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Picking fruit is not climate justice

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To disrupt ongoing colonialist, racist narratives of Oceania as a source of cheap labour in which climate change is increasingly interwoven, it is necessary to firmly align Oceania workers' rights with climate justice. Oceania workers' crucial role in Australia's food security is minimised when temporary labour mobility opportunities are framed as a 'solution' to Oceania's complex climate change challenges. Furthermore, climate justice demands, at a minimum, greater attention to structural reform of temporary labour programs to eliminate exploitation of migrant workers. Since for many Oceania workers in Australian industries, economic benefits are accrued at significant social cost, current temporary labour mobility regimes cannot, without significant improvement, produce additional benefits needed to substantively redress climate change harm. Engaging the Tuvaluan concept of *fale pili*, meaning to care for your neighbour as if they were family, we consider how this concept can facilitate greater support for workers' rights and for climate justice.

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INTRODUCTION

It is noteworthy that some of the Oceania countries considered most highly vulnerable to climate change—such as Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Tuvalu—are also those whose citizens participate in Australia's guest worker programs, many of which involve agricultural work. Australia's guest worker programs, which commenced with the Seasonal Worker Programme in 2012 (now titled the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme), are well documented as being economically beneficial but with high social costs for guest workers and their families and communities back home[1–5].

This paper considers emerging framings of the nexus of climate change and labour migration from a climate justice perspective specifically in the Australian political economic context, noting that guest workers around the world face very similar situations of precarity (see ref. [6]). We commence with the proposition that labels typically applied to Oceania citizens in the context of guest work and climate change, such as 'unskilled workers' and 'climate vulnerable people', can perpetuate problematic stereotypes and concurrently limit understanding of worker agency in climate change and migration regimes. We also highlight a recent discourse among some Australian leaders, of opportunities to engage in agricultural work as somehow already delivering climate adaptation to Oceania. To contribute to exposing and countering this problematic discourse of Oceania workers, we engage the Tuvaluan concept of *fale pili*, meaning to care for your neighbour as if they were family. *Fale pili* helps us pay attention to the ways in which those who come to Australia on temporary work contracts (and the range of people—from artists and activists to political leaders to diaspora groups—who support them) are neighbours who, at times, are in need of care. Examining narratives among workers and activists on issues of workers' rights and climate justice, we also draw on our lead author's lived experience as both a community leader supporting Tuvaluan workers and an autoethnographic and social researcher. We examine different ways in which workers can be better supported in the vital role they play in Australia's economy as well as that of their own countries, through better workers' rights and advancing climate justice. When climate change causes harm to humans, these harms can be unjust as not everyone contributes to the same extent to the creation of the negative impacts of emissions, nor equally accesses their benefits, or has the same means to cope with the impacts. Climate justice is advanced when harm is repaired in ways that takes these factors into consideration[7]. In the case of international labour migration, workers may be crossing the border into more industrialized countries which have produced greater emissions and arguably have a responsibility to explicitly advance climate justice via the labour migration programmes in their country[7,8].

Context

Oceania workers pick fruit, pack meat, clean hotel rooms and care for the elderly in Australia alongside backpackers and other migrants. For those on temporary visas, their work contracts are often made possible through guest work programs, initially lobbied for by horticultural industries in Australia due to a dearth of local supply of workers and supported by Oceania governments. Short-term work in horticulture was later expanded to other industries. Workers from abroad are, thus, undertaking labour that many white Australians do not do, and for which non-white members of the permanent population are typically barely recognised (see ref. [9]). Instead of being discursively positioned (e.g., in the media) as key to the supply of highly valued services and commodities such as fresh, local produce, Oceania people are more likely to be imagined in colonialist and racist narratives as a source of unskilled and cheap labour in Australia, with desires to stay illegally[10,11]. This discourse is rooted in a deeply colonial history that Oceania has suffered in various ways in relation to its people's presence on Australian farms. First, there was a period from 1863–1906 when workers from Oceania, particularly Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, experienced indentured labour, many of whom were then later deported when a White Australia policy was introduced. Second, Banabans and Nauruans, whose islands were rich in phosphate, had their islands decimated by colonial-era phosphate mining. The island of Banaba was so badly damaged that the Banabans were displaced, while the phosphate dug up from Banaba ensured that Australian farms were productive. Teaiwa[12] has described this history as an imperial relationship,

