

# Facilitating voluntary adaptive migration in the Pacific

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**Voluntary adaptive migration across international borders will be a critical component of an overall adaptation strategy for at-risk individuals and households in the Pacific region in order to increase their resilience to natural hazards and prevent future displacement.**

Both the colonisation process and the mandate and trusteeship systems developed in the aftermath of the first and second World Wars had a profound effect on regional mobility in Oceania. They provided the foundations for a multiplicity of sub-regional 'clusters' of the Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) within which the members have varying levels of privileges. Former or continuing colonial, mandate or trustee states (such as New Zealand, France and the United States) act as cluster 'hubs'.

The effect of this clustering has been to greatly enhance the capacity for cross-border mobility overall but with considerable variation. The range of rights include the granting of unrestricted right of entry and stay by way of an entitlement to citizenship in the hub state; preferential entitlement to residence by targeted quotas; and privileged access to the hub-state labour market and temporary work in certain sectors of the hub-state economy.

In contrast, a sub-regional cluster, The Melanesian Spearhead Group, including the four independent states of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as well as the indigenous Kanak-led party in New Caledonia (still a French colony), has no central hub. Consequently, the effect of cluster membership is more homogeneous, relating to privileged rights of entry as visitors and temporary access to selected occupations within the labour markets of member of the cluster.

In absolute terms, the numbers of persons displaced by disasters in Oceania is low compared to other regions. An estimated 318,000 people have been displaced by sudden-onset disasters over the past five years. However, in per capita terms, the picture is different; in 2012 Samoa and Fiji were among the ten countries worldwide with the highest per capita levels of displacement.

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The clustering of states into sub-regional groupings is not static; new clusters continue to emerge as an aspect of the ongoing and continual alignment of state interests at a sub-regional level. This dynamism has the potential to greatly enhance mobility in the region by fostering new agreements providing for the temporary or permanent cross-border movement of Pacific peoples. The status of citizens within the cluster can be crucial in determining the scale and type of post-disaster assistance and, in particular, the extent to which that assistance has implications for cross-border movement.

### The current regional legal framework

In a region of islands where most borders are lines on a map through vast ocean spaces, affecting cross-border movement is difficult. Existing regional immigration frameworks typically do not have policies specifically aimed at facilitating cross-border movement in response to natural disasters or in anticipation of future disasters linked to climate change.

Between PICTs, there is a large degree of mutual privileging in terms of granting visa-free or visa-on-arrival entry as visitors. This stands in contrast to the countries of the Pacific Rim which do not generally grant waiver or visa-on-arrival status to citizens of Pacific islands. This may mean that individuals or households wishing to cross borders in response to natural disasters are more likely to be able to do so by travelling to another island country than to the Pacific Rim countries.

In respect of work, some features of the present legal framework potentially limit opportunities for voluntary adaptive migration. When granted, access to employment in Pacific countries is often highly regulated and controlled and many have binding post-employment repatriation requirements. These features, common to many regional systems, may affect the ability of these systems to respond to natural disasters by facilitating cross-border migration in a timely or economically sustained fashion.

This issue will need to be factored into discussions around both voluntary adaptive migration and resettlement, along with more familiar regional issues such as land tenure and access to land by non-citizens.

Immigration frameworks in the region contain a range of pathways to residence. In many cases residence is granted for spouses and dependent children of host-state citizens. In host states with an established diaspora, this will be a useful policy mechanism for facilitating voluntary adaptive migration over time. However, although family life throughout the Pacific typically involves extended family networks spanning close-knit communities or villages, most immigration policies in the region have no specific provisions aimed at facilitating the migration of the wider family group.

While the introduction of new policy mechanisms dealing with the specific situation of those affected by natural disasters is to be encouraged, current policy mechanisms are amenable to adjustment. They could be amended to allow people affected by natural disasters, including those linked with climate change, to make voluntary choices about moving from places where environmental change is severely compromising long-term residence, especially in those Pacific states where the largest population growth is expected to occur in coming decades.

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