

SDG 10, reduced inequalities:
‘Migration with Dignity’ Programme in Fiji
A case study in reducing inequality through managed labour mobility,
2015–2023

This case study explores the ‘Migration with Dignity’ programme initiated by the government of Fiji as an innovative response to the structural inequalities faced by small island developing states (SIDS¹). SDG 10 calls for the reduction of inequality within and among countries, and this paper demonstrates how well-managed labour migration schemes can contribute to this objective. Drawing on international partnerships, domestic training, and reintegration mechanisms, Fiji has pioneered a model that protects workers’ rights, improves economic outcomes, and promotes social cohesion. The study also considers challenges and limitations and concludes with policy-relevant questions for broader global application.

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 10 seeks to reduce inequality within and among nations. While global income inequality between countries has decreased in recent decades, inequality within countries and between social groups has often worsened (World Bank 2022). Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Fiji face unique vulnerabilities, such as climate change, limited employment opportunities, and the outmigration of skilled workers, which have exacerbated social and economic divides.

Fiji, with a population of approximately 900,000 people, experiences youth unemployment at a rate exceeding 18% (ILO 2023), while rural poverty and vulnerability to climate change contribute to migration pressures. In response, the Fijian government launched the ‘Migration with Dignity’ programme in 2015. The initiative offers a legal, regulated, and rights-based framework for temporary labour migration, in collaboration with Australia and New Zealand. This case study analyses the programme as a model for reducing inequality and promoting ethical migration practices.

¹ SIDS – Small Island Developing States, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA): <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/list-sids>



The Context: Inequality and Migration in the Pacific

Fiji and other Pacific Island nations have long faced socio-economic and geographic marginalisation in global economic systems, largely due to their remoteness, small domestic markets, and vulnerability to external shocks. Historically excluded from major trade and investment flows, these countries continue to experience significant development disparities. Challenges include:

- Youth unemployment: in 2022, youth unemployment in Fiji reached 18.3%, with women disproportionately affected (International Labour Organization 2023). Youth in rural and maritime areas face even higher barriers due to limited access to training and formal labour markets;
- Climate-induced displacement: rising sea levels and more frequent cyclones have begun to render some coastal and low-lying island communities uninhabitable. Entire villages on outer islands have been relocated, disrupting livelihoods, cultural ties, and education continuity (UNESCAP 2021);
- Skills underutilisation: despite improvements in educational access, there is a growing mismatch between the skills young people acquire and the limited employment opportunities available domestically. This leads to a phenomenon often referred to as ‘educated unemployment’, where tertiary graduates remain underemployed or jobless for prolonged periods.

At the same time, chronic labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, and aged care in Australia and New Zealand have opened up opportunities for temporary migrant labour from the Pacific. However, when migration is unregulated or driven by desperation, it can lead to a range of negative consequences, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, excessive recruitment fees, social fragmentation, and deepening income inequality between migrant-sending and non-sending households.

‘Migration with Dignity’ – programme design

The ‘Migration with Dignity’ programme aims to transform migration from a necessity driven by hardship into a dignified, voluntary choice anchored in human rights and development. Designed to offer structured and safe mobility opportunities, the programme supports national resilience while helping migrants realise their full potential abroad and upon



return. The strategy is underpinned by inclusive planning and multisectoral coordination across government agencies and international partners. Its core components include numerous actions.

- **Bilateral agreements:** Fiji negotiated comprehensive labour mobility agreements with Australia and New Zealand to establish seasonal and longer-term work visas. These agreements ensure adherence to international labour standards, provide workers with access to grievance mechanisms, and facilitate coordination between labour-sending and receiving countries to prevent abuse.
- **Pre-departure training:** prior to deployment, all selected migrants undergo extensive training in technical skills, financial planning, occupational health and safety, rights awareness, and cross-cultural adaptation. This not only enhances job performance and personal safety but also improves the likelihood of productive reintegration upon return.
- **Gender inclusivity:** recognising gender disparities in access to international employment, the programme actively promotes female participation through gender-sensitive outreach, mentorship networks, and safe work guarantees. As a result, the share of female workers rose from 14% in 2016 to 38% in 2023, highlighting the success of inclusion strategies (International Labour Organization 2023).
- **Monitoring and support:** the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations (MEPIR), in collaboration with NGOs and Fijian diplomatic missions, ensures continued oversight of workers' conditions. Regular check-ins, hotline services, and field inspections help address rights violations and provide psychosocial assistance when needed.
- **Reintegration support:** to maximise the long-term developmental benefits of migration, returnees are supported through financial literacy workshops, access to startup grants, vocational retraining, and business incubator programmes. Reintegration also includes mental health support and social re-embedding in home communities, especially for those who have been abroad for multiple seasons.

