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► The role of fair recruitment in addressing climate mobility in the Pacific Islands region



- ▶ **The role of fair recruitment in addressing climate mobility in the Pacific Islands region**

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Foreword

The Pacific Islands region is experiencing some of the world's most acute climate impacts, including rising sea levels and increasingly severe weather events. These changes are driving new and complex patterns of mobility across the region. As communities move in response to environmental pressures, the need to ensure that mobility occurs under fair, rights-based and safe conditions has become more urgent than ever.

This policy paper provides an important and timely contribution to the growing body of work on climate mobility by examining the role of fair recruitment in protecting the rights and livelihoods of those who move. It brings together stakeholder insights and practical examples to show how fair recruitment can serve as a key tool for enabling labour mobility to support climate adaptation, rather than becoming a source of increased vulnerability.

Through its detailed analysis and actionable recommendations, this paper offers guidance for governments, employers' and workers' organizations, and development partners across the Pacific Islands region. It outlines how fair recruitment can strengthen the integrity and impact of labour mobility programmes, enhance the resilience of displaced and relocated communities, and reinforce the link between mobility and decent work.

Produced under the Pacific Climate Change, Migration and Human Security (PCCMHS) Phase II programme, and grounded in the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment, the paper also highlights the importance of coordinated regional action and tripartite dialogue. I commend the authors and thank all the partners who contributed their expertise to this effort. The ILO Office for the Pacific Island Countries is grateful to the Government of New Zealand for its continued support to the PCCMHS programme.

As Pacific Island countries move forward with implementing the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility, this policy paper offers a practical road map to ensure that fair recruitment principles underpin all dimensions of climate mobility.

Sincerely



Martin Wandera

Director

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Executive summary

The Pacific Islands region is at the forefront of the climate crisis, facing increasingly severe environmental challenges that are disrupting livelihoods and driving new forms of human mobility. In this context, fair recruitment has emerged as a critical policy tool to ensure that climate-induced migration contributes to resilience and decent work.

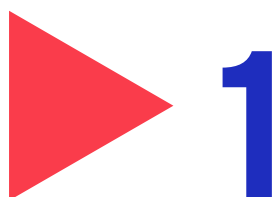
This policy paper explores the intersection of fair recruitment and climate mobility, focusing on three key dimensions: (i) labour mobility; (ii) planned relocation; and (iii) displacement. It identifies how integrating fair recruitment principles can promote rights-based migration and support climate adaptation efforts across the Pacific.

The paper highlights the risks of maladaptation when mobility occurs through unregulated or exploitative pathways and offers evidence-based recommendations to align labour migration programmes with ILO standards. It draws on stakeholder interviews, regional case studies and the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment to assess current practices and propose practical reforms.

Key recommendations include:

- **Align labour mobility with fair recruitment standards**
Labour mobility schemes provide vital employment and income opportunities for Pacific Islanders. Strengthening alignment with fair recruitment principles can enhance their positive impact on workers and communities.
- **Enhance pre-departure and post-arrival support**
Provide comprehensive pre-departure information and training on rights, legal frameworks and working conditions. Partner with trade unions and Migrant Resource Centres to deliver sector-specific, gender-sensitive training, and ensure ongoing post-arrival support services.
- **Integrate fair recruitment into planned relocation**
Mainstream fair recruitment principles in relocation governance. Ensure equitable access to decent work, social protection and vocational training for relocated individuals. Engage local employers and community actors in job placement and skills development.
- **Address marginalization in most communities**
Strengthen collaboration between governments, employers and oversight bodies to ensure fair and inclusive employment for relocated populations. Support community-based monitoring and inclusion initiatives to protect vulnerable groups.
- **Establish a regional knowledge platform**
Create a centralized regional platform to coordinate actors, share policies and good practices, and enable collaboration through accessible databases, case studies and networking tools.
- **Embed climate resilience in mobility programmes**
Integrate community-based training on climate preparedness, safe housing, food security and remittance planning into labour mobility and relocation programmes, enhancing household resilience to climate shocks.

These strategic recommendations aim to ensure that climate-induced mobility across the Pacific is safe, rights-based and resilience-focused, while enhancing regional coordination and socio-economic inclusion. With coordinated action by governments, employers' and workers' organizations, and development partners, the Pacific region can lead by example in promoting safe and dignified mobility grounded in the principles of decent work.



Introduction

Rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events driven by climate change are shifting long-established mobility patterns across the Pacific Islands region. This paper is based on the insight that labour mobility – along with fair and ethical recruitment, transfer of skills, the effective use of remittances and sustainable reintegration – can be part of a climate adaptation strategy for Pacific Island countries, but only when there is decent work for migrant workers.

Risks of maladaptation emerge when migrant workers are desperate to find a livelihood and lack adequate protections. In cases where wages are low (or unfairly paid), deductions of wages are high, working conditions are poor or legal protections are weak, migrants may also find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt, with much of their income, savings and remittance being diverted to loan repayment rather than supporting their families and communities back home. Instead of enhancing resilience, poorly managed labour mobility risks leaving workers and their families in an even more precarious position than if they had remained in their place of origin.

Fair recruitment plays a critical role in ensuring that labour migration serves as a tool for climate adaptation rather than a pathway into greater vulnerability. Zero-cost recruitment – where all recruitment-related expenses, including both recruitment fees and migration-related costs, are covered by employers – ensures that migrant workers can fully benefit from their earnings, allowing them to build savings and send remittances that support climate adaptation in their home communities while avoiding cycles of indebtedness. Moreover, fair recruitment practices, reduction of irregular migration and transparent contracts uphold fundamental labour rights, ensuring that migrants are paid fairly, work in safe conditions and have legal protections against exploitation. Fair recruitment is the foundation for decent work, and therefore essential to supporting just transitions to greener economies and societies.

This policy paper investigates the role of fair recruitment in safeguarding the rights of individuals affected by climate change, focusing on three dimensions of climate mobility: (i) labour mobility; (ii) planned relocation; and (iii) displacement. Fair recruitment, as defined by ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment (GPOG):

- protects migrant workers against deceptive practices, abuse and specific risks of exploitation and discrimination;
- promotes compliance with international labour standards; and
- helps governments and the social partners address regulatory gaps (ILO 2019).

In the context of climate mobility, fair recruitment should be seen as a tool to support the resilience and adaptive capacity of Pacific Island communities, with the end goal being decent work. This paper sheds light on current policies and practices in the areas of labour mobility, relocation and displacement, and explores how fair recruitment could strengthen existing approaches to safeguarding the rights of people on the move, in alignment with national policies and regional strategies for climate mobility.

Grounded in evidence-based research and aligned with international labour standards, the paper is enriched by a primary research campaign through which practitioners of climate mobility were interviewed about the way in which policies and programmes intersect with the reality of people's movements in the region. Actionable recommendations are proposed based on this evidence.

Finally, tripartite approaches that can be adapted to the challenges faced by Pacific Island countries are explored and contextualized by pragmatic examples of cooperation both between local communities and trade unions and between the governments and the social partners. The case of support provided to displaced people in Tonga by the Public Service Association, for instance, illustrates how trade unions can mobilize resources and support displaced workers effectively, showcasing ways to animate the mandate of employers' and workers' organizations. Several examples of this kind populate each section of the paper.

1.1. Context and challenges

The Pacific Islands region is among the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world, with small island developing States facing acute challenges from rising sea levels, extreme weather events and other environmental stressors. As climate impacts intensify, the region has seen increasing incidences of displacement, planned relocation and mobility, including both short-term labour mobility and long-term/permanent emigration. These phenomena are placing unprecedented pressures on local, national and regional governance systems. To provide a foundational understanding of climate-related mobility in the Pacific, this section is anchored in the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility,¹ which outlines a coordinated and rights-based approach to addressing the interconnected dimensions of displacement, planned relocation and labour mobility in the face of climate change. Reflecting one of the first regionally endorsed approaches, the Framework serves as a regional baseline for conceptualizing climate mobility, guiding policy responses and fostering collaboration among Pacific Island countries, partners and stakeholders. This section presents current trends and challenges related to the three dimensions of climate mobility: planned relocation, displacement and labour mobility.

1.1.1. Planned relocation

As documented by a body of extensive literature over the past decade, many Pacific Islands governments and communities are increasingly deploying planned relocation as a controversial – yet necessary – element of their wider climate change adaptation efforts.² Additionally, relocation has been used as a means of providing employment and economic opportunities where few exist in the national island economy.

Many Pacific Islanders rely on subsistence farming and fishing, which are deeply tied to their local ecosystems. Relocation often removes these communities from the resources and environments necessary to sustain these livelihoods, leaving them dependent on external aid or forcing them to seek new jobs or occupations, including overseas. When jobs are available, relocated populations may not possess the skills required for available roles, and new locations often lack adequate training opportunities (IOM 2019). The risk of economic marginalization is real, as relocated people of working age are often integrated into the informal economy or low-wage jobs.³ If the new location becomes a long-term home, many families are exposed to dependency and vulnerability.⁴ The well-documented case of the planned relocation of Carteret Islanders to Bougainville illustrates the manifold challenges linked to socio-cultural displacement, limited access to livelihood opportunities, governance and coordination pitfalls, and potential social tensions between host communities and relocated individuals (Boege and Rakova 2023), highlighting the dual challenge of ensuring food security and economic stability for relocated populations.

