

Solomon Islanders have a significant history of labour mobility and diaspora. In the 19th century they provided around 18,000 migrant labourers for the Queensland sugar industry (Moore 1990). In the 20th century, this diaspora was diverted and contained within Solomon Islands boundaries — first to plantations, and then largely to the opportunities available in and around the national capital, Honiara. In the 21st century, after a period of crisis induced in part by the effects of this movement, the internal diaspora is again building rapidly. In international (and especially wider Pacific) comparison, however, Solomon Islands is a significant outlier.

In 2014 the Solomons-born diaspora is numerically less than it was in 1906, when the Solomon Islands population was less than one-fifth of what it is now. At a mere 0.08 per cent of the resident population, the contemporary Solomons diaspora is globally among the smallest (Bedford et al. in press) and it shows few signs of growing, even as other Pacific and international diasporas are becoming increasingly important to the sending islands' life and economic development. Between 2000 and 2006, of 1,560 Solomon Islanders moving on longer term visas the net transfer to Australia was less than 160 (Bedford and Hugo 2012).

If ever there was a region that would benefit from migration, the island Pacific is that region (Hugo 2012). Pacific states are smaller and further from major international markets than most other developing countries. Their constraints in terms of economic scale and isolation are such that without opportunities for international mobility they simply will not achieve the market-led economic growth imagined for them (World Bank 2010). Nor will they be able to achieve education, health and other human development capabilities anticipated in the Millennium Development Goals.

The burgeoning population of young Solomon Islanders in the 21st century is more in touch with the wider world than any previous generation. They aspire educationally and, like all young people, want to explore the possibilities the wider region offers. Opportunities are opening for mobility between Pacific islands, and especially nations in the Melanesian Spearhead Group, but access to training and work opportunities in the region's richest economies remain powerfully constrained. Containing the Solomon Islands' diaspora within the nation's territorial boundaries is, we think,

a recipe for both lost development opportunities and ongoing internal tension.

This brief note presents a basic framework (developed further in Craig et al. in press) for understanding both previous Solomon Islands' labour mobility and diaspora, and current opportunities and constraints.

## Regulation of mobility and diaspora

As Australia and New Zealand entered global food production systems in the 19th century, demand for labour increased rapidly. In Australia's tropical north sugar plantations struggled to attract labour, and turned to the Pacific. After a ragged start ('blackbirding'), relatively stable and mutually beneficial contracting arrangements emerged, supported by imperial regulation and inspection, and protectorate arrangements at the regional level. This migration was largely circular — workers would sign on through local agents for 3-year terms at fixed pay (Moore 1990). But the circularity was open-ended; many young people did several stints, and around 25 per cent of them chose to stay in Queensland long term.

When considering federation, Australian interests sought a different role and status in the Pacific. Settler colony status appealed, exercising some security in the region by imperial proxy, and building a population drawing on migrants from Europe as opposed to China and the Pacific. The *Pacific Islands Labourers Act 1901* was an early companion to the white Australia legislation. The immediate effect was to deny Queensland plantation owners access to a key labour market, and their Melanesian employees access to longer term opportunities for mobility and diaspora. Longer term trading, labour contracting and migratory links in the western Pacific were effectively severed into the present time. Solomon Islands labour migration in the late 19th century offers clear evidence that any simple formulation about Melanesians not wanting to migrate (especially compared to Polynesians) is quite misleading. But even more strikingly, the 5,000 returnees in 1906 represent a greater population than the entire Solomons-born diaspora internationally today. The United Nations Population Division (2013) recently estimated that just 3,600 Solomon Islands-born people were living outside the island country (Bedford et al. in press).

After 1901 circular and longer term movement of Solomon Islanders was contained internally, and focused

on coconut plantation work (pre World War II) and, since the 1970s, on Honiara — the centre of colonial and post-colonial urban development (Chapman 1985; Friesen 1994). The containment of Solomons diaspora within these boundaries has had a range of effects, including the recent tensions.

### Looking ahead

Internationally, migration has been strongly resurgent in recent decades. Neoliberal policies have emphasised the economic value of migrants, and led to competition for skilled 'designer' migrants and for students who pay course fees and stay on to gain residence. Circular migration for low-skilled seasonal employment is a positive development; its focus is on ready availability and compulsory return. This in turn has helped governments restrict political costs — workers are seen as temporary, not competing with local workers at the destinations. Critics point out that this narrow circularity differs radically from that which prevailed in the 19th century, and produces different outcomes: young Melanesians appear to be on the wrong side of an institutionally segmented mobility that Bauman (2000:221) calls 'the extraterritoriality of the new global elite and the forced territoriality of the rest'.

However, opportunities and pathways do exist, and the will to see them open up is growing. International evidence about the development virtues of mobility and diaspora is compelling (Hugo 2012). Remittances internationally return more than three times the value of official development assistance to developing countries; returnees come back with skills and investment, and diasporas enable travel and reduce costs for all migrants alike. Solomon Islands too needs to benefit from these possibilities.

Access to 'two-step' migration pathways for students can be enabled by partial scholarships or fees concessions, institutional twinning, and skills-sharing arrangements in training and skilled work, with options to return under other visas with experience taken into account. Diaspora engagement and mobilisation, and intraregional South-South mobility within regional organisation domains may also become significant. Seasonal work opportunities are growing (and will grow further with Fijian participation after their elections late in 2014), fuelling desire from those involved for ways to capitalise on experiences. Other forms of labour market access under free trade agreements, including PACER Plus, could provide further opportunities. Our research intentions are to watch this space.

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