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Policy Changes: Kiribati migration and settlement

Introduction

This article examines how policy changes at a range of levels could improve decision making by and initial settlement outcomes for Kiribati migrants, a relatively new migrant group to New Zealand. It draws on recent research, based on in-depth interviews, on the settlement experiences of Kiribati migrants and their families living in New Zealand (Thompson, 2016). The first section examines how minor changes to existing operational policies under the Pacific Access Category (PAC) could improve migration decision making and enable new migrants to search for and find employment in a more efficient manner. The second section examines the efficacy of the current PAC quota for Kiribati, given the demographic, economic and environmental

vulnerabilities facing it. Looking to the future, the last section explores the need for a longer-term strategic approach to policy formation relating to climate change and migration with special reference to Kiribati.

Minor changes to PAC operational policies

There is general acceptance among academic researchers that migration is a dynamic response to a range of interlinking factors, including economic, social, environmental and political influences (McLeman and Smit, 2006; Bedford and Bedford, 2010; Perch-Nielsen et al., 2008; Samers, 2010). These and other issues, such as demographic factors, conditions in the home country of migrants, and immigration policy settings for potential destinations have

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been recognised as influencing the decision of citizens to move or stay (King, 2012; Lee, 1966). This complexity was corroborated by Kiribati migrants living in New Zealand, with their decision to migrate inextricably linked to a mix of positive expectations about life in New Zealand and negative views about the future of Kiribati (Thompson, 2016).

Fourteen Kiribati migrants (eight women and six men), representing 91 members of the Wellington Kiribati community (7.5% of the total Kiribati population in New Zealand born in Kiribati and 30% of the Kiribati-born population living in the Wellington region), were interviewed about their settlement experiences in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). The common view of the participant group was that they could provide their children with a 'better life' in New Zealand compared to what they might expect if they remained in Kiribati. This was typically denoted in terms of their children having access to fresh fruit, safe drinking water, a clean environment, good education, and high-quality health services.

Although there was broad agreement among participants that these expectations were largely met, half of the men and all of the women with the exception of one (led predominately by those who had never travelled out of Kiribati before coming to New Zealand), were embarrassed at their naivety in believing that they would be provided with free housing and jobs to kick-start their settlement in New Zealand. It was in the context of these settlement 'shocks' that many women recalled thinking about returning to Kiribati. A number of cultural sensitivities were indicated as contributing to the poor exchange of information about life in New Zealand. For those seeking information, this included wariness about their questions being viewed by family and friends living in New Zealand as prying into their private lives, or being perceived as an indirect way of asking for settlement assistance. For those providing information, the lack of rich information could be attributed to reluctance in telling their relatives about to migrate to New Zealand that they were

Pacific Access Category policy

The Pacific Access Category is an immigration programme that enables citizens aged between 18 and 45 years from Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati to register for an annual ballot. Those who are successful in the ballot are invited to apply for residence on the basis that the principal applicant or their partner obtains a job offer of full-time work that is for 12 months or more, pays enough to support them and their families to live in New Zealand (the income threshold is currently set at \$33,500 per year), and must be able to read, write and speak English. Applicants must be of good character and be in good health to be considered for residence.

experiencing difficulties, as to do so could suggest that they were unable to assist new migrants with their settlement.

The inability of many Kiribati migrants to obtain good information from their social networks living in New Zealand led to a reliance on a range of informal information sources, such as magazines, movies and, more recently, what they could glean from the internet. Unlike refugees entering New Zealand, who are provided with information about key settlement issues, such as housing, employment, social services and social values, Kiribati migrants (as with all other voluntary migrants) are expected to gather their own information about life in New Zealand.¹ While the difference in approach between refugees and voluntary migrants can be understood (given the high needs of refugees), a case can be made that the lack of accessible settlement information for those migrating under the PAC is at odds with the targeted nature of this immigration programme. As with refugees, those Kiribati migrants who formed unrealistic expectations were found to have experienced detrimental shocks and a sense of loss of control, resulting in poor initial settlement outcomes (Simich, Beiser and Mawani, 2003; Fanjoy et al., 2005).

