

Three DevPolicy Blogs on I-Kiribati women who have been seasonal workers in New Zealand since late 2019.

Abstract

Three blogs in the ANU's DevPolicy series (August/September 2021), reproduced below, review the impacts of COVID-19 related border closures on I-Kiribati women recruited for seasonal work in New Zealand between September 2019 and January 2020. These women, most of whom have been in New Zealand for almost two years, have been unable to return to Kiribati because there has been, and remains, no clear repatriation pathway.

The authors examine some of the challenges the I-Kiribati women, their employers and their families at home have faced in adapting to continuous employment over the two year period, rather than the six month contract the women originally signed on for when they left Kiribati. At the time of writing (late August, 2021) community transmission of COVID-19 in both Fiji and New Zealand meant that discussions between the Kiribati and New Zealand Governments about special arrangements to facilitate repatriation were again in limbo.

The women face the prospect of commencing a third successive season of picking and packing blueberries, kiwifruit, tomatoes and, later, lemons and mandarins, without the usual break back in Kiribati between seasons to recover from the strenuous 8-10 hour days/nights in the field or packhouse in New Zealand. Their contributions, along with those of the I-Kiribati men and other seasonal workers who have worked continuously in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture sector since before March 2020, have been exceptional, if little acknowledged and recognised, during an exceptional year for the RSE scheme.

I-Kiribati female seasonal workers in New Zealand for the long haul

By Charlotte Bedford, Richard Bedford and Rena Tekanene on Aug 25, 2021 06:00 am

On 1 August 2021, 16 months after New Zealand and Kiribati closed their international borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the 286 I-Kiribati workers then in New Zealand, a third (97) of whom are women, remain in the country under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. There has been no pathway home for any of these workers.

Nearly all of the 97 women were originally employed on five to seven-month contracts. For the 186 men, around 60% had eight to nine-month contracts, with most of the remainder expecting to work for six months. When making household arrangements for their absences in late 2019-early 2020, none of the men or women could have imagined spending more than 18 months away from their families.

In this three-part blog we outline some of the experiences of 47 of the I-Kiribati women who we have visited repeatedly since June 2020 to talk about their extended stay. Around half of the women were previously interviewed as part of the [RSE Impact Study](#) in South Tarawa in 2019. At the time of the 2019 interviews, all of the women had been employed for the 2018-19 year and were keen to return to New Zealand for the next season.

For the 2019-20 season, the 47 women, who are all employed by the same primary RSE, were recruited in three groups. They were employed on five to six-month contracts due to finish in autumn or early winter 2020. Their employer operates in the Auckland and Northland regions harvesting berries, citrus and vegetables, and one group of 18 women is shared with another RSE via a joint agreement to recruit (ATR). The second RSE is a kiwifruit producer in the Bay of Plenty. Ten of the women, who work as a group harvesting vegetables in Auckland, are mainly new recruits. The other two groups are a mix of returnees, with three of the women returning for their eighth successive season in 2019-20.

Without a viable repatriation pathway, the 47 women have worked continuously for the same two RSEs since they entered the country, and Immigration New Zealand has granted successive RSE visa extensions to ensure the women remain legally resident.

By July 2021, the women had been employed for between 18 and 21 months; at least three times the length of their original contracts. For the women, and the RSEs who oversee their pastoral care, there have been some benefits, as well as challenges, to the longer than anticipated periods in New Zealand.

One of the benefits has been the broadening of the women's horticultural experience. In efforts to keep the women continuously employed for 30 hours per week, as per the RSE policy requirements, the RSEs have shifted the women between different crops and tasks. In doing so, the women have picked up new skills in harvesting, pruning and maintaining a variety of crops, and the RSEs now have a more widely-experienced female RSE workforce. The opportunity to earn a seasonal work income for an extended period, and to save and send money to family in Kiribati, is another significant benefit.

Over the past year, the women have lived in different types of RSE accommodation, giving them the opportunity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different sorts of living arrangements for seasonal workers. They've also lived in different local communities and established new connections, especially with members of the resident I-Kiribati communities near Auckland and in the Bay of Plenty.

The links between I-Kiribati RSE workers and members of the diaspora have strengthened over the past year and resident I-Kiribati in New Zealand have played a major role helping the I-Kiribati workers, and their employers, deal with wellbeing issues that have arisen.

For the women, the long absences from home have presented a range of social and health-related challenges. In a 'normal' year, seasonal workers experiencing significant personal difficulties or dealing with family emergencies have been able to

return home. This is the first year since the RSE scheme began that this self-regulating adjustment to personal and family problems has not been possible.

