



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Beyond Paternalism and Racism in Pacific Labour Migration

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Key Insights

- The operation of the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in its present form reflects and reinforces the unequal relationship between New Zealand and countries in the Pacific that have been shaped by colonial and imperial practices.
- Our analysis of policy and strategy documents related to the RSE scheme reveals three key discourses (language and ideas) that underpin the foundation and operation of the RSE. They are: 1) a form of paternalism that is shaped around claims of 'co-development', 2) a strong commitment to technocratic managerialism, and 3) the racialisation of Pacific people as 'good' candidates for seasonal manual labour.
- Paternalism is expressed primarily in the notion of benevolence and development aid that reflect and reproduce colonial power relations between New Zealand and its neighbouring Pacific countries.
- Managerialism, the idea that 'orderly migration' relies on evaluation, monitoring, target setting, and enforcement, is evident in New Zealand's disproportionate authority over determining the entry numbers as well as the conditions that structure the stay and work experiences of the RSE workers.
- Pacific people are racialised as the ideal seasonal workforce for physically challenging jobs in the horticultural and viticultural industries – sectors that are characterised by low wages and working conditions.
- Our analysis indicates a need to rethink the RSE scheme as a 'global model' for circular migration management as it reproduces colonial power relations. We suggest that Pacific migration policies should be reevaluated to rectify the existing power imbalance in the administration of RSE and other Pacific-focused schemes. A more equitable and fairer outcome can be achieved through mutual dialogue with Pacific countries to enhance the rights and freedoms of migrants and provide pathways to residence should Pacific people desire so.
- To address the imperialist underpinnings of the RSE scheme and other migration policies focused on the Pacific, the reform efforts should be firmly grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, with substantive involvement of Māori as tangata whenua.

Research undertaken within the WERO: Working to End Racial Oppression research programme has been developed in relation to the Takarangi framework. The Takarangi is a double spiral pattern prominent in Māori carving that is also depicted in the background of this brief. In WERO, the Takarangi framework has shaped our work on the values and ethics of all research that we undertake to address racism. Further information on the Takarangi is available online: <https://wero.ac.nz/research/takarangi-wero-values-and-roadmap/>

Introduction

The mobility of peoples from countries in Te Moana-nui-a-kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) has become a common feature of migration arrangements in Aotearoa New Zealand since the mid-late 20th century. Today, alongside migration among established Pacific diaspora communities, thousands of Pacific people migrate to work in short term seasonal roles in the horticultural and viticultural industries. Governed by the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, these Pacific workers are subject to the strictest regulations in New Zealand's migration regime, leaving them exposed to low wages and working conditions, exploitation and cycles of dependency.

As part of our WERO research on racism in migration policy, we analysed RSE policy and strategy documents to examine the discourses that support its establishment and operation in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand. We asked how this circular labour mobility programme legitimises the differential treatment of Pacific workers in the RSE in contrast to other migration programmes, and what the programme design means for the treatment of Pacific peoples. In this

brief, we highlight the three key discourses that underpin the foundation and operation of the RSE: paternalism, managerialism and racism. We begin by providing a brief background on the RSE before introducing the discourse analysis methodology we used, discussing key findings, and concluding with implications from the research.

Background of the RSE

The RSE is a seasonal labour programme that was established in 2007 by the New Zealand Government to manage the circular migration of people from nine Pacific countries to work in horticulture and viticulture. The RSE has been described as a 'global model' for migration management (Gibson & McKenzie, 2010), an approach to migration policy that aims for mutually beneficial migration that is underpinned by "orderly, predictable and productive" (Ghosh, 2007, p. 107) flows of people. In this regard, the scheme is akin to similar arrangements in other settler colonial contexts, such as the Australian Seasonal Worker Programme and the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. The annual RSE cap and number of workers arriving each year are presented in Figure 1.

