

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

MODERN SLAVERY COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL
NEW SOUTH WALES**

UNCORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 12 September 2025

The Committee met at 9:35 am

PRESENT

Dr Joe McGirr (Chair)

Legislative Assembly

Ms Jenny Leong (Deputy Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. Robert Borsak

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Ms Lynda Voltz

The CHAIR: Welcome to the fourth hearing of the Committee's inquiry into modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Dr Joe McGirr, and I am the Chair of the Committee.

I ask everyone in the room to turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of those procedures.

Ms JENELLE JOSEPH, Director, Tanna Projects Limited, affirmed and examined

Waskam EMELDA DAVIS, Chair, Australian South Sea Islanders – Port Jackson, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you for taking the time to give evidence. Would you both like to start by making a short statement?

JENELLE JOSEPH: I'm the director of a charity group called Tanna Projects, which is a very small charity dedicated to the support and welfare of those living on Tanna island in Vanuatu. A lot of the evidence that I will give today will be based on my experience with Vanuatu workers. We have been in Vanuatu since after Cyclone Pam, around 2016, and we feed approximately 140 widows, elderly and disabled people in the area of Whitesands, Tanna, taking shipping containers of warm clothes and blankets each year. After numerous visits and seeing the difficulties of living under the shadow of an active volcano and being 650 metres above sea level, we began to see the dire and desperate situation that they were in when the volcano spewed acid rain and volcanic ash, destroying their crops, and their continued disappointment of not being able to grow a successful crop.

We understood the economic importance for people to earn money besides growing their own food. This sparked the idea of bringing people from the surrounding villages to work in Australia, take money home and help them build houses for their families and businesses for the future. We connected with an approved employer in Griffith. We brought 33 workers in the first year. This was rather a baptism of fire. Living with 33 men who had never worked in Australia and who had lived a wonderful "island time" lifestyle, now those workers were struggling to attend work each day, manage their money, resist the urge to visit casinos for a quick dollar and drink kava and alcohol each day. Their working days were hard, getting used to seven hours of work and then coming home, washing clothes, cooking food, getting ready for work the next day and then falling into bed. After about three short months, they got the hang of it and settled into a good rhythm.

We have been helping these workers from Tanna for the past four years. Each of them takes home approximately A\$20,000. This has changed their life drastically. Comparing that to the wage of a teacher in Vanuatu, who earns the equivalent of A\$90 per week, these workers taking home as much as A\$20,000 in a nine-month period is staggering and life changing. As we all know, the Seasonal Worker Programme began as a four-year pilot and was then formally introduced in 2012, mainly as an aid program to help the economic development of the nations in the Pacific, and also to fill the labour shortage in the Australian agriculture sector. Currently, there are 6,080 Vanuatu workers in Australia on a 403 PALM visa. This does not include disengaged workers or workers on other visa streams working in the agriculture sector. Let's do the maths: 6,080 workers making approximately A\$20,000 would be over A\$120 million going into the Vanuatu economy.

Dr Stephen Howes at ANU states that in 2021, 12.2 per cent of the working population of Vanuatu were either under the PLS, SWP or RSE programs. The program was bringing an enormous amount of money into a country whose main income is traditionally through tourism. But, as we have seen, cyclones, earthquakes and COVID have put a massive strain on the economy of Vanuatu, with fewer tourists coming to the country. We all know that the program was never set up as a pathway for immigration or a cover for indentured servitude but, rather, as an added bonus to help the Pacific nations with building and strengthening their economy.

Recently, I was interested that the labour Minister of Vanuatu was defending the Seasonal Worker Programme, rejecting the comparisons to the days of blackbirding. He suggested that his country was not subject to what happened to them 200 years ago, as the people want to work and receive money to bring back home to their families. The list of people wanting to come to work is numerous and the visa demands high, with family and village chiefs signing off on the credibility of workers to Australia. After the nine-month placement, Australia encourages them to return home.

Recently, approved employers and farmers under the PALM scheme—whose livelihoods relied on hardworking, cooperative, eager workers to get the crops in—have been called to justify their work practices, their fair work law interpretations, their understanding of their obligations under immigration visa requirements and the demands of unions, and they are now battling the stigma of being accused of being exploitative and unscrupulous, whose farms are breeding grounds for contemporary forms of slavery. In a report for the United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary slavery, I became very concerned at the focus of the report being levelled at the PALM scheme's failing and the lack of accountability. The report, on page 3, states:

This report documents some of the most severe cases of migrant worker exploitation that IARC has encountered over the five years of Visa Assist, with some clients suffering slavery-like conditions at the hands of unscrupulous employers. The report examines the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme because IARC has advised many vulnerable clients in this scheme ...

