

OVERCOMING PRECARITY? SOCIAL MEDIA, AGENCY AND NI-VANUATU SEASONAL WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Seasonal worker programmes have been established and promoted initially in New Zealand and subsequently in Australia from early in this century (Bedford *et al.* 2017). Following domestic agricultural labour shortages, the Australian Government introduced a pilot scheme, eventually termed the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), to bring agricultural workers on short-term contracts of up to seven months to work in the agricultural industry. The scheme sought to solve labour shortages in the industry, previously addressed through the temporary employment of backpackers, and was expected to provide development assistance to Pacific island countries (PICs) through workers' incomes. The SWP was modelled on the New Zealand Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, itself modelled on the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Worker Programme. Parallels exist between these three contemporary employment schemes, and century-old plantation systems in Australia (Connell 2010) which point to both positive and negative outcomes.

Both the RSE and SWP have generally been presented as 'quadruple win' schemes since workers gain income and experience, agricultural producers gain an accessible and cheap workforce and both sending and receiving countries gain economic benefits. Most existing literature on these schemes has focused on the economic benefits and income gains for workers and sending countries (Gibson, McKenzie and Rohorua 2014, World Bank 2017). In Australia, small-scale qualitative studies, where more detailed discussions have been undertaken with seasonal workers, have revealed various social problems (Petrou and Connell 2018, Howe *et*

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al. 2019). The few studies make it difficult to identify the scale and significance of these problems, though they have often been reported in the media (*eg.* Doherty 2017). Concerns have been raised over inadequate accommodation, underpayment of wages, poor working conditions and difficulty accessing services. Other problems relate to more ill-defined issues such as loneliness, detachment from kin and climatic differences. Such problems have not always been locally resolved by employers (usually farmers), labour hire companies, unions or others. Indeed, the nature and extent of these problems has suggested that seasonal workers are a precariat, working and being disadvantaged in a similar structural context to that of seasonal agricultural workers in Canada and elsewhere (Petrou and Connell 2018, Stead 2019). This paper examines how ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers have used Facebook, the Pacific Islands' largest online social network (Cave 2012), to reduce and manage such problems. In so doing, the paper analyses twelve months of discussion that occurred in Vanuatu's largest seasonal worker Facebook group, 'Seasonal Workers Vanuatu'.

Relatively recently social media, particularly Facebook, has become a valuable platform for sharing information about seasonal work experiences and opportunities; the Australian government maintains an official 'Seasonal Worker Program' page, various departments within the Vanuatu government regularly post updates about the SWP, and many recruiting agents now operate Facebook pages. Beyond that, seasonal workers themselves have used mobile phones and social media, notably Facebook, to discuss, warn and advise others of problems that might be experienced and how to avoid them. This paper provides a preliminary discussion of how ni-Vanuatu migrant workers use their own human agency to achieve solutions, put in place warnings, advise on trends and maintain useful social contact to negotiate the inherent power imbalances that characterise guestworker schemes.

The paper focuses on Ni-Vanuatu since they are the most numerous Melanesian worker group in Australia, and because both authors are familiar with Vanuatu and the lingua franca, Bislama. Vanuatu is the only Melanesian state to have been part of both the RSE and SWP schemes from their start. Vanuatu, which became independent in 1980, is classified by the United Nations as a least developed country with a population of 290,000 scattered over 65 populated islands with over a hundred languages. The economy is mainly centred on small-scale agriculture, which provides livelihoods for about two thirds of the population. Fishing,

financial services and tourism are valuable. Economic growth has been slight in recent years, more than 40% of the population live below the poverty line and both unemployment and under-employment are rising (UNDP 2013). Vanuatu has consequently sought access to overseas employment programmes. Wage differences between Vanuatu and Australia are substantial and returning to work in Australia is dependent on employer recommendations. As a result, ni-Vanuatu workers are often unwilling to openly discuss any problems that might result in dismissal or loss of income (Howe *et al.* 2019). Through examining Facebook discussions, we ask what themes and issues seasonal workers consider important and argue that social media can provide one important avenue for navigating experiences of seasonal work.

Social media and migrants

Research into migrants and information communication technologies (ICTs) has tended to focus on how migrants utilise new technologies such as social media and mobile phones to reinforce identities, exchange information, and participate in decision making and political life at home (*eg.* Lee 2006, Siapera and Veikou 2013, Marino 2015, Chambers and Chambers 2018). Social media facilitates migration by reinforcing ties with family and friends and providing a platform for sharing knowledge on the context and processes of mobility. The insider knowledge shared through social media is discrete, unofficial and tailored to particular national and regional needs and contexts. Thus, potential migrants are well-informed when undertaking migration, as social media transforms migration networks (Dekker and Engbersen 2013, Dekker *et al.* 2016). However other work has suggested that Facebook is used by migrants to share emotions rather than build a local community or share practical information (Lásticová 2014). Social media can have many uses. Overall, however existing studies into migrants and social media have tended to focus on long-term rather than short-term migration, and little consideration has been given to temporary migrants, such as those employed under guestworker schemes. The present study begins to address this gap.

Migrant workers are the subject of only a minority of studies into ICTs including mobile phone use by workers in Singapore (Thompson 2009); how ICTs (including mobile phones, Skype and Facebook) are employed

in processes of transnational mothering (Cabanés and Acedera 2012, Bacigalupe and Camara 2012, Longhurst 2013); how workers express identification with their host nation through Facebook (Golan and Babis 2019); and the role of Facebook in the evolution of semi-professional communities (Golan and Babis 2017). Nothing has been written about how temporary workers might employ social media to navigate the precarities associated with guestworker schemes.