Some of the main issues facing the women include: physical and mental exhaustion from months of continuous work doing hard, physical jobs in the orchard and the pack house; living together communally in shared accommodation for much longer than the usual six months; the need for social interaction beyond the immediate group and the unintended consequences of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, in some cases, unplanned pregnancies and births; and continuing to manage relationships with family in Kiribati.

In the next blog in this series, we examine how the I-Kiribati women and their employers have negotiated these various challenges.

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Disclosure

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The post [I-Kiribati female seasonal workers in New Zealand for the long haul](#) appeared first on [Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre](#).

[I-Kiribati female seasonal workers in New Zealand: lived experiences](#)

By Charlotte Bedford, Richard Bedford and Rena Tekanene on Sep 01, 2021 06:00 am

As recounted in our [first blog](#), 286 I-Kiribati workers, including 97 women, have been in New Zealand since borders closed early last year, with no way home. This blog continues to tell the story of 47 of the I-Kiribati women.

The way the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme works requires team members to spend most of every day working and living in close proximity. For the three groups of women, living together for more than 18 months has led to personality clashes and disagreements over work and own-time activities and behaviour; at times challenging group solidarity. Uncertainty about future seasonal work, anxieties linked with family issues in Kiribati, and the absence of any clear time horizon for their stay in New Zealand which has been compounded by New Zealand's recent [COVID-19 community outbreak](#), have contributed to these tensions.

Coping with extended periods apart from their partners is difficult for the I-Kiribati women and the men. The incidence of STIs among I-Kiribati workers has increased according to one pastoral care worker who is devoting a lot of time to safe sex education. There have been six reported pregnancies among the group of 47 women, and, to date, five of the I-Kiribati women have given birth in New Zealand.

In previous years, if an RSE woman discovered she was pregnant she would be supported to return home to give birth. This has not been possible for the I-Kiribati women. RSE workers are not eligible to access New Zealand's public health system free of charge, and RSE medical insurance, which is mandatory, does not cover pregnancy and childbirth costs. The costs, which start at NZ\$9,000, fall directly on the worker.

Childbirth away from home has been one of the most complex wellbeing issues to manage, and has required significant collaboration between the I-Kiribati mothers, RSEs who have arranged for paid maternity leave via government assistance and provided ongoing pastoral care, and members of the I-Kiribati community in Auckland who have housed new mothers and continue to offer support.

For the I-Kiribati women, alongside navigating relationships with team members and others in New Zealand, they are also maintaining relationships with family members at home. For some, this includes young children who are in the care of partners and extended family while the women are absent. The women are missing important family events – celebrations, bereavements – and, for 43 of the women who have children, they may be missing rites of passage for children at different life-stages (especially church and school-related events.) The husbands of two of the women have died while they are in New Zealand. One husband was the primary caregiver for their children, necessitating new arrangements to be put in place for the children's care, while also coping with the unexpected bereavement.

Some of the women operate small businesses in South Tarawa and these too are being managed by others in their absence. For family members back home, who have been responsible for the care of dependents and/or business operations for much longer than anticipated, this has placed additional burdens on them.

All of the I-Kiribati women we interviewed in New Zealand, aside from two who have recently given birth, regularly send remittances back to families. For some, the extended seasonal work and associated remittances have led to pressure from family for the women to stay, rather than try to return home. This creates tensions for

the women who are physically and mentally exhausted and missing their families, but also know their unexpected stay gives them an opportunity to earn money at levels they will never achieve in Kiribati where most of them do not have regular cash-earning opportunities.

Not all of the I-Kiribati women want to leave; some are keen to stay for as long as possible. But there is growing consensus – among RSEs, New Zealand government officials, Pacific liaison officers, as well as members of diaspora communities – that the I-Kiribati RSE workers need to have the option to return to their families.

The women and their employers, supported by members of the resident I-Kiribati community, have shown incredible resilience and adaptability over the past 18 months in the face of difficult, and often changing, circumstances including the present [nationwide lockdown](#) due to COVID-19. These experiences have, in turn, strengthened employer-worker relationships which are at the heart of the RSE scheme. But the RSE scheme is not designed for workers to remain indefinitely. Negotiating a viable pathway home for I-Kiribati RSE workers must become a priority for both the New Zealand and the Kiribati governments once New Zealand's COVID-19 outbreak is eliminated.

This is the second blog in a series on [#I-Kiribati women workers in NZ](#).

The post [I-Kiribati female seasonal workers in New Zealand: lived experiences](#) appeared first on [Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre](#).

