Ministry of iTaukei
Affairs

A PILOT STUDY ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF LABOUR MOBILITY SCHEMES ON WOMEN AND FAMILIES

A case study of 29 villages in Tailevu

October 2023

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A case study of 29 villages in Tailevu
by the Ministry of ITaukei Affairs, with the support of Balance of Power.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The labour mobility program is a response to the demand for labour from Fiji. Participants in labour mobility programs are drawn from both urban and rural centres, as well as from various ethnicities, although the absolute majority are ITaukei. This study focuses on ITaukei workers and their communities (families, villages, tikinas etc) given the disproportionate impact of labour mobility schemes on ITaukei communities. Through the program, ITaukei workers have the opportunity to gain international work experience and earn a decent living for families back in Fiji. The program also enables ITaukei workers to access employment opportunities in agriculture, hospitality, construction, healthcare, and manufacturing. This is a government-led initiative established through bilateral agreements, which allows temporary migration of Fijian workers to overseas destinations, primarily in Australia and New Zealand.

These bilateral agreements also benefit receiving countries such as Australia and New Zealand where the labour market demands are high for seasonal workers and temporary employment. The agreements outline the terms and conditions of the program, including the number of workers to be deployed, the duration of their stay, their rights and entitlements, and mechanisms for ensuring their welfare and protection.

Fiji's labour mobility program has been mutually beneficial for both ITaukei workers and the destination countries. It has helped address labour shortages in sectors where there is a demand for workers, while providing ITaukeis with an avenue to enhance their skills, earn higher incomes and improve their livelihoods.

For Fiji, the program is intended to provide employment opportunities for Fijians as well as improve livelihoods and standards of living for many families. However, there are challenges that require intervention from the Ministry of ITaukei Affairs, based on the deeper impact of the labour program on ITaukei communities. For example, some anecdotal evidence from provincial officials show that beyond the familial sphere, the implications of labour mobility make themselves felt within wider community settings and are exacerbated in rural and remote communities. An immediate result of the labour mobility program is the separation of families with the primary income earner living and working away from their family; the nuclear family is impacted by this absence. In rural and remote communities, the broader community also feels an impact when there is an abrupt withdrawal of several capable community members (majority of whom are men) to toil beyond their traditional borders. These people often continue to provide financial support, however their physical absence

leaves communal responsibilities unfulfilled. As such, there is now growing recognition of social implications of labour mobility on families and communities. How does the role of a woman/mother/sibling/community member change when the husband/father is absent, and she becomes the de facto head of the household? How does a community adapt to the absence of multiple members, who may provide financial support but are no longer physically present to carry out traditional/communal obligations; these are some of the questions that are explored in this study.

The rationale of the study is not only to contribute to the body of knowledge around labour mobility but also inform agendas for the two different partners:

→ Ministry of ITaukei Affairs (MTA) – MTA is responsible for developing, implementing, and supporting programs/activities that ensure the good governance and wellbeing of the ITaukei people. The findings of the survey will assist in policy advice and the provision of safeguards to ensure sustainable livelihoods and social cohesion for families and communities.

→ Balance of Power (BOP) - BOP supports locally-driven research to better understand changing social norms around gender equality and leadership. The findings of the survey will provide evidence of the shift in gender roles and community responsibilities in traditional settings, which can be used to increase positive perceptions and valuing of women's leadership.

For this study, MTA officially began consultations with the Ministry of Employment, Productivity, and Industrial Relations (MEPIR) in 2021. Subsequent meetings eventuated in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 10 May 2023. As part of the arrangement, MTA agreed to provide support to the process of identifying suitable community participants for labour mobility schemes. This included the revision of the 'Applicant Profile Form' to ensure more a transparent selection process involving the *vanua*. The revised form is attached in **Appendix 1**.

Methodology

As is customary for research in Fiji, the survey was conducted using the Fijian Vanua Research Framework[1] (FVRF). It involves *talanoa* or dialogue, *bula vakavanua*, observation, literature reviews, informal and formal meetings to negotiate and agree on outcomes that will enable a way forward. The approach is grounded in indigenous ITaukei epistemology, which Nabobo-Baba (2008) explains is based on the holistic integration of the people, the land, and their spiritual dimensions. The components of the FVRF are intricately woven through this study, ensuring that respect, humility, and traditional ITaukei cultural protocols have been adhered to. The illustration below identifies the different steps undertaken whilst conducting research in the vanua, which were undertaken throughout this study.

Flowchart showing steps of Fijian Vanua Research Framework - Created by Arielle Lino
Based on Unaisi's article "Decolonising Framings in Pacific Research: Indigenous Fijian Vanua Research Framework as an Organic Response

Due to the rapid nature of assessment, Tailevu province was chosen, given its proximity/ease of access to Suva and the significant numbers of people from the province engaged in labour mobility programs. According to the data supplied by the National Employment Centre (NEC), a total of 212 workers from Tailevu province have participated in the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) program in Australia. Of the 212 workers, there are 173 males and 39 females.

In keeping with protocol, an awareness session was conducted at the Tailevu Provincial Office. The awareness included discussions around the objectives of the survey, research field sites, logistical

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1   The ITaukei Vanua Research Framework (FVRF) is a Pacific Research Methodology created by Unaisi Nabobo-Baba.

arrangement, and expected outcomes. This followed the *sevusevu* or traditional protocol to seek consent to engage in this research activity in the province. After the preparatory phase, selected villages were divided into two for the two teams that were undertaking the survey.