These findings suggest that access to good information would lessen the shock, anxiety and stress experienced by many Kiribati migrants and their families arriving under the PAC. Research suggests that the provision of settlement information would be particularly helpful for Kiribati women, who were significantly disadvantaged compared to most Kiribati men because of their much lower

likelihood of having previously travelled out of Kiribati. Information, written in the Kiribati language, on the cost of living, employment and the private rental housing market would go a long way in assisting new migrants to gain a better appreciation of what life would be like in New Zealand. This information could be provided by the High Commission in Tarawa to inform those considering migrating to New Zealand. Improved information on the operational aspects of the cash economy, which plays a smaller part of the economic lives of its citizens in Kiribati, would mitigate many of the settlement shocks experienced by these migrants (Thompson, 2016).

In addition to the role of information, another area worthy of further scrutiny concerns operational policy settings under the PAC relating to employment. While it is widely recognised that employment is one of the most important determinants of settlement outcomes (Beckhusen et al., 2012; Colic-Peisker, 2002, 2003; Burnett, 1998; Henderson, 2004), research on the settlement experiences of Kiribati migrants living in New Zealand suggests that current operational policy settings could be improved, enabling new PAC migrants to enter the labour market more efficiently (Thompson, 2016). Kiribati migrants coming to New Zealand under the PAC identified a number of policy obstacles standing in the way of them obtaining offers of jobs utilising their skills.

One of the most common complaints raised by Kiribati migrants was the pervasive lack of recognition by New Zealand employers of the PAC immigration programme and the fact that

those approved for entry under the PAC have the right to work in New Zealand, subject to obtaining a satisfactory job that meets certain criteria.² As a result of employers not understanding how the PAC operated, employers with vacancies were unwilling to offer jobs to Kiribati migrants (who were typically searching for jobs while on a visitor visa) if they did not hold a current work visa. This had the effect of Kiribati migrants applying for standard work visas, only to have their applications declined due to labour market tests indicating the availability of New Zealanders to work. This confusion resulted in many Kiribati migrants repeatedly applying for work visas, leading to increased transaction costs and raised

communicated to those Kiribati migrants with industry-recognised skills that they did not want to commit time and effort to a process they perceived as being overly complex and unlikely to yield positive results. In other words, the marine industry did not think that Kiribati workers would be successful in their applications for work visas.

This led to all those participants, or their partners, with marine industry skills having to take any job, as long as it met the requirements for gaining permanent residence. As a result these migrants took on jobs as cleaners and supermarket stackers, and only moved into employment utilising their skills once they had gained permanent residence. While this two-step

intended to ensure that whole families do not migrate to New Zealand without having some assurance of their ability to obtain work, this operational practice could be viewed as being unreasonable given that the partner of the principal applicant may have higher skills, and that for families with dependent children, both adults are commonly required to obtain jobs to meet the annual income threshold set under the PAC. With this, a defined time period for migrants to complete the immigration process, and the practice of having to apply for work visas on multiple occasions, it was not surprising that the process of obtaining job offers was indicated as one of the most stressful experiences of their settlement.

Another policy area under the PAC worthy of consideration is the operational instruction allowing only the principal applicant (the person who registered for the PAC) to come to New Zealand to search for a job.

Recommendations for operational policy changes under the PAC

These findings suggest that minor changes to existing operational policy settings under the PAC have the potential of making the process significantly easier for new migrants. Small modifications, such as raising awareness among New Zealand employers of the PAC, and providing new migrants with a letter from Immigration New Zealand, would go a long way to obviating the requirement imposed by many employers that PAC migrants hold a work visa to obtain a job offer. These changes would also reduce the inefficient process of PAC migrants applying for work visas, only for their visa applications to be declined due to not meeting the labour market test. While the requirement to meet the labour market test may be viewed as a reasonable obligation, the fact that PAC migrants will eventually compete with New Zealanders after they obtain their permanent residence visa suggests that this process is simply delaying competition with other New Zealanders. On this basis, it could be argued that it would be most beneficial for PAC applicants and their partners to be provided with open work visas, enabling new migrants to move into jobs utilising their skills. This would reduce the current practice of new PAC migrants taking on any job that met labour market requirements, only to then move into subsequent employment of their choice once they gained permanent residence status.

levels of stress and anxiety for migrants and their families. These difficulties could have been avoided if Kiribati migrants were provided with a letter from Immigration New Zealand that they could show employers, outlining that they were entitled to search for a job in New Zealand that met specified PAC criteria.

