.
- The need to provide support and strategies for workers and their families on how to handle stress.

In a focus group with returnees in one community it was noted that community pastoral support could also be helpful for returnees and their family members, but they clarified that this was dependent upon the skills and abilities of these individuals. Several recommendations were also offered by stakeholders about how to better support workers and family members who were struggling in the reintegration period, including the creation of a counselling hotline and improving communication practices and processes. In the group of returnees and their families who were consulted in November 2023 the recommendation was also made that workers who were experiencing marital issues should be encouraged to stay back from seasonal work until their issues are resolved.⁸ This group suggested that more training and support about how to manage relationships at a distance should also be offered prior departure. When asked if they would be willing to participate in pre-reintegration counselling prior to their return to Vanuatu if it were available, 46 per cent of the 52 workers who were interviewed in July and August 2023 said they would.

Psychosocial dimension: Challenges

Psychosocial dimension:

Challenges at the individual, community and structural level

A relatively small number of workers (two men) described experiencing challenges returning to Vanuatu. One of these workers who was 41 years old and had undergone four seasons of work overseas said coming back to Vanuatu had caused him a lot of stress and had been very difficult. Another 36-year-old worker who said he had been to New Zealand 15 times said he felt he did not have enough support. When asked to describe the challenges he had faced, however, this worker qualified that he felt as if his family was only focused on their own family issues when he returned. When he was asked if the experience of seasonal work had resulted in any changes to his family relationships when he came back, he replied that it had not. While workers like this individual may be returning to complex family relationships and dynamics that may be completely unrelated to seasonal work, they would still likely benefit from additional support.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that this has also been used by controlling or abusive partners to restrict their partners’ participation in seasonal work. Some workers (women in particular) who are living in coercive and abusive relationships may be using the opportunity to participate in seasonal work as a stepping stone for leaving a violent relationship. While this advice should be shared with workers and their families as a suggestion, it would not be advisable for the ESU or other regulatory or oversight bodies in Vanuatu to arbitrarily restrict access to seasonal work based solely on the report of a marital problem.

Several of the stakeholders who were interviewed for this research, however, expressed a number of concerns in relation to seasonal work, and particularly about the perceived behaviour of returnees. Some of these concerns included reports of increased substance abuse and gambling. Gambling was also identified as a concern by a participant in a focus group involving family members who described some returnees as “using remittances to gamble in casinos”. Some stakeholders pointed out that alcohol abuse had also caused problems in New Zealand and Australia, including car accidents associated with drunk driving (several of which have been reported in Vanuatu’s media). Some stakeholders also expressed concerns around excessive drinking particularly among male workers when they return. However, as noted previously, it is unclear how widespread these issues are, which suggests the need for more research on the topics.

Further, research focusing on worker safety and wellbeing in Australia published in 2023 found that some Pacific women workers experienced violence while they were in Australia, but were often hesitant to seek support:

...PALM scheme women can experience various forms of violence including intimate partner violence, controlling behaviours, sexual assault and sexual harassment. Services providers felt that women were reluctant to seek out support services because of the fear of what it could mean for their employment or visa.

(Kanan and Putt, 2023:2)

This research found that while there were support services available to women workers in Australia, employers were meant to be the first point of contact. The researchers concluded that this was problematic, however, given “the power imbalance since workers are reliant on the employer for their visa and ongoing work” (Kanan and Putt, 2023:2). Unresolved issues of harassment, exploitation and violence while overseas would have a negative impact on these workers when they return to Vanuatu.

While this research on worker safety and wellbeing in Australia also found that most challenges and concerns raised by workers (71%) are related to their employment (Kanan and Putt, 2023:1), and stressed that the majority of workers completed their experience without incident and with a high level of satisfaction, the authors did identify several psychosocial concerns for some Pacific workers while in Australia. These included relationship problems and marital breakdown, followed by concerns about children who were left at home and mental health issues (Kanan and Putt, 2023:1). The lack of available, effective and accessible services during overseas employment, largely due to language and cultural barriers and a lack of understanding of the available system and services, can have a direct correlation with worker wellbeing in the reintegration period.

In identifying related concerns upon reintegration, workers and their families who participated in this study identified an overall lack of awareness about psychosocial issues in Vanuatu’s communities and a lack of services more generally as a key challenge for returnees. While one stakeholder said they had a program under development that would offer counselling to youth using a therapeutic model, beyond the targeted services for women and children who experience violence or for people with disabilities, the lack of counselling and other psychosocial support services within Vanuatu was a key structural challenge identified by several stakeholders. This cross-cutting structural concern relating to a lack of basic services in Vanuatu, and specifically services to support workers upon reintegration, is addressed in the next section.

Preliminary mapping of Vanuatu's reintegration services

Overview of Vanuatu's reintegration service environment

As detailed in the introduction to this report, the context for labour mobility in Vanuatu is unique and multifaceted. Many Ni-Vanuatu workers return to seasonal labour opportunities in New Zealand and Australia more than once, and work assignments are typically from six to nine months in duration.

Given the circular nature of seasonal work in Vanuatu, it will be helpful for service providers and other stakeholders to understand labour mobility as part of a continuum, rather than divided into discrete periods of “pre-departure”, “deployment” and “reintegration”. This understanding is implicit in the broader ecosystem approach that also encompasses the multilocal aspects of labour mobility. An ecosystem approach to the reintegration service environment should, therefore, also include services, support and training in destination countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, as well. Some of these elements of the return and reintegration service ecosystem will be taken up in the Discussion and Conclusion and in the Recommendations to this report.

