

Cross-border migration with dignity in Kiribati

Karen E McNamara

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The cross-border labour migration scheme proposed by the Kiribati government is an example of a governmental response to climate-induced change, where the demographic focal point is at the individual or household level.

Kiribati is made up of 32 atolls scattered across the southern Pacific Ocean. Long-term habitability of these low-lying islands is threatened by sea-level rise and, in an effort to plan for the challenges ahead, a number of policies and programmes have surfaced to reduce the country's vulnerability to climate change. Kiribati has no sustainable long-term internal migration option as there is simply no higher ground to move to, with most islands being less than three metres above sea level. The country's leaders have therefore attempted to develop new opportunities for its citizens to migrate abroad.

The 'migration with dignity' policy is part of Kiribati's long-term nation-wide relocation strategy. The first part of this policy is to create opportunities for those who wish to migrate abroad now and in the near future. The goal is to forge expatriate communities in various receiving countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, so that they may support other migrants in the longer term, and also

to enhance the opportunity for remittances to be sent back. With costs largely subsidised by the government, the second part of this policy is to improve the levels of educational and vocational qualifications that can be obtained in Kiribati, so that they match those that are available in the places where residents may migrate to. It is hoped that this training and upskilling will provide opportunities to migrate abroad 'with dignity' and build on existing cross-border labour arrangements.

This policy, however, only helps pave the way for those who are ready and willing to migrate but it does not reach everyone, especially those with very limited literacy skills or those with largely subsistence livelihoods. Given that this option to safeguard livelihoods is only centred on a restricted number of people, this policy falls short of equitably ensuring protective migration mechanisms for all. A further consideration relates to whether or not such a policy will result in long-term positive outcomes in both sending and receiving countries.

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Planting mangroves in Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, to help protect the coast from sea-level rise and storms.