Team Alpha	*Team Delta*
Melaia Tikoitoga	Vasitia Jale
Mereani Kidianaceva	(*The late*) Rt Emori Latianara

The *sevusevu* was also conducted in all the field sites to seek consent from the heads of each village. A consent form was also developed and signed by all respondents. (The form is attached in **Appendix 2**). As mandatory, the consent form identified the objective of the research and introduced the confidentiality clause.

The data collection process was in two phases: questionnaire and *talanoa.* The questionnaires (**Appendix 3**) were two-fold: closed and open-ended. The closed ended question included demographic questions whereas the open-ended addressed challenges and coping mechanisms for families and communities. During the *talanoa* session whereby views were freely expressed around a *tanoa.*

At the end of the survey, 163 villagers (29 villages) had participated in the survey. Of the number surveyed, all were purposefully selected based on (close) relation to NEC workers either in Australia or New Zealand. Compared to the data provided by NEC, the sample size reduced due to unforeseen circumstances including village *soqo* and unavailability of respondents.

Results

The total number of respondents interviewed was 163 (n = 163). Out of the 163 respondents, there were 85 female and 78 male informants. These informants were mostly between the ages of 18 – 35 with 48% being above the age bracket. A detailed breakdown is indicated in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents according to age

■ 18-35 years ■ 36-55 years ■ 55+ years
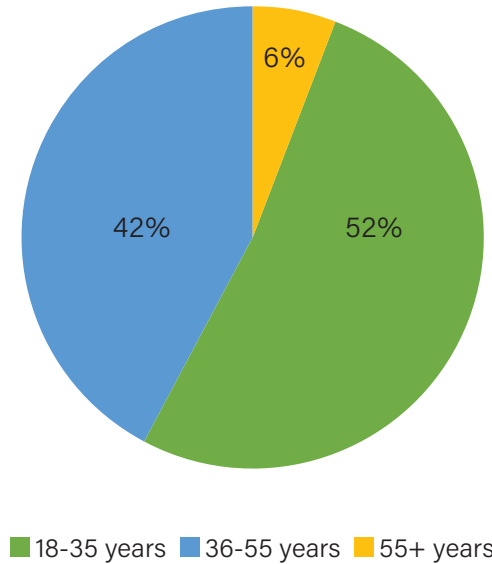
As for relationship to National Employment (NEC) workers, over 87.8% of the respondents indicated that their relatives i.e., spouse, sibling, parent, brother/sister are currently overseas under the NEC scheme. The high incidence indicates the locality of the field site where communal living is the norm. Additionally most of the villagers going overseas are young married adults. **Figure 2** shows a detailed breakdown of the relationship with NEC workers by percentage.

Figure 2. Relationship of respondents to NEC scheme participants

■ Spouse ■ Sibling ■ Parent ■ Extended family ■ Other
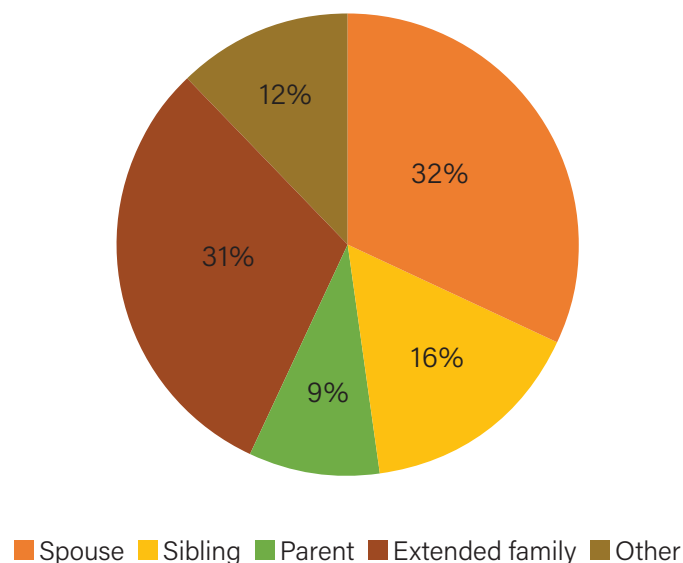
The data in **Figure 3** corresponds to the type of household in the designated villages in Tailevu. More than half of those interviewed indicated that they live in a nuclear household i.e., 2 – 5 people with a little over 33% stating that they live in a 'bigger family' household i.e., 6 – 10 people. The number is not surprising as many households in an ITaukei village setting typically have around 2 – 10 people.