Within Vanuatu itself, the context for the reintegration of workers is also important, however. Contributors to this report, from labour mobility stakeholders to migrant workers themselves, identified a number of cross-cutting structural concerns that impact the reintegration experience in Vanuatu. Key to this was the lack of dedicated services tailored specifically to supporting workers when they return

to Vanuatu. These challenges were raised in relation to services across the economic, social and psychosocial dimensions, and impact not only returnees, but their families and communities as well. While progress was made by the establishment of dedicated Reintegration Officers within key agencies⁹, addressing these circumstances more comprehensively at the structural level will be a bigger undertaking.

When asked to identify some of the key areas for more support and services that might benefit seasonal workers and their families in the reintegration period, the 43 workers who were surveyed in December 2023 identified business planning and entrepreneurship (79%), financial management and budgeting (55%) and skills development and training (49%) as their top priorities (see Figure 9 below). In the same survey, 83 per cent of returnees said they would participate in reintegration training if it were offered to them. Nearly half expressed a preference that it be held during the first week after they returned, while approximately the same number said that it would be more helpful to have it after they had been back in Vanuatu for a month.

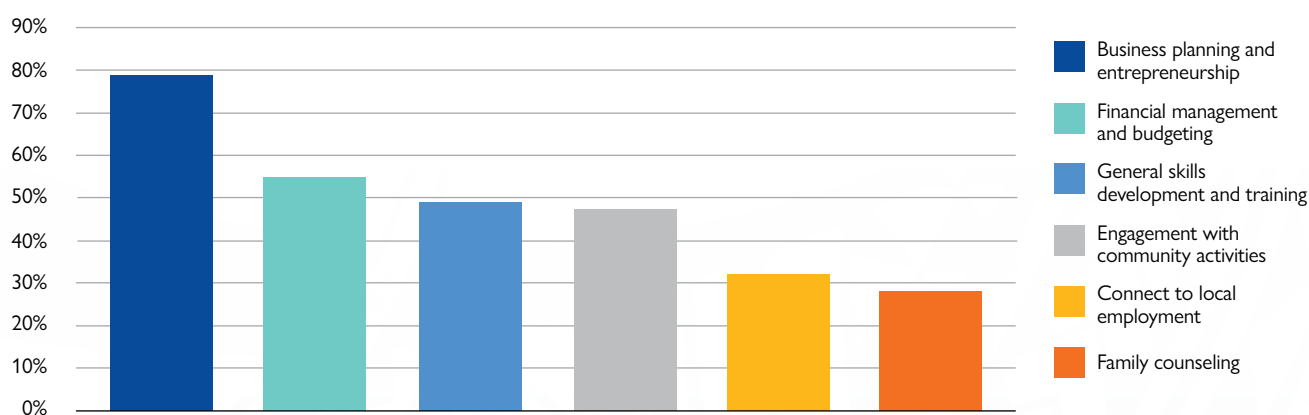


Figure 9: Key areas for more support and services identified by returnees

⁹ For example, positions for Reintegration Officers have recently been recruited by the Employment Services Unit as well as in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mapping reintegration services in Vanuatu

The following sections provide general information on existing services that are available to migrant workers in Vanuatu, including in the reintegration period (for a more detailed list, see [Annex 3](#)).

Economic



The economic services in Vanuatu that are available to returnees, and in some cases their family members as well, in the reintegration period include the support offered by the Employment Services Unit to help returnees apply and access their superannuation, as well as refer them to relevant services and programmes. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a dedicated Reintegration Officer and they are actively providing support for interested returnees and their family members in commercial and semi commercial farming. VLab's Yumi Growem Vanuatu (described in Box 3) also provides support for returnees (along with a business partner of their choice) in the reintegration period to establish small businesses. Other organizations including the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Vanuatu Skills Partnership and Australia Pacific Training Coalition offer skills develop and training programmes to the general population that may also support returnees in the reintegration period. There are also several [microfinance schemes](#) and employment search websites that are available in Vanuatu and could also be supportive for workers in the reintegration period.

Social



In Vanuatu health services are mainly concentrated in the two urban areas (Port Vila on Efate and Luganville on Santo), and in general they are too few in number to adequately serve the population. They are also usually offered on a fee for service basis. Apart from Port Vila and Luganville there are hospitals on Tanna, Ambae, Vanua Lava and Malekula as well as health centres, dispensaries and aid posts spread around the country. It is estimated, however, that 98 per cent of all of Vanuatu's doctors, 74 per cent of all nurses and 70 per cent of all midwives are working in the two urban hospitals (World Bank, 2018:18). There are a handful of private health clinics available in Port Vila, staffed by physicians. Dental services in Vanuatu have been described as "grossly inadequate" and are only available in urban areas (MoH, 2019:10). There are also only one or two physiotherapists working in Vanuatu (in Port Vila) who offer their services on a fee for service basis, and no occupational or speech therapists.