1 The text of the Framework is available at: <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Pacific%20Regional%20Framework%20on%20Climate%20Mobility.pdf>.

2 See for instance: McNamara and des Combes (2015); Gharbaoui (2020); Monson (2022); and Bengé and Neef (2020).

3 According to the ILO (2018), more than 60 per cent of the global workforce participates in the informal economy, with rates even higher in many developing regions. Vulnerable groups, including those displaced or relocated due to climate change, are disproportionately represented in these segments, often with limited access to social protection or job security.

4 See Bengé and Neef (2020). The authors use meta-analysis of planned relocation efforts in the region, so as to distil findings from existing evidence.

Despite progress, governance and funding gaps in the region persist. Most of the few existing national planned relocation frameworks rely heavily on international donor support, which is often insufficient to meet the scale of the challenge. This dependency threatens the pace of development of national social protection institutions.

The socio-political dynamics of land tenure and ownership in Pacific Island countries add another layer of complexity. In Fiji, for instance, indigenous land is inalienable, which creates both a safeguard against dispossession and a barrier to planned relocation. Additionally, the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), establishes as a legal obligation that any decision concerning transmission of land rights is to be consulted with indigenous communities. Negotiating land for planned relocation often involves intricate discussions between landowning groups, displaced communities and the government. These negotiations are further complicated by existing socio-political tensions, particularly in countries where land ownership is a contentious issue (Benge and Neef 2020).

From a fair recruitment perspective, planned relocation introduces risks where people are not able to access adequate employment in their area of relocation (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021), or where they are vulnerable to unfair recruitment practices and employment relations are precarious and poorly protected. These issues can be particularly pronounced in urban areas, where competition for jobs is intense and the risk of a race to the bottom in regard to working conditions prevails.⁵ Wage discrimination is not uncommon, and forced labour remains a major risk. Unethical or unfair recruitment practices, including favouritism, wage discrimination and exploitative working conditions, may further compound these vulnerabilities. Fair recruitment systems would limit these risks.

While many of these issues also arise in contexts of displacement and are discussed in the following section, they are relevant to planned relocation as well. Future research efforts can shed more light on these interlinked challenges.

1.1.2. Displacement

With climate-induced phenomena and lack of economic opportunities increasingly forcing communities to leave their ancestral homes, displacement has become a pressing concern for nations throughout the region. Unlike planned relocation, which entails structured and often state-led efforts, displacement is typically sudden, reactive and fraught with uncertainty. Fair recruitment and decent work, as principles for guiding labour mobility, can also support sustainable recovery from disasters and displacement situations.⁶

This distinction between displacement and planned relocation becomes particularly significant when considering the governance challenges in the region. Social welfare systems in many Pacific Island countries are fragmented and under-resourced, with institutional capacities still evolving to address the multifaceted needs of local communities, let alone of displaced populations. Tripartite institutions face operational constraints that limit their ability to fully deliver on their mandates. These challenges are further compounded by the unique societal structures in the Pacific, where communal systems, cultural norms and traditional governance play a central role in shaping responses to displacement.

Climate-induced displacement in the Pacific manifests through a range of phenomena. Sudden-onset disasters, such as tropical cyclones, storm surges and flash floods, are among the leading drivers of displacement in the region (Nansen Initiative 2013). Fiji, for instance, has experienced repeated instances of mass displacement following severe cyclones such as Winston in 2016 and Yasa in 2020 (Price 2019). Samoa was hit by a devastating tsunami in 2009 with the loss of 150 lives. Vanuatu, in December 2024, was struck by a severe earthquake that killed 14 and displaced over 4,000 persons.⁷ These events have led to large-scale disruptions, with thousands of

⁵ According to findings from key informant interviews in the framework of this policy paper.

⁶ See, for example, the ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205).

⁷ Even if earthquakes are not unequivocally events that are brought about by climate change, it is worth noting that the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), in partnership with the Department of Labour, has conducted an assessment that estimated the damages for businesses and the loss of employment caused by the event (Pacific Humanitarian Team 2024).

individuals seeking temporary refuge in urban centres or higher ground. While some communities manage to return to their homes, many are left in limbo, unable to rebuild due to persistent environmental risks. In 2023 alone, more than 50,000 individuals in the Pacific Islands region were displaced – or were at risk of displacement, depending on the data source – by extreme weather events (IOM 2023).

Compounding these sudden incidents are slow-onset events such as coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and droughts, which gradually erode the habitability of certain areas. In Kiribati and Tuvalu, rising sea levels are encroaching, for instance, on the already limited freshwater supplies, leaving communities with no option but to abandon their homes. Similarly, the Solomon Islands has experienced the disappearance of five reef islands due to erosion, forcing the migration of affected communities (Filho et al. 2020). Similarly, repeated short-term disasters can erode adaptive capacity, leading to longer-term displacement.

Climate projections indicate that slow-onset processes highlight the creeping nature of climate displacement, where the gradual degradation of living conditions erodes traditional livelihoods and exacerbates existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, and can ultimately culminate in forced migration (Germany, GIZ 2021). The socio-cultural impacts of displacement in the Pacific are profound. For many Pacific Island communities, land is more than a resource. It is a cornerstone of identity, spirituality and social cohesion. Displacement severs ties with ancestral lands, leading to cultural dislocation and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. This loss is particularly acute for indigenous populations, who often rely on communal land tenure systems that are incompatible with urban or resettlement settings. Moreover, social and economic transformations can bring about the disruption of extended family networks and community structures, exacerbating social isolation and psychological distress. Women and children are particularly vulnerable in displacement contexts, facing heightened risks of exploitation, discrimination and limited access to essential services.

Economic challenges further complicate the displacement narrative. Displaced populations often lose access to traditional livelihoods, such as fishing, farming and artisanal crafts, which are closely tied to their local ecosystems. This economic dislocation is coupled by the lack of formal employment opportunities in urban centres or host communities. Displaced individuals frequently find themselves in precarious labour markets where they are vulnerable to exploitation, underpayment and unsafe working conditions, and often excluded from coverage by labour market institutions and social welfare (ILO 2024). The perceived undercutting of local workers by displaced workers can also feed resentment and tensions, exacerbating social exclusion and xenophobia.

Weak governance has been witnessed both at the national and regional levels. While regional initiatives, such as the Pacific Climate Change, Migration and Human Security Phase II programme, provide a foundation for regional-level collaboration on addressing climate-driven displacement, national-level implementation is progressing unevenly. Weak labour market institutions are coupled by financial and technical constraints, contributing to unregulated recruitment systems where workers may be hired without proper protections, contracts or oversight.

Built environmental constraints further exacerbate the challenges of displacement in the Pacific. Displaced populations at times move into areas that are themselves vulnerable to climate impacts, such as low-lying urban centres or informal settlements.⁸ These locations are typically characterized by inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, urban sprawl and limited access to basic services, including clean water, sanitation and healthcare. This leads to the risk of secondary displacement and failed integration. For example, in Honiara, Solomon Islands, the influx of displaced individuals from rural areas has placed pressure on the already fragile infrastructure, resulting in informal settlements and placing additional strains on basic services (Souter and Orams 2019).

Integrating fair recruitment practices into disaster responses, urban planning, labour market strategies and regulated recruitment systems can help to limit the labour market and social exclusion faced by displaced populations, as well as reduce risks of rights abuses and forced labour. Governments also need to create an enabling environment for decent jobs to be created by the private sector, which should include improving technical and vocation education and training (TVET) and making it easier to start a business.

⁸ According to findings from key informant interviews conducted in the framework of this policy paper.

1.1.3. Labour mobility

Labour mobility within and across the Pacific Islands is a well-established phenomenon rooted in historical, cultural and economic factors. While climate-induced and environmental factors rarely act as the sole determinant of labour mobility, they reshape labour mobility by intensifying adverse drivers of unsafe, disorderly and irregular migration and lead to further vulnerabilities during recruitment, employment and return.

Labour mobility in the context of climate change exists along a spectrum ranging from voluntary migration to forced migration.⁹ Often the impetus behind labour migration is simply the desire for a better livelihood, but it can at times be a response to pressing economic need (IOM and ILO 2022). As an example of climate change-induced labour mobility, saltwater intrusion in low-lying atolls like Kiribati and Tuvalu has led to declining agricultural yields, which has driven increasing numbers of individuals to seek employment either abroad or in the major town of the main island (Fornale and Kagan 2017). Labour mobility can serve as an adaptation strategy by enabling affected communities to diversify income sources and enhance resilience, for instance, through remittances and skills transfers.¹⁰ However, the extent to which labour migration contributes to adaptation depends on the conditions under which workers are recruited – with special attention needing to be paid to mitigating risks of debt bondage.¹¹

Recent decades have witnessed the formalization of labour mobility schemes in the region, chief among them being New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme (commenced in 2007) and Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, which consolidated the Seasonal Worker Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme in April 2022.