Figure 3. Number of household members

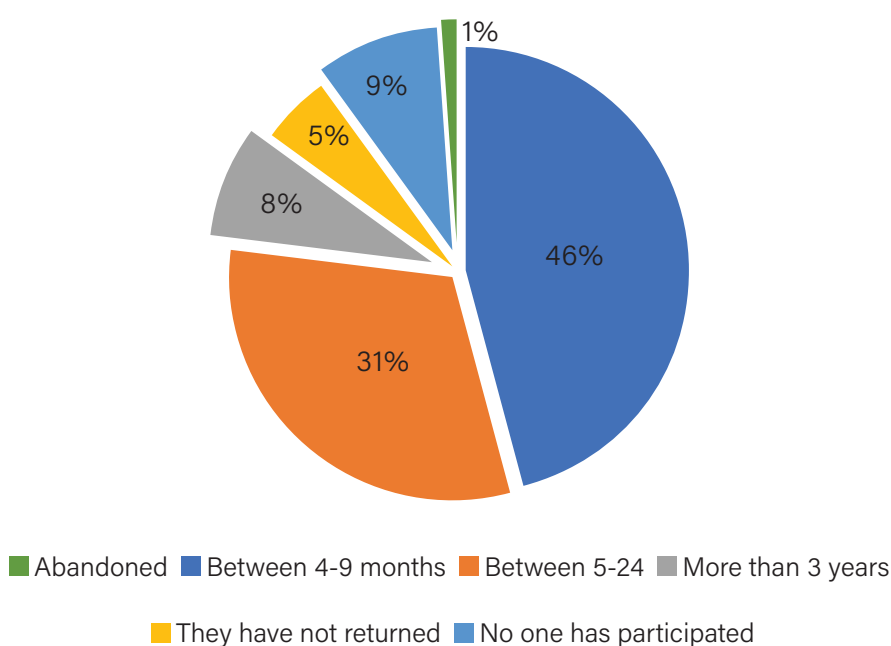■ Lives alone ■ 2-5 people ■ 5-10 people ■ More than 10 people
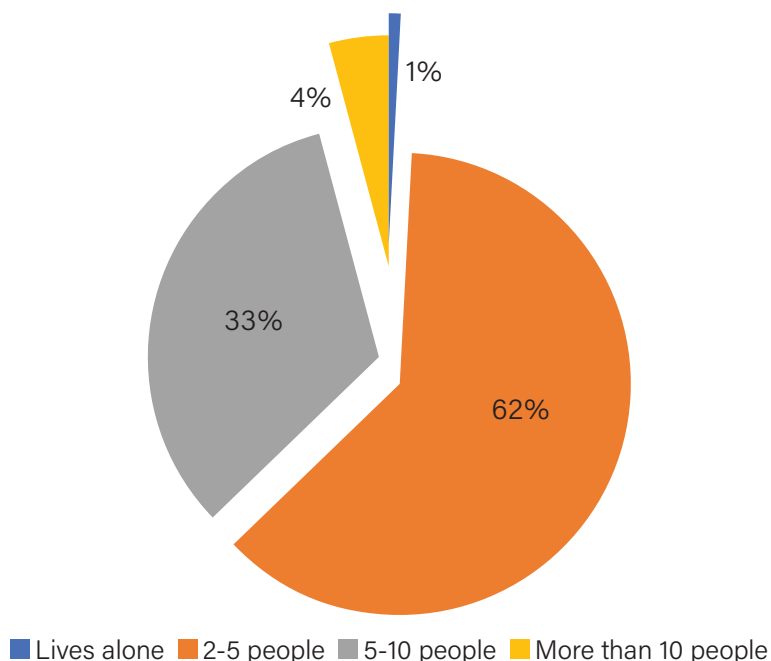
To cater for these households, respondents depended less on remittance from NEC workers. According to **Figure 4** below, most relied on agriculture i.e., selling local produce and Medium to Small Micro Enterprise (MSME) e.g., canteens to pay for family's daily requirements. There is a sense of independence amongst the respondents choosing not to rely on remittance from NEC workers.

Figure 4. Source of Income

■ Remittance Labour Mobility ■ Agriculture ■ SME's ■ Aquaculture ■ Working Fulltime
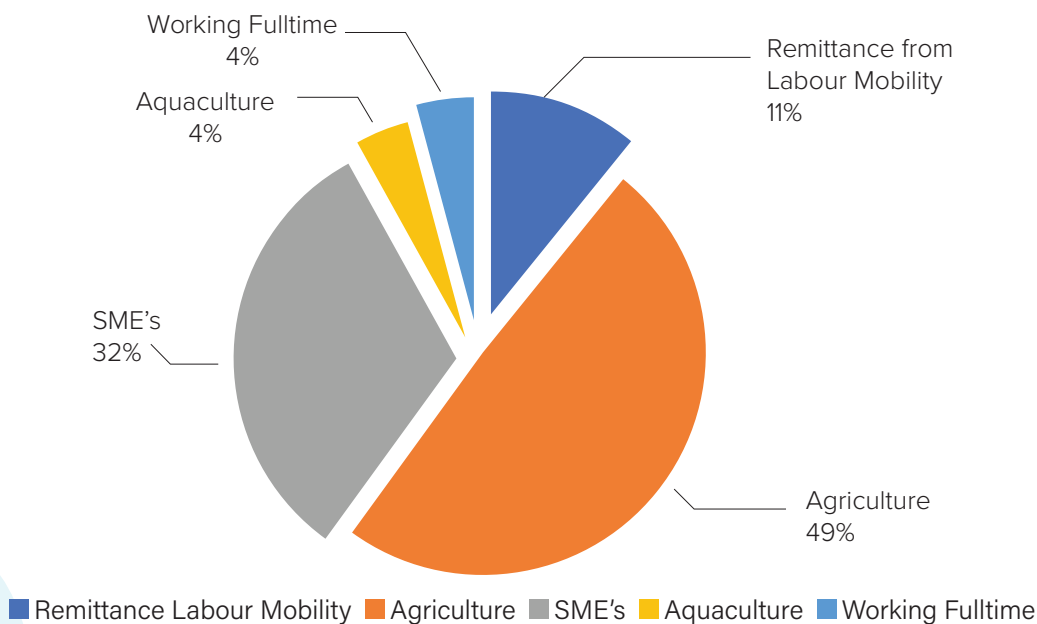
One such explanation for Figure 4 can be attributed to the duration of deployment as illustrated in Figure 5. According to respondents most of the NEC workers are into their first 9 months of work, and a big portion of salary is deductions - for repayment of employers' expenses i.e., workers' return airfare, initial establishment allowance, transportation to worksite, accommodation. Figure 5 also shows that there is a high score for 4 – 9 months and 5 – 24 months. However, an area of concern is the number of workers that fall within the remaining 23.3% percentile, given these are mainly NEC workers that have switched employment and/or have absconded and not contacted family members. A common issue relayed by female informants is the change in employment where the diaspora committee in Australia have advised and arranged for alternative employment. One respondent had indicated that her spouse changed employment a month upon arriving in Australia and has not contacted his family since. It has been 3 years since his deployment.
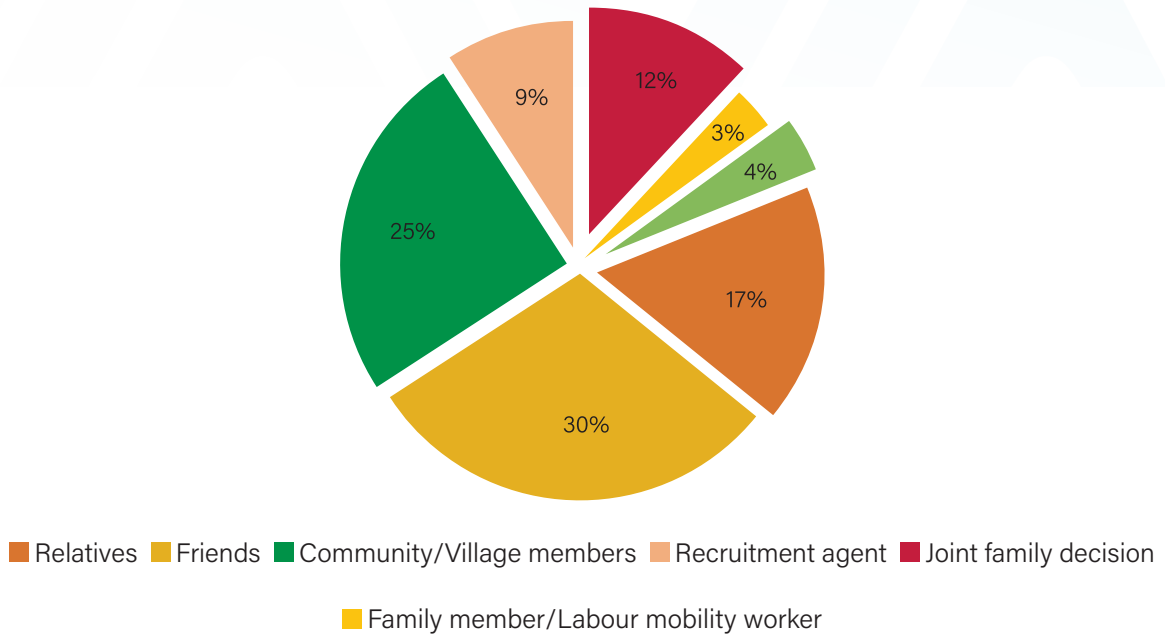
Figure 5. Status of Deployment (in months)