Other sectors are similar in terms of being largely concentrated in the urban areas of Port Vila and Luganville or located only in specific centres on a small number of islands. For example, Vanuatu's court system consists of a Supreme Court and Court of Appeal based in Port Vila, approximately 10 Magistrates Courts spread across rural Vanuatu (and in Luganville), and approximately the same number of Island Courts (which are staffed by lay justices). There are only two correctional services facilities in Vanuatu (Port Vila and Luganville). Police stations are also largely concentrated in Port Vila and Luganville. There are also police stations on Tanna and Epi, and several police posts in rural areas. The Vanuatu National Workers Union is also based in Port Vila and offers legal advice on labour rights violations to workers.

Vanuatu also has two universities: the National University of Vanuatu based in Port Vila, and the University of the South Pacific (USP). USP's main Emalus Campus is based in Port Vila, and there are three sub-centres in Santo (Luganville), Malekula, and Vanua Lava. Other educational and training services are offered by the Vanuatu Institute of Technology, the Vanuatu Maritime College, the Vanuatu Agricultural College, as well as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition and Vanuatu Skills Partnership.

While Vanuatu does not have a government sponsored social welfare system, several organizations provide services to support vulnerable populations. This includes targeted support for women and children who experience violence, programming for youth, legal aids and counselling for vulnerable workers, and services and support for people with disabilities. Some of the key organizations providing these services are: Wan Smolbag, the Vanuatu Women's Centre, Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities, VPrize, Sista, Youth Challenge Vanuatu, and Vanuatu National Workers Union.

Several United Nations and related agencies including UNICEF, UNDP, UN Women and IOM Vanuatu offer various programmes and services as well. In mid-2024, IOM started rolling out its Famili i Kam Bak workshop to support the reintegration of returnees and their families by promoting family and community reconnection, effective communication and community engagement, providing information on available support and services, addressing psychosocial issues, and empowering participants with financial management skills. International NGOs are also active in Vanuatu, with some offering programmes and services for returned workers and their family members. These include World Vision, the Red Cross Society, Save the Children, Care International, and Oxfam. Government units including the Department of Women's Affairs and the Disability Desk, both based in the Ministry of Justice and Community Services also offer support, as do the Vanuatu Christian Council, churches and religious groups.

Psychosocial



There are limited psychosocial support services available in Vanuatu in general. The Vanuatu Women's Centre provides crisis counselling and legal services for women and children who experience violence and abuse. The Disability Desk and the Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities provide lay counselling and support for people with disabilities. The Mind Care Unit at Vila Central Hospital in Port Vila has one physician and three psychiatric nurses who are trained to provide mental health support. Other psychosocial support may be provided by Vanuatu's churches and religious groups, as well as community leaders, and through participation in sporting and cultural institutions and programmes.

Assessment of key service gaps

Within Vanuatu it is evident that there is a scarcity of basic services on the whole, particularly outside of the urban context of Port Vila on Efate and Luganville on Santo.

While civil society organizations and International NGOs, among other organizations, are working to support the Government of Vanuatu in addressing some of these gaps in basic services, many of these initiatives are targeted to discrete segments of the population and/or limited in reach and scope. This basic service environment contributes to several push factors for labour mobility in Vanuatu. It also relates directly to the reintegration context, including limiting access to employment opportunities, and influencing how and where returnees use their earnings. The lack of services in rural areas likely also leads many returnees to remain in urban areas for longer stretches of time (particularly between overseas work periods).

The service environment in Vanuatu is also characterised by a lack of services directly targeting seasonal workers, particularly when they return from overseas work. The services to support seasonal workers in the reintegration period that do exist in Vanuatu were broadly characterized by workers and other who were interviewed for this study as inadequate in reach and number, poorly advertised, and lacking effective coordination. While addressing the service needs of Vanuatu's labour mobility workers should also be a priority in Vanuatu, this must be carried out with clear recognition of the need to improve the service delivery environment for the population as a whole, and particularly the most vulnerable.

Discussion and conclusion

This report has taken an ecosystem approach to understanding the context, experiences and challenges that characterize the reintegration landscape in Vanuatu.

The ecosystem approach considers the impacts of seasonal work not only on individual workers, but on their families, communities and on Vanuatu society as a whole. While seasonal work has often been measured by its economic impacts, the ecosystem approach also considers the social and psychosocial impacts on workers and their families. The ecosystem approach recognizes that the socioeconomic context workers return to in Vanuatu shapes the decisions and choices that they and their family members make and has a direct bearing on the reintegration experience. Through the ecosystem lens, labour mobility should be seen on a continuum rather than divided into distinct phases. Seasonal work spans multiple locations and involves stakeholders in Vanuatu as well as in destination countries, such as Australia and New Zealand. An effective approach to reintegration for returnees in Vanuatu will need to be based on consideration, understanding and coordination across all of these elements.

Overall, labour mobility workers and their families from Vanuatu are benefiting significantly from the opportunity to work overseas, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. These benefits are most evident in the economic sphere where workers can earn an income up to ten times higher than they would in Vanuatu. Returnees reported that their earnings from overseas work were primarily being used to meet daily expenses, for educational and health care costs for their own children and the children of other family members, and for improving their housing circumstances. Some returnees reported that they hoped to start a small business with their savings (or already had) and several said they had gained new skills, particularly around time management and a stronger work ethic. Despite such gains, lack of skills recognition and job placement in domestic market upon their return posted as barriers to capitalize on brain gain in Vanuatu. Beyond the economic benefits, there is also increasing recognition that the skills and social remittances of seasonal work have significant value as well. Overall, returnees who were interviewed for this study expressed high levels of satisfaction with their labour mobility experience in general and indicated that they had not faced significant issues or challenges reintegrating into their families, communities or Vanuatu society upon their return.

