

*Submission to the Inquiry into activating trade and investment between Australia
and Pacific island countries*

TOWARDS MORE JUST AND EQUITABLE LABOUR RELATIONS, AND STRONGER
AUSTRALIA-PACIFIC ISLAND RELATIONSHIPS

Dr Victoria Stead

Senior Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation
Deakin University

INTRODUCTION

This submission relates to the Inquiry's interests in strengthening employment links between Australia and Pacific Island countries; understanding and mitigating barriers to trade and investment between Australia and Pacific Island countries; and the role and effectiveness of support structures and networks, including Pacific diaspora and civil society.

The points and recommendations below are drawn from the findings of two long-running research projects, both currently through Australian Research Council grants (DE180101224 and IN180100055):

- *Race, Labour and Belonging: Strengthening Rural Workforces and Communities:* This research, conducted from 2016-present within Australia, includes a specific focus on the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), including the experiences of Pacific Islander workers, farmers, and local Pacific Islander communities in the Greater Shepparton Region of north-central Victoria.
- *War Memories and War Tourism:* This research, conducted from 2015-present in Papua New Guinea and Australia, includes specific attention to the trekking industry associated with the Kokoda Track in PNG. The research uses interviews and other data collection methods (participant observation, documentary analysis) to understand the experiences of local PNG communities, Papua New Guineans employed in the trekking industry, Australian trekkers, and Australian trek company operators.

These projects in turn draw on my more than 13 years' experience conducting research in and about the Pacific region and its relationships with Australia. In addition to my role as Senior Research Fellow at Deakin University, I am also an Executive member of the Australian Association for Pacific Studies.

KEY FINDINGS

1. *Australia-Pacific Islander relations are shaped, and impeded, by socio-economic inequalities and unequal freedom of movement*

These inequalities underpin, and indeed set the conditions of possibility that enable schemes like the Seasonal Worker Programme. Pacific Islanders travel to Australia to pursue horticultural labour because it holds the promise (if not always the reality) of superior wages to those which it is possible

for people to earn in their home countries. In this sense, the scheme has many positives, however in my research in Shepparton over the past four years many Pacific Islander workers have also explained that they would have preferred to stay in their home countries, with their families, if the same work opportunities were available to them there. Many have articulated a keen awareness of the unequal socio-economic conditions between themselves and many Australians, and the inequalities in status that they see being replicated through the scheme. Pacific Islander workers describe, for example, a feeling that they are being perceived as suitable only for kinds of work (like fruit picking) that Australians deem undesirable. There is a danger, inherent in the scheme, that Australia is representing and treating the Pacific as a particular kind of place (a source of cheap, compliant labour), and Pacific Islanders as particular kinds of people (good for low-skilled, otherwise undesirable work). Such characterisations would be reductive, dangerous, insulting, and harmful to our regional relationships.

In Papua New Guinea, in the context of the trekking industry around the Kokoda Track, local people similarly describe the socio-economic inequalities that structure their relations with Australians. Locals who have attempted to enter the industry as operators or trek companies describe the difficulty they face in doing so, because they cannot meet the costs or effectively compete against Australian trekking companies. Here, too, the perception is that the kinds of work available to Papua New Guineans (as porters carrying Australian trekkers' bags, for example) are more junior, and less profitable kinds of work compared to those available to Australians. Many Papua New Guineans described seeing benefits and profits accruing to outsiders. As one local in the area around Kokoda Station stated:

“‘Kokoda’ is like a magic word. You say it and money flows down, benefits flow down, but none of it seems to come to us.’

Here, as in the context of the Seasonal Worker Programme, these experiences can produce a sense of grievance, disappointment, frustration, and injustice.

The issue of unequal freedom of movement is a persistent one raised by Pacific Islander participants within both bodies of research. In PNG, local people frequently identify the barriers to their own access to Australia (e.g. difficulties getting visas), contrasting these to the relative ease of movement of Australians into PNG. In Australia, Pacific Islanders highlight the strict, time-limited and constrained conditions of the SWP, contrasting these to the relative ease with which they see Australians, including both business people and tourists, travel to and within the Pacific region.

RECOMMENDATION: Prioritise forms of training, seed funding, and targeted support to allow Pacific Islanders, including Pacific Islander small business owners, to operate on equal footing with Australian corporate operators.

RECOMMENDATION: Institute greater freedom and ease of movement for Pacific Islanders seeking to travel to Australia.

2. *Unequal relations impede the capacities of Pacific Islanders to complain or seek redress for unfair conditions*

In both contexts – the SWP in Australia and the Kokoda trekking industry in PNG – inequalities in Australia-Pacific Islander relations make it harder for Pacific Islanders to speak out about unfair or exploitative labour conditions.

In PNG, porters on the Kokoda Track were highly reluctant to complain because they feared (based on experience and the experiences of those they worked with) that they would not be picked for work on future treks. They described, moreover, a strong compulsion to “be friends” with the Australians whose bags they carried, and to maintain good relations at all costs because the gifts and tips that Australians sometimes give at the end of a trek have become a critical part of people’s livelihood strategies.