■ Abandoned ■ Between 4-9 months ■ Between 5-24 ■ More than 3 years
■ They have not returned ■ No one has participated

Figure 6 shows how applicants make decisions about deployment. Given the communal nature of ITaukei communities, it is no surprise that the decision to apply and eventually be deployed is for many a joint family decision (30.1%) and agreed among relatives (12.3%). However, it is concerning to note there is nevertheless a sense of individualism present in some decision making as 24.5% of the respondents stated that the decision to apply/work overseas was made solely by the applicant (i.e. NEC worker). Another area of concern is NEC worker/s relying heavily on recruitment agents and friends' advice without further research and even family consultation.
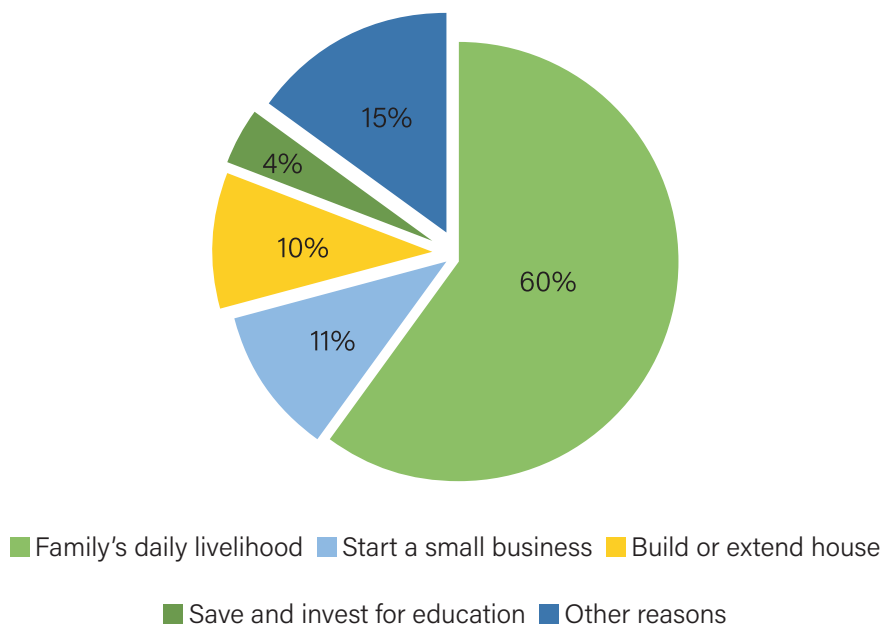
Figure 6. Source of information and decision making

Legend:
- Relatives
- Friends
- Community/Village members
- Recruitment agent
- Joint family decision
- Family member/Labour mobility worker

Although the reasons for the decision to work overseas may differ, many respondents indicated the move was to support their family's immediate expenses. However, there are a there are a few (15%) who made the decision to finance long-term investments i.e., housing and education. This low rate is concerning as although short-term goals are met there is a risk that NEC workers return with less savings and no substantive return on investments. **Figure 7** below shows a detailed graph outlining the reason for NEC deployment.