Both the RSE and PALM are designed to address labour shortages in specific industries in their respective countries while providing economic opportunities for Pacific Islanders (Gibson and McKenzie 2014). These programmes have contributed to household incomes, community development and the reduction of poverty in sending regions (Gibson and Bailey 2021). Despite their advanced economies and expansive labour markets, Australia and New Zealand continue to offer limited placement opportunities, often concentrated in low-skilled, seasonal roles with little progression potential. For instance, in the year 2018, only 24 migrants from Kiribati were placed in semi-skilled jobs in the labour market of Australia, a country with an employed population of more than 12 million workers.¹²

Programmes like the RSE and PALM have facilitated the participation of Pacific workers in labour-intensive industries such as horticulture, viticulture, hospitality and food services, but due to the restrictions or caps in the existing schemes, the number of applicants continue to exceed the available vacancies. Certain countries in the Pacific Islands region facing significant migration pressures, due to lack of jobs or climate change-related factors, have particularly limited access to international mobility opportunities, with flight costs being an important determinant. Tuvalu and Kiribati, for instance, are curtailed by their relative geographic isolation, absence of diasporas in key countries of destination and limited resources within their government institutions to support labour mobility schemes.

9 Forced migration here refers to a migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g. in the context of natural or environmental disasters).

10 Community consultations conducted by BASE and Oxfam in the Pacific revealed that nearly half of remittance recipients Tonga, and Vanuatu received financial support from family abroad to rebuild homes damaged or destroyed by cyclones. Preferred resilient infrastructure solutions included cyclone-resilient prefabricated houses and water tanks. This underscores the role of remittances in enhancing household resilience to climate-related disasters (Corno 2022).

11 According to the ILO (2022), Pacific seasonal workers migrating to Australia and New Zealand incur average recruitment and migration-related costs of AU\$2,054 and AU\$1,471, respectively – equivalent to 12 per cent and 11 per cent of their gross earnings. Such upfront costs, often financed through informal loans, expose workers to the risk of debt bondage. These risks are exacerbated in the aftermath of climate-related disasters, when affected households may resort to distress migration – selling land or assets to fund migration perceived as a survival strategy.

12 Kiribati is particularly disadvantaged due to its remote location. Numbers for countries such as Samoa, Vanuatu and Tonga are indeed larger, but still small when compared with the overall magnitude of Australian labour shortages (Curtain et al. 2022).

Outside of the PALM and RSE schemes, countries in the Pacific region have initiated both bilateral agreements (for example, between Kiribati and New Zealand) and cooperative frameworks, among others, to facilitate labour mobility. Subregional agreements include the Melanesian Spearhead Group's Skills Movement Scheme, which aims to facilitate the movement of skilled professionals in the health, hospitality, education and construction sectors. Flows of labour migrants under this scheme remain limited, however, as they are capped at 400 workers per country.¹³ Additionally, intra-Pacific labour mobility programmes have recently gained traction as a means to address skills shortages in smaller Pacific nations, while providing employment opportunities for workers from sending nations. A notable example is the Niue–Solomon Islands Labour Mobility Pilot, the first managed intra-Pacific labour mobility programme under the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus. Signed in July 2024, this initiative facilitates the placement of Solomon Islands' nurses in Niue's health sector to address workforce shortages while creating employment pathways for surplus skilled labour (PACER Plus Implementation Unit 2024).

Evidence from the interviews conducted for this policy paper highlights persistent issues of high recruitment costs, unsafe working conditions, limited flexibility to change employers and a lack of access to effective grievance mechanisms for labour migrants in the region. While grievance redress mechanisms are in place, concerns remain regarding their capacity and accessibility – with many migrants encountering barriers such as limited outreach and inadequate support services that hinder their ability to effectively seek redress. These vulnerabilities underscore the need for robust regulatory oversight, adequate institutional capacity and the integration of fair recruitment practices into both multilateral and bilateral frameworks and labour agreements to ensure that labour mobility in the Pacific region contributes to resilience and equity in the face of climate change and lack of economic opportunities in Pacific Island countries.

While the regulated mobility schemes contribute to safer, more rights-based employment opportunities for Pacific workers, it is important to note the stark contrast that these schemes present with the conditions faced by unregulated or less-regulated migrant workers, particularly those from outside the region. For instance, workers employed on foreign fishing vessels operating out of Fiji (including both nationals and migrant workers) often fall outside the protections afforded by formal schemes, and are among the most vulnerable to exploitation, including unsafe working conditions, lack of legal protections and limited access to redress mechanisms (Yea and Stringer 2023).

13 The MSG Skills Movement Scheme is limited to citizens from Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

 2

Fair recruitment: Relevance and practices in the context of climate mobility

2.1. Conceptual framework: The Fair Recruitment Initiative and its relevance for climate mobility in the Pacific Islands region

The ILO's Fair Recruitment Initiative focuses on international labour migration, that is, the recruitment of migrant workers for the purpose of employment across country borders. At the same time, fair recruitment, as defined by the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment (GPOG), applies to all workers – whether in migration contexts or within national labour markets. This policy paper aims to address both, by describing the potential impact of the application of fair recruitment principles to the three dimensions of climate mobility addressed above, namely displacement and planned relocation, which frequently occur within country borders, and labour mobility, which frequently takes place across borders.

► Box 1. The Fair Recruitment Initiative in the context of crisis

While much of the ILO's work on fair recruitment has focused on migrant workers due to their heightened vulnerabilities, fair recruitment principles are universally applicable, including in relation to those affected by crises and within national borders.

A key aspect of the GPOG is the explicit recognition of the importance of fair recruitment in conflict and crisis situations. Operational Guideline 12 underscores the role of governments in upholding human rights and promoting fair recruitment during such circumstances. Specifically, governments are urged to take measures ensuring that enterprises, recruitment agencies and international assistance programmes operating in crisis contexts do not engage in human rights violations or recruitment abuses. This is particularly relevant in situations where displacement, instability and loss of legal protections can expose workers – both within and across borders – to exploitative recruitment practices. Whether in disaster-affected regions, post-conflict reconstruction or humanitarian aid settings, integrating fair recruitment principles ensures that workers, regardless of their status, are treated with dignity and fairness in their employment pathways.

A fundamental principle of the GPOG is that no worker should bear recruitment fees and related costs. This principle is grounded in the reality that charging workers for recruitment undermines fair hiring practices, increases vulnerability to debt bondage and other forms of exploitation. The definition of recruitment fees and costs within the GPOG is comprehensive, covering direct and indirect charges, including travel, medical tests, visa processing and training expenses. These provisions align with international labour standards, particularly the Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181), which calls for effective regulation of recruitment practices, and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, which explicitly mandates the protection of workers – especially migrants – from abusive and fraudulent recruitment practices.

The prohibition of recruitment fees and costs is particularly relevant in contexts where workers face risks of deception, contract substitution and coercion during the hiring process. The Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, reinforces this by obligating governments to take preventive measures against forced labour risks, including in recruitment and placement processes. In crisis-affected settings, where displaced individuals and vulnerable workers may be desperate for employment, enforcing the principle of no recruitment fees or costs becomes even more critical to preventing exploitation. The need to address fair recruitment and issues related to forced labour is particularly relevant in sectors like international migration for employment in the fishing sector, where reports suggest that workers often face severe mistreatment and are frequently unaware of their rights.

Table 1 presents a summary of key principles of the Fair Recruitment Initiative that are most pertinent to climate mobility in the Pacific region, specifically displacement and planned relocation within national borders and labour mobility across national borders. The table does not cover all of the elements of fair recruitment, focusing only on those that are instrumental to address the key issues identified for the Pacific region by the researchers.

► Table 1. Relevance of fair recruitment principles for different dimension of climate mobility

Issue area	Summary of key fair recruitment principle	Relevance and status quo for labour mobility in the region (international mobility)	Considerations for planned relocation and displacement (within national borders)
Policy and practices on recruitment	Transparent recruitment regulations backed by effective enforcement. Regulation of recruitment and employment activities should be clear and transparent, effectively enforced, and in line with a human rights approach to labour migration. The competent authorities should take specific measures against abusive and fraudulent recruitment methods, including those that could result in forced labour or trafficking in persons. Related to GPOG Principles 3 and 4	Labour Schemes like PALM and the RSE are designed with regulations to protect migrant workers' rights, but in most, if not all such programmes, implementation can be inconsistent. There are documented instances of unfair and fraudulent practices in recruitment, including deceptive terms, lack of contract transparency and labour rights infringements in the countries of destination (ILO 2022).	Fully applies to internal mobility as well. Within a country, employment relations and recruitment practices must be regulated transparently to protect workers from potential exploitation, including practices that could lead to forced labour or trafficking.
	Access to relevant information. Workers should have access to free, comprehensive and accurate information regarding their rights and the conditions of their recruitment and employment. Related to GPOG Principle 5	Both the PALM and RSE schemes require pre-departure briefings that cover topics such as wages, working hours, accommodation and grievance mechanisms. However, pre-departure orientation provided by the labour sending units is generally limited to two days, and comes late in the pre-departure process, where prospective migrant workers generally do not have adequate capacity to absorb the provided information.	Fully applies to internal mobility as well. Displaced or relocated individuals/communities are at higher risk of infringements of their human and labour rights; hence, access to relevant information is key. ¹⁴

14 Relevant information includes clear guidance on the risks associated with displacement or migration, labour rights and entitlements, legal status, as well as recruitment practices, wage expectations and working and living conditions in destination areas. Information systems such as labour mobility advisory services, pre-departure orientation and community-based early warning mechanisms can help individuals make informed decisions and reduce exposure to exploitative arrangements (ILO 2021).