While only a small number of workers reported challenges predominantly in the economic dimension, some of the key issues raised included concerns around financial literacy and budgeting, as well as understanding exchange rates and how to minimize the cost of remittances. Claiming superannuation in Australia also remains a significant and ongoing issue for many PALM workers. While some of these issues may be improved through the provision of training and targeted services to workers at various stages of the labour mobility continuum, they also have clear structural dimensions. Ensuring that labour mobility workers and their family members have access to bank accounts in Vanuatu, and looking at options for cost-effective transfer of remittances may be of significant benefit. Including labour mobility workers more actively in Vanuatu's National Financial Inclusion Strategy and ensuring that better processes are established at the structural level will ease the burden of navigating complicated and expensive economic processes and challenges for individual workers.

While there has been an increasing focus on some of the perceived negative social impacts of labour mobility on Vanuatu's workers and their families, several benefits were clear in this study. Many workers reported improved communication with their family members, mainly due to improved financial security and stability, and there were several social benefits derived from improved housing and food security, and access to higher levels of education and health care for returnees and their family members. For many women in particular, whether they are returning from seasonal work themselves or have taken on greater responsibilities at home while their male family member was working overseas, there are reports of improved self-esteem, decision making power and independence. Returnees from Vanuatu also contribute to their communities through improvements to schools and churches, and by supporting disaster relief efforts. While there are increasing perceptions about negative social impacts including substance abuse, gambling, family breakdown and domestic violence in relation to labour mobility in Vanuatu, a more contextualized and evidence-based approach is needed to meaningfully address the issues.

This also holds true for other social concerns. While reports of domestic violence must be actively addressed in any context, issues of family conflict and breakdown in relation to labour mobility need to be understood in their broader context. Given the high rates of domestic and sexual violence in Vanuatu's population as a whole, these issues can also be anticipated within the population of labour mobility workers. Providing targeted education for workers on effective family communication and parenting support, domestic violence, substance abuse, and gambling is beneficial and should happen across the labour mobility cycle, but this should also be linked to broader public health and education campaigns in Vanuatu more generally. Efforts to address these social issues will be strengthened by better access to accurate data and more comprehensive research, by strengthening the very limited service environment in Vanuatu more generally, and by improving coordination and collaboration among key stakeholders.

There is no doubt that the reintegration period provides an opportunity to better support labour mobility workers and their families in Vanuatu and to, in the words of Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, maximize the benefits while minimizing the challenges (Pacer Plus, 2023). Doing this will require that labour mobility is recognized for its clear benefits and that any challenges are well understood and contextualized, and that they are also addressed at the structural level where possible. Vanuatu's approach to reintegration must be clearly based on the experiences, needs and realities of returnees, their families, their communities and Vanuatu society as a whole. This will require an approach to reintegration that is people-centred, evidence-based, integrated and well contextualized.

Aspirant migrant workers and their families in Famili I Redi workshops in Port Vila. © IOM 2023



Recommendations

Key recommendations for strengthening the reintegration ecosystem in Vanuatu are:

1. Improving the quality of data and access to basic data

The data about migrant workers in Vanuatu and their families remains uneven. Several local authorities, development partners and service providers expressed not knowing how to access returnees and their family members. Basic demographic information about where workers are from, where they plan to return to between seasonal work experiences and period of return (short term, long term, permanent) are also not available. Ensuring that basic data about workers and their families is collected in a reliable data set will allow the Government of Vanuatu, development partners and service providers to reach a greater number of workers and their families. It will also support key stakeholders in developing a better understanding of some of the key dynamics of labour mobility in Vanuatu and in targeting support and additional services more effectively.

2. Supporting better research to inform and understand key areas of concern

Key areas of concern relating to labour mobility such as perceived family breakdown and domestic violence, substance abuse, and impacts on Vanuatu's tourism and hospitality should be informed by more comprehensive research. This research will allow decision-makers and other stakeholders to develop a clearer and more evidence-based understanding. It will also assist Vanuatu in targeting interventions and services more effectively. Taking a more balanced, comprehensive and evidence-based approach will assist Vanuatu and other stakeholders in their efforts to address some of the root causes of more complex social issues in more effective ways.

3. Strengthening the service environment in Vanuatu and destination countries

A key area of concern raised by a range of stakeholders related to the lack of coordination and collaboration among stakeholders in Vanuatu, and the lack of services to directly support returnees and their families. While recent efforts to establish dedicated Reintegration Officers within various government departments in Vanuatu is a good first step, and the Labour Mobility Working Group supports increased collaboration, this area could be strengthened particularly with relevant stakeholders outside of the Group. The service environment in Vanuatu is poorly resourced and social welfare services are broadly delegated to a small number of programmatic interventions offered by civil society organizations, trade unions, United Nations agencies, NGOs, churches and religious groups, as well as community leaders; the last few stakeholders who may not have the time, skills and capacity to respond to social issues, particularly sensitive ones, effectively.