In Australia, SWP workers similarly work under the threat of losing their job without redress. Workers typically work for periods of up to 6 months, and the prospect of return in subsequent seasons (years) is held out by the industry and Australian government advocates of the scheme as a key benefit. However workers’ capacity to return is often dependent on the inclinations of the farmers they work for and/or the labour hire agents who mediate their employment. This greatly inhibits their willingness to complain or advocate for their rights and conditions. In one fruit-packing shed in Shepparton, I documented a tremendous turnover of staff across three years. Of an original group of ~20 workers in the first year, only three were included in the return group the second year (which also had ~20 workers), despite all of the original group wanting to return. The third year, only two returnees were included in the cohort. One worker, who had been vocal in organising the group, was not chosen to return, with the packing shed manager identifying “personality issues” as a vague explanation for the decision. Under Australian workplace legislation, this would not be an acceptable justification for the cessation of a workers’ employment, but the conditions of the SWP make it possible for Pacific Islander workers to be treated in this way.

RECOMMENDATION: Recognise and protect Pacific Islanders workers *as workers*, not as development beneficiaries. Ensure that Pacific Islander workers have actual, not simply rhetorical, access to the workplace rights and securities available to Australian workers.

RECOMMENDATION: In the specific context of the SWP, institutionalise a right to return in future seasons such that any removal of that right can only be on strict conditions (e.g. documented failure to meet responsibilities, serious misconduct, etc.) rather than merely on the discretion of employers. This should be on par with the protections offered to Australian workers.

3. Experiences of Australia-Pacific Islander relations are complex, and these complexities can be missed in evaluations

My research with both SWP workers in Australia, and with Papua New Guineans employed in the trekking industry along the Kokoda Track, as well as with their families and wider communities, reveals complex and often ambivalent attitudes and experiences. People are often grateful for their employment, and the benefits they have access to, but may *also* feel that the situations they are in are exploitative or otherwise unequal.

In Australia, SWP workers often articulate an awareness of the history of “blackbirding” – the coercive or exploitative recruitment of Pacific Islanders to work the cane-fields of Queensland and northern NSW through the 19th century – which forms a historical echo to their own employment. Workers sometimes invoke a language of “modern day slavery” to describe parallels between the past and their own present experiences. At the same time, the same people may also strongly desire and actively pursue the continuation of their own employment. These facts are not contradictory, but rather reflect the reality of an unequal field in which workers seek to make the best of situations that are nevertheless marked by sharp inequalities.

In PNG, local people impacted by the trekking industry also experience their own employment (or their failure to access employment), and their interactions with Australian trek companies and trekkers, within the context of Australia's colonial history in PNG. Indeed, awareness of this colonial history is much more widespread and alive for Papua New Guineans than it is for the vast majority of Australian trekkers or trek company operators who I have interviewed in the course of my research. Papua New Guineans draw attention to the inequalities and grievances they see as reflective of this colonial dynamic continuing into the present day, even as they also pursue and desire participation in the industry.

In each case, the complex and often-ambivalent feelings that Pacific Islanders describe are not readily identified or well understood through hasty or thin research. Survey-based evaluation mechanisms that ask people questions like "are you satisfied with your work?", or "would you recommend this work to others?" are highly unlikely to capture the complexities of people's experiences. This is because people's experiences are often multifaceted but also, as indicated above, because people experience structural pressures limiting their capacities to speak out or voice discontent, and are often fearful (with good reason) of the consequences of doing so. In my research, it has taken long periods (months, sometimes years) of building rapport and trust, and use of ethnographic methods (e.g. close attention to lived experience, rather than one-off interviews or surveys) to gain insight into Pacific people's complex experiences of their relationships with Australia.

RECOMMENDATION: Research and evaluation of Australia-Pacific Island trade, investment and labour relations be based on sustained, deep engagement such as that made possible by Pacific Islander researchers themselves, by anthropologists, or others using qualitative methodologies based on meaningful ties to Pacific peoples and cultures. Quick survey-based methods are unlikely to accurately capture the multifaceted nature of Pacific Islander experiences of trade, investment and labour relations with Australia.

4. Pacific diaspora, family and community relations are crucial for supporting good trade and labour relations, including for seasonal workers

The importance of kinship and community networks within Pacific Island cultures is widely recognised. These networks often extend across countries and oceans, and are fundamental for supporting good trade and labour relations. This is particularly important to recognise in the context of the Seasonal Worker Programme. The temporary nature of the scheme, and the regulatory measures preventing workers bringing family members with them, contribute to a popular understanding of SWP workers as unattached. My research in Australia highlights though that SWP workers are still often connected to extended kinship (family) or community networks, and that these networks are vital to workers' wellbeing. SWP workers are also often connected to more established Pacific Islander communities, including in regional Australia.

RECOMMENDATION: Recognise the interconnections between SWP workers and other Pacific Islander communities within Australia, and harness these as a strength.