Issue area	Summary of key fair recruitment principle	Relevance and status quo for labour mobility in the region (international mobility)	Considerations for planned relocation and displacement (within national borders)
		Good practices exist at bilateral level, for example, the Australian United Workers Union is supporting trade unions in Fiji in developing pre-departure manuals for prospective migrant workers to combat discrimination and harassment.	
	Efficient processes through reduction of layers of intermediation. Recruitment regulations and processes should be efficient, to cut down layers of intermediaries so as to reduce costs for employers and workers. Related to GPOG Principle 7 and Operational Guidelines 10 and 11	The governments at both ends of mobility corridors in the Pacific are heavily involved in the organization of movements.¹⁵ This is more prominent compared to other regions in the world, where networks of recruiters and private employment agencies play a more prominent role. This provides grounds for the ILO tripartite constituents to be trendsetters both in the administration of mobility and in the efficient regulation of emerging networks of intermediaries.	Limited applicability to internal mobility, as international mobility is more complex, requiring visas, work permits and stay in distant, potentially unfamiliar and culturally different environments.
Forced labour	No confiscation of documents. Workers' identity documents and contracts should not be confiscated, destroyed or retained. Related to GPOG Principle 7 and Operational Guidelines 13 and 14	Formally, the principal labour mobility schemes in the region (PALM/RSE) have de jure protections to prevent forced labour practices. There is no evidence of confiscation, retention or destruction of identity documents. Outside of regulated schemes, Pacific Island workers continue to become undocumented in instances when they change employment, where protections against forced labour can be inconsistent or absent.	Does not apply to internal mobility given there is free access to the labour market.

¹⁵ While government involvement remains central, an increasing share of operational responsibilities is delegated to approved employers and licensed recruitment agents, particularly through direct recruitment mechanisms such as work ready pools. However, oversight and regulation of these actors is often weak, with limited checks on licensing, due diligence and compliance monitoring – exposing migrant workers to recruitment-related risks, including contract substitution and non-transparent deductions (ILO 2022).

Issue area	Summary of key fair recruitment principle	Relevance and status quo for labour mobility in the region (international mobility)	Considerations for planned relocation and displacement (within national borders)
	Occupational mobility and the right to move and return. Freedom to change employers in the country of destination and freedom of workers to move within a country or to leave a country should be respected. Migrant workers should not require the employer's or recruiter's permission to change employer. Related to GPOG Principle 9 and Operational Guidelines 15 and 16	Under the principal labour mobility schemes in the region, seasonal migrant workers' visas are tied to their specified employer (sponsor), sometimes creating difficulties related to changing their employer within the visa timeframe. Evidence suggests that migrant workers are hesitant to report labour rights infringements or voice grievances, as they are afraid that a conflict with the employer may result in them having to return to their country of origin – rather than being allowed to change employers within the same sector or region.	Does not apply to internal mobility
	Non-charging of fees. No recruitment fees and related costs should be charged to, or otherwise borne by, workers or jobseekers. Related to GPOG Principle 6 and Operational Guidelines 5 and 6	One of the fundamental components of fair recruitment is that migrant workers should not be charged – directly or indirectly – for any fees or related costs for their recruitment. The competent authority may make exceptions to this, under certain conditions, and after consultation with the most representative workers' and employers' organizations. In practice, however, under the PALM scheme, candidates are charged for travel and visa costs through wage deductions (ILO 2022).	Less applicability to internal mobility where most of the recruitment is direct. However, there are risks of intermediaries charging displaced/relocated individuals for access to specific jobs in the new locality as well related costs such as transportation being self-funded. There is little or no research concerning recruitment fees and costs with respect to internal mobility. Easier to implement and enforce in the context of employment after displacement and relocation, as recruitment happens locally.

Issue area	Summary of key fair recruitment principle	Relevance and status quo for labour mobility in the region (international mobility)	Considerations for planned relocation and displacement (within national borders)
Skills	Recognition of skills and qualifications. Recruitment should take into account policies and practices that promote mutual recognition of skills and qualifications between the countries of origin and countries of destination. Related to GPOG Principle 8 and Operational Guidelines 17 and 18	National occupation frameworks are far from being congruent in the Pacific region. Attempts have been made in South Pacific Islands to harmonize the standards of training centres with those of main countries of destination, especially Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, in the Northern Pacific, similar approaches are used to facilitate skilled migration towards the United States of America.	Recognition of skills and equivalence of qualifications between countries of origin and destination does not apply to forms of climate mobility that happen within a given country. However, internal movements, such as those from rural to urban areas, often expose gaps in the formal recognition of traditional and informal skills, as relocated/displaced individuals may lack certification for competencies in areas like agriculture or handicrafts, limiting their employability in formal urban labour markets. Recognition of Prior Learning mechanisms can be instrumental in supporting the labour market (re-)integration of displaced or relocated individuals, for example, among those who have acquired skills through informal or non-formal learning.
Social dialogue and rights at work	Migrants' right to organize and unionize. Migrants in the country of destination should be granted the rights to organize and unionize, benefit from unified employment contracts at the national or sectoral levels, as well as benefit from applicable collective agreements.	Social dialogue is at its early stage in many countries of destination¹⁶, with the exception of Australia and New Zealand. The limited capacity of employers' and workers' organizations in countries of origin means that social partners in the region, particularly trade unions, still play	Does not apply to internal mobility.¹⁷

¹⁶ This refers to smaller countries of destination in the South Pacific, such as Fiji, where social dialogue mechanisms are less developed compared to Australia and New Zealand. Despite the lack of capacity among trade unions, there are no major legal restrictions preventing migrant workers from forming or leading trade unions in Pacific countries of destination, with the exception of Papua New Guinea. This provides a fertile ground to organize workers, including migrants.

¹⁷ In some cases, sectors such as agriculture and domestic work are excluded from standard labour protections. While this lies beyond the direct scope of fair recruitment, it reinforces the importance of complementary efforts to ensure decent work post-recruitment.

Issue area	Summary of key fair recruitment principle	Relevance and status quo for labour mobility in the region (international mobility)	Considerations for planned relocation and displacement (within national borders)
		a limited role in the domain of labour mobility. However, recent engagements of trade unions are promising (for example, in the design and implementation of pre-departure training; PICTU's involvement in the Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting).	
	Related to GPOG Principle 1 and Operational Guideline 1	The effectiveness of grievance redress mechanisms in regional labour mobility schemes remains limited due to under-resourced oversight bodies, limited access to justice mechanisms, language barriers, and constraints imposed by visa conditions that tie workers to specific employers, which deters formal reporting. The physical remoteness of work sites can further hinder access to support services and trade union representation.	Fully applies also to internal mobility. Displaced or relocated individuals/communities are at higher risk of infringements of their human and labour rights; hence, access to grievance redress mechanisms is key. ¹⁸
	Transparent employment contracts. The terms and conditions of a worker's employment should be specified in an appropriate, verifiable and easily understandable manner, and preferably through written contracts. Related to GPOG Principle 5 and Operational Guidelines 8 and 9	Social partners retain strong leverage on collective agreements in Australia and New Zealand. These are not specific to migrants, but rather to sectoral dialogues.	Contract transparency is also relevant in internal migration, where informal arrangements and lack of written contracts may obscure agreed terms and protections.

18 See, for instance, Human Rights Watch, *"There's Just No More Land": Community-led Planned Relocation as Last-resort Adaptation to Sea Level Rise in Solomon Islands*, 2025; or Nicola Piper and Matt Withers, "Forced Transnationalism and Temporary Labour Migration: Implications for Understanding Migrant Rights", *Identities* 25, No. 5 (2018): 558–575.

2.2. Emerging practices and policies

2.2.1. Planned relocation

Planned relocation efforts in the Pacific Islands are organized through a variety of approaches, wherein both communities and government are contributing to their organization, sometimes with hybrid leadership involving both community representatives and government actors engaged in the management of the response.

Community-driven relocations are prevalent: affected populations initiate and administer the process based on immediate needs. Recruitment practices for relocated populations are rarely formalized. Planned relocation is increasingly conceived as a form of adaptation to pre-empt displacement later on, and with the aspiration of improving the livelihoods of relocated people (Benge and Neef 2021).

