

PACIFIC LABOUR MOBILITY ANNUAL MEETING

7-10 December | Apia

1. The Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting (PLMAM) 2021 was held on 7-10 December. Under the theme “Positioning for Growth: Challenges and Opportunities”, the Government of Samoa hosted a hybrid virtual event format, with in-person events held in Apia, Samoa, hubs in various participating countries, and an online virtual event platform. Participants included public and private sector representatives of the Pacific Islands Forum member and observer countries, including PACER Plus members, industry, regional organisations and civil society representatives, academics and relevant stakeholders.
2. The meeting was organised following the 3rd PACER Plus Ministers Meeting in June 2021, which called for the PLMAM to be held virtually before the end of 2021 as well as to convene a Ministerial dialogue on labour mobility.
3. From the PLMAM hub at the Sheraton Samoa Aggie Grey’s Hotel and Bungalows in Apia, the meeting was blessed by Reverend Nuuausala Siaosi Siutaia. The Honourable Leatinuu Wayne Soialo, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Labour of Samoa, delivered the keynote address and officially opened the 2021 PLMAM.

Ministerial Dialogue – Setting the scene: The future of Pacific Labour mobility

4. Chaired by the Honourable Leatinuu, the trade and labour ministers from Tuvalu, Fiji, Australia and New Zealand and the ministerial representative from Tonga, commended the importance of labour mobility in the region. The Dialogue acknowledged:
 - 4.1 the ongoing commitment of Australia and New Zealand to their labour mobility initiatives throughout these uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic, noting a ‘new norm’ in travel and the movement of people across international borders.
 - 4.2 the rapidly evolving challenges on the supply and demand of labour through the global pandemic, and commit to continued collaboration and partnership to find appropriate solutions.
 - 4.3 the need to work towards a holistic labour mobility policy setting, informed by evidence, and integrated into broader national strategic development agendas.
 - 4.4 that moving forward, there is a need to look at existing labour mobility schemes and work with labour-receiving countries to expand coverage to new industries and sectors; priority must be given to circular migration to allow workers to continue to access employment opportunities and to establish integrated skills development.

5. Australia acknowledged the support of labour sending countries and the contribution of workers in promoting economic resilience across the Pacific region. Australia further reiterated its commitment to Pacific labour mobility as the primary avenue for rural and regional Australian employers to obtain temporary workers. Australia further acknowledged that recent changes in labour mobility initiatives, including the consolidation of labour mobility schemes to a single program the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, have been in response to Pacific voices and the role of PLMAM in continuing this evolution.
6. New Zealand acknowledged the role of labour mobility in promoting resiliency in the Pacific region, and the contribution workers make to the economic, social and cultural fabric of New Zealand. New Zealand remains committed to partnering with Pacific countries to ensure future labour mobility opportunities are aligned with partners' own development aspirations.

Progress towards the outcomes of PLMAM 2019

7. Participants acknowledged progress on the implementation of the outcomes has been challenged by the global pandemic, noting the closure of international borders since early 2020, within six months of PLMAM 2019 held in Auckland and the subsequent cancellation of PLMAM 2020.
8. Participants acknowledged that progress has been made in some areas, notably the recent establishment and scale up of activities in the PACER Plus Implementation Unit in Apia, Samoa.
9. Participants noted many of the discussion topics in PLMAM 2019 have remained on the agenda in PLMAM 2021. These issues relate to contract arrangements and the roles and responsibilities in ensuring that workers' welfare and working conditions are adequately safeguarded and understood. **Participants agreed** that the COVID-19 pandemic had intensified attention on worker welfare as a priority issue.

Where we are going: Future trends in Pacific labour mobility

10. Participants noted the progress of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat towards delivering a Comprehensive Regional Labour Mobility Assessment. The review will assess existing labour mobility agreements in the region and the status of current national labour mobility policies, and identify the interactions between labour mobility and regional and subregional trade agreements.
11. Participants noted the establishment of the PACER Plus Implementation Unit which also hosts the Labour Mobility Secretariat, providing guidance to all Pacific labour sending

countries, as well as dedicated resources for PACER Plus Parties to draw on for assistance and support.

12. Participants noted the recent changes announced by Australia under the PALM Scheme, which would see a greater commitment to skills development, qualifications and increased pay for workers.