Despite the fact that the PAC has been in operation for over 15 years, the lack of a policy connection between work visa policy and the PAC led to an undue dependence by new Kiribati migrants on personal networks, such as family and friends, typically resulting in their congregating in low-paid service industries. A large part of the problem for those Kiribati migrants with specific industry skills was the unwillingness of New Zealand employers, who wanted their skills, to invest their time and resources in assisting these migrants to apply for work visas. In particular, employers in the marine industry

employment process could be considered as par for the course for new PAC migrants, it raises serious concerns about the unintended consequences of less than adequate operational policy settings. Indeed, rather than them being facilitative, those migrating under the PAC are forced to negotiate their way through disconnected policy streams. A number of options could be considered to improve these operational processes, including, as noted above, providing new PAC migrants with a letter outlining the intent of the PAC that they could show employers, providing PAC migrants with open work visas, and eliminating the labour market test given that these migrants are using these jobs as a pathway to residence.

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As noted previously, this reasoning is based on the rationale that, as a specific immigration programme, operational policy should support and facilitate the intent of the PAC, rather than encumber the efficient connection of migrants to the labour market. Fine-tuning operational policy would not only streamline how new PAC migrants entered the labour market, reducing costs for employers, but also ease settlement costs for migrants. Another area for policy consideration would be to allow the partner of the principal applicant to join them to search for work together and to make informed decisions about where they want to live. This would reduce transition costs by mitigating the need for migrant families to be separated if the partner finds work in another region, or families having to relocate and for the principal applicant to have to start the search for work again.

Overall, although policy settings typically involve a balance between being facilitative and reducing risks, this investigation underlines that policy settings are only as good as how well they work in the real world. This is not intended to imply that PAC operational policies need to be eliminated and replaced, but rather that small changes to existing policy settings have the capacity to improve labour market and settlement outcomes for Kiribati migrants, and other PAC migrants.

Policy changes to parameters of the PAC

At a higher policy level, a pertinent question that arises is whether the existing PAC quota of 75 places per year (this relates to 75 people, including the principal applicant, partner and dependent children) for Kiribati is still appropriate. The small size of the Kiribati ethnic population in New Zealand in 2000, when the PAC policy was being developed, suggests that the size of the quota may have been prudent, but other factors have emerged to challenge the appropriateness of the quota today. The first factor relates to the fairness of the quota, given the size of the Kiribati population relative to that of other PAC countries. Without implying the need to reduce the size of quotas for other countries, with its estimated population

of over 114,000 in 2016, the quota of 75 places for Kiribati under the PAC seems particularly restrictive compared to the 250 places allocated to Tonga, with an estimated population of just over 106,000 in 2016, and 75 places allocated to Tuvalu, with a population of 11,000 (World Population Review, 2016; Bedford et al., 2016; Bedford and Bedford, 2010).

A second factor is the growth of the Kiribati ethnic population in New Zealand, from 540 in 2001 to 2,115 in 2013 (Bedford and Bedford, 2010; Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Although still very small compared to many other Pacific ethnic populations in New Zealand, the increase in the Kiribati ethnic population indicates a greater capacity of

people of Kiribati raises questions about the efficacy of the size of the PAC quota for this atoll nation. Despite research confirming that atolls are dynamic, adaptive and resilient structures (Webb and Kench, 2010; Woodroffe, 2008), concerns have been raised about climate change and other anthropogenic impacts on the viability of vital socio-environmental systems necessary to sustain the population of Kiribati (Kelman and West, 2009; White and Falkland, 2009). Detrimental influences, such as progressively more powerful sea surges resulting in coastal erosion and overtopping of the land, prolonged episodes of drought, and increasing sea temperatures, combined with untenable

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this group to absorb new Kiribati migrants and their families settling in New Zealand. This is supported by research showing a strong inclination by family, friends and the wider Kiribati community to assist and support new migrants to adjust to their new environment (Thompson, 2016). Some examples of assistance typically provided to new migrant families during the initial stages of their settlement include: providing accommodation by taking them into their homes upon their arrival in New Zealand; helping them search for jobs; supporting them to access education and other social services; and facilitating them to establish their own independent households. Over the longer term, these networks also played a critical role as back-up to families in times of adversity and unexpected financial hardship.

Lastly, the high level of environmental and economic vulnerabilities facing the

population densities in Tarawa, high levels of pollution, widespread poverty and poor health outcomes (particularly for children), suggest that an increase in the PAC quota for Kiribati, based on vulnerability, would be highly appropriate.