The reality of post-relocation livelihoods for communities does, however, show a mixed track record in the Pacific Islands region, with some communities finding themselves worse off following relocation, and others enjoying improved livelihoods (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021). This mixed track record highlights the need for context-specific strategies that align logistical aspects with economic, social and psychosocial integration.

Although not always documented in official laws and regulations, several Pacific Island countries have recently engaged in planned relocation measures that reflect some principles of fair recruitment and decent work. Fiji has been at the forefront of planned relocation initiatives in response to climate-induced risks. Its Planned Relocation Guidelines, developed in collaboration with the ILO and other partners, provide communities with an approach that combines cultural preservation and livelihood restoration.

The Guidelines also explicitly call for a “livelihood-based approach to adaptation”, as opposed to “planned relocation being merely a reaction to climate change”. However, with regards to the full range of fair recruitment principles, the Guidelines, which are conceived as a living document, have the potential to suggest actions in line with fair recruitment principles, as they look at decent work as an integral outcome of the relocation process. Applicable Fair Recruitment Initiative principles in this context relate to transparency, non-discrimination and the prohibition of charging recruitment fees to individual workers (Fiji, Ministry of Economy 2022).

The Guidelines are accompanied by standard operating procedures (SOPs) for planned relocation.¹⁹ The latter incorporate important aspects of fair recruitment principles: they prioritize non-discrimination in access to labour markets and in general to economic opportunities, and advocate for the inclusion of vulnerable groups, such as women and persons with disabilities. Vocational training and livelihood restoration are highlighted in alignment with capacity-building efforts to support employability. However, critical elements of fair recruitment such as access to justice for labour-related grievances are not present. The SOPs on planned relocation in Fiji also show shortcomings in terms of integration with broader labour mobility frameworks, and there is no systematic linkage to the Fiji National Migration Policy or other sectoral policies addressing the labour market. However, while the practical implementation of fair recruitment principles remains a challenge, the capacity-building efforts currently underway at the national level within line ministries represent a positive step forward. These initiatives aim to enhance understanding of the SOPs among task forces and government stakeholders to ensure that socio-economic aspects are taken into account.

Even when strategies and policies are in place, the financial burden of planned relocation often stands in the way of their implementation. Planned relocation projects are resource-intensive, requiring significant investments in transportation, housing, infrastructure and community development. Most Pacific Island countries lack the fiscal space to support such efforts independently and are reliant on international donor funding. While donor contributions are essential, they can be insufficient or inconsistent, leading to delays and under-resourced initiatives.

¹⁹ These were published in 2023 and provide a detailed set of operational guidelines on how principles should be applied during each stage of implementation: identification, planning and relocation, long-term recovery.

This financial instability often undermines the long-term sustainability of planned relocation efforts, particularly when the needs of relocated populations extend beyond immediate resettlement to include livelihood restoration and community integration. Trust funds are an emerging model to mobilize funding.

In 2019, Fiji established the Climate Relocation and Displaced Peoples Trust Fund for Communities and Infrastructure, dubbed the “world’s First Ever Relocation Trust Fund” (Fiji, Permanent Mission of Fiji to the United Nations 2019). Conceived as a small yet sophisticated loss and damage fund, its main objective is to leverage funding from the State and from the donor community to plan and implement relocation efforts (Jolly, Ahmad and Scott 2024).²⁰ As a core tenet, the Trust Fund prioritizes support to the “continuation of livelihoods post-relocation” (Fiji, Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund 2023). In parallel, consideration could also be given to enabling existing social protection instruments – such as the National Provident Fund – to provide dedicated support to members affected by climate-related disasters, in order to reinforce the adaptation function of such mechanisms. While many principles of fair recruitment are not yet captured in the Trust Fund model, these could be gradually incorporated in the future to promote the Fund as an instrument of sustainable relocation by addressing placements in the host economies beyond a mere emergency intervention scope.

Governance and institutional challenges further exacerbate the difficulties associated with planned relocation. With the exception of Fiji and Vanuatu, Pacific Island countries lack comprehensive policies and frameworks to guide planned relocation efforts, resulting in fragmented and ad hoc responses. An underlying issue is that key tripartite stakeholders are often not involved in governance and programme design. A further shortcoming is the absence of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Addressing these governance gaps requires a multi-stakeholder approach that includes social partners and integrates fair recruitment principles to ensure accountability and to safeguard the rights of relocated populations. For example, establishing partnerships between governments, international organizations, communities, trade unions and the private sector can improve ownership and accountability, and hence effectiveness.

2.2.2. Displacement

Displacement management in the region varies widely, with a mix of reactive and proactive measures. These efforts involve collaboration between affected communities, governments and civil society, aiming to balance immediate humanitarian relief with long-term rehabilitation. While progress has been made in some areas, significant gaps remain. This analysis explores how fair recruitment principles are or could be embedded in policies and institutions to tackle displacement.

Regional frameworks such as the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility are currently finalizing the implementation plan, and while national adaptation plans recognize the challenges of displacement, their implementation to date remains fragmented and underfunded.²¹ Where proactive approaches are being developed, such as in Kiribati, national policy frameworks tend to pre-empt climate-induced displacements by promoting labour mobility approaches (IOM and ILO 2022).

Disaster management efforts in the Pacific Islands often prioritize immediate relief over long-term planning, with limited integration of subregional cooperation or proactive strategies that address the root causes and broader socio-economic implications of displacement for sustainable livelihoods and decent work. While displaced populations can in many cases return to their community of origin, there are numerous examples of protracted displacement throughout the Pacific region, particularly following disasters that hit low-lying outer islands (IFRC 2021).

²⁰ The authors document that Fund’s provisions allow for reallocations of underutilized funding sources to provide emergency assistance in the case of ad hoc displacement events. The Fund has secured pledges from the Government of New Zealand.

²¹ In a more promising development, the ILO’s Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security project is currently working with the technical working group on human mobility on finalizing the implementation plan for the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility.

To date, Post-Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNAs) remain the principal evidence-based approach to managing displacement in the region, when available. However, despite being critical for evaluating impacts and mobilizing resources, PDNAs often lack the comprehensive scope needed to integrate forward-looking strategies, which ultimately should also address labour market issues. The case of Vanuatu provides a compelling illustration of both the potential and limitations of such assessments in addressing climate-induced displacement.

In 2018, Vanuatu adopted its **National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement**, which includes provisions on recognizing planned relocation as a measure of last resort as well as safeguards to protect human rights and minimize economic impoverishment. After Vanuatu was hit by two tropical cyclones – Judy and Kevin – in 2023, a PDNA pursuant to the National Policy was conducted that exemplifies the strengths and drawbacks of disaster impact assessments in the management of displacement.

The dual cyclones destroyed approximately 6,384 houses, requiring significant recovery and reconstruction efforts. The PDNA revealed that approximately 66 per cent of the population was affected, and while this does not necessarily equate to displaced populations, these persons suffered significant disruptions to livelihoods particularly in the agriculture and tourism sectors (Vanuatu, Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination 2023). While the PDNA approach detailed reconstruction priorities, the integration of fair recruitment practices to mitigate exploitation risks for displaced workers (for example, in the construction sector) remained limited. The cyclones impacted almost 40,000 workers, over two thirds of whom were employed in the informal economy. Women micro-entrepreneurs were disproportionately affected. Recovery efforts, including subsidies and training, were proposed but lacked specific fair recruitment mechanisms to safeguard these vulnerable groups. Gender disparities and increased risks of violence were exacerbated post-disaster. The assessment identified gaps in protection services but did not extend its recovery framework to include fair recruitment practices, which could have helped to close the loop with regard to issues such as quality of employment, risk of discrimination and ostracization of displaced people in local informal economies.

While displacement governance in the Pacific region has traditionally focused on national-level policies and disaster management frameworks, there is growing recognition of the role that tripartite plus mechanisms can play in supporting displaced populations. Recent responses to climate-induced displacement showcase a blend of national-level initiatives and grassroots action, particularly through the involvement of trade unions and civil society organizations. Following the volcanic eruption and tsunami in Tonga in 2022, the Public Service Association (PSA), a trade union representing public sector employees, played a key role in supporting displaced individuals by actively organizing informal sector workers alongside public sector employees (PSI 2022). In response to the disaster, the PSA collaborated with the ILO, the Pasifiki R&D Corporation and the Tonga National Workers' Council to launch an online platform facilitating the sale of handmade crafts internationally. This initiative aimed to provide informal workers with opportunities to produce and sell handicrafts, generating income and aiding in economic recovery (*Talanoa 'o Tonga 2024*). The successes of national-level tripartite initiatives in the Pacific show a strong foundation for addressing the challenges of climate mobility, but their impact remains limited without broader regional integration. Scaling up tripartism to the regional level, through mechanisms such as the Pacific Island Council of Trade Unions (PICTU), offers significant potential to foster collaborative and cohesive responses to displacement across the Pacific. By building on existing frameworks – and by leveraging regional solidarity, as the case of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) demonstrates (box 2) – tripartite partnerships can address not only immediate displacement challenges but also longer-term socio-economic vulnerabilities.