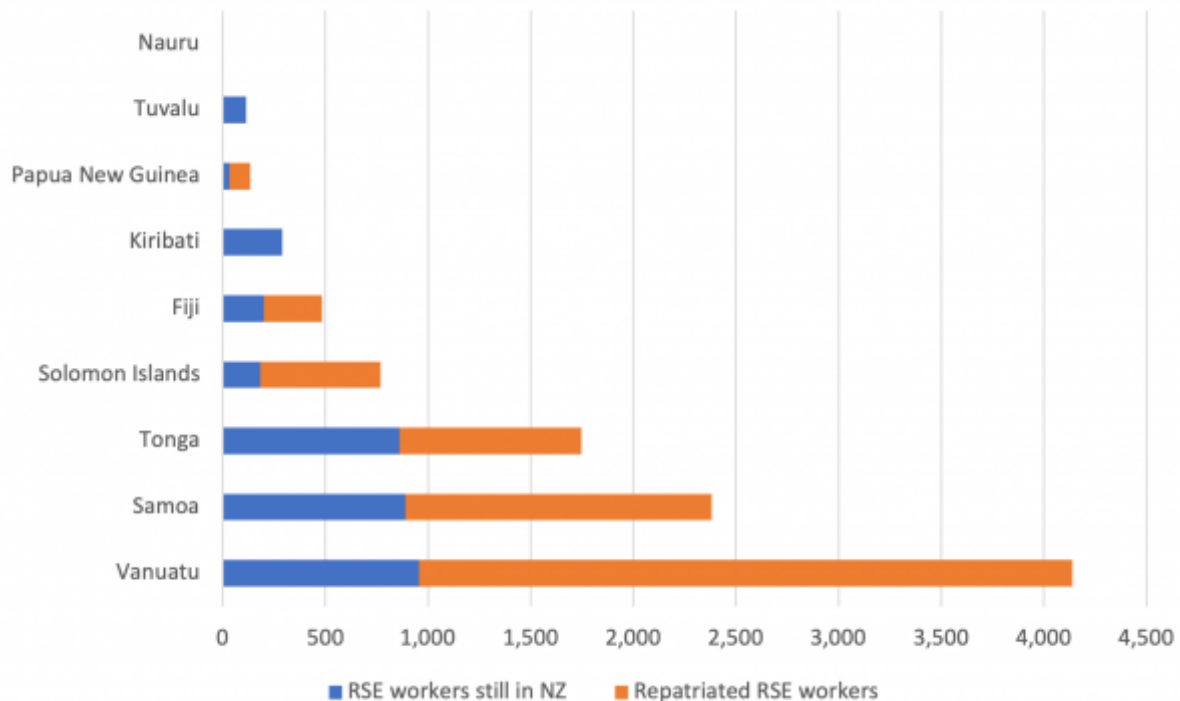
[RSE repatriation: Kiribati needs to step up](#)

By Charlotte Bedford and Richard Bedford on Sep 03, 2021 06:00 am

When New Zealand closed its international border on 19 March 2020 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 10,000 Pacific seasonal workers were in the country under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. Over the past year, one of the most significant and complex aspects of the RSE scheme's operation has been the repatriation of Pacific RSE workers who have sought to return home. The [repatriation efforts](#) which began in late June 2020, have been led by New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) in close collaboration with horticulture industry groups and Pacific officials.

By early August 2021, 65% (6,551) of the 10,078 Pacific RSE workers in New Zealand in March 2020 had been repatriated. Of those, just under 50% (3,183) were to Vanuatu, with over 1,000 supported by New Zealand Airforce flights; the only publicly-funded repatriation flights from New Zealand to date. For the remaining ni-Vanuatu workers, and for RSE workers returning to other countries, commercial operators or charter flights have been used. Over 75% of RSE workers from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG had returned home by August. More than 60% of Samoan RSE workers had also been repatriated, along with over 50% of workers from Tonga and Fiji (see graph on next page).

**Current status of RSE workers in New Zealand in March 2020
(as of 1 August 2021)**



Note: The numbers of Nauruan RSE workers are very small; there are currently five Nauruan RSE workers still in New Zealand. Source: Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, unpublished data, 1 August 2021.

The repatriation program continues to be operationally and logistically challenging for MFAT officials. Barriers include: changing entry and quarantine requirements by Pacific governments, for instance the Samoan and PNG governments' requirement from 1 July for all returning nationals to have full COVID-19 vaccination for entry; limited managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) capacity in Pacific countries which must cater for all returning nationals, not just RSE workers; lack of available flights and the associated costs, as well as, in some countries, the costs of up to 21 days' MIQ which must be borne by returning RSE workers.