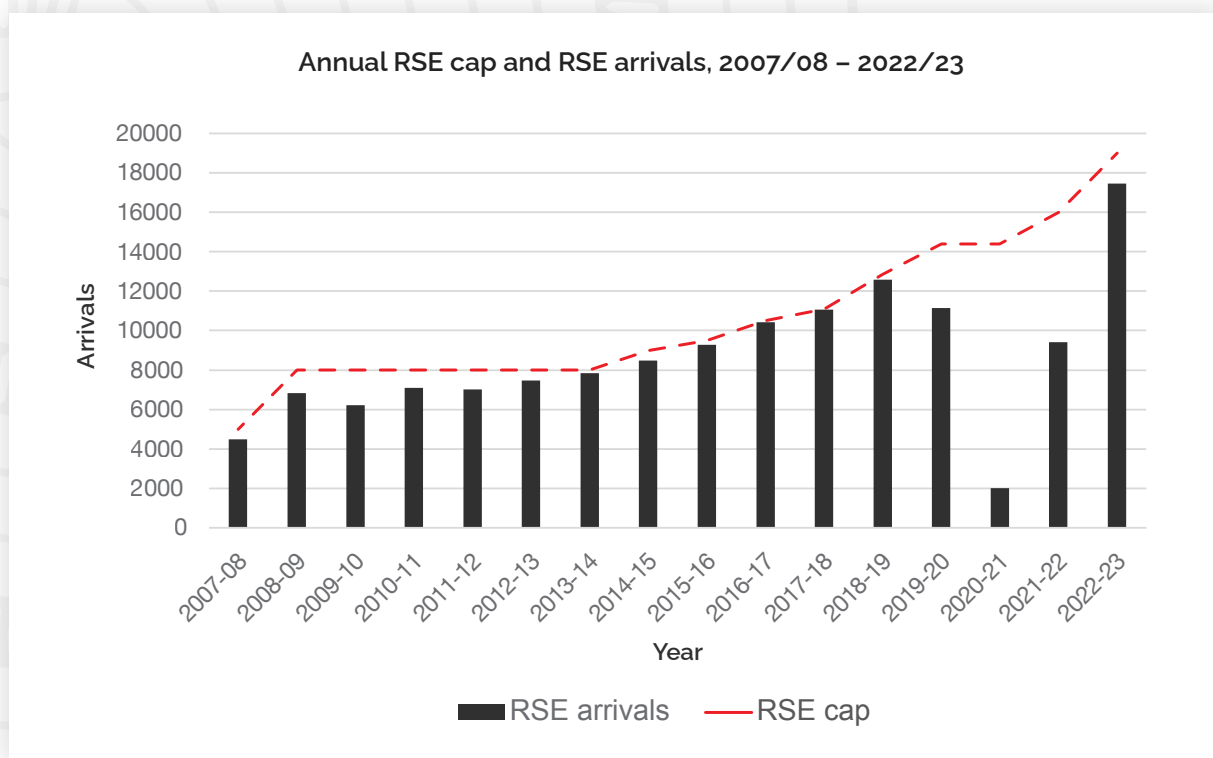


Figure 1: Annual RSE cap and RSE arrivals, 2007/08 – 2022/23. Note: The Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted RSE and other migrant arrivals in 2019/20-2021/22. 2022/23 arrival data not available yet. Source: [Immigration New Zealand 2023](#)

While it has been touted as a 'best practice' migration policy (see Gibson & McKenzie, 2010), the RSE scheme is highly restrictive, providing migrants with short-term visas to work for part of a year (7 to 9 months) and restricting workers to specific occupations and employers, limiting rights to change employers and precluding migrants from applying for residence or any other kind of visa. The programme claims to be a tool of development for neighbouring countries but is fundamentally premised on providing cheap flexible labour to generate profits in primary industries. As we were undertaking this research, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission published a report that identified systemic patterns of human rights abuses and described the RSE as bordering on 'modern-day slavery' (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2022). The New Zealand Government has since undertaken a review of the scheme that aims to enhance the fair treatment of workers (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2022), but has also simultaneously increased the number of spaces available to a record 19,000 for the 2022/2023 year. In the lead up to the 2023 general election, the National Party proposed to "double the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) worker cap over five years to 38,000" (Getting back to farming, 2023). While the new National-ACT-NZ First Government agenda remains unclear, the ACT Party-National Party coalition agreement specified commitments to "increase the cap on the number of workers" and "increase the flexibility of the quota allocation system". These proposals imply the entrenchment and extension of the RSE labour supply model.