► Box 2. Disaster management coordination in the Caribbean: A potential model for the Pacific region

Similar to the Pacific Island region, island states in the Caribbean region are affected by climate change and are highly exposed to the adverse effects of sudden-onset environmental disasters. To join forces to adapt and agree upon mitigation measures, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a regional economic community, has launched cooperation initiatives on environmental disaster management.

Despite the lack of a framework agreement in the CARICOM region dedicated to migration and climate change, CARICOM Member States established a Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), which is in charge of coordinating responses, mainly through the use of a notification mechanism. Cooperation goes beyond this critical notification system. In case of a disaster, any Member State can issue a request to CDEMA, which in turn places a request to all members. In response to the request, individual Member States can then signal their commitment to support the affected state through financial, organizational, logistic, in-kind or other measures.

The mechanism has proved highly effective in the past. Following large-scale disasters such as hurricane Irma in 2017, CARICOM Member States rapidly provided disaster responses to the most affected Member States, including through supporting disaster-displaced populations, the relocation of affected communities and the provision of shelter. Socio-economic integration of displaced individuals included enrolment of school-age children in schools and job matching support for youth and adults. Disaster-displaced persons are also not required to show identification documents for intra-regional mobility if these documents have been lost or damaged and, in some cases, may be granted indefinite stay in the hosting country and receive support for permanent resettlement.

As a comparable regional disaster management mechanism does not currently exist in the Pacific Island region. The Pacific Island Forum could explore solutions towards the establishment of a pragmatic subregional disaster management agency based on a similar foundation of solidarity and proactive support by Member States.

2.2.3. Labour mobility

As discussed above, opportunities for employment in industries such as tourism, meat processing, fisheries and seasonal agriculture in Australia and New Zealand provide important economic lifelines for Pacific Islanders (Doan, Dornan and Edwards 2023). The PALM and RSE schemes have formalized pathways for migration that offer economic opportunities while contributing to remittance flows that sustain communities in home countries. From a fair recruitment and decent work perspective; however, economic benefits notwithstanding, the current frameworks for labour mobility also have challenges that demand attention.²²

To date, Pacific Island workers under the RSE and PALM schemes continue to encounter high recruitment-related costs, high wage deductions for recruitment-related costs and expenses in destination countries, job offers not always reflecting expectations before departure (deceptive recruitment practices), and inadequate access to grievance mechanisms and social protection.²³ While the RSE scheme explicitly prohibits recruitment fees, there is evidence of workers incurring unofficial costs through third-party agents (such as excessive travel

22 Additional efforts are ongoing under PACER Plus (for example, the Worker Wellbeing Guiding Principles and the forthcoming Fair Recruitment Guidelines) and at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, where fair recruitment is a key focus of the regional labour mobility principles currently under development.

23 These observations are based on interviews conducted with Pacific Island stakeholders as part of this review. See also: Doan, Dornan and Edwards (2023), which documents issues such as unexpected deductions, unmet earning expectations and inadequate access to grievance mechanisms; and Bedford (2024), which details recent policy changes reducing wage guarantees and increasing allowable deductions under the New Zealand RSE scheme.

costs and service fees) (IOM and ILO 2022). By contrast, under the PALM scheme workers are formally expected to cover certain costs, such as medical examinations, passport, visa processing fees and travel costs, although the scheme imposes restrictions on excessive recruitment fees. In combination, these costs can represent a significant financial burden, particularly for workers from low-income Pacific Island countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and ILO (2022), many workers from Kiribati and Vanuatu depend on loans or informal financial agreements to meet recruitment-related expenses, heightening their risk of falling into debt and being subjected to financial exploitation. This requirement of the PALM scheme directly conflicts with the fair recruitment principle that mandates that workers should not pay for their employment, as these fees can lead to debt bondage or other forms of exploitation, and hence prevent labour mobility from contributing to migrant workers' home communities and countries, including in relation climate change adaptation and resilience.

Private employment agencies play an important role in the two schemes, as both the RSE scheme and PALM allow for direct hiring of migrant workers, including through the use of private employment agencies. The RSE scheme regulate the involvement of private employment agencies as "overseas recruitment agents" (New Zealand, New Zealand Immigration, n.d.); whereas PALM refers to procedures to be followed by "approved labour hire companies" (Australia, PALM, n.d.). Private employment agencies may act as intermediaries in recruiting, employing and managing workers on behalf of the final employer. While the reliance on private employment agencies can streamline labour mobility processes for both employers and migrant workers, it also adds layers of complexity that can obscure accountability and increase the risk of exploitative practices. The more intermediaries involved, the harder it becomes to ensure compliance with fair recruitment principles, particularly regarding the zero recruitment fees principle, but also in relation to contract transparency and grievance redress.

Contract transparency and language accessibility pose challenges under the PALM and RSE schemes. In many cases, Pacific Island workers sign a letter of offer prior to departure, often written exclusively in English and lacking detailed information about rights, entitlements and wage deductions. Upon arrival, they may be asked to sign a second employment contract – again in English – which may contain terms less favourable than initially specified. While Australia has recently piloted initiatives to improve contract understanding, including translated job offer guides in countries such as Timor-Leste and Vanuatu, these tools are not yet systematically implemented across the region. Moreover, the requirement for basic English proficiency may unintentionally exclude rural populations with limited formal education. Australia has also taken steps to improve broader worker protections, including the Strengthening Reporting Protections Pilot, aimed at enabling migrant workers to safely report exploitation without immigration consequences.

Pre-departure training programmes are deployed under both the RSE and PALM schemes, but they often fail to ensure comprehensive understanding due to language barriers and the complexity of legal frameworks. Primary research conducted for this policy paper indicates that the current two-day pre-departure training is insufficient to adequately prepare workers for the complexities of working abroad, leaving little room to comprehensively address critical themes such as workers' rights, responsibilities and legal protections.

Language differences further exacerbate the issue. Workers reportedly often arrive in their host countries unprepared to navigate the new legal and cultural environments, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and financial mismanagement.

Gaps also extend to the pre-decision phase of the recruitment process, which precedes formal pre-departure training. Workers frequently lack adequate support and guidance during this early stage, meaning that workers often do not fully understand the implications of their employment abroad. By the time workers attend the pre-departure sessions, it is often too late to address foundational misunderstandings or to provide the comprehensive support they need. While workers participating in the PALM scheme can choose their preferred industry when enrolling in the scheme, they face significant restrictions on changing employers – even in cases of poor working conditions or underpayment. If workers leave their jobs for such reasons, they risk being labelled as "disengaged", resulting in visa cancellation and the subsequent loss of all protections and rights in Australia. The inability to change employers, even in cases of underpayment or poor accommodation, effectively

ties workers to potentially exploitative conditions, in contradiction of the fair recruitment principle that workers must have the freedom to leave or change employment without jeopardizing their legal status.

Workers have reported poor working conditions, wage theft and insufficient access to grievance mechanisms. A case from 2024 shared by a practitioner interviewed for this paper aptly illustrates this point: when an employer under the PALM scheme threatened to shoot his workers, the workers called the police and were moved to a hotel for their safety. When the PALM scheme's welfare officer followed up with the migrant workers after several weeks, they were still at the hotel, forced to cover the costs of their own accommodation. This glaring case underscores the inadequacy of the scheme's de facto support mechanisms in the country of destination. In other cases, mechanisms to address grievances and enforce labour protections are not used at all due to workers' fear of retaliation and limited awareness of available resources. While important progress has been achieved since the PALM scheme's inception, gaps in the operational framework remain. SOPs remain weak, resulting in situations where migrant workers are vulnerable to labour exploitation and unsafe conditions.²⁴ This lack of robust enforcement mechanisms highlights the broader issue of interventions tending to be reactive rather than proactive.

One of the most significant gaps in the region's labour mobility frameworks remains the absence of comprehensive regulatory oversight at the government level. Private employment agencies operating within the Pacific region often lack stringent monitoring, enabling exploitative practices such as overcharging for recruitment and/or placement services. In Australia, private employment agencies and private recruiters are regulated at the state level; whereas in New Zealand, labour intermediaries have to comply with business and employment laws only. However, it is known that these regulatory systems in countries of destination are only effective if coordinated with enforcement capacity in the country of origin.