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while Banaba is largely absent from the Australian public memory. Third, current-day labour conditions for Oceania workers have been described as 'modern slavery' due to problems with underpayment, poor accommodation, unsafe work environments, and workers not being legally allowed to switch employers if they are not satisfied with their conditions[4,11]. Fourth, the importance of guest-work-based Oceania labour to Australia's horticulture industry, and ultimately its food security, was made starkly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia's borders—shut to tourists, international students and even Australian citizens—opened to several planeloads of Oceania workers for harvests of fruit such as mangos to proceed[13]. Fifth, government and other narratives on the labour mobility programs remain highly paternalistic. National imaginaries continue to construct rural Australia in terms of racial hierarchy, both largely ignoring the considerable contribution of non-white people to farming and rural communities, and often focusing on reproducing a narrative of workers being 'unskilled'[9,10,14]. Thus, in the context of historical and intergenerational ongoing exploitation and non-recognition of Oceania people and their lands in relation to Australian farms, Australian horticulture has thrived, with newer contributions being made by Oceania workers in meat processing, fisheries and other primary industries. In sum, Oceania people, already shouldering a significant portion of the burden of 'development' for their home country economies, have had a long involvement in the Australian economy but are barely recognised for their historical and contemporary key contribution to the ongoing supply of primary goods and services to Australian consumers.

The new burden of climate change

In academic debates, international labour migration is becoming understood as potentially contributing significantly to climate resilience in vulnerable communities, but, given that international labour migrants are often at risk of exploitation, any adaptation potential should be informed by considerations of climate justice[7,8]. Currently, none of the guest worker programmes in Australia available to citizens of Oceania's island countries formally specify climate change adaptation as a goal, let alone operate within a climate justice framework. However, international labour migration that advances climate change adaptation is now increasingly observable in policymaking, both nationally in the sending countries of the Oceania region, and at the regional scale[15,16]. For example, international labour migration is a priority action in the *Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management*[17], and is identified as being of ongoing importance to livelihoods in Tuvalu in the context of climate change in Tuvalu's *National Labour Migration Policy*[18]. The *Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security Program*[19] emphasizes that labour migration is only effective as climate change adaptation if the human security of workers and the views of all stakeholders are included[15], a goal which aligns with climate justice.

Despite these policy developments, given the intertwined history of colonialism, racism and Oceania labour, it is concerning but perhaps not surprising that Oceania workers have been positioned by some Australian political leaders as shouldering the burden, through their existing labour efforts, of addressing Oceania's complex climate change challenges (see ref. [10]). There was a particularly telling statement made by a member of the Coalition government in 2019, in power from 2013-2022:

> "I also get a little bit annoyed when we have people in those sorts of countries pointing the finger at Australia and say we should be shutting down all our resources sector so that, you know, they will continue to survive… they'll continue to survive on large aid assistance from Australia….they'll continue to survive because many of their workers come here and pick our fruit"[20].

This is a concerning indicator of a new form of colonial relationship, which problematically positions Oceania workers as morally responsible for fixing the problems caused by climate change impacts back home. The expectation seems to be that workers' remittances are to be spent on adaptation that Oceania national governments cannot otherwise afford. It is a narrative that implicitly positions Australian employers as a source of infinite opportunity in a changing climate, and views Oceania nations as lacking agency to advance adaptation without Australia's bounty and development assistance. In this relation there is also a neoliberal assumption that Oceania people's wages earned in Australia will be necessary to fund climate change adaptation back home. While also acknowledging the importance of Australia's development assistance, this individualising of Oceania's climate adaptation responsibility to migrant workers coolly positions those least responsible for climate change to address its impacts through guest work, while conveniently bypassing considerations of climate justice[7]. Indeed, climate justice arguably cannot be advanced if wages are expected to be directed at 'survival', since those wages will not be available for other things, such as school fees, which would have benefited from workers' wages if climate change did not exist. Further, climate injustice will arguably occur if social injustices such as worker exploitation are experienced by workers from climate-vulnerable countries while participating in a mobility programme organized by industrialized countries.

The discourse of workers and their allies

In this discursive context, it is important to take stock of how workers themselves and their allies position themselves and speak of their challenges, particularly on issues of workers' rights. Oceania workers can and do contest the labour mobility regimes in which they work in various ways. In Australia, workers are increasingly speaking out and acting on issues they are facing such as worker exploitation. They are mobilising their voices to raise awareness of their concerns in various arenas, such as the media, and when participating in inquiries and studies into guest worker issues. For example, a worker from Vanuatu was reported in the Australian media as saying, 'if you walk around the supermarket [in Australia] and you see all the beautiful fruits and vegetables, it is because of us. We contribute a lot.' The same worker stated, 'we are here, we work for the farms, we are part of [Australia's] economic development so we should be treated the same as Australians'. Another worker from Vanuatu spoke of his experience working in Australia as 'like slavery times' in an Australian Federal Court hearing into significant underpayment of seasonal workers[4]. At an Australian Senate hearing into job security, Samoan workers described poor working and living conditions, changing rates of pay, and issues that in total made their experience as workers one of 'modern slavery'[21].