While improving service delivery in Vanuatu will require a long-term approach and strong commitment from government institutions; in parallel, destination countries such as New Zealand and Australia can contribute by providing more accessible and appropriately contextualized services to migrant workers, particular to ensure worker safety, wellbeing and skills development, while they are working overseas and connecting this with efforts and needs within Vanuatu. This could include training in areas relating to those already on offer, for example through New Zealand's Vakameasina programme, but extending it to a greater number of workers both within New Zealand and in Australia. Importantly, Vanuatu and destination countries should ensure that the skills and qualifications acquired by migrant workers are recognised to benefit their return and reintegration into domestic markets, and remigration. Existing training and qualification programmes available for migrant workers in destination countries should also be reviewed and updated frequently to respond to the skills gaps and needs of countries of origin, including Vanuatu. Service providers like Vanuatu's Wan Smolbag could also potentially assist in creating content for workers while they are in Australia and New Zealand on diverse topics including nutrition, human rights, sexual and reproductive health, combatting diabetes, and climate change, in ways that are well-contextualized to Vanuatu's context.

4. Improving the approach to training and skills development across a continuum

While there have been success stories in the area of skills development and training, particularly in relation to VLab's Yumi Growem Vanuatu (see Box 3) and the Vakameasina programme (see Box 1) in New Zealand, these efforts could be significantly strengthened and expanded. The lack of effective and accessible skills training for labour mobility workers when they are in destination countries was a key gap identified in this research. The skills training that is offered to workers should be hands on, practical and suited to Vanuatu's context and economic viability, as well as aspirations of individuals.

Skills development should span across a continuum from pre-departure to reintegration to ensure that workers are consistently supported. Goals and needs should be identified pre-departure, with skills and training opportunities offered on a range of topics while workers are in destination countries, and connected more directly to key service providers and needs within Vanuatu upon return. These skills could be better matched to the needs of businesses and key sectors in Vanuatu and focused on addressing identified gaps. Some of these gaps include building trades skills, and skills suited to the tourism and hospitality sectors, as well as money management and small business development. Skills and training should also involve transferable qualifications, as well as recognition, where possible and could also address key areas of concern including, for example, climate adaptation knowledge and skills.

5. Recognizing and harnessing the circular nature of labour mobility in Vanuatu

Programmes and services aimed at reintegration in Vanuatu should clearly recognize the circular nature of labour mobility in Vanuatu. Pre-departure training like Famili i Redi can be complemented by continuous capacity building and support to migrant workers while they are in destination countries. It can also be offered to returnees and their family members during the reintegration period through programmes like Famili i Kam Bak, among others. It would also be beneficial to see pre-departure and reintegration less as discrete phases, but as opportunities to consolidate targeted learning and support over longer periods of time for workers and their families. For example, topics in the pre-departure and reintegration phases might be more similar for workers who are in their first several seasons of overseas work and might shift to other priorities for workers who have returned to seasonal work multiple times.

The circular nature of seasonal work for many workers from Vanuatu makes the reintegration period a fertile opportunity for setting workers up to leverage gains more effectively in subsequent seasons and consolidate learning and approaches in a more iterative way. By their third or fourth season, workers may be in a better position to consider longer-term opportunities like saving for "retirement", and developing a small business than are workers in their first several seasons who may be more focused on meeting basic needs. In parallel, another approach that could be considered is to provide support to families who remain in Vanuatu to productively use remittances while their partners/family members are working overseas, rather than targeting investment opportunities and economic programmes solely on returnees. This, in a way, could potentially address the issue of remittances misuse which is one of the issues that migrant households may experience.

Approaching labour mobility in Vanuatu as circular and in a more planned way may also provide clearer pathways for workers from Vanuatu and local businesses to better coordinate their needs and interests and allow workers to leave and return to paid work in Vanuatu in a more planned and transparent way.

6. Raising awareness and enhancing access to psychosocial support networks and services

An overall lack of awareness on psychosocial wellbeing, and a lack of counselling and support services in Vanuatu, particularly outside of the capital, were raised as an issue. It is therefore important to raise public awareness on the importance of psychosocial wellbeing, including with labour mobility workers, their families and communities, at all stages of labour migration. To address the limited capacity of public institutions in providing psychosocial services, especially in remote locations, leverage and capacitate existing social support networks, for example pastoral care and community networks, to provide community support, referral, and healthy mindset programmes for workers and their families should be considered. Expand counselling and psychosocial support to reach wider community, including explore the potential to establish a counselling hotline; as well as, offer workshops to help families understand the challenges faced by returning workers, and vice versa, to foster supportive environments and ease the transition back into community life.

7. Addressing ongoing economic issues at the structural level

There are a number of issues in the economic dimension, including cost of remittances, and accessing superannuation in Australia that could be addressed more effectively at the structural level. This includes actively incorporated labour mobility workers and their families into Vanuatu's National Financial Inclusion Strategy. Workers departing Vanuatu should not be "unbanked" in Vanuatu and processes for setting up domestic bank accounts could be streamlined for workers and their families. Processes for aggregating remittances and supporting workers and their families in contributing to longer-term savings and to Vanuatu's pension fund (if they choose to use their earnings this way) will also assist. The Vanuatu and Australian governments should address the ongoing challenges for Vanuatu's labour mobility workers in accessing their superannuation payments in a more comprehensive way.