In several Pacific Island countries, private employment agencies play a role in labour mobility programmes under government-issued licenses. In the Solomon Islands, the Labour Mobility Unit within the Department of Labour oversees the licensing, coordination and management of recruitment agents (ILO 2022). In Vanuatu, employers have the option to recruit workers either directly or through licensed agents under the [2022 Recruitment Licensing Directive](#). Direct recruitment is facilitated by the Vanuatu Department of Labour and Employment, which administers a centralized work-ready pool of vetted workers. Evidence for the landscape of private recruitment agencies in other Pacific Island countries is more scarce. For instance, Tuvalu's revised [Labour and Employment Act \(2017\)](#) mandates that no entity or individual can operate as a recruitment agent or private employment agent in Tuvalu or for overseas job placements unless explicitly authorized in writing by the Secretary of Labour. However, there is no publicly available overview of the number of licensed recruitment agencies. By contrast, Papua New Guinea employs a government-managed approach to labour mobility, with all recruitment for overseas labour mobility programmes managed by the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations, which maintains and oversees the national work ready pool.²⁵

Having a regulation and a licensing scheme in place is not a guarantee that the rights of migrant workers will be respected. Assessment, monitoring and evaluation of the oversight and enforcement of regulations are still missing, and international experience shows that regulations are effective only if they are coordinated and enforced on both sides of a mobility corridor. Anecdotal evidence from Kiribati workers participating in the RSE scheme, for instance, suggests common incidences of being misled about their contractual terms, with some discovering upon arrival that their working conditions and wages were significantly different from what was initially promised (ILO 2022). The lack of regular monitoring, stringent enforcement and transparent reporting allows deceptive recruitment practices to persist and undermines the effectiveness of existing regulations.

²⁴ See, for instance, the SOPs described in section 2.2.1 above.

²⁵ For instance, Samoa has recently piloted a community-based recruitment model involving District Councils and NGOs, offering a potentially replicable approach for inclusive recruitment governance.

Furthermore, as experienced in other parts of the world, in the absence of coordination at the both ends of a mobility corridor, national regulatory frameworks may risk becoming a source of additional administrative duties without effectively enhancing protection of migrant workers against deception, overcharging and fair recruitment principles in general.²⁶ Bilateral labour agreements can play a key role in addressing these risks, and their formulation should be guided by the principles of Convention No. 181, which is currently ratified by only one country in the region (Fiji).

Under the PALM scheme, participating workers and employers make a mandatory contribution to Australia's superannuation system during employment. However, upon returning to their home countries, these workers quite frequently face challenges in accessing their accumulated superannuation funds. As of 2024, the Australian Taxation Office was holding more than AU\$1 billion in unclaimed superannuation owed to former temporary residents, including PALM workers. On average, short-term PALM workers accumulate approximately AU\$3,800 in superannuation over a nine-month placement (Dingwall and Kupu 2024). Yet, many encounter obstacles such as complex paperwork, limited information and communication technology (ICT) capacity, limited internet access and language barriers when attempting to claim these funds. Additionally, a 35 per cent tax is imposed on superannuation withdrawals for temporary residents. This diminishes the amount received by returning workers and creates a de facto financial burden simply for participating in the scheme.²⁷ The difficulties faced by PALM workers in reclaiming their superannuation, coupled with the large tax deduction, represents, in practice, an obstacle for migrant workers to access their social security contributions on the basis of equality of treatment and non-discrimination. Under New Zealand's RSE scheme, there was until recently no access to superannuation for RSE workers. To facilitate retirement savings for RSE workers, the New Zealand Government, in collaboration with private financial services, has established the Seasonal Worker Superannuation Administration Service (SWSAS). This service enables RSE workers to make voluntary contributions to their respective home country's National Provident Fund. In order to access the service, employers first need to voluntarily register with the SWSAS.²⁸

Another prominent issue is that women remain underrepresented in both schemes, as male workers continue to dominate participation rates. In Australia's PALM scheme, women accounted for approximately 13 per cent of participants in 2022. In New Zealand's RSE scheme, women also make up just a small minority of seasonal workers, particularly in agriculture (Doan, Dornan and Edwards 2023). Employer preferences and biases, as well as cultural and logistical barriers often prevent women from accessing labour mobility opportunities. The above challenges are replicated in the context of climate-induced migration, where Pacific Islander women on the "forced" side of the voluntary–forced spectrum of mobility are at particular risk of lacking the resources, networks and bargaining power to navigate recruitment systems.

At the macro-level, challenges include the limited capacity of labour-sending countries to manage the complex requirements of these schemes, including recruitment, pre-departure training and ongoing support for workers. Institutional weaknesses and inadequate resources in sending countries create inefficiencies that start from inadequacies in screening procedures for worker selection and recruitment. If jobs under the PALM and RSE schemes are seen as opportunities for Pacific Island countries to cope with climate change hazards, the market-based principles currently determining selection could benefit from the introduction of some quotas for vulnerable candidates to provide better access to marginalized groups, especially when it comes to women and youth.³⁹ Beyond responding to labour shortages in destination countries, labour mobility schemes were also originally conceived as a strategy to alleviate labour surplus pressures in countries of origin – particularly among rural and low-skilled populations. Formalized labour mobility schemes hence need to be complemented with tripartite action on improving working conditions and labour rights in both countries of origin and destination in order to address root causes of decent work deficits, poverty and forced labour.

26 The issue of tightening the net of regulation is complex and needs to be studied further. Frederiksson (2010) provides a theoretical model tested for cases in which licensing systems reverted back to an increase of red tape and, in the worst cases, corruption. In the worst cases, in regions where mobility is highly regulated, the system even became a source of corruption, ultimately exacerbating the risk of over-indebtedness.

27 Which is de facto at odds with Fair Recruitment Principle 5.

28 Payroll deductions are then aggregated, converted to the appropriate foreign currencies and transferred to the specified overseas national provident funds.

29 This remark can be read in the rationale documented in ILO (2022), for which PALM and RSE should be seen not only as means to meet labour demand requirements, but also to serve as an action to help Pacific Island countries that have been particularly affected by climate change.

There is a role not only for Governments, but also for the social partners to contribute to supporting fair and ethical recruitment and to preparing prospective workers before they leave for employment abroad. Trade unions should reinforce their activities aimed at representing the rights of workers throughout the migration cycle. Pre-departure and post-arrival services should be established or integrated wherever they are absent, and be improved where they already exist. For instance, the expansion of workers' activities related to service provision has created new opportunities for the labour movement in Europe to engage with migrants and to better identify the specific challenges faced by this group. Several initiatives in recent years have pursued this objective. In July 2023, the Pacific Island Council of Trade Unions (PICTU) organized its meeting with affiliates and adopted a position statement on labour mobility in the Pacific. However, the road to enable trade unions to act regionally and to advocate for changes in programmes such as PALM and the RSE scheme appears to remain a long one.

In the absence of the ability to wield such regional influence at present, dialogue between Pacific Islands trade unions with their counterparts in countries of destination represents a particularly important avenue for supporting the labour rights of Pacific migrant workers throughout the migration cycle. Initial steps have been made in this space with the participation of PICTU representatives in the official subregional forum for migration (Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting), held in Vanuatu in 2023 and in Brisbane (Australia) in 2024. On the day before the 2024 forum began, PICTU organized its own meeting with trade union representatives from Australia and New Zealand. With the dialogue now open, PICTU members have begun to engage with trade unions in Australia and New Zealand to pursue joint actions aimed at advocating for less restrictive immigration policies, especially in relation to seasonal migration schemes. The promotion of inter-country trade union collaboration can also support the development of guidance and tools to be used by labour activists in Pacific Island countries. This is the case of the United Workers Union of Australia, which is supporting trade unions in Fiji to develop pre-departure manuals to equip prospective migrants to Australia so they can deal with potential discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

 3

Policy recommendations

Based on the gaps and challenges identified – and the results, potential and lessons learned from practices and case studies – this chapter provides policy recommendations aimed at integrating fair recruitment into climate mobility policies and practices at the national and regional levels in the Pacific.

The section is organized by dimension of climate mobility, so that follow-up actions can be identified by relevant stakeholders, including government institutions, their tripartite constituents, and civil society organizations and international organizations with a mandate on labour and migration issues. Whenever suitable, tripartite approaches should be deployed for the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

► Table 2. Technical recommendations to enhance the contribution of fair recruitment to climate adaptation in the context of just transition

Climate mobility dimension	Recommendation	Action(s)
Labour mobility	Prepare and organize tripartite consultations to review alignment of the RSE, PALM and other schemes with fair recruitment principles.	Review labour mobility schemes to institutionalize zero recruitment fee and related cost policies, ensuring that no auxiliary costs (such as travel, medical checks and visa applications) are covered by migrant workers or passed onto workers later through wage deductions. Costs could be covered by a dedicated fund, initially subsidized by governments of countries of destination, while progressively exploring market-based solutions funded by employers and backed by social and private insurance tools. Promote inter-employer mobility for participants of existing schemes. This may require a reform of visa conditions to decouple workers' legal status from a contract with a specific employer. Explore cooperation with Australian and New Zealand public employment services (PES), or private employment agencies, to support re-matching and re-skilling when needed. Open pathways for semi-skilled and skilled opportunities within existing mobility schemes so as to decrease risks of exploitation that are more prevalent in seasonal and low-skilled migration. To address the challenges of social security portability under labour mobility schemes such as PALM and RSE, countries of origin and destination should adopt tailored approaches that ensure workers can reclaim their accrued funds effectively and equitably. Access to social protection and mechanisms for portability, especially health insurance and pension contributions, for all enrolled migrant workers should be provided in the schemes.³⁰ Explore options for accessible, multilingual recruitment information portal(s) that provide information on employers, job descriptions, wage details, living conditions, grievance mechanisms and contract templates. The portal could – and should – be owned by a regional dialogue, rather than by bilateral cooperation initiatives, which are usually limited in scope. The EURES model for international placements within the European Union may be a source of inspiration. Strengthen the capacity of oversight bodies in countries of destination (for example, within Ministries of Labour and labour inspectorates) to monitor and enforce compliance. Engage trade unions in monitoring, for instance, by training union officers to monitor informal labour markets and to advocate for migrant workers' rights. These monitoring activities could be a ground for cooperation between workers' organizations in countries of destination (monitoring workers' conditions and respect of rights at work) and in countries of origin (providing feedback based on migrants' experiences upon return).