Strategic policy development: climate change and migration

At an even more general policy level, developed countries like New Zealand can be expected to come under increasing political pressure to respond to the issue of climate change-induced migration in the Pacific, especially with regard to the two atoll countries which have PAC quotas. However, in this case there is no established policy to policy to change or respond to. Rather, policy development on how to recognise and protect those citizens who may eventually be forced to migrate due to climate change has been characterised

by an absence of international agreement and policy formation. The lack of progress on this issue can be attributed to a number of complex issues, ranging from the largest greenhouse gas emitters seeking to avoid becoming liable for the costs of protection, to the reluctance of countries to develop policies in the absence of an international framework. The lack of a precise definition of what determines a citizen as needing protection as a result of climate change impacts is at odds with the precise definition of who can be considered a 'refugee' (Limon, 2009; Knox, 2009; Biermann and Boas, 2010). This does not mean that climate change-induced migration will not occur, but rather that currently it would do so in a legal and policy vacuum, resulting in policy risks both for those countries whose citizens may be forced to migrate, and for those countries, such as New Zealand, which will be expected to respond to increased pressure for alternative places for residence, especially for atoll dwellers.

Adding to this complexity, countries such as Kiribati are likely to face an ongoing struggle to convince other countries of an association between climate change and migration. While the prospect of whole populations having to relocate due to the disappearance of atolls as a result of increased sea levels may be relatively easily understood, the hypothesis advanced by McAdam (2012) that migration will occur not simply as a consequence of climate change, but from the interaction of slow-onset climate change influences and existing vulnerabilities, is likely to be significantly more difficult to grasp. For those countries, such as New Zealand, which will be expected to assist, this complexity means that they may not be in a position to recognise rising risks to the socio-

environmental systems necessary to sustain the Kiribati population. While increased investment in research on climate change and existing vulnerabilities may go a long way in improving our knowledge base of what is happening in Kiribati, the absence of a strategic policy framework on climate change and migration still poses risks for New Zealand.

Although it is understandable that New Zealand would be reluctant to be seen as a 'first mover' in the formation of policy on the protection of 'forced' climate change migrants, the absence of at least some preliminary thinking runs the risk of New Zealand having to respond in the longer term to a high level of humanitarian crisis in an ad hoc fashion. Such a response presents risks to future governmental administrations and to New Zealand society, which will increasingly have to shoulder costs related to housing, employment and other forms of assistance. This is not intended to suggest that there is a need to develop a full and detailed policy now, but rather that it would be beneficial for some policy thinking to be started on this ongoing and complex issue. While New Zealand should continue to encourage efforts by Kiribati to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change impacts, there is also a need to be realistic about the many risks and constraints facing Kiribati.

It is with this in mind that it is argued that more could be done to open New Zealand labour market opportunities for Kiribati citizens via temporary work programmes (Bedford and Bedford, 2010) and an increase in the PAC quota. Over the longer term, an increase in the PAC quota for Kiribati would provide an important immigration outlet for Kiribati citizens, allowing for an 'orderly' increase

in the migrant population (Bedford et al., 2016). This would in turn enable increased levels of Kiribati migrants to be successfully absorbed by an increasing Kiribati ethnic population in New Zealand. While this argument may be viewed as being currently unnecessary, and perhaps premature, it underlines the importance of policy thinkers looking to the future, no matter how difficult that may be. Indeed, the more complex the issue, the more lead time is required for enquiry, debate and discussion to be had on possible responses.

Conclusion

Policy settings have a major influence on the decisions people make with regard to overseas migration, or, in the case of refugees, to avail themselves of protection provided. As such, migrants and refugees do not enter their new host countries in a policy vacuum. Rather, they are enveloped not only by the policy settings of the day, but also by the social attitudes of their host societies. Across the policy spectrum, changes to existing policies and the formation of new policy thinking on the complex subject of climate change and migration all deserve attention by policy thinkers seeking to improve both short-term and longer-term outcomes for Kiribati migrants and New Zealand society.

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- 1 Although Immigration New Zealand provides a significant amount of information to assist new migrants and much of this is available electronically, Kiribati migrants are likely not to know where to look for this information. Another constraint may be the difficulty of new migrants in fully understanding what is meant by the information due to lack of language proficiency.
- 2 Those invited to apply for residence need to provide evidence of a current offer of full-time work that is for 12 months or more. This offer can be for either the primary applicant or their partner. Those with dependent children will also need to show evidence that they and their partner will earn \$34,500 or more between them each year.

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