It also states on page 4, "The exploitation of workers under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme is well documented." The examples provided in this report were only of three visa categories. Only one of those was a

403 visa, which is the only visa that can be obtained under the PALM scheme. Any other visa type cannot be obtained under the PALM scheme. This was hardly an example of the scheme being a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery.

I was also hard pressed to find this well-documented proof of extensive and systematic abuse. What I'm concerned about is the misinformation that is projected onto the PALM scheme and, by default, onto all farmers and labour hire companies, when I know—and I have extensively experienced—that most of the workers who are being exploited have been exploited by crime syndicates or unregistered labour hire companies or even, at worst, their own countrymen. When a worker who disengages from the PALM scheme is lured by more money or perceived liberties and freedom to choose where he works, he or she then decides to find work outside of the scheme. They are no longer considered a PALM worker. Yet, as you can see from the reports, there is no differentiation between the two.

Let me please make this very clear: I'm not suggesting that there are not businesses that are taking advantage of workers. I have found many. I have had cause to report and I have questioned the practice of many businesses within and without the program. I've also called to account landlords who allow 12 to 15 people to live in a four-bedroom house under horrific conditions and charging high rent, but these are mainly disengaged workers. I've called them to account not because the worker complained but because I've attempted to raise the standard for the landlord and the worker.

Unfortunately, COVID changed the working landscape for all businesses. This is where Tanna Projects was inundated with calls for help from many workers who felt their liberties were restricted or their work hours had been unfairly reduced and, therefore, they were victims of unfair work practice and slavery conditions, with their freedom of movement restricted. Our willingness to help them after some investigation was always an option, but most times evidence of poor treatment was not evident. Some were begging to just move from farms because they wanted to be with family in Griffith and they had heard that there was plenty of work in the area, and there was plenty of work. There was a desperate need for workers, but not at the risk of violating the visa conditions.

We have many varied stories that will make you shake your head. Only six months ago I received a call from a worker in Tamworth who'd only just arrived under the PALM scheme from Tonga. He wanted to be with his family in Griffith and begged for me to find him work. His circumstances were good. They were satisfactory. Even he begged to leave and come to his family in Griffith but, if I couldn't find him work, he would disengage. I have letters from workers under a 416 visa who have been exploited by Chinese contractors and, after receiving dodgy immigration advice from Multicultural centres, have now become victims, ending up with a ruined visa history.

I was also involved in work situations with young men from Vanuatu. Personally, I had met with them on their island—a group of 12 workers—and I had meticulously pulled the letter of offer under the PALM scheme, explaining in detail the information, obligations and services available to them while they were in Australia. Explaining to them the ramifications of disengagement and how this would affect them, I asked if there were any questions. They all knew that disengagement was not an option and promised to finish to the end of the term of the contract. But four months into the contract, a young man we'll call Ray decided to follow his family members who absconded years prior. Ray was getting brilliant money where he was and the promise of return work for the future, but the lure of the perceived freedom caused him to disengage.

My experience under the PALM scheme with disengaged workers, particularly in Griffith, has caused me great concern. From receiving dodgy advice from Multicultural centres, their severe naivety about how it works, poor personal adult decision-making and deciding that not being allowed to smoke on site at the farm, not being allowed to get drunk each day or not turning up and their restrictions of liberties was unfair treatment, they therefore considered themselves a slave. It's astonishing to me that disengaged workers are still classified as PALM workers, when clearly they've chosen to or been forced to withdraw from the program. Many of the workers who approached me to help them find work had no intention of re-engaging back with the program and were happy to be in violation of their visa conditions.

The CHAIR: Ms Joseph, have you got much more to go?

JENELLE JOSEPH: No, I don't have, sorry.

The CHAIR: That's okay. I was going to suggest you could table it, but that's fine. Keep going. It's very important to hear what you've got to say.

JENELLE JOSEPH: I can do that—no problem. It's been very difficult. The UN rapporteurs also suggested that they need to get freedom of movement, but this won't work for the approved employer and the farmer. I'll just scroll down a little bit. In my experience, DEWR has always welcomed feedback. They've opened phone complaint lines and encouraged strategies to combat disengagement. DEWR's main focus has always been

on the welfare and wellbeing of the workers in Australia, and they monitor the placement of workers to ensure that they have the same work rights as everybody else.

There is no doubt, in my experience, that vulnerable workers are subject to exploitation, and these have been disengaged workers from the PALM scheme or those that come on other visa schemes. As they make their own adult decisions, they become vulnerable to exploitation. But I have also seen that those under the PALM scheme have the safeguards that they need to protect them. The most rewarding thing about what we do is that this is only a small percentage of workers that come under the program. We as charities are delighted that these workers take home so much money, and it actually changes their lives.

The CHAIR: Ms Davis, would you like to make a statement?