30 For instance, the 35 per cent tax on superannuation withdrawals for temporary residents should be waived or reduced for PALM workers through revised bilateral agreements. For the RSE scheme, the SWSAS should be expanded and made mandatory for all employers participating in the programme.

Climate mobility dimension	Recommendation	Action(s)
		Some countries of origin also deploy Labour Attachés or Liaison Officers in destination countries, although their role is complementary and context-dependent – particularly in settings where national labour inspection systems already provide effective oversight. Expand comprehensive and user-friendly access-to-remedy and grievance redress mechanisms for migrant workers, with specific support streams for women and youth workers. Provide free-of-charge legal aid and auxiliary support services (for example, emergency accommodation) to migrant workers through collaboration with trade unions, NGOs, government agencies of countries of origin and destination, and diplomatic missions. As above, cooperation between workers’ organizations at the two ends of the migration corridor is also recommended. Explore solutions to strengthen the participation of vulnerable groups (such as women, persons with disabilities), through quotas or other affirmative actions. This could be done through higher-level initiatives to broaden the scope of labour mobility schemes as a social intervention to help countries severely affected by climate change. The consultation mandate of trade unions – that is, their formal or recognized role in being consulted – in the design of these activities, if properly supported by a staff development programme, is likely to increase the capacity of the workers’ movement in the region. Cooperation between trade unions on both sides of migration corridors can also increase membership among Pacific Islanders in trade unions in Australia and New Zealand.
	Enhance pre-decision and pre-departure training and support.	Ensure that individuals and communities affected by climate-related risks have access to accurate and timely information on all available mobility and adaptation options – including labour mobility – before any migration decision is made. This should include guidance on the labour laws of countries of destination, expectations, rights, risks and pathways towards decent work, thereby enabling informed and voluntary decision-making.

Climate mobility dimension	Recommendation	Action(s)
		Develop and implement more extensive pre-departure training programmes that cover rights and responsibilities and navigating country of destination services and support systems. Strengthen partnerships between trade unions and Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) to deliver accessible, language-appropriate training tailored to specific sectors of countries of destination, building on good practices already deployed (such as the United Workers Union Australia cooperating with trade unions in Fiji). Incorporate modules on gender-based discrimination and financial literacy into training to address specific vulnerabilities. Complement this with post-arrival support services, including access to legal aid and counselling. Collaborate with governments, trade unions and private sector organizations to develop sector- and country-specific training sessions and manuals addressing recruitment rights and principles, grievance redress, and workplace protections. Ensure these materials are tailored to the specific contexts of Pacific Island workers and aimed at government officers, vocational training centres and potential employers.
Planned relocation and displacement	Mainstream fair recruitment principles in planned relocation governance.	Strengthen partnerships between relocation planners, local authorities, local employment agencies, community leaders, churches, village councils and smaller NGOs that already play key roles in community support and coordination, with a view to aligning vocational training and employment opportunities with fair recruitment standards. Ensure that relocated or displaced workers have equal access to social protection and labour rights, including wages, healthcare and pensions in line with national standards. Improve access to training, upskilling and employment services, including Recognition of Prior Learning, to support displaced and relocated workers in (re)entering formal employment (by leveraging their existing skills, ensuring inclusivity for vulnerable groups, and fostering collaboration between training centres, local employers and community organizations.) Train local government officers, community leaders, vocational training centres and interested employers on the principles of fair recruitment (for example, in regard to transparency in job offers, non-discrimination and grievance redress). For instance, by engaging small-scale employers (local fishing cooperatives, agricultural businesses or handicraft producers) to offer apprenticeships or jobs to relocated or displaced individuals. Strengthen community-based protection mechanisms for displaced individuals and households, building on lessons learned from past efforts (for example, Vanuatu's seasonal worker programmes, under which displaced populations can benefit from prioritized access to labour mobility pathways).

Climate mobility dimension	Recommendation	Action(s)
	Include economic integration plans in planned relocation frameworks.	Include economic integration plans in planned relocation frameworks, such as: providing agricultural land; organizing job placement programmes involving existing local community actors; and creating small business grants. Partner with private sector employers to offer training aligned with local labour market needs. Taking stock of existing experiences in Fiji and in the CARICOM region can be a first step to animating these plans and building on lessons learned.
Planned relocation and displacement	Strengthen and expand the relocation trust fund model through the integration of livelihood components.	Building on Fiji's trailblazing Climate Relocation Trust Fund, explore options to establish relocation trust funds that incorporate dedicated livelihoods components (covering areas of market-sensitive relocation planning, training systems, recruitment, livelihood restoration, capacity-building and job creation at relocation sites). Incorporate fair recruitment principles in trust fund provisions to promote donor buy-in and to strengthen the economic, social and human rights dimensions of sustainable relocation.
	Address economic marginalization in host communities.	Strengthen the capacity of oversight bodies (for example, within Ministries of Labour and labour inspectorates) to monitor and enforce compliance. Engage trade unions in monitoring, for instance, by training union officers to monitor informal labour markets and advocate for migrant workers' rights. Establish collaboration between national and local government authorities and employers to connect relocated individuals with decent work opportunities that are aligned with and fairly remunerated for their skills.
Cross-cutting the three dimensions	Develop a regional knowledge platform for coordination and collaboration.	Establish a centralized regional knowledge management system integrated within the Pacific Climate Change Portal to map actors, policies and good practices related to climate mobility, serving as both a repository and networking hub. The knowledge management system should include: ► a directory of stakeholders (including governments, regional bodies, international organizations, NGOs and community groups); ► a database of policies and operational frameworks; ► a section for validated case studies and lessons learned; and ► tools for stakeholders to connect, share expertise and collaborate on projects, including forums and virtual networking events.

Climate mobility dimension	Recommendation	Action(s)
	Integrate climate preparedness and resilience into labour mobility, displacement and relocation programming.	The system should be managed by a regional body such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, updated regularly by designated focal points in each country, and supported by capacity-building initiatives to train users. Provide community-based training so that potential migrants and their families anticipate environmental and climate change risks. Promote awareness of cyclone-resilient housing and empower families – especially women and youth – to engage proactively in safe homebuilding. This preventive approach equips households to reduce exposure to climate hazards, rather than responding only after disasters occur. By building on existing initiatives – such as World Vision Vanuatu’s “Haos blo Yumi” cyclone-resilient housing programme – training and awareness-raising efforts could include modules on: ▶ disaster preparedness and basic principles of food and water security management; ▶ remittance planning and budgeting for household resilience in the face of climate shocks; ▶ safe housing options and construction knowledge; ▶ shared household responsibilities; and ▶ strategies to maintain food security during periods of climate stress. These modules should also be embedded in pre-departure counselling, dialogues and awareness-raising activities targeting prospective migrant workers and their families, for instance to incentivize channelling remittances into resilience-building efforts.

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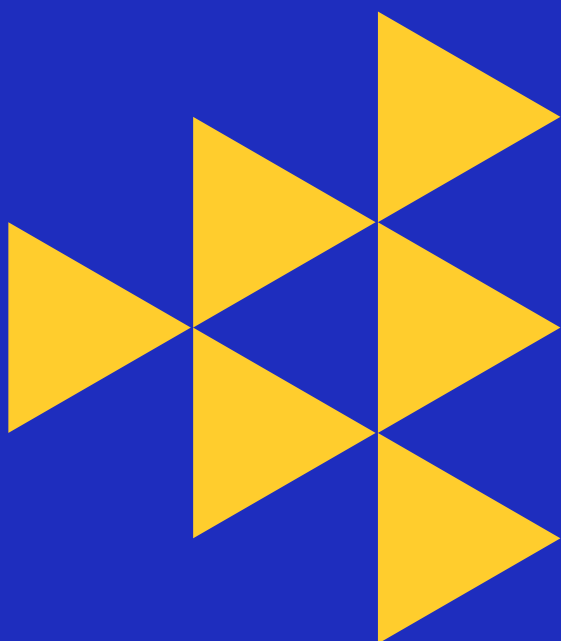
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**PACIFIC CLIMATE CHANGE MIGRATION AND HUMAN
SECURITY (PCCMHS) PROGRAMME PHASE II**