Oceania governments are also increasingly taking a stand on conditions for their citizens while working abroad. For example, the Samoan government recently paused the sending of workers to Australia pending action on an investigation of worker mistreatment in Australia[22]. In 2022, the Vanuatu government launched an inquiry based on concerns about worker safety, including bullying, poor housing, exploitative work practices and lack of support services[23].

Case study: *Fale Pili* among Tuvaluan guest workers and the Tuvaluan diaspora

Author Taukiei, in his former role as president of the Tuvalu Brisbane Community, has directly observed workers contesting risks to their safety, removing themselves from unsafe working

environments and seeking out tangible support from those they trust. Taukiei was contacted several times by workers from Tuvalu who were experiencing difficulties during their time working in Australia; he helped to support them through challenging emotional periods or after leaving unsafe work environments. In times of difficulty, workers contact community organisations, especially diaspora groups, which are in a position to help with advice, emergency funds and accommodation. In particular, diaspora groups such as the Tuvalu Brisbane Community are well placed to provide culturally appropriate forms of advice and emotional support in Oceania languages. It was partly Taukiei's community role supporting workers that prompted a study on climate justice and guest work which we reported on more comprehensively elsewhere[8]. We engaged with guest workers from Tuvalu to document their perceptions of the nexus of labour mobility and climate change challenges[8]. We developed a culturally appropriate methodology for conducting research with Tuvaluan workers that was ethically robust and respectful of workers' privacy[8]. Workers involved gave their informed consent.

Here we document one Tuvaluan worker's challenges as a case study of worker agency, with the diaspora playing a vital role in supporting the worker. We engage the Tuvaluan concept of *fale pili*[8,24] to understand responsibility and care among diverse Tuvaluan people. This culturally embedded concept has been practised and passed on from generation to generation in Tuvalu, and it has guided Taukiei, often at a subconscious level, while he engaged with the workers. *Fale pili* can be understood by the following principles:

1. Neighbour—looking after your neighbour as if they were your own family. Neighbours in this sense come in many forms, such as people living next door, people in the next village, people on your island, people on the islands around your island, any Tuvaluan, and others who are not Tuvaluan as well. This often includes other Oceania people.
2. Responsibility—feeling obliged to help anyone in need of your assistance, whether they are family, anyone from Tuvalu or others.
3. Safety—the importance of prioritising safety for anyone in need, even if you have to give up what is yours.
4. Open boundaries—this is the overarching sense of 'conscience' that seeks ways to dismantle social or financial barriers to help people who are in need, particularly Tuvaluans.

Taukiei was guided by *fale pili* when he received a phone call from one Tuvaluan guest worker requesting financial assistance; this occurred after they had left their workplace in Australia due to perceived unfair treatment and unsafe work experiences. For privacy reasons it is not possible to disclose the specifics of the type of work in which the Tuvaluan guest worker was employed, but it was within a primary industry. In conversation with the worker, Taukiei learnt that very little on-the-job training had been provided. The employer had told the worker that they did not have enough time for such training and that the guest workers could just learn while doing the work. The work was very high risk with many safety requirements. It was evident to the guest workers that they needed to be properly trained and made aware of all the risks and hazards when carrying out their daily work tasks. One of the Tuvaluan workers was injured on the job and was sent by the employer to the hospital alone in a taxi. He was required to pay for his own taxi fare and hospital expenses. There was no effort made by the employer to settle the hospital cost even when the worker sent the bill to the employer. While the worker was recovering from his injuries, both his salary and his Tuvaluan colleague's salary were frozen. The injury occurred in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The worker was not placed in accommodation during his recovery by his employer or by the administrator of the guest worker program (the Pacific Labour Facility [PLF]). The Tuvaluan workers both felt that their race played a part in their employer's treatment of them. Serendipitously, the guest worker had a relative living in the same Australian state who accommodated him and his Tuvaluan colleague while they were recovering. During this time they reflected on their experience and decided their safety depended on not returning to work at all.

The workers contacted the PLF about the safety and financial issues, but to their knowledge nothing was done. No investigation into the matter seemed to occur and no assistance regarding their accommodation or finances was provided. The workers then contacted the president of the Tuvalu community (Taukiei) for assistance, which sparked Taukiei's investigation into the matter. After calling people at the PLF for clarification, Taukiei learnt that the incident with the Tuvaluan worker was not a one-off incident but had happened several times. It appeared that the employer had taken advantage of the fact that the Tuvaluan workers did not fully understand the workplace health and safety procedures and the contract that they had signed. Therefore, the employer was able to exploit that lack of understanding and lack of knowledge of the laws and rights of the workers in Australia.