Agricultural guestworkers in Australia, New Zealand and Canada often work long hours in remote locations. While these workers are generally employed in groups, they are often isolated from local communities (Reid-Musson 2017, Petrou and Connell 2018). This situation parallels that of Filipino care workers employed on temporary employer-linked contracts in Israel. For Filipino workers, social media has become an important way to connect with families at home as well as other workers in Israel (Golan and Babis 2017, 2019). The carers, who work long hours within private residences, are relatively isolated during the week, and, except for their day off, have little opportunity to socialise offline. Through Facebook and other social media applications, the carers could socialise and feel connected to communities without the need for physical presence. Research in New Zealand reveals that 52% of Tongan and Samoan RSE workers used Facebook to contact home, while a smaller proportion used email and Skype. Mobile phones were used by 93.5% of workers but were far from being the only way workers contacted home (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment n.d). For temporary migrant workers, social media can provide an invaluable means to keeping in contact and exchanging news and information at a distance. Nonetheless, how workers do this remains poorly understood.

ICTs and social media use in the Pacific

Until quite recently, geographical isolation, small populations, telecommunications monopolies and high operating costs meant ICTs were beyond the reach of most Pacific Islanders. In this century, this has rapidly changed, and Islanders have now firmly crossed the 'digital divide'. Beginning around 2003, reform and deregulation of the telecommunications industry along with associated lower access costs have made ICTs, and mobile phones in particular, much more accessible. The quick uptake of this technology has been driven in large part by the

youth dominated population, and as smartphones have become more popular, and 3G and 4G networks have become available, the region has 'leap frogged' computer-based internet access in favour of internet enabled mobile phones (Cave 2012). In Vanuatu, by 2009 92% of the population already had access to mobile phones, and the gap in frequency of use between urban and rural residents was rapidly decreasing (Sijapati-Basnett 2009). More recent data from Vanuatu's 2016 Mini-Census indicates that mobile phones are unquestionably the primary communication device used in both rural and urban areas, while internet is at least as significant as more traditional forms of news media such as television and newspapers. Nonetheless, population dispersal poor transport connections and limited infrastructure in rural areas mean access to radio, internet, television and newspapers remains concentrated in urban areas (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2017).

Alongside improved internet access, social media has become increasingly popular throughout PICs, and has been adopted as a platform to share news and information, discuss current issues, expose corruption and agitate for political outcomes (Finau *et al.* 2014). Facebook is the largest online network across PICs, and by 2012 already had 700,000 users in the Pacific Islands. Rapid growth in social media use has been largely driven by Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Samoa, and is concentrated amongst 16-34 year olds (Cave 2012, Hobbis 2019); a large and growing demographic in PICs. More recent figures are not available, however Brimacombe (2017) suggests that ongoing improvements to infrastructure in the region mean this growth has probably continued exponentially. This is particularly true for countries such as Tonga and Vanuatu, where access and improvements to telecommunications networks have occurred more recently.

Social media use has evolved differently in response to local conditions such as corruption and government media censorship (Finau *et al.* 2014). Across the region, social media has provided Pacific Islanders with opportunities to participate in dialogue at national and international scales. In Vanuatu, the Facebook group *Yumi Toktok Stret* ('We speak truthfully') focuses on *stret* conversations about political, economic and social issues in the country. The group description explains:

If you have any concerns or thoughts about a topic, or want to express your feelings about issues like politics, social issues, economics or other topics that are happening now and affecting Vanuatu, post them here so that all of our members can talk about them, and speak frankly in a debate format.

As of June 2019, the group had attracted roughly 99,000 members and had spawned spin off pages including *Yumi Toktok Stret News* (35,000 followers) as well as regionally focused groups such as *Yumi Toktok Stret Ambrym* (roughly 3,600 members). Analogous groups exist in Papua New Guinea (*Sharp Talk*, 29,000 members), the Solomon Islands (*Forum Solomon Islands*, around 19,000 members) and Fiji (*Letters to the Editor Uncensored*, just over 17,500 members). Not all members reside in each of the groups' countries of focus, but this arguably makes the conversations taking place on social media more significant. Discussions that would have once been confined to a single village or community are now occurring at the scale of the nation and beyond. Facebook and similar forums are, for the first time, creating relatively open dialogues at an unprecedented scale, and it is not uncommon for issues first debated on groups such as *Yumi Toktok Stret* to make it into domestic print media.

Social media has not only increased the scale at which information is spread, but has expanded the demographics of those who can and do contribute to such conversations. In Vanuatu, and other Melanesian states, youth – who are the largest demographic group – are not traditionally encouraged to voice opinions publicly (Lindstrom 1990). The experiences and opinions of young people, and particularly young women, are routinely discounted or dismissed. The relative anonymity afforded by social media posts has thus opened up debate to people who traditionally would not be considered knowledgeable nor have had authority to voice opinions in public (Brimacombe 2017). Social media has thus altered debates and conversations both numerically and demographically throughout the region.

Despite the growing importance of social media in the Pacific, research into its use remains limited and has focused on democracy (Finau *et al.* 2014), activism (Titifanue *et al.* 2016, Brimacombe *et al.* 2018), policy discussion and engagement (Willans 2017, Brimacombe 2017), and climate change advocacy (Titifanue *et al.* 2017) within nation states. At the transnational scale, Lee (2006) and Nishitani (2014) have considered how social media can reinforce identity and facilitate flows of information and goods within the Tongan diaspora. Within Vanuatu, research has tended to focus on a single Facebook group, the aforementioned *Yumi Toktok Stret* (eg. Willans 2017, Finau *et al.* 2014, Brimacombe 2016). Nothing has been written about 'special interest' groups, such as those aimed at seasonal workers. Nor has there been any consideration of how geographically dispersed groups, such as seasonal workers, might use

social media to negotiate the unequal power relations that structure their participation in the scheme. That provides our starting point.

Facebook data

As a preliminary study of social media use amongst seasonal workers, this paper focuses on the single Facebook group 'Seasonal Workers Vanuatu'. The group was established in 2015 'just to inform the workers and those who want to work as RSE to get some information here on how to access into overseas market'. The terms RSE and SWP were often used interchangeably by group members, and while discussions concerned work in both New Zealand and Australia, most of the recent discussions focused on Australia, perhaps due to new developments relating to the expansion of the scheme.