Study Design

Our research involved a discourse analysis of migration policy and strategy documents. Discourse analysis entails reading and analysing texts, such as policies and regulations, and asking key questions about them to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions about the social realities. These questions include:

- Who produced the text?
- Why was the text produced?
- Who benefits from this text and the way it was written?
- What assumptions underpin the creation of this text?

As a methodology, discourse analysis is inherently political because it involves asking critical questions about social realities and challenges the legitimacy of the norms that shape how we understand the world. We use discourse analysis to critically question the assumptions, ideology (beliefs), and unrecognised biases that shape the RSE scheme and its operation. For this research, 47 RSE and immigration related policy and strategy documents¹ were collated from several different sources, including the websites of the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (MBIE), Immigration New Zealand, the New Zealand Productivity Commission, and Hansard - the New Zealand Parliamentary record. Forty-seven RSE and Pacific migration related documents were included in the analysis.

Findings & Conclusions

Our discourse analysis of RSE-related policy and strategy documents revealed three dominant discourses: 1) a form of paternalism that was shaped around claims of 'co-development', 2) a deep commitment to technocratic managerialism, and 3) the racialisation of Pacific people as good candidates for temporary manual labour.

Paternalism

Firstly, in the documents we analysed, the RSE was regularly described in ways that reveal paternalistic attitudes from the New Zealand Government towards Pacific countries and people. For instance, in descriptions of the objectives and outcomes of the RSE scheme, New Zealand is positioned as leading Pacific development and sustainability, which reproduces an assumption that Pacific countries are in need of help and development and a longstanding power imbalance in the region. The 'Guide to Becoming a Recognised Seasonal Employer' (2022, p.2), for instance, notes:

Encourage economic development, regional integration, and good governance within the Pacific, by allowing preferential access to workers who are citizens of eligible Pacific countries.

By expressing benevolence towards Pacific countries, New Zealand positions itself as a superior

¹ The details of all policy documents analysed and cited in this brief are available in the [supplementary document](#).

and more developed nation with purported responsibilities to support and guide the region. This claim resonates with the way that New Zealand positioned itself as an imperial and colonial power in the Pacific during the 20th Century (see Mallon et al., 2012; Pickles & Coleborne, 2016) and frames Pacific countries in a deficit manner (see Gebhard et al., 2022).

The documents we examined also frequently position the RSE scheme as a form of co-development, using phrases such as "friendship/partnership with the Pacific countries", "mutual benefit", and "collective ambition". This narrative obscures both the singular authority the New Zealand Government exercises over the programme and the economic profits that New Zealand growers accumulate through the scheme. Perhaps most notably, the restrictions on RSE workers' mobility and the requirement for seasonal return are justified by a claim to "support Pacific peoples in their expressed wish to remain in their own countries" (Pacific Climate Migration Cabinet Paper Progress Update, 2018, p. 1), even while it is unclear from existing engagement and consultation when these wishes have been expressed and by whom.

Managerialism

Secondly, the RSE scheme is presented in ways that emphasise the importance of managerialism – that is, that migration policy should be based on management practices of evaluation, monitoring, target setting and enforcement. For instance, the Proposed Immigration Work Programme to Improve Pacific Migration Policies (2018, p. 5) cabinet paper stated: "Well-managed immigration is essential to our economic and social success as a country."

Such managerialism extends to the entry and exit of RSE workers but also to the conditions of their stay in New Zealand. Two key characteristics of the RSE scheme are that RSE workers are limited to specific types of roles – specifically "planting, maintaining, harvesting and packing crops" (Guide to Becoming a Seasonal Employers, 2022) – that limit wider career development, are tied to their employers, and they are also typically housed in purpose-built accommodation away from other communities. These practices amount to what

Canadian researchers Horgan and Liinamaa (2017) describe as 'social quarantining': the "isolation of workers from the rhythms of everyday social life in the broader communities where their housing and workplaces are located" (Horgan & Liinamaa 2017, p. 714). Social quarantine mechanisms ensure the steady, constant supply of seasonal labour without the commitment to inclusion or integration.