This example shows one way in which workers from Tuvalu navigated and addressed problems faced while working abroad, as well as the underlying concept of *fale pili*, which guided those in Australia of Tuvaluan heritage who were called on by the workers for assistance. Both Taukiei and the worker's relative felt responsible to provide the workers with assistance (financial, accommodation, communication), acting to promote safety among neighbours in need. *Fale pili* provided a framework of care that ensured the workers did not become homeless or unemployed—both of which were very real possibilities during the lockdown and closed interstate-border period when problems arose. This case study highlights the already precarious wellbeing of some Oceania workers in Australia, and the socially and culturally specific relations of care among workers and diaspora that can operate to improve worker wellbeing. Cultural frameworks of care such as *fale pili* could and possibly *should* be the starting point for thinking through the nexus of labour mobility and climate justice, as actors such as the PLF and employers can benefit from becoming more neighbourly towards workers. The workers in this case study, being in a worse position emotionally and financially following their experience in an Australian workplace, arguably experienced a social injustice, and in the process, were denied progress towards climate justice. Rigorously observed safety practices on the part of the employer, and a more holistic approach to supporting employer-worker relationships by the PLF, both in alignment with elements of *fale pili*, could have seen better outcomes for all in this case.

Emerging links between climate justice and worke×rs' wellbeing

On the issue of climate justice and labour mobility, the words of artist Yuki Kihara are telling. Kihara wrote the following poem immediately after an Australian political leader stated that Oceania's islands would survive climate change, because 'many of their workers come here to pick fruit'. Describing the comments as 'blatantly racist', the Samoan artist also said:

> given the long list of atrocities committed by the Australian government including their refusal to close down the coal mine industry that's accelerating climate change, their aid should not be used to mask the ongoing violence inflicted onto generations of Pacific people[25].

These comments, published in a major national newspaper, the *Samoa Observer*, clearly indicate the willingness of Oceania media to contest racist and colonialist depictions of Oceania workers in a changing climate. Yuki Kihara's poem, titled *Pick Our Fruit*, was addressed to the Australian political leader and made it clear that

relations of care are not being prioritised in the mobility regimes. The poem read in part:

Your fruit grows on land that does not belong to you.

Your fruit is grown with the phosphate taken from the islands of Nauru and Banaba where they can no longer bear fruit.

Your fruit has been picked by generations of Pacific slaves.

Your fruit grows in abundance because you have taken ours[25].

The comments made by the Australian political leader were also criticised by the prime minister of Tuvalu at the time. Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga 'threatened to pull [Tuvaluan] labour from Australia's Seasonal Worker Program' in light of comments by the Australian political leader, who was recorded saying people from Oceania countries threatened by climate change—like Tuvalu—would survive because many or their 'workers come here to "pick our fruit" '[26]. Sopoaga summoned Australia's High Commissioner to Tuvalu to explain the comments and stated that he would cancel Tuvalu's participation in the program if not satisfied.

The strong words of Yuki Kihara and Enele Sopoaga suggest increasing action against the insertion of climate change into ongoing colonialist and racist narratives of Oceania as a source of cheap labour, that fail to acknowledge considerations of worker wellbeing. In line with these statements, it will be increasingly necessary for those interested in fair work for Oceania's workers to more firmly align the rights and wellbeing of Oceania workers with climate justice. The workers in our study, in addition to experiencing climate change impacts back home, on the whole experienced high social costs as a result of participating in guest work in Australia, with most affected by at least one highly challenging social issue such as poor mental health, marriage breakdown linked to the pressures of working abroad, or worker exploitation. Families of workers who remained at home in Oceania also experienced high costs, such as loss of ability to provide for extended family following marriage breakdown[8]. Workers in our study did not frame remittances as specifically having the potential to help build resilience to climate change. However, some did describe their guest work experiences with reference to longer-term climate change challenges, such as viewing Australia as a possible site of permanent migration where abundant land and space made for attractive livelihood opportunities. However, others wanted to return home to their families and remain in Tuvalu in the long term[8]. It is also worth mentioning that some of the workers experienced good relations with their employers that embodied *fale pili*, highlighting the mutual benefits that can be experienced by employer and workers and other actors when relations of care are prioritised. For example, Tuvaluan workers in the forestry industry were trained in firefighting. This skill proved useful, as the workers volunteered as firefighters during the extreme bushfires in Australia in the summer of 2019-2020. The Tuvaluan volunteer bush fire fighters extended a relation of care to the Australian community in their time of need. Other workers were able to assist their employer recruit new workers from among their social networks in Tuvalu[8].