In early June 2019, the group had 13,359 members, and was the largest public Facebook group aimed at seasonal workers in Vanuatu. Membership required approval by a page administrator and was open to anyone interested in seasonal work. While it is not possible to analyse membership in any great detail, scrolling through the membership list and reading the discussions that took place within the group reveals that membership was dominated by seasonal workers (both RSE and SWP), their families and recruiting agents. Other interested members of the public such as academics and pastoral care providers, accounted for a minority of members. While site administrators made frequent posts, no one individual dominated discussions, and posts appeared to come from a range of seasonal workers and their family members. Not all group members lived in Vanuatu, but a large proportion listed Vanuatu as their place of residence.

To determine the key functions of and discussion themes within the group, we read and classified posts spanning the period June 2018 – June 2019. Conversation proceeded at a rate of about five posts per day, hence we were able to examine roughly 1,825 posts. These posts attracted various 'reactions' including 'likes', 'dislikes', 'loves' and so forth. It is beyond the scope of this preliminary study to provide a tally of these posts and reactions. Rather, we have focused on highlighting common and recurring themes within the posts and have concentrated on posts that appeared to have come from seasonal workers or their families.

While ‘Seasonal Workers Vanuatu’ is a public group, and one that can be accessed without even logging in to Facebook, we have translated posts into English or standard Bislama (rather than the online shorthand) to protect the anonymity of group members and make it harder to search for individual posts. One has been left in its original form to provide some flavour of the dialogue. Original punctuation has been preserved. We employ a number of these direct quotes to illustrate ‘typical’ interactions within the group. We have presented these quotes in mock-up Facebook style, where original posts have a white background, and responses or replies are indented and shown on a grey background.

The contents and the recipients

Within the group, discussions could be started by anyone. Broadly, there were two types of people who initiated discussions: firstly, seasonal workers, their families and those who wanted to apply for or wanted more information about the schemes, and; secondly, those who had some role in administering or mediating the scheme, such as recruiting agents (but not government employees), or pastoral carers located in Australia. Posts from this latter group generally focused on sharing information about opportunities or developments. When questions were asked or advice was sought, replies came from everyone. Seasonal workers drew upon their own experiences, compared notes with others and called upon agents to help one another navigate the system. These ‘ordinary people’ were very much in charge of the conversation and directed it as they wished. Discussions followed several themes which we have categorized here into six dominant groups: (a) keeping in personal touch and seeking family news, (b) basic descriptions of the working context, (c) sharing information about the schemes, (d) self-management and organization, (e) policy and development of the schemes, (f) investment opportunities. We touch on each of these categories but focus on the latter four, using some examples of ‘typical’ posts to illustrate how discussions proceeded.

While the Facebook group provides an important forum for dialogue, it is not the only place where seasonal work is discussed. Moreover, internet access is still skewed towards urban areas of Vanuatu (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2017), and so it is reasonable to assume that workers hailing from more remote, rural areas of the archipelago participated in the Facebook group to a lesser extent than their urban counterparts. Most ni-

Vanuatu, including seasonal workers, possess and use mobile phones in the ‘normal’ way, and there are some categories of information, such as private family matters, that are best covered in phone conversations rather than over the more public Facebook forum. Furthermore, it is likely that some seasonal workers have little interest in Facebook, and hence do not use it, preferring instead the traditional face to face *storian* (story telling) approach to sharing information. Research has not addressed whether ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers also communicate either by Skype or by email. Finally, Facebook requires a certain level of literacy and computer savvy, and some workers are more comfortable communicating in other ways. Nonetheless, and as the discussion below demonstrates, Facebook provides an important medium for sharing information about and negotiating experiences of seasonal work.

(a) Keeping in personal touch and seeking family news

While maintaining personal ties is extremely important, it is the content of most of the many private mobile phone conversations between workers and family in Vanuatu and elsewhere, hence it was a less significant topic on Facebook. However, in particular circumstances where, for example, personal relations had been lost or broken down, Facebook played a role. In one instance, a Pacific Islander pastor resident in Australia posted about a group of seasonal workers who had been, in his opinion, misbehaving. A woman whose husband was a part of this group responded with great concern, and the following exchange took place (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tracing family members

Mr [Pastor], is this news true?... And is it happening on Farm [...]?. The banana farm in Queensland?
 Please, I need answers 😞 😞..
 My husband is working on that farm... And lately he's had too many excuses not to speak to me... I'm wondering what's going on

[...]

You don't mind giving your husband's name? ...Am happy to pay him a visit

Connections forged in the online sphere could have consequences and outcomes in the offline world.

In another example, a ni-Vanuatu worker died suddenly in New South Wales. A post asking for information about his death quickly attracted 143 comments including photos identifying the man, condolences and offers to contact the man's family in Vanuatu to pass on the news (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sharing news about misadventure

NSW I gat wan news 1 boy Santo hemi ded, anywan i save talem se news ia hemi tru or kiaman wan?

Translation: *There is some news from NSW 1 boy from Santo is dead, can anyone tell me if this news is true or fake?*

Facebook can thus provide a valuable means for rapidly passing information and allaying (or confirming) fears about misadventure. Much like Kraemer (2013) described for the case of mobile phone usage in Port Vila, Facebook is being employed in creative ways to expand social networks along which information about social happenings (affairs, deaths and similar) travels. However, while Kraemer (2013) suggests that mobile phones have made 'secret' communication easier, in the above examples, Facebook has been used for the opposite purpose: affairs and other social interactions that may have once been possible to hide, are now being discussed more openly in a transnational public forum.