There is also a recurrent emphasis on technocratic excellence in RSE policy and strategy documents. These include references to the importance of 'rigorous' evaluation and 'productivity analysis' to justify operational matters and to define the administrative caps on RSE workers. It is evident that the needs of industry define the number of workers:

Each year, the industry identifies its labour needs, and these are tested against the available sources of labour to determine the number of RSE workers required by each region. This includes determining what efforts are being made by employers to recruit New Zealanders, particularly Work and Income clients. (Cabinet Paper on Increasing the cap for the RSE scheme, 2017/2018, p. 5)

These technocratic approaches within the RSE are part of the reason why the World Bank has described the scheme as "one of the most effective development interventions for which rigorous evaluations are available" (Cabinet paper on increasing the cap for the RSE scheme (2017/2018, p. 17). The emphasis on evaluation, targets, caps and other technocratic interventions operates as a form of 'risk' management that legitimises highly restrictive approaches to managing Pacific labour mobility because of claims that uncontrolled migration would be a threat to New Zealand's economic wellbeing and national identity.

Racism

Lastly, our analysis demonstrates that claims of co-development benefits and the feasibility of managerialism are propped up by the racialisation of Pacific people as the ideal workforce for horticultural and viticultural industries. The documents that described the

characteristics of RSE workers frequently used words like 'enthusiastic', 'productive', 'suitable', and 'dependable.' While seemingly positive, these discursive framings of Pacific RSE workers position them as ideal for the physically challenging jobs in the horticultural and viticultural industries – sectors that are characterised by low wages and poor working conditions. These 'positive' discourses on worker attribution are a form of "benevolent racism" (Esposito & Romano, 2014, p. 69) that serves to justify the foundation and operation of the RSE scheme and position Pacific people as 'good' workers who will be compliant to employers.

Our analysis shows that this racialisation of RSE workers frequently drew on comparisons to New Zealand workers (especially Work and Income clients), to working holiday visa holders (overwhelmingly from Western countries), and to international students (many from Asian countries). Comments from RSE employers in surveys and evaluation reports consistently described Pacific RSE workers as more suitable due to being significantly more physically productive. In contrast, evaluation reports cast doubt on the willingness of New Zealanders to undertake seasonal labour because of its conditions, wages, requisites of the task and the incentives on offer. Working holiday makers and international students were similarly described as less productive and motivated, a factor that is undoubtedly at least partly connected to the greater freedoms these migrants have to change employers, work in other occupations and apply for other visas. As such, our analysis revealed that Pacific workers are understood by employers to be inherently more suitable to physical labour while their limited options were not considered as a reason for compliance. In other words, Pacific RSE workers are racialised as good workers who are in need of government control, which encourages compliance to employer demands in a way that enhances productivity.

Beyond Paternalism & Racism

As a circular migration programme that has regularly been touted as a 'global model' for migration governance (see Gibson, & McKenzie, 2010), the RSE has been the subject of frequent assessments and evaluations. While such inquiries have value in measuring the outcomes of the RSE, as part of the technocratic management of migration they have largely done so on the terms established within the scheme: development impacts, remittances, employer perceptions about worker suitability, and migration returns. This WERO research is different from these reports because the critical discourse analysis used here reveals the taken-for-granted paternalism, managerialism and racism that is the foundation and operation of the RSE. There are several implications from this research including:

- The RSE reflects inequality between New Zealand and countries in the Pacific that resonate with New Zealand's colonial and imperial relationships and practices in the region.
- To address the unequal, paternalistic relationship between New Zealand and its neighbouring Pacific countries, changes to Pacific migration policies should be based on mutual dialogue with Pacific countries, enhance the rights and freedoms of migrants, and provide pathways to residence should Pacific people desire this.
- Evaluations, reviews and inquiries that only measure the RSE on its own terms are limited in potential to recommend tweaks that improve the operation of the scheme and in doing so can reinforce the unjust and exploitative relationships it creates. Our analysis suggests that there is a need for more critical external analysis of the scheme's foundations.
- Any changes in migration policy towards the Pacific or other parts of Aotearoa New Zealand's migration system need to be centred in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and involve a substantive role for Māori as tangata whenua.

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