Sustainability of bilateral and regional labour mobility systems, and Pacific supply side management

13. **Participants agreed** there was a need for more details of the economic benefits gained by workers in the current pandemic environment, to better understand the scale of economic return in relation to increased expenses for participation for workers such as increased remittance fees, accommodation, or travel costs.
14. Participants recognised the cross-cutting nature of labour mobility and the value in ensuring a range of domestic agencies were included in strategic discussions on labour mobility. The introduction of regular trilateral dialogues between Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific countries was seen as a useful mechanism to enable greater transparency and flow of information to drive efficiencies in labour mobility efforts.
15. Participants acknowledged the pressures facing labour sending units due to the significant uptick in demand for workers from Australia and New Zealand, and the additional requirements associated with labour mobility in a COVID environment that are putting strain on units.
16. **Participants agreed** that detailed labour supply assessments are required at a national level to support the alignment between labour mobility opportunities and increasing labour demand for workers in Australia and New Zealand.

Impact of closed borders and increased numbers on worker welfare

17. Participants noted that the impact of closed borders and the uncertainty of travel arrangements have exacerbated social and behavioural issues.
18. Accommodation standards and suitability for workers over extended periods (and seasonal changes) was highlighted as an emerging issue. Participants welcomed efforts by Australian agencies to work with employers, raising and promoting standards of accommodation, quality assuring accommodation.
19. Participants noted the increased incidence of workers absconding from employers during the pandemic, a complex issue that requires greater focus, evidence, data collection and analysis to better inform current practices.

20. **Participants agreed** that stronger national policy settings, grounded on evidence will assist in understanding and addressing workers absconding from Employers. A dedicated focus on this is required for the benefit of all labour sending and receiving countries.
21. Participants welcomed Australia and New Zealand's commitment to work through their respective labour mobility programmes on initiatives to improve and address pre-departure briefings to ensure workers were fully aware of accommodation, transport and travel arrangements, ongoing costs borne by the worker, complaint management, dispute resolution, mediation and ongoing employment options.
22. Participants noted the challenges with workers taking annual leave. This issue was viewed as contributing to worker welfare concerns and fatigue during the border closures.
23. Participants noted the value placed on cultural ties and ability to remain connected to home as a measure to manage complex socio-cultural impacts, but also maintain the motivation and productivity of workers abroad. These issues could be considered in the recruitment phase and in the ongoing welfare management approach. The importance of access to faith communities continue to emerge as integral element of welfare support.
24. Access to communications and wi-fi connectivity was also noted as an important element in the welfare of workers, not only promoting contact with family and networks in home countries, but also for learning and upskilling opportunities.
25. Enhancing the workers voice and capturing their experience was also highlighted as important. Creating feedback channels and having transparent communication enables workers to raise concerns in confidence. Participants recognised the relative importance of this in the current environment.
26. Participants acknowledged the social impact labour mobility schemes have on Pacific Island communities which extend beyond just the workers. Villages and families are experiencing gaps of working men to fulfil responsibilities and tasks.

Ethical employment of Pacific Labour

27. Participants welcomed the commitment by employers to innovation, continuous improvement and strong social and good-practice principles. These were recurring elements seen in the practices of respected employers of Pacific workers (by industry partners).

28. **Participants agreed** further work should be pursued to develop an agreed standards and principles framework for employers in Australia and New Zealand, with a focus on consistency (where possible) across countries and states to enable greater transparency on costs for workers.

Enhancing the Mobility and Skills of Pacific Workers

29. Participants welcomed the commitments of Australia and New Zealand to developing the skills of workers through a range of initiatives within the region, and while working in Australia and New Zealand. The positive work on qualifications recognition in labour mobility was noted, in particular the Pacific qualifications harmonisation project currently under way.
30. Participants noted various pathways to ongoing skills development and seek to ensure increased access to training and learning opportunities provided by institutions such as Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC).
31. **Participants agreed** to continue to work together to enhance skills of Pacific workers, recognising that collaboration between governments, training institutes and industry partners was necessary to achieve improved skills and qualification recognition. Participants agreed that this should remain a focus of attention in the year ahead. Participants highlighted how training programmes for skill development should be responsive to the interests and needs of workers, and should be transferable to their home country.
32. Participants noted the emerging need for more comprehensive re-integration initiatives for returning workers, given the growth of labour mobility programs in Australia and New Zealand. Re-integration programs should maintain basic financial literacy skills as well as focus on innovative, entrepreneurial approaches for small business opportunities. Re-integration programs should be identified and scheduled prior to worker departure and continued communication during seasonal employment. Participants agreed this was an area where shared experiences could be valuable.