(b) The context of employment

Workers shared stories of their successes and celebrated their achievements in the workplace by posting short videos, photos and case study stories. These stories accounted for a large proportion of all posts, and generally attracted words of encouragement and many likes from other group members and comments such as *Tuff tumas!* (roughly 'That's really cool/awesome!') and *Nice wan* ('Nice one'). These posts not only showcased the skills of seasonal workers and provided positive reinforcement, but also allowed family members and potential workers to see for themselves what kind of work is involved in the SWP scheme. Images and videos are useful as many of the crops that workers harvest are

not native (nor can they grow) in tropical environments and many Pacific Islanders would not have seen a commercial scale farm before. The description accompanying one video explained (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Sharing videos about work

This is kiwi picking in New Zealand.. This clip is for those of us who want to travel to go and work in NZ or Australia. We can see how our friends who have already travelled pick [kiwi fruit] and how they treat the kiwi fruit in tanks...

Alongside images of ni-Vanuatu at work, a number of posts sought to raise awareness about everyday life and social norms in Australia. This included information on how to use bank accounts and what fees banks charge; warnings to steer clear of dangerous native animals such as spiders and snakes; advice about road safety and not texting while driving; what foods to eat to stay healthy while in Australia; the best way to send remittances; and, warnings about Australia's heatwave over the summer of 2018-19. In this way, experienced seasonal workers, agents and others were able to share and glean a wealth of useful knowledge about the practicalities of life in a foreign country beyond mere accounts of scenery. Much of this knowledge – such as how to use a bank card or ATM – was essential to life in Australia, and group members regularly commented on how useful these kinds of posts were, particularly as they came from fellow ni-Vanuatu rather than more anonymous employer led briefings.

In addition to serious information exchange, jokes were made about protracted seasonal absences. One RSE worker commented (Figure 4):

Figure 4: Jokes about the scheme

If I spend seven months in New Zealand over 13 years (RSE scheme) am I already a New Zealander? Is it possible to have a NZ citizenship?
5 months in Vanuatu is like being a tourist on holiday 🤔🤔

Such jokes suggest a degree of satisfaction with employment over a several month period, and that challenges have been overcome, but they also speak of frustrations about workers' ongoing temporary status, possible disconnection from home, and unease about repeated absences

from families. In this manner these jokes capture the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ sides of guestworker schemes (Smith 2019), which bring economic opportunities and gains, but also have social consequences such as separation from family members.

(c) Sharing information about the schemes

Posts seeking and offering advice were common. Those with an official role in the scheme were the most likely to initiate posts sharing advice whereas others were more likely to start conversations requesting assistance or information. With the group’s large membership, Facebook provided a way to compare and contrast experiences between people who had worked on different farms in both Australia and New Zealand, originated from different parts of Vanuatu and had been engaged by different recruiting agents. Many posts focused on seeking advice about negotiating and understanding workers’ rights and obligations in home and host countries (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Questions about contracts

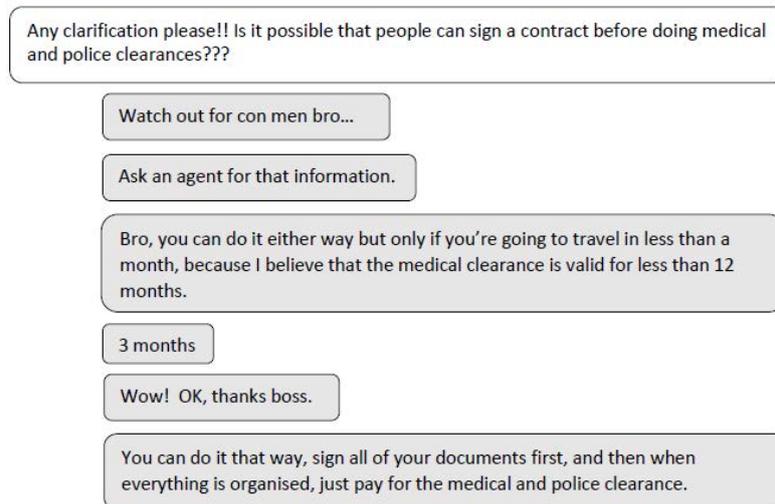
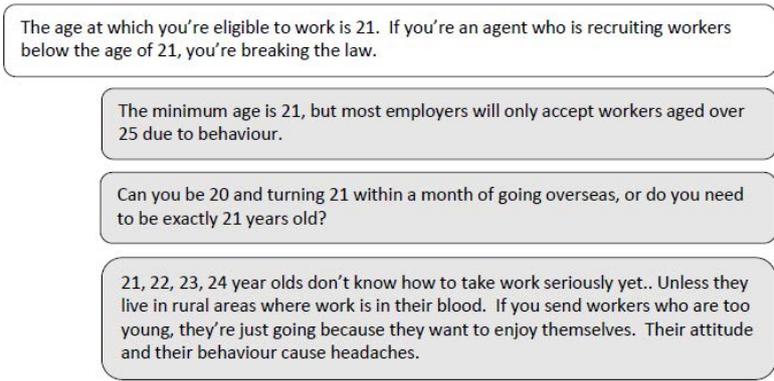
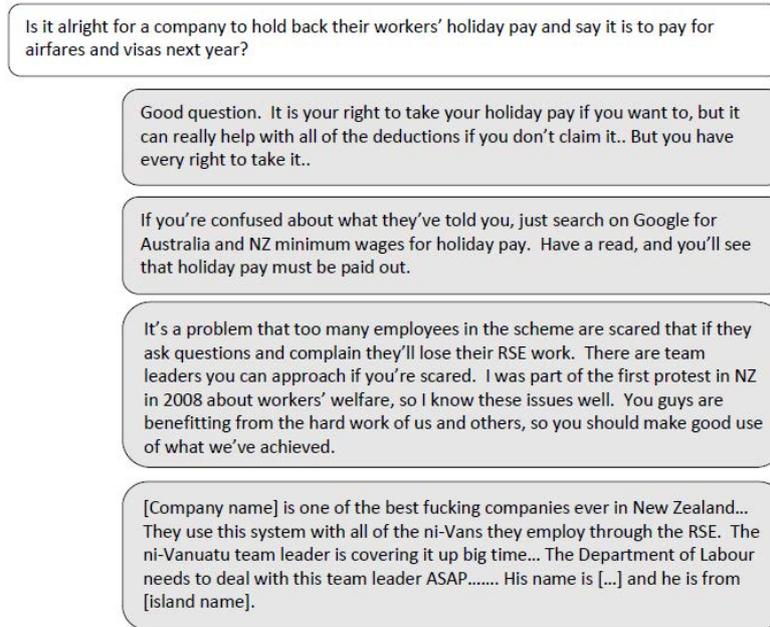