Figure 7. Reason for deployment

Legend:
- Family's daily livelihood
- Start a small business
- Build or extend house
- Save and invest for education
- Other reasons

As the NEC workers are deployed overseas, daily house/family chores were shared by relatives and other family members i.e. parents, siblings. However, 23% of the respondents indicated they were the ones that assumed the responsibility. From the survey, women take on added responsibilities i.e. tending to plantations, gathering food from the garden/farm, disciplining the children etc. A growing concern is the 12.3% indicated below that chores are not done by remaining relatives. The negligence of these chores disrupts family dynamics and may lead to broader social shifts and behavioral changes in the community.

Figure 8. Change in role dynamics
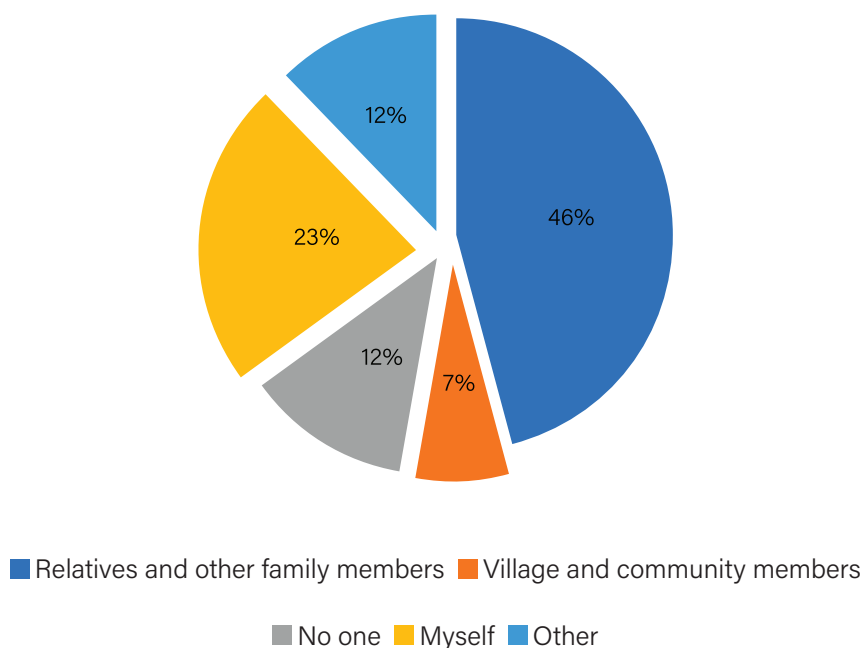
There were significant changes in role dynamics. Figure 9 below outlines the type of changes (positive vs. negative changes). As highlighted, the negative changes outweighed the positive changes. The positive changes indicated here include strengthening of family bonds i.e., extended family members pitch-in, changes in wealth status e.g., establishment of business, house extension and increase in participation in family, village *soli*. The negative changes include singlehandedly raising children; two (2) participants have reported being served divorce papers, there was also no financial support by NEC worker and other family members have shown lack of assistance towards the family especially in looking after the farms.

Figure 9. Types of change

■ Yes changes ■ No changes ■ No comment   ■ Positive changes ■ Negative changes
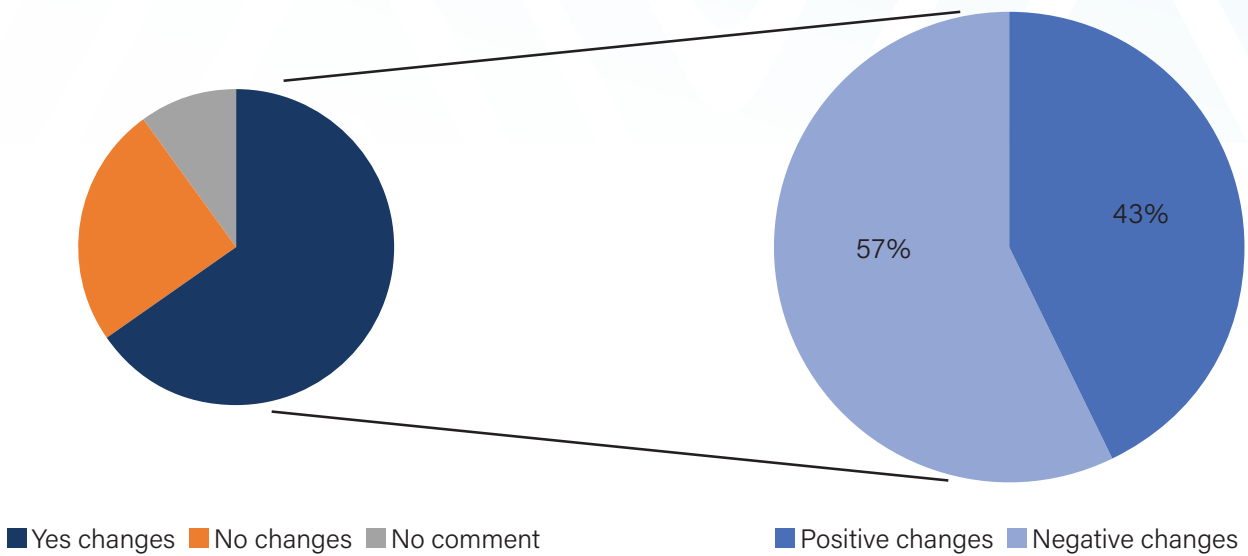
Figure 10 shows the challenges faced due to the deployment of NEC workers. There are four categories identified: emotional, social, physical, and economic. As per the dataset, emotional challenges ranked high in the spectrum. The emotional challenges include loneliness, change in family dynamics that causes withdrawal (e.g. divorce, no/minimal contact) and weakening of family, village relationships. One of the respondents (spouse) indicated that there were a lot of misunderstandings with her parents-in-law. The majority of physical challenges identified included the physical absence of