Family sending off a seasonal worker to Brisbane. © IOM 2024



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Annexes

Annex 1 – Geographic distribution of seasonal work opportunities

Vanuatu's new *Draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan* references statistics drawn from the 2020 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census (Hakkert and Pontifex, 2022) to suggest that there may be an uneven distribution of labour mobility opportunities in Vanuatu (Gov, 2023:5). The situation is, however, not that clear in relation to the PALM scheme in Australia and the RSE in New Zealand. The question in the 2020 census asks only whether a person had worked for money overseas during the last 12 months before the census (Hakkert and Pontifex, 2022:78). Of the 6,136 people (representing just over three per cent of Vanuatu's population at the time) who said that they had worked overseas in the past 12 months, 1,095 (18%) of these had not actually worked in either New Zealand or Australia (Hakkert and Pontifex, 2022:78).

The statistics quoted from the 2020 census in Vanuatu's *Draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan* seem to suggest, however, that slightly more than half of migrant workers in Vanuatu were from Shefa province and that on that basis there may be an uneven distribution in relation to worker recruitment. This has been repeated in other publications in a way that implies that this is a clearer set of circumstances

than may actually be the case. For example, using the *Draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan* as his reference, Martin states:

Over 90 percent of ni-Vanuatu migrants are from four provinces: half are from Shefa province, 17 percent from Sanma, and 11 percent each from Malampa and Tafea provinces

(Sackett, 2023).

While the *Draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan* suggests that even though these numbers are not exclusive to labour mobility workers travelling to Australia and New Zealand and that they may have shifted significantly since 2020 (GoV, 2023:5), they seem to support perceptions around uneven distribution of labour mobility opportunities.

Putting these percentages in context, however, provides a significantly different picture even if the 18 per cent of workers who said they had not worked in Australia or New Zealand are still factored in. For example, at the time of the 2020 census, the overall population of Vanuatu was divided amongst the provinces in the following way:

Province	2020 Population	Percentage of 2020 population	Percentage having worked overseas in the past year
Shefa	103,987	34.7%	52.1%
Sanma	60,884	20.3%	17.3%
Tafea	45,714	15.2%	11%
Malampa	42,499	14.2%	11%
Penama	35,607	11.9%	4.6%
Torba	11,330	3.8%	4%
Total	300,021*	100%	100%

*While the census report lists the total population at 300,019 the numbers listed for the provinces add up to 300,021 (Hakkert and Pontifex, 2022).

With the exception of Penama province (which seems underrepresented) and Shefa province (which seems overrepresented) the other provinces are generally well-represented compared to their population size.

If remove the 18 per cent of people who had not worked in Australia or New Zealand in the past 12 month period the picture becomes even more unclear. In the census, this cohort of workers reported that they had either worked in New Caledonia or elsewhere (Hakkert and Pontifex, 2022:78). It is feasible that the bulk of these other workers, several of whom may have been skilled or professional workers, came from Shefa province (and Port Vila specifically), making up the proportionate difference in the perceived overrepresentation of workers from Shefa province who reported having worked overseas. For the purposes of understanding where labour mobility workers who are going to work in Australia on the PALM scheme and in New Zealand on the RSE scheme come from and determining whether there is, in fact, uneven distribution provincially and/or from rural and urban areas, the 2020 census data may not be very helpful.

There are also a number of other complicating factors. In Vanuatu itself, province of origin is a complicated question. For example, someone might legitimately say they are from

Tanna but they may have spent the majority of their life (unrelated to seasonal work) living in Port Vila. Unless the question is asked very specifically – Where have you lived for most of the previous year? Did you leave your village or community to participate in seasonal work? – the information you might get from workers themselves around province of origin could be inconclusive.

As well, research carried out in 2018 by Bailey and Rereman suggests that the distribution of workers at that time was quite different from the perception suggested by the *Draft Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan*. This research concluded in 2018 there appeared to be somewhat evenly distributed recruitment from rural contexts in Vanuatu (Bailey and Rereman, 2018:1), with a slight overrepresentation from particular rural locations such as Torba province relative to the population size. If Vanuatu seeks to understand the distribution of labour mobility workers across the various provinces – either in terms of where they are recruited from and where they are returning to – more comprehensive data collection and research targeting these issues will be required.

Annex 2 – International regulations relating to the reintegration context

The following are some of the international standards, instruments, and frameworks with components related to the reintegration context, which could be applied to labour mobility arrangements in Vanuatu.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* ensures the fundamental right of freedom of movement, both within countries and across borders, encompassing the concept of return migration. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration explicitly emphasizes this right, affirming that individuals have the freedom to depart any country, including their own, and the right to return to their home country (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). This declaration upholds the principles of mobility and the ability of individuals to move freely without undue restrictions, acknowledging the significance of both emigration and immigration as integral aspects of human rights.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

The *Global Compact for Migration* (2018) also contains provisions on return and reintegration of migrant workers. Specifically, Objective 21 explicitly states to “cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration”. More importantly, the three proposed actions under this objective are as follows: (a) promote gender-responsive and child-sensitive return and reintegration programmes; (b) provide equal access to a full range of services and protections, as well as economic opportunities for migrants to reintegrate in and contribute to society; and (c) address the needs of communities of return by making them a part of national and local development plans, budgets and infrastructure needs (United Nations, 2018).

United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* emphasizes the “right of migrants to return to their country of citizenship” and highlights the responsibility of States to ensure the proper reception of their returning nationals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015:2). Moreover, specific targets within the Agenda address migration and related aspects, providing opportunities to focus on reintegration policies and programs.