Figure 6: Discussions about eligibility



The issue of unfair or illegal deductions and underpayments by unscrupulous employers has plagued the SWP, and received considerable media attention (eg. Doherty 2017, Fair Work Ombudsman 2019). Seasonal workers were very aware of this potential problem, and were eager to understand for themselves whether their employer was behaving correctly or, as many feared, holding back payments illegally (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Discussions about pay



Some workers felt that official avenues for complaint in Australia, such as the Fair Work Ombudsman, merely dismissed their concerns because they were only temporary or casual workers. One group member commented (Figure 8):

Figure 8: Experiences of dispute resolution

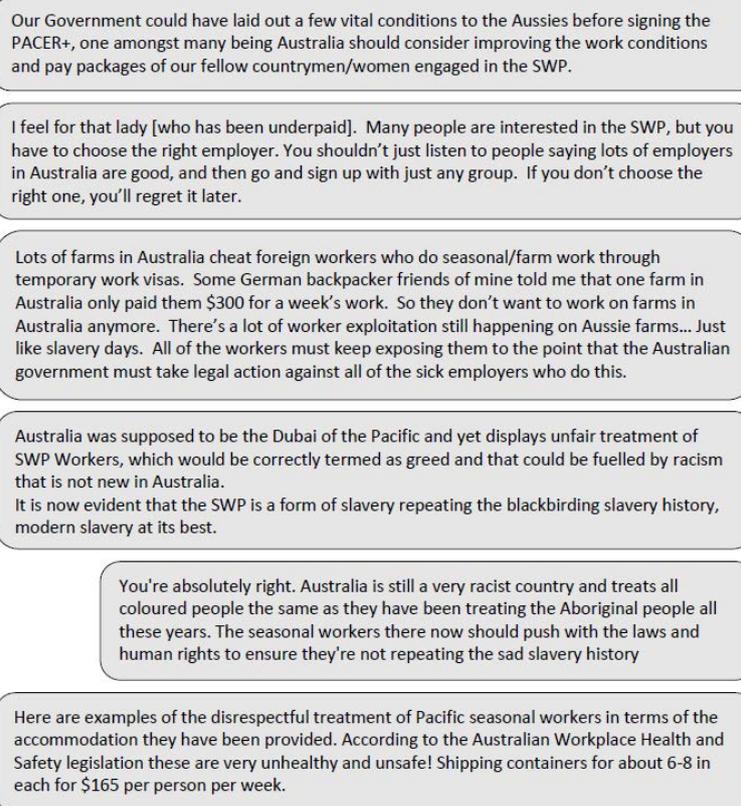


In this context, Facebook provided an invaluable avenue for seeking advice from trusted peers rather than negotiating the bureaucracy of a faceless, seemingly uncaring, foreign government department.

In a similar vein, group members often shared reports about underpayment of wages. Rather than laying the blame solely on Australian employers

however, workers suggested that their own government had a role to play in ensuring their workplace rights were respected. The following comments appeared on threads about wage theft, underpayment and poor treatment of seasonal workers in Australia (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Discussions about problems in host country



In some instances, it was long-term PIC migrants, living permanently in Australia, who were the most vocal about violations of workplace rights. The photo, of inadequate dorm accommodation (Figure 10), and the comment about Australia being 'a very racist country' were both posted by

Pacific Islanders resident in Australia. Such migrants have the potential to play an important role in looking out for the rights of seasonal workers, and in rural Victoria have informally taken on valuable pastoral care responsibilities (Nishitani and Lee 2019). However, few ni-Vanuatu currently live in Australia and this form of support may be largely absent.

Figure 10: Photos were shared of inadequate accommodation



Pay rates and exchange rates were also popular topics for discussion. One photo of a group of workers on a pineapple farm attracted the following comments (Figure 11):

Figure 11: Comments about pay rates

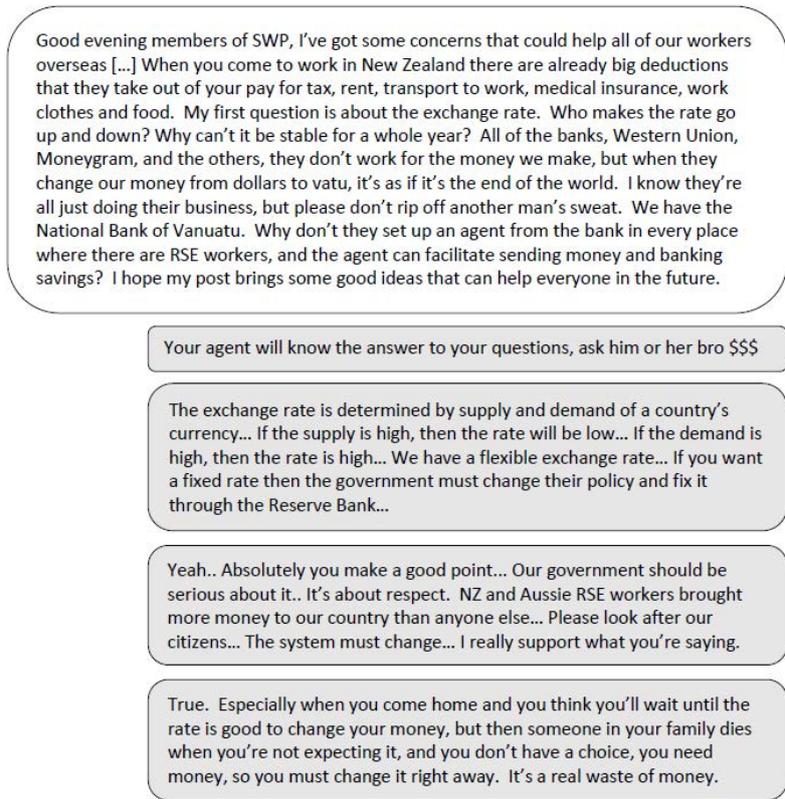
All of the boys and girls in Australia work hard, but their union is tough and the money they earn isn't enough. You look, \$40 per bin is really too little (nice photo squad).