Prior to New Zealand's community outbreak of COVID-19 on 17 August, there were repatriation pathways into most Pacific countries, despite the barriers. Only three countries – Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru – have had no repatriations to date, partly due to the lack of direct flights between New Zealand and these three central Pacific countries.

For RSE workers who have had a repatriation pathway, they've had to decide whether to return home or stay on for another season to earn money to support their families. This has been [a difficult decision for many workers](#) as they weigh up the trade-off between the social costs of extended absence from family, and the financial gains of ongoing seasonal work in New Zealand. Recent estimates by horticulture industry groups suggest around half of the approximately 4,000 'long-term' Pacific

RSE workers who entered prior to March 2020, and were still in the country in August 2021, want to return home before the end of this year.

For 286 I-Kiribati RSE workers who entered New Zealand late in 2019-early 2020, and have now been in the country for more than 18 months, there is no viable pathway home. Up until Fiji's community outbreak of COVID-19 in April 2021 and the associated suspension of international air travel (for non-medical purposes) to/from Fiji, there was a possible route home for Kiribati nationals via Fiji. But RSE workers and their employers did not take this option largely because of the costs involved and uncertainties around the availability of seats on the periodic charter flights between Fiji and Kiribati.

The return of RSE workers has been deemed low priority by the Kiribati government in light of limited MIQ capacity (now a total of 175 places) and the need to allocate places to other I-Kiribati nationals arriving home, including via sea. Returning to Kiribati via Fiji required RSE workers to spend a month in MIQ – two weeks in Fiji and two weeks in Tarawa – at their own expense, and an indeterminate amount of time in the community in Fiji while waiting for a charter flight to Kiribati. With the outbreak of COVID-19 in Fiji this pathway has closed.

MFAT officials have been working to negotiate an alternative route home for I-Kiribati RSE workers, but without direct flights between the two countries it has proved extremely difficult. Before New Zealand's latest COVID-19 outbreak, the use of New Zealand Defence Force assets to return I-Kiribati workers was being explored. Chartering a flight was another option, but questions remain as to who would cover the costs. It would be unfair for the costs to fall on employers and RSE workers when both have already paid their share of a return airfare under the original RSE employment contract. Flights via Brisbane were being considered, but this route is complicated by Australian visa requirements, and the need for workers to undertake two weeks' MIQ in Brisbane at the workers' expense. Recent outbreaks of COVID-19 in Australia have terminated this option in the short-term.

Vaccinating I-Kiribati RSE workers and requiring them to undertake MIQ in New Zealand pre-departure may be another possibility. The vaccine rollout to RSE workers is well underway with an estimated 50% of RSE workers in New Zealand having now had their first vaccine dose.

Ultimately the decision rests with the Kiribati government to facilitate the return of their nationals; it is not a decision MFAT can make unilaterally. To date, the general view held by Kiribati officials seems to have been that I-Kiribati RSE workers are better placed in New Zealand, where they are employed in full-time work and earning a decent income, rather than in Kiribati where employment opportunities are limited. While Kiribati remains free of COVID-19, New Zealand's present outbreak complicates matters further.

The situation is, however, [becoming urgent](#). RSEs and pastoral care hosts of I-Kiribati workers are under significant strain, providing wellbeing support to workers for much longer periods than the usual length of the RSE visa (up to 9 months for I-Kiribati workers). They are also dealing with [complex wellbeing issues](#), such as

pregnancies and childbirth, as I-Kiribati workers establish relationships in New Zealand. There is a need for culturally appropriate counselling services to be available to workers who may need help, as well as support for RSEs and pastoral care hosts who are dealing with wellbeing issues with which they have no prior experience.

The return of I-Kiribati workers who have urgent needs for repatriation should be a priority consideration for the Kiribati government once New Zealand's COVID-19 outbreak is eliminated. Kiribati officials should also consider the potential damage the continued lack of a repatriation pathway may do to the longer-term prospects of RSE recruitment from the country. RSEs are unlikely to risk bringing in I-Kiribati workers in future if they cannot guarantee their return home. Kiribati is not participating in the 2021 RSE border exceptions, due in part to the lack of a clear repatriation plan, nor is it part of New Zealand's [recently announced travel corridor](#) with select Pacific countries.

To support the wellbeing of I-Kiribati RSE workers and their employers in the immediate future, and to remain a player in the RSE scheme longer-term, the Kiribati government needs to prioritise a direct repatriation pathway from New Zealand for its stranded seasonal workers as soon as it is safe and feasible to do so.

The post [RSE repatriation: Kiribati needs to step up](#) appeared first on [Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre](#).