Results and impact

The outcomes of the programme, while still evolving, indicate positive and multidimensional social and economic effects that underscore its relevance as a tool for addressing SDG 10:

- Over 35,000 Fijians have participated in the programme since its inception (Fiji Ministry of Employment 2023). Participants come from both urban and rural



backgrounds, with a growing number of applications each year reflecting increasing trust and awareness of the programme's safeguards;

- Around 80% of participants reported improved household income, with average annual remittances rising from USD 5,000 to USD 8,200 per worker (Asian Development Bank 2023). These funds are commonly used to improve housing, invest in microenterprises, and pay for children's education, contributing to upward mobility;
- Families receiving remittances report increased school enrolment, especially for girls, and more regular healthcare visits, suggesting long-term positive impacts on human capital (World Bank 2023). Anecdotal evidence also indicates improved nutrition and reduced rates of early school dropout;
- Irregular departures dropped by 62% between 2015 and 2022 (MEPIR 2023), attributed to greater availability of legal migration channels and trust in programme integrity. This decline has also reduced vulnerability to exploitation by human traffickers and illegal brokers;
- The programme facilitated interaction and cooperation between Fiji's main ethnic groups – iTaukei and Indo-Fijians – through joint training, deployment, and reintegration activities. These shared experiences contributed to stronger intergroup understanding, reducing tension and building a sense of national identity and unity (UNDP 2022).

Despite its successes, the programme faces critical constraints that may limit its long-term impact and scalability. Programme access is capped by visa quotas imposed by host countries, and placements are often tied to seasonal labour demand, particularly in agriculture and hospitality. These constraints restrict the number of beneficiaries and leave many qualified candidates unable to participate. Overreliance on remittance income may disincentivise domestic labour force participation, especially among youth who perceive migration as the only path to economic security. In addition, households that do not benefit from remittances may experience growing intra-community disparities, thereby reinforcing inequality.

Although female participation has increased, women often work in more precarious and less regulated jobs abroad – such as caregiving or hospitality – where the risk of exploitation, wage discrimination, or harassment is heightened. Cultural barriers also persist, limiting some women's mobility and autonomy despite programme safeguards (International Labour Organization 2023). Some policymakers and civil society actors argue that the programme is a short-term fix that diverts attention from the need to develop local industries and employment



opportunities. Critics contend that sustained economic growth should prioritise domestic job creation and inclusive development, not outmigration as a default solution (Sutherland 2023).

Conclusion

Fiji's case illustrates that ethical, rights-based migration frameworks can serve not only as a livelihood mechanism but also as a structural tool for reducing inequality between nations and among social groups. Key lessons include:

- Legal and regulated pathways can protect workers from exploitation, promote decent work, and help receiving countries meet labour shortages without undermining human rights;
- Government and multilateral collaboration are essential to align migration with international labour standards, provide accountability mechanisms, and ensure sustainable reintegration post-return;
- Migration policy should complement local economic development, functioning as one pillar of broader resilience strategies. National development plans must also invest in skills, infrastructure, and inclusive job creation domestically.

The 'Migration with Dignity' programme demonstrates that migration, when managed through inclusive and rights-based systems, can serve as a tool for reducing inequality. However, sustaining its impact requires regional cooperation, continued investment in local job creation, and inclusive development planning. The model offers insights for other low-income or climate-vulnerable countries seeking to harness migration as a pathway to equity.

Questions

1. How can countries ensure that labour migration reduces rather than exacerbates inequality? Reflect on national migration policies and their design to prevent internal inequalities. Consider how to distribute migration opportunities fairly, and how to avoid deepening socio-economic gaps between those who migrate and those who remain.
2. Should developed countries take a greater role in facilitating ethical migration pathways as part of their ESG commitments? How global equity links to corporate and government responsibility. Discuss challenging developed nations to consider whether



supporting fair labour migration systems aligns with their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks.

3. What safeguards are essential to protect migrant workers from exploitation? Explore necessary legal, institutional, and social protections for migrant workers to ensure decent work and uphold human rights.
4. How can reintegration mechanisms be improved to make migration circular and sustainable? This addresses post-return policy gaps. Provide ideas on how returnees can reinvest their earnings and skills productively at home, contributing to local economies and avoiding long-term dependency on migration.
5. Can Fiji's approach be replicated in other developing countries? What local factors must be considered? Prepare an analysis of context-specific variables such as governance structures, economic opportunities, diaspora size, and bilateral relations that determine whether Fiji's model can be transferred elsewhere.

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