\$40 is better than what we earn in Vanuatu, you can't find that kind of money here.

Oh yes, it's better than Vanuatu, but \$100 per bin is a good rate.

Uncertainties existed over whether workers were receiving the proper exchange rate for any monetary transactions (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Concerns over exchange rates



Group members railed against perceived injustices and celebrated when employers were found guilty of underpayments or illegal deductions and when back payments or compensation were granted (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Celebrating successes

Great victory! Should never have happened in the first place. The exposure of more of these contractors & farmers that cheat, and treat people as slaves has to come to an end, and the workers from all Pacific nations must take a stand that they are not to be treated and abused badly while working in Aussie [...] Victory to the workers who stood against the bad practices. Walk with dignity, you did the right thing.

CONGRATULATIONS! Praise and glory our Lord you look above us all and protect us. Good on you Vanuatu seasonal workers for standing up for your RIGHTS.

Others worried about the role of unions (Figure 14):

Figure 14: Concerns about unions

I think the unions are meddling too much in seasonal work issues. It's good in one way but it can affect the scheme. A classic example is Fairwork Australia, they've stepped in to cut the hours of work and make the pay rate drop from \$22 to \$18/hr.

Concerns covered the role of banks, exchange rates, food and accommodation, adequate contracts, wages and overtime payments. Facebook provided a safe space in which workers could air their grievances, celebrate successes and participate in debate with their peers about the benefits and potential pitfalls of seasonal work and the roles they wanted participating governments to play.

(d) Self-management and organisation

Problems with participating in the scheme were not only attributed to participating governments, and employers, but could also result from the behaviour of individual workers. Facebook discussions indicated that seasonal workers also recognised the need (and ability) to self-regulate and ensure that collectively ni-Vanuatu workers were well regarded; no one wanted the bad behaviour of a few to ruin the chances of everyone else. Similar assertions were evident earlier (Figures 6 and 7). One worker

wrote to alert others to an incidence of stealing that had occurred within his own group of workers (Figure 15):

Figure 15: Warnings about behaviour

Good evening members. There was an incident last week that I feel I should share with all of the RSE and SWP workers. Last week there was a boy from Malakula (3 seasons work) who withdrew some money without permission that belonged to an older worker, who is in New Zealand for the first time. This older worker didn't know how to use an ATM card, so the boy was helping him to withdraw money when he needed it. It's a long story, but to cut it short, the boy asked his boss if he could return to Vanuatu because his son was sick. After that, he stayed at our accommodation and took the older man's ATM card and withdrew a lot of money, which he took back to Vanuatu. The older worker went to check his bank balance, and found he had no money in the bank. Then he checked the statement and found that in June, his card had been used to buy things at lots of different shops in town. Then he realised it must have been the boy, because he was the only one who knew the pin number. This kind of behaviour is not acceptable. If you're a returnee, please set a good example for all the newcomers.

Anecdotally, RSE and SWP work has been associated with a spike in adultery and marriage breakdowns, and there were a number of Facebook discussions about this topic, and how it might be avoided (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Discussions about extra-marital affairs

I want to travel, but I've seen some women post because they're concerned about their husbands... But I have a question, do you want to travel for work, or to find a partner? Because now there are lots of broken homes as a result of seasonal work. If you have a problem in your home, it would be good if the agent could screen everyone before they send them to work for the RSE or SWP... Because some people form couples overseas, and then when there is a complaint they blame their partner at home. If you can't travel and behave responsibly, then you shouldn't travel. That's just my opinion.

It would be better if couples could travel together, then there wouldn't be any complaints or separation.

This is a good idea, but what if you have children, how...? And what if couples travelled together and just ended up fighting overseas instead!

I know a husband and wife who travelled together to live and work in the same place. They spent the whole time fighting, and one time the man hit his wife. The woman was to blame, but they sent him home.

It's true, but it takes two people to make these kinds of problems, not just the person who travels. The ones who stay home are just the same. The point is that before you travel, you must decide what your goal is, so that you know what you're working for, and you must agree on it together. You can't just go and play the tourist and come back with nothing.

The issue here is not the agent, we shouldn't make them responsible... It's a decision made in the home, both partners agree that one must leave to support the family. The agent asks for references from leaders like the pastor, chief, wife... I'm appealing to the homes. If you don't trust your partner, don't create problems. Everyone has the chance to work in the RSE... but married people need to be faithful.

Some men and women want to go and fuck overseas, but they want to work and make money too. They don't know how to act responsibly because they have all of these strong ideas. This kind of behaviour is how you get AIDS 😞

Others lamented that workers who drank alcohol were causing problems, and worried that if it did not stop, the scheme may be in jeopardy (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Comments about controlling behaviour

Now alcohol use is worse than it used to be, and people don't respect the rules or exercise discipline. Lots of people are just stubborn and won't listen to the team leaders. I think it would be better to find a solution that can help these people and minimise the issues before it gets to the point where it's so bad that it ruins the scheme.