In contrast to attempts within Australia to position Oceania's climate change solutions as working within current guest labour programs, climate justice demands, at a minimum, greater attention to structural reform of the programs, with the aim of eliminating exploitation of guest workers. The International Labour Organization states that 'labour migration should be a choice, and not a substitute for creating decent jobs or mitigating climate change'[27]. For those Oceania workers for whom economic benefits are accrued at significant social cost, current temporary labour mobility programs are unlikely to produce additional benefits needed to substantively redress climate change harm. While international labour migration is increasingly listed as a component of regional and national climate change adaptation and climate mobility policies in Oceania's island countries[16], guest worker programs do not currently include any substantive or even aspirational considerations of how climate change adaptation can be facilitated through labour migration[8]. The labour mobility programs in Australia do not currently recognise the concept of migration as adaptation, despite 'climate mainstreaming' being a pillar of Australia's development assistance policy. Taking into account other studies that also document high social costs to workers and their communities back home (see also refs. [1,2]), it seems likely that guest worker programs as currently structured in Australia are even maladaptive—that is, failing to advance climate change adaptation, despite economic gains. From a climate justice perspective, the onus should be on host countries such as Australia to advance adaptation and justice in their guest worker policies and programs. Much could be done to harmonise Australia's international labour migration with climate change adaptation and mobility policies of migrant-sending countries (e.g., facilitate opportunities to develop skills in climate-resilient agriculture[28]).

Concluding thoughts

Our discussion suggests it is not unreasonable to anticipate seeing more social and political activism from Oceania on climate justice and labour mobility in the future. While labour mobility can only address a small part of Oceania's adaptation challenges, it is crucially important to shift away from racialised discourses of inexpensive, unskilled labour and towards decolonised recognition of worker agency, knowledge and political subjectivity. Operationalising such a new discourse could take guidance from Oceania concepts that centralise relations of care such as *fale pili*. Following the defeat of the Coalition by a new Labour government in 2022, there is strong interest in forging stronger relations with Oceania countries in Australia. A new Pacific Engagement Visa has been announced that will, for the first time, offer a pathway to permanent residency for Pacific Island citizens who work in Australia in jobs not typically recognized as skilled. The Pacific Engagement Visa has been discussed as useful for Pacific Island people facing severe climate change impacts[29]. With this initiative, which aligns with the opening of boundaries, and much discussion of the 'Pacific family', the Labour government may be receptive to a discussion of *fale pili*. Patriarchal conceptions of the 'Pacific family' that have long plagued the geopolitics of the region need to be phased out, and Oceania concepts such as *fale pili* can be used instead to guide more equitable relations in the region on issues of neigbourliness, safety, responsibility and open boundaries and ultimately, climate justice.

In the context of guest worker programs, however, it must be noted that climate justice is a complex issue that has no silver bullet or even a clear goal agreed by all stakeholders. A pathway to permanent residency, for instance, will not necessarily reduce the risk of worker exploitation. However, policy reforms guided by concepts such as *fale pili*, that insist on equitable and just relations of care for those in need, could facilitate a broader change in narratives as well as worker experiences, benefiting diaspora communities and workers, as well as other stakeholders, including Australian government department(s), guest worker program coordinators, workers' representatives, employers, and rural communities. For example, at the heart of a *fale pili* policy approach could be a more horizontal and transparent set of discursive arenas for everyone—especially workers, but also diaspora groups and families back home—to be heard, recognised and respected as part of program development by the Australian government. Workers, employers and communities as a whole are more likely to develop and experience safe and responsible

workplaces and, in turn, climate justice if relations of care are prioritised, guided by the broad concepts of looking after neighbours, safety, responsibility and open boundaries of *fale pili*.

Inclusion and ethics statement

As guest workers are known to be a potentially vulnerable group of research participants, an ethically and culturally appropriate approach to data collection was used, which was developed and applied by a Tuvaluan Indigenous knowledge holder, who is the lead author of the paper, and which involved the use of Tuvaluan language and customary practices. Participants were able to ask questions about the research and provide informed consent in their own language. The research was conducted under ethics approval ID Number: 1954713.1 from the Faculty of Science Human Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Melbourne.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used in this study are not publicly available due to them containing information that could compromise research participant privacy/consent.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

T.K. and C.F. made substantial contributions to the conception of the work, drafting the work, final approval of the completed version and accountability for all aspects of the work.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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