Target 8.8 aims to protect labour rights and promote a safe and secure working environment for all workers, while Target 10.7 focuses on facilitating orderly, safe, regular, and

responsible migration and mobility of people. Additionally, Target 10.c seeks to reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances. These targets can play a crucial role in shaping reintegration policies and programs that support returning migrants in their efforts to reintegrate into their home communities successfully (United Nations, n.d.).

Furthermore, the Agenda's commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is evident in Target 5.c, which emphasizes adopting and strengthening policies and enforceable legislation to promote gender equality at all levels. Target 5.2 seeks to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including labour and sex trafficking and other forms of exploitation. These gender-focused targets can also serve as essential references in designing and implementing reintegration policies and programs, ensuring that returning migrant women and girls receive adequate support and opportunities for empowerment (United Nations, n.d.). By incorporating these key targets, the 2030 Agenda recognizes the importance of inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to migration and reintegration efforts, contributing to sustainable development and human rights for all.

Migration for Employment Recommendation (revised), 1949 (No.86)

Section VII: 20 in the *Migration for Employment Recommendation* indicates the state's responsibility to admit migrant workers or members of their families who have returned to the benefit of any measures in force for the granting of poverty relief and unemployment relief, and for promoting the re-employment of the unemployed.

International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families

Article 67 of the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families* requires states to adopt measures regarding the orderly return of migrant workers and members of their families to the country of origin when they decide to return or their authorization of residence or employment expires or when they are in an irregular situation. Further, states shall co-operate, as appropriate, to promote adequate economic conditions for their resettlement and to facilitate their durable social and cultural reintegration in the country of origin.

Annex 3 – Preliminary Mapping of Support and Services in Vanuatu

The following sections provide a preliminary mapping (as of August 2024) of the support and services that may be available to labour mobility workers, and their families, in Vanuatu in the reintegration period (some appear in more than one dimension).

Economic

- Employment Services Unit (ESU) – Superannuation Kiosk and other referral support for returnees.
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) – support with Agri Business to move toward commercial/semi commercial farming and dedicated Reintegration Officers.
- VLab, Yumi Growem Vanuatu – Business incubator/ entrepreneurship training, support and mentorship.
- Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) – business registration and support for business.
- Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) – Skills development and training programmes in a range of areas including construction, agriculture, tourism, hospitality, automotive, business management and information technology.
- Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) – Offering skills development courses (carpentry, tourism, foundation skills and leadership and management), free micro credentials for workers and scholarships.
- Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) – Vanuatu's pension scheme.
- Digicel Vanuatu – My Cash international money transfer service.
- Vodafone Vanuatu – M-Vatu international money transfer service.
- IOM Vanuatu – Famili i Redi pre-departure training.
- World Vision Vanuatu (WVV) – Famili i Redi and other programmes including Growing Resilient and Strengthened Civil Society Organisations for Improved Woman and Youth Economic Empowerment.
- International Labour Organisation (ILO) – Small business support (beginning in 2024).
- National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV) – Financial literacy training, Isi Haos, Agri loans.
- ANZ Vanuatu – Financial literacy training (Money Minded).
- South Pacific Business Development – Microfinance.
- Vanwoods – Microfinance.
- UNWomen – Business, training for women through market vendor associations.
- WOK I KIK – online job advertising platform.
- Employment Vanuatu Portal – an online job search and recruitment portal hosted by the Government of Vanuatu.
- Link Personal Services – Recruitment and job advertising platform.
- Haos Blong Wok – Job search centre and support
- Youth Challenge Vanuatu - Employment and job readiness training for youth, entrepreneurship and business development, life skills and personal development, educational support, sports and recreation, community service, vocational skills training, job matching and placement.

Social

Health sector

- There are six hospitals in Vanuatu, two in the urban centres (Vila Central Hospital, Port Vila and Northern Provincial Hospital, Luganville) and four across the other provinces (Tanna, Ambae, Vanua Lava and Malekula). There are also 38 health centres, 113 dispensaries and 243 aid posts (World Bank, 2018:16). It is estimated that 98 per cent of all of Vanuatu's doctors, 74 per cent of all nurses and 70 per cent of all midwives are working in the two urban hospitals (World Bank, 2018:18). There is a fee for service.
- There are a handful of private health clinics in Port Vila, staffed by physicians.
- Private pharmacies are located in Port Vila and Luganville only.
- The only dedicated mental health services in Vanuatu are located in Vila Central Hospital's Mind Care Unit, that is staffed by one physician and three psychiatric nurses.
- Beyond private air ambulance services (that also service the public health care system as needed and available), Vanuatu also has one private ambulance service, ProMedical Vanuatu, staffed by trained paramedics, with ambulance stations in Port Vila and Luganville.
- A Chinese naval hospital ship, the Peace Ark, has visited Vanuatu three times in the last decade (2014, 2018 and 2023) providing free medical services.
- Dental services are only available at Vila Central Hospital's public dental clinic, and through a handful of private dental clinics in Port Vila. A government report from 2019 described the oral health workforce in Vanuatu as "grossly inadequate", and concentrated only in urban areas (MoH, 2019:10).
- Only one Physiotherapist in Vanuatu (fee for service) located in Port Vila no occupational Therapy or Speech Therapy.