Sentiments like those expressed in Figures 15-17 show that workers recognised the need to take responsibility for their own actions, to support other workers and ensure that the reputation of ni-Vanuatu workers was not sullied. Indeed, the existence of the Facebook site was itself evidence of this. Opportunities existed for workers to return in subsequent years (since employers welcome experienced workers) and concerns expressed over 'correct' behaviour indicate that no one wanted to jeopardise this possibility. These findings are consistent with other studies of the SWP (eg. Petrou and Connell 2018) and RSE (eg. Smith 2016) that suggest workers are aware of the need to behave 'properly' should they wish to participate in seasonal work again.

(e) Discussions about policy and the development of the schemes

Group members were eager to learn about proposed changes to policies in home and host countries. Posts about the expansion of the SWP into new industries (the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS)) received lots of positive comments and requests for more information. Many group members tagged others who they thought might be interested in these opportunities, so expanding the visibility and spread of information. Posts about the PLS attracted comments such as (Figure 18):

Figure 18: Interest in the PLS

Wow, this is interesting. 😊.

Awesome 😄

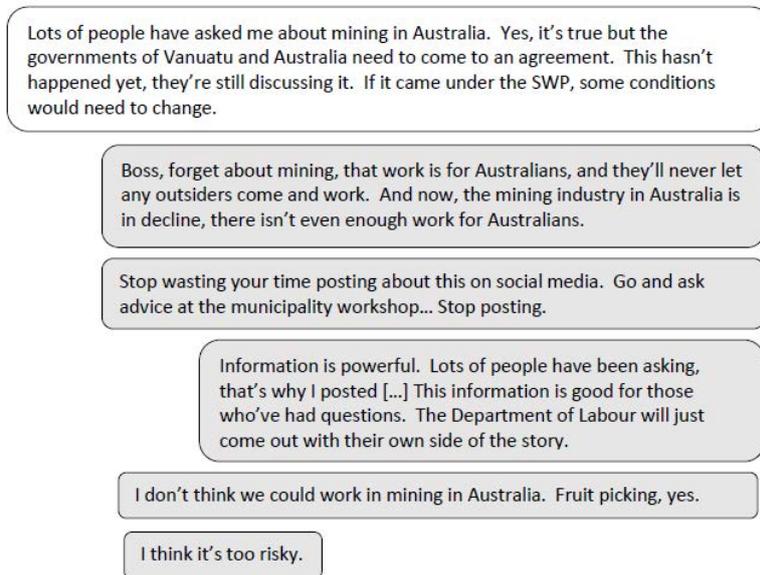
Wow, I'm interested any email address please

Where are the information sessions being held please?

THATS VERY NICE.... Anymore vacancies....?

Some posts debated further expansion into other industries, not yet included under the PLS (Figure 19):

Figure 19: Sharing news about new developments



Other developments were not considered so welcome, and when a group member shared a post about proposed changes that would require returned workers to transfer their superannuation to the domestic equivalent, the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF), the following discussion ensued (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Criticism of home government proposals

[...] At the end of the day, ni-Vanuatu won't be able to access their own money when they come back to Vanuatu, and the VNPF will be cutting the copra [ruining the livelihoods] of hardworking ni-Vanuatu.

Bullshit... That's enough stealing by elites. If someone only goes overseas once or twice, are you going to provide work for them afterwards? Let people use the money they've earned with their own sweat.

VNPF, we already have too many deductions to deal with, so sorry, we don't need yours too.

VNPF's idea would only hurt seasonal workers... Three or four months of deductions, then Australia takes 60%, the worker has 40%, and how much do you want from them? Please don't make workers' lives hard.. Find another way..

The VNPF wants to steal money away from the people again. People get sick from working in the cold, and the work is hard and you want to steal again. Everything is already OK with superannuation, you come home and you claim the money back. But with the VNPF, you only get the money when you're dead and your family are the only ones who enjoy it. VNPF stop sticking your nose in everywhere. RSE and SWP workers go to work and earn money for themselves and their families, not so that you can boss them around.

Workers especially were anxious to learn both about changes within the existing scheme that might affect wages and other matters, and new employment opportunities that might exist in mining or other areas, as seasonal worker schemes expanded.

(f) Investment opportunities

Group members frequently shared information about opportunities for investment and scams to beware of. Some seasonal workers posted ads for items they were selling themselves such as tins for baking bread or electronics. Others posted success stories detailing their own investments and achievements to inspire others to do the same. One group administrator explained (Figure 21):

Figure 21: Rationale for sharing successes

The reason for sharing success stories is to help boost the scheme in Vanuatu, and show all approved employers and farmers that everyone's work is fruitful, to show a picture of how Australia and New Zealand are helping us in Vanuatu through the scheme, and how it can boost and employ a lot more ni-Vanuatu.

One post advertised traditional foods that could be taken overseas (suggesting the desire of workers for home comforts) (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Small business promotion

If you're travelling to Australia or New Zealand, we're selling food that we've been producing for a long time. We have one variety with two pieces of tulluk [traditional pudding] inside it for 450 vatu. It is certified so that you can take it overseas. We also have full laplap [traditional pudding] that has meat and cabbage inside it, and one with coconut milk. They stay fresh for more than 6 months. We'll bring some to the airport, so if you are travelling and want to take some with you, come and see us. If you're already overseas, and you want fresh laplap with meat in it, send me a message or call me on [phone number].

Others provided advice about possible scams. Some, like the Samsung scam below, related more to the use of Facebook than seasonal work per se, but targeted seasonal work participants (Figure 23). As noted earlier (Figures 5-9) there are regular warnings about con men and rip-offs.

Figure 23: Warnings about scams online

I want to share some advice about two scams (in NZ and Australia). These scams are targeting a lot of us. There is one going around now about the Samsung company run by a woman called Lisa Cathy and her brother Jerry. They've been using the Samsung name to scam people. They'll ask for the password for your Facebook account. My advice is to always stay safe. We've all got families, think about why you've come to work in these two places.