Figure 10. Challenges

the family member, particularly men. As a result, the data gathered from the interviews indicated that there was a shift in social norms of women taking an active leadership role in the family and community during the absence of their spouses. Some of the respondents indicated that children are left in the care of grandparents since both parents are deployed overseas; and in some cases, the absence of the able-bodied men meant that elderly parents have to look after themselves, "*I don't have anyone to look after me as I am sickly.*" For social challenges these mainly consist of difficulty in assimilation into traditional responsibilities either family or community spheres. Of all these categories, economic challenges ranked low as most of the NEC workers honor their financial responsibilities.
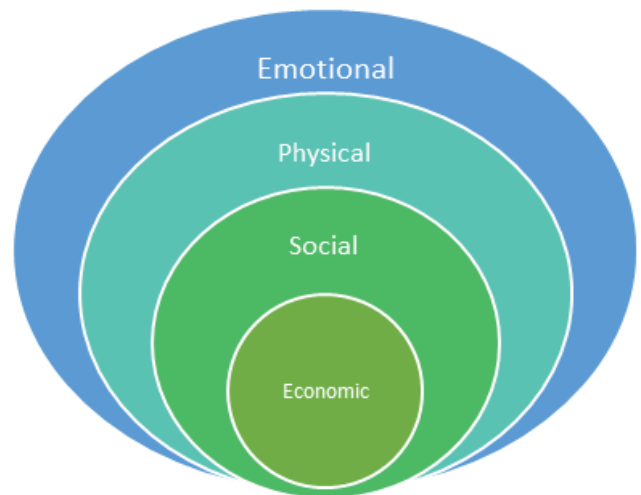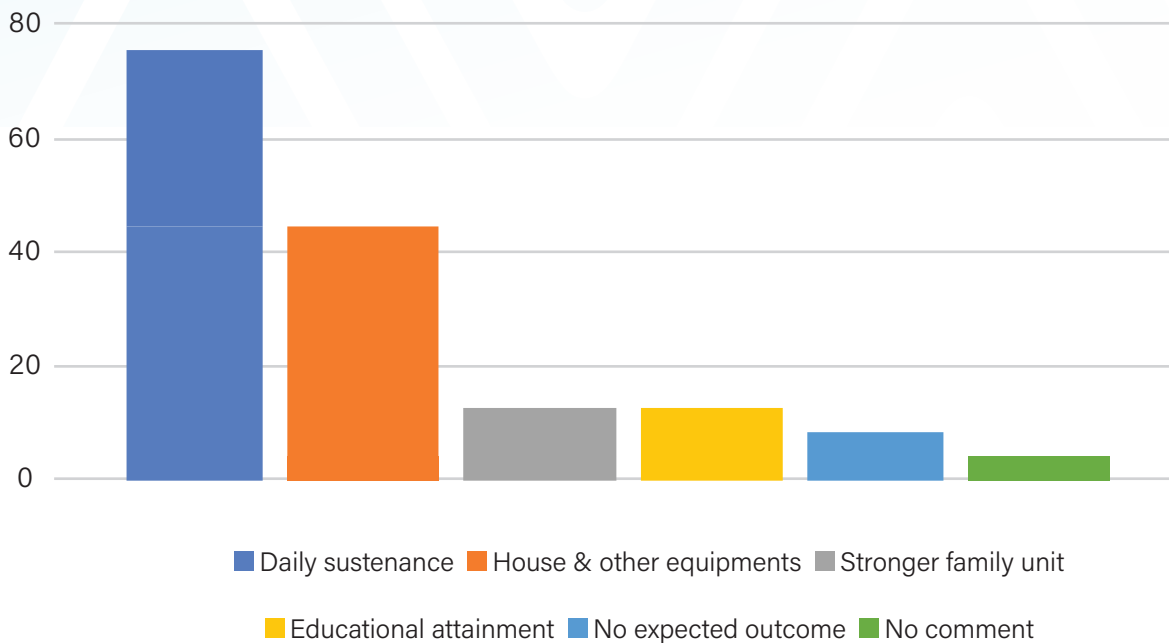
Figure 11. Expected outcomes

Figure 11 outlines the expected outcomes that informed the family member's decision to deploy overseas for NEC. According to the graph, 75 respondents indicated working to meet daily sustenance requirements such as financial expenses at home and in the broader community. Although this is a short-term benefit it is sustaining the family and the extended family unit, nonetheless. This contrasts with the 44 respondents with long term plans who expected to improve/ purchase house or other equipment and have invested in their house (construction or maintenance) with 5 respondents purchasing boat engines as a side business. This is in line with the 12 respondents who indicated education over the longer term as a priority for family members. A point of interest is the 12 respondents expecting a stronger unit due to the deployment of family members. Upon further prompting, 2 of these respondents indicated that prior to deployment, NEC workers were unemployed and undervalued at home. The decision was therefore not only for financial stability but to strengthen family bonds. Another interesting theme as relayed by 12 respondents is 'no expected outcome'. According to the responses received, this is due to NEC worker not staying in-touch (2), newlyweds (1), salary used to buy alcohol (9).