Justice sector

- Vanuatu's court system consists of a Supreme Court and Court of Appeal based in Port Vila, approximately 10 Magistrates Courts spread across rural Vanuatu (and in Luganville), and approximately the same number of Island Courts (which are staffed by lay justices).
- There are two correctional services facilities in Vanuatu (Port Vila and Luganville).
- There are police stations in Port Vila and Luganville, and on Tanna and Epi, as well as several police posts in rural areas.
- Vanuatu National Workers Union (VNWU) – offering legal advice on labour rights violations to workers.

Education sector

- There are approximately 695 Early Childhood Education Centres, 450 Primary Schools (Years 1 to 6) and 112 Secondary Schools (Year 7+) in Vanuatu (MOET, 2022:10). Education is not free in Vanuatu and the cost of education and fees can range from approximately VUV 6000 (AUD 75) for primary school fees to VUV 120,000 (AUD 1,500) for secondary school tuition and fees (MOET, 2018).
- National University of Vanuatu (NUV) – Offering undergraduate and master's degree programmes in both English and French.
- University of South Pacific (USP), Emalus Campus – Regional university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in English.
- Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT) – Providing technical and vocational training.
- Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE) – Training teachers and offering education programmes.
- Vanuatu Maritime College – Offering maritime training courses.
- Vanuatu Agricultural College – Offering training related to agriculture and agribusiness.
- Vanuatu College of Nursing Education – Offering training in nursing.
- Talua Theological Training Institute – Offering theological training.
- Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) – Offering skills development courses (carpentry, tourism, foundation skills and leadership and management), free micro credentials for workers and scholarships.
- Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) – Skills development and training programmes in a range of areas including construction, agriculture, tourism, hospitality, automotive, business management and information technology.

Other social services

- Wan Smolbag – Offering health services, nutrition services and programmes, a youth drop-in centre, literacy training and other skills development and training (arts, sewing, performance arts). Locations in Port Vila, Luganville and Pentecost. Acts as an evacuation centre during disasters.
- Vanuatu Women's Centre – Crisis counselling and legal services for women and children who experience violence and abuse, prevention and awareness, Male Advocacy Program (training male advocates to reduce gender-based violence and promote equality).
- World Vision Vanuatu – WASH programmes, agricultural and economic development support, education and early childhood, disaster risk reduction and preparedness, gender equality and social inclusion and support for vulnerable groups, and Haos blo Yumi reintegration workshop focusing on building cyclone-safe housing.
- IOM Vanuatu – disaster risk reduction and preparedness programmes and Famili i Kam Bak workshops offering sessions on effective communication and community engagement, providing information on relevant services, addressing psychosocial issues, and empowering participants with financial skills.
- Vanuatu Red Cross Society – Disaster preparedness and response, first aid training, health, sanitation and hygiene promotion, climate change adaptation.
- Save the Children Vanuatu – Early childhood education and educational support and training, child protection and child rights, health and nutrition and maternal/child health, disaster risk reduction, livelihoods and food security.
- Care International Vanuatu – Disaster risk reduction and emergency response, climate change adaptation, food security and livelihoods, WASH programmes, gender equality.
- Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) – Disaster relief and recovery, food security and livelihoods, WASH programmes, health and education.
- Oxfam Vanuatu – Disaster risk reduction and emergency response, climate change adaptation and resilience, gender justice and women's rights, good governance.
- Vanuatu Family Health Association – Offering health services and sexual and reproductive health information.
- UN Agencies (UNICEF, UNWomen, UNDP) – these agencies all work together with government and civil society to improve service delivery in health, education and economic development and to increase child protection and gender equality.
- Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities – advocacy and rights promotion, education and training, rehabilitation services, livelihoods and economic empowerment, community-based inclusive development.

- Disability Desk, Ministry of Justice and Community Services – policy, awareness and advice on disability support services.
- VPride – Education and awareness around LGBTIQ+ rights, community mobilization and support, and capacity building and training.
- Sista – Offering various services aimed at supporting and empowering women and young women in particular.
- Youth Challenge Vanuatu – Employment and job readiness training for youth, entrepreneurship and business development, life skills and personal development, educational support, sports and recreation, community service, vocational skills training, job matching and placement.
- Department of Women’s Affairs – various programmes and support for women.
- Vanuatu National Provident Fund – Vanuatu’s national pension scheme.
- Vanuatu Christian Council – Offering various religious and pastoral care programmes.
- Evacuation centres – There are designated evacuation centres in community organizations, community halls, churches, and schools across Vanuatu.
- Vanuatu churches and religious groups – Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Church of Christ, Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God, Jehovah’s Witness, Mormons, Baha’i and a small number of others.
- Community leaders.

Psychosocial

- Vanuatu Women’s Centre – Crisis counselling and legal services for women and children who experience violence and abuse, prevention and awareness, Male Advocacy Program (training male advocates to reduce gender-based violence and promote equality).
- Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities – advocacy and rights promotion, education and training, rehabilitation services, livelihoods and economic empowerment, community-based inclusive development.
- Disability Desk, Ministry of Justice and Community Services – policy, awareness and advice on disability support services.
- Vanuatu Mind Care Unit – With one physician and three psychiatric nurses.
- VPride – Education and awareness around LGBTIQ+ rights, community mobilization and support, and capacity building and training.
- Vanuatu churches and religious groups – Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Church of Christ, Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God, Jehovah’s Witness, Mormons, Baha’i and a small number of others, with several offering pastoral care.
- Sporting and cultural programmes.