Another member warned (Figure 24):

Figure 24: Warnings about scams in host country

Someone is going around to ni-Vanuatu SWP workers in Australia, asking them to sign a letter authorising him to withdraw their superannuation money and send it to the VNPF. We don't know much about this person, but we're suspicious about fraudulent activities. He's an Australian. Please, does anyone know anything about this person?

What's his name?

Check your messenger bro

Can you check with the VNPF tomorrow about the background of that person please? I'm waiting for your response by this week. Please, it's urgent.

Can you private message me the name of that person so I can tell my boys to be alert where we are staying.

Fake recruiting agents have been an issue within Vanuatu, and lists of approved employers and photos of government certifications for genuine agents were posted on the page. When scammers were apprehended, the news was shared (Figure 25):

Figure 25: News about home country scams

The police today arrested a young boy from Ambae who was using the name [...] to purposely steal money from people. He was arrested because he was lying to people all over town, telling them he was an agent for the SWP. If you've given money to him, you can go to the police station to claim it or take information to the police. Thanks to the Vanuatu police force

Some members requested assistance on behalf of family members who were the victims of these scammers (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Requests for assistance

Are there any agents sending people to Australia for the SWP who need more workers, or are short on numbers? Please private message me. I've got some family on Ambae who were lied to by an agent. They're ready with passports, x-rays and medical check-ups, and are just waiting to be deployed. Message me if you have space, they're very hardworking males, there's about 15 of them. Thanks for your help.

Facebook thus provided a forum for exchanging information about possible investment opportunities to seek out, as well as those to avoid.

Conclusion

While seasonal employment schemes, including the SWP, have demonstrated economic success, notably in the incomes earned by many workers, concerns have existed over wages and salaries, but also over contract breaches, accommodation and other broadly social concerns. The establishment and significant use of the Facebook group 'Seasonal Workers Vanuatu' both emphasises that many existing and prospective seasonal workers (and their kin) have been concerned about some aspects of the scheme, and that they have been able to utilise social media to provide advice and remedy problems. Facebook provided a space where they could air grievances, offer solutions, celebrate successes and participate in discussions about the benefits and potential pitfalls of seasonal work and the roles they wanted participating governments, unions, hire agents and others to play. In some cases responses were both spontaneous and instantaneous. On Facebook, seasonal workers (and other group members) could direct conversations and share knowledge, have frank and anonymous discussions, that they usually would not have had with politicians, unions, contractors or employers, and to do so in a language they are confident in, but which is partly inaccessible to standard English speakers. At the same time posts demonstrated how workers also sought to take responsibility for their own actions, and support and encourage others, who might in some circumstances have been seen as competition for scarce job opportunities.

Significantly, this Facebook group, exhibits an ongoing and lively exchange of ideas, compared with the official 'Seasonal Worker Programme' Page (which has less than 2000 likes, compared with over 13,000 members), where there is no exchange of ideas and simply formal statements about the scheme, which attract comments such as 'I'm interested, how do I apply?' but which rarely receive responses from the page administrator or others. The frequent dialogue in 'Seasonal Workers Vanuatu' emphasises how ni-Vanuatu workers themselves are no longer only reliant on receiving information through 'official' sources such as recruiting agents, contractors, government officials and the news media. In this manner Facebook groups fill a critical gap in information sharing about seasonal work and allow workers to exercise agency in directing and contributing to conversations about seasonal work, and deciding which themes are most important to them.

The employment of migrant seasonal workers in Australia has involved both benefits and costs, including the emergence of a precariat with a weak social, legal, and employment status, in a very different cultural and linguistic context. Ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers exemplify an internationally mobile precariat, unfree to change employers or lodgings, on farms where they work, live and socialise, separated from their families, and from the "host" society, while working long hours. Ni-Vanuatu were thus seen as dispensable workers without autonomy or authority, and with few effective opportunities to challenge problems. While in many respects that remains true, the recent development and use of social media has enabled one means of circumventing, reducing and challenging these problems, and warning others of problems and issues in advance, of acquiring and exercising agency and of celebrating successes. This is a small example of 'e-Democracy' in action and contributes to evidence around the growing potential of social media in the Pacific to open up new conversations, effect positive change (Finau *et al.* 2014) and provide new avenues for civic engagement (Willans 2017). Similarly, and while Pacific societies have a strong tradition of oral knowledge transmission, the increasing use of social media in the region points to the potential growing importance of other, more text (and image) based, forms of information exchange. As Schrooten (2012) argues in the case of Brazilian migrants, pure 'offline' ethnographies of migrant social networks and 'togetherness' are no longer always enough to fully understand migration experiences.

The relative anonymity of social media means conversations via Facebook can occur without the need for open confrontation, an important

consideration where Pacific islands cultures value consensus and avoid dissent. Social media has also contributed to changing the status of the workers themselves. Most seasonal workers are aged around their thirties (World Bank 2017), just beyond the category of ‘youth’ in Vanuatu, so that they would not usually be considered knowledgeable enough to speak in public as experts. Facebook allows them to share expert knowledge and experiences in a way that would not be possible offline, in ‘real life’ situations. Combining experiences from a wide range of locations within Vanuatu and host countries, has created a large, ‘live’ knowledge base that updates in real time such that the Facebook group can be considered an online ‘self-educating community’ (Goran and Babis 2017). Furthermore, and as for other marginalised groups (Goran and Babis 2017, Komito 2011, McKay 2010), social media has provided ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers with new opportunities for bonding, support and monitoring of the scheme. Consequently, social media has played a small part in increasing the benefits and reducing the risks of overseas seasonal employment. As social media evolves towards greater sophistication and wider participation, its impact is likely to increase somewhat further in favour of the migrant workers.

Note: Where relevant all Bislama sentences and texts have been translated into English by the first author.

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