The *talanoa* session also raised a few issues that are worthy of consideration:

(i)   ***The shift in roles of women and decision-making practices.***

One of the objectives of this survey is to provide insights into if and how changes in gender roles are being actualised because of the labour mobility schemes. A fundamental aspect of the study includes observing the emergent tendency of women to lead and make decisions, tasks typically associated with men in the traditional rural settings. The

findings might potentially help not just in documenting this change but also in fostering a more supportive environment for women assuming leadership roles. As it appears, the shift in decision making practices or leadership roles should not limit itself solely to an increase in the involvement of women in leadership roles but also enhancing positive perceptions of women's leadership. This creates an opportunity to help show that the shift in gender roles is not unprecedented or imposed from outside, but rather an organic change from within that is resulting in more inclusive and shared leadership roles between men and women in our rural communities.

For example, in Village B, a wife is making all decisions for three kids while her husband is away. She is responsible for all decisions relating to their education, health, diet. Her father-in-law stated that during the two years his son has been away, there has been a significant improvement in the educational achievements of the children.

Other women have, in the absence of their husbands while on deployment, played a stronger role in village activities. In Village E, one wife and mother now has the financial freedom afforded to her by remitted funds to contribute to family and village obligations and be more vocal in matters relating to the family and the village in village meetings and groups, particularly the Village SSVM group, of which she is now head.

One woman in her mid-20s and living with her parents-in-law, has taken on the role of primary provider for them, tending to the farm, selling produce at the market, and raising her two children.

(ii)   ***More participation of youths and men than women in labour mobility schemes***
The elders raised the importance of also creating opportunities for in labour mobility schemes. The suggestion was raised due to the reduction in the number of able-bodied people in the villages. For Village A, the reduction in number has led to the local rugby team conducting funeral rites (or *bouta*) for three neighboring villages. Similar sentiments were shared by elders of Village B whereby they were requested to provide able bodied persons to a funeral in the province of Naitasiri. According to the elders, the village in Naitasiri was short on able bodied persons due to NEC; the funeral rites were therefore performed by relatives from Village B. Another growing concern shared by most of the villages is the non-participation of youths still in the village, in village functions. The margin of this greatly increased after the availability of labour mobility program.

(iii) ***Rise in family issues***

As indicated in Figure 10 and 11 above, family issues arose from NEC deployment. This was elaborated upon by elders in Village C, highlighting that apart from sending remittances to families, workers also sent remittances to cousins for purchasing alcohol. This often leads to excessive noise and disruption to family and village peace.

Another related area of concern is the workers' new commitments. As shared to the research team, NEC workers are choosing to change work while overseas, disregarding contract and family plans. For example, a wife in Village D shared that her husband in his second week left his work and joined a rugby club. He was told to do so by ITaukei overseas. Now, the wife is estranged from the husband and left alone to raise their son.

In addition to this, with an absent husband the wife is expected to fend for her family. This is shared by a housewife[2] stating that some of her decisions have been questioned especially when it contradicts her in-laws. This often leads to conflicts in the home.

(iv) ***Proper vetting of contracts and benefits***

For some NEC workers, employment contracts are questioned. They face difficulty adjusting overseas due to housing, food, and logistical arrangements with employers. For example, a contract signed here in Fiji was different to the reality faced whilst overseas. There were other deductions made to their pay which in turn left them with only a few dollars left to survive and affected their ability to assist families back home financially.

Some of the villagers have highlighted that costs associated with the deaths of NEC workers while on deployment are not covered by their contracts with employers. Some NEC workers have died whilst deployed, and other family members have had to pitch in financially in order to repatriate them home for burial. A village in Namara highlighted this to the research team as the deceased family member was retained for over 3 weeks in the receiving country where they had worked whilst family members and friends looked for avenues and resources to bring him home.

(v) ***Shift in priorities from vocational and tertiary education to low and semi-skilled work on the labour mobility programs.***

The study also underscored a shift in societal values that's increasingly veering away from a long-standing emphasis on vocational and tertiary education for youths, and towards low and semi-skilled work, specifically under labour mobility programs.

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2   Information withheld as per her request.

Community elders have expressed their concerns about this steady trend. It seems that the majority of the ITaukei families in their communities are shifting their focus away from education, seen as a long-term investment for the future, and aligning more towards the low skill labour mobility programs. This new alignment is rooted in the prospects they present - particularly, the chance to travel, earn foreign currency which is significantly stronger compared to the Fiji dollar, and the opportunity to send remittances back home to support family sustenance.

However, this shift could pose detrimental consequences for the future growth and sustainability of the community. While the immediate benefits of these labour mobility programs are noticeable, they also encourage a form of short-term thinking which revolves around temporary employment, without a clear career path or long-term thinking or goals in sight.

Recommendations

In light of the survey findings outlined above, there are several recommendations worth consideration:

→ A more systematic process that involves the Ministry of ITaukei Affairs in the selection process with NEC, in order to:

- → maintain sustainable numbers of men and youths in each village to ensure that village duties and obligations can be conducted.

- → ensure more women participate in the scheme, to ensure a degree of gender parity both in deployment and at home.

→ Ministry of ITaukei Affairs to work with NEC and overseas employers to find ways to ensure families back home are supported financially during deployment, including working with employers to have a mandatory savings plan for workers, to be deducted from source.

→ Integrate ITaukei concepts into the scheme i.e., including *veitautaunaki vakavanua* and the concept of *vakamamaca* for reintegration. These will help strengthen familial bonds and values, and ensure communal responsibilities are maintained.

→ Develop safeguarding guidelines (including due diligence processes on employers) to protect the interests and welfare of workers and their families.

→ The appointment of officers within the Provincial Council to be focal points for families especially women, to contact to raise social issues caused by the family member's deployment.

→ Engaging immediate families in pre-deployment briefings so there is a shared sense of purpose of the deployment.

→ Training and awareness with wives and mothers included, particularly for those who are taking on leadership roles in their homes and communities. Also, there is a need for communities to be more involved when one of their members are away overseas. The roles of the NEC participants members are often carried on by spouses and close family members.

→ Providing women-only spaces for reflection, sharing of experiences and learning from each other about situations faced, addressing familial challenges, and responding to demands on the family.

→ Strengthening awareness and accompaniment of women's leadership and decision-making roles in familial and communal settings, in the absence of their spouses or men who participate in the labour mobility programs. This involves building understanding on this shift, and offering ways to support women who are bravely stepping up to take leadership roles, both at home and for the betterment of the greater community or the *'vanua'*.

- The need to enhance coordination and establish a platform for regular communication and coordination amongst agencies. The need to foster the exchange of information, data and research findings related to labour mobility trends, opportunities, and challenges.

- Identifying capacity building needs and developing training programs to enhance skills and knowledge.

- Ensure the protection of rights and welfare of ITaukei workers engaged in overseas deployment and families that remain by developing mechanisms for monitoring, grievance handling and timely support services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this social impact report provides valuable insights into the effects of labour mobility programs in Fiji. It highlights the economic and social benefits while revealing the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by our communities and migrant workers.

By implementing appropriate policies and support mechanisms, Fiji can maximize the positive impacts of labour mobility while mitigating the risks and ensuring the wellbeing and rights of its workers and our communities.

There are also opportunities to partner with or strengthen partnerships with other ministries and organizations that play a role in mitigating the negative social impacts of the labour mobility scheme. For example, partnering with Soqosoqo Vaka Marama ITaukei, recognizing their role as the only registered indigenous organization in Fiji, with reach into provinces and villages across the country. The Ministry of ITaukei Affairs could also strengthen engagement with the Ministry of Employment, Productivity, and Industrial Relations to mitigate the negative impacts of labour mobility. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could review bilateral agreements to make them more equitable for deployed workers.

It is evident that women are playing a more prominent role in leadership and decision making when their spouses are deployed, as well as having a greater degree of financial independence in matters relating to family, in particular the education and wellbeing of children. While this new role for women has been the result of the absence of their husbands/fathers, it is apparent that women do not lack the drive for leadership, rather they lack the broader community recognition of, and support for, their uptake of these leadership roles to lead in their families and communities. The Ministry of ITaukei Affairs along with other stakeholders could consider putting in place mechanisms to support and promote these women and their families in their new roles.

Appendix 1: Consent form

A PILOT STUDY ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF LABOUR MOBILITY SCHEME ON WOMEN AND FAMILIES IN TAILEVU

WRITTEN CONSENT

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking your time to participate in this short survey. The findings from this project will help the understanding of the:

1) Impact on family and community wellbeing of community members' participation in overseas labour mobility schemes.

2) Changes in the role of women (if any) resulting from absence or husband\father\brother in the family unit, household and in the community at large.

This short survey will take less than 20mins and will be carried out today if you agree to participate.

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the survey if you want to do so. Please also note that you can choose not to answer any questions regarding the survey.

→ I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this interview.

→ I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

→ I understand that all information I provide within this interview will be treated confidentially.

→ I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

→ I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in [presentations, published papers etc.]

I agree to the above points, and to participate in the project   YES ☐   NO ☐

Signature_____

Date_____

Appendix 2: Works cited

IOM, Migration in the Republic of Fiji: A Country Profile, Suva, Fiji, 2020.

Ministry of ITaukei Affairs, Tailevu Village Profiling Survey, 2020.

Nabobo-Baba, The Vanua Research Framework (VRF), 2007.

World Bank Group, Pacific Labour Mobility, Migration and Remittances in Times of COVID-19: Interim Report, 2020.

Appendix 3: Survey Questions

Overarching Questions

1. What are the changes in roles and responsibilities of households (those that are left behind) while the household member is away in the SWP?

2. How can changes be supported to ensure benefits are sustained without undermining the core values of families and communities?

3. What are some of the challenges for the worker and households in the periods of separation and how have they managed the challenges?

Social – demographic Stats (close ended questions)

1. What is your relationship to [workers name]?

   a. Spouse

   b. Sibling

   c. Parent

   d. Relative/family member

   e. Other

2. What gender do you identify as?

   a. Male

   b. Female

   c. Other

3. How old are you? (Record number/years)

4. How many people live in your household? (Record number)

5. What is the main source of your household's income?

   a. Remittance from labour mobility

   b. Subsistence farming

   c. Wages and salary

   d. Other

6. What is the main reason for your family member participating in the labour mobility scheme?

   a. Support family's day to day living.

   b. Invest and save to build a house.

   c. Invest and save for education.

   d. To gain skills and experience from overseas

   e. Others

7. How long was your family member away for their recent deployment in the labour mobility scheme?

8. Who was involved in making the decision for your family member to participate in the labour mobility scheme?

    a. Relatives

    b. Friends

    c. Community / Village members

    d. Recruitment agent

    e. Joint family decision

    f. Family member / labour mobility worker themselves

    g. Other

9. Who was the main person who replaced (workers name) in responsibilities in the family and community?

    a. Relatives and other family members

    b. Village /community members

    c. No one

    d. Myself

    e. Others

Open ended questions

1. How has your family utilized the savings / remittance earned by your family member participating in the labour mobility scheme?

2. What are some of the challenges faced when (workers name) is away for deployment through the labour mobility scheme?