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes, please, and thanks for that insight into the great work that you're doing. First of all, I'd like to acknowledge that we're on Gadigal country. These lands were never ceded. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land. My name or my custom name from Vanuatu, bestowed on me by the Nikolatan chiefs of Tanna, Tannaota, is "Waskam". I carry that name with pride as a leader in this country and a Ni-Vanuatu dual citizen now to advocate for the rights of our seasonal workers and families. In particular, Vanuatu, I represent. I'm grateful for being included at such short notice. I don't know if Stephen's here. I've never seen Stephen. Either way, I got a call yesterday afternoon—thanks, mate—and I had a dummy spit, but that's all right. This is really important work and I'm really thankful to be included. It's great to see Jenny Leong, one of our great human rights activists and politicians, here today to support.

I'm a second-generation descendant of Australia's first seasonal workers scheme—indentured labour, blackbirding, of the Pacific, which started here in New South Wales in 1847. Benjamin Boyd, who you may know, a celebrated entrepreneur—Ben Boyd Road, Ben Boyd National Park—was the first to bring our people, some 200 from Tanna, enslaved alongside Maori and Indigenous slaves. So this is not new to our nation, in that there were 60-odd thousand brought here after that Boyd expedition to Queensland. My grandfather, my mother's father, was 12 years old, stolen from Tanna, off the beach. So we have a very deep lived experience and understanding of what it means to survive some of the challenges that we're facing, especially some 178 years of oppression, alongside our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. We were placed on the same missions, stations and plantations.

Time and time again, I've asked Department of Foreign Affairs, DEWR and all of these great agencies that are looking after our families coming into this country to have blackbirding as a preamble and an education for our Asia-Pacific region so that people know the context in which they're dealing with our country and our policies, especially coming under a White Australia policy and the remnants of that that still exist today in this 403 visa. Our organisation—I sit before you, unfunded, 15 years of voluntary work. No ulterior motives here.

I guess my question today is, what is the rationale behind this particular inquiry, and what do you want to achieve from the inquiry? Because for us, as Australian South Sea Islanders, who are 70,000 strong—guesstimate, because we are very much a part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander demographic—we want to see decentralisation of this PALM scheme because of the experiences that we've had historically and also what we're experiencing today, with people reaching out still, and the amount of deaths and a number of other issues that have come to our table. People reach out to us because we look like them. Some 67 per cent of the seasonal worker or PALM scheme is Melanesian. We are the black-skinned people of the Pacific, and Vanuatu is a large proportion in representation of this program. We need to have a very strong cultural framework, as we do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country. Everyone's acting like it's rocket science, and we're not dealing with other Indigenous nations.

We're distinctly different, but we are the same in terms of some of the cultural protocols, because we are Melanesian. Torres Strait Islanders are Melanesian. Australia sits in the Melanesian region of the Pacific. Australia is home to the largest Melanesian population outside of their Pacific nations. There is a little bit of a read that I've got here and, excuse me, it's such important work. I guess, coming from that lived experience, witnessing the struggle for Australian South Sea Islanders for recognition, and it's still being sidelined—since 1903, when the first deportation orders came in to send back a large number of our people under a White Australia policy—and the advocacy that's gone on and that I've lived through as an activist, through my own family, I am just wanting to put that on the record. Those who know me will probably think, "Here she goes again." That's okay.

It's important to understand that the workers are not commodities but are human beings. Therefore, all policies, whether of the Australian Government or the Vanuatu Government, must be people-to-people centred. We talk about this top-down approach—and I've been told through many discussions, even in travelling to Vanuatu, "But we are the Government, so we have to take that top-down approach"—but people are the centre. Regardless of you being government or not, it's a human rights issue, and we need to think about that and look at how we can work better together and respect cultural frameworks. We have a reconciliation action plan in this

country for First Nations people. It's not rocket science, people. Self-determination is key. We have the solutions to our problems. Yes, I was born here, but my DNA is strongly connected—the stamp is on my face—back to my people. We're working from a cultural and a spiritual context, not just bureaucratic.

The CHAIR: Ms Davis, we are keen to have some questions, and we've only got about 10 minutes left until running over.

EMELDA DAVIS: Oh, wow. I should have went first.

The CHAIR: But I don't want to cut you off. Keep going. I know the Committee is keen to explore a couple of questions.

EMELDA DAVIS: With regards to the economic gain to Australia, it is estimated that two-thirds of the workers' earnings stay back in Australia and only one-third is remitted back to Vanuatu. Labour mobility workers—the PALM scheme—contribute economically to two different categories in Australia: namely, one, the industry they work in, for example, the agriculture sector, where the biggest number of Vanuatu workers are, with whopping revenue in a single financial year of over \$89 billion; and two, the everyday living expenses such as accommodation, transport, excursions, food, clothing et cetera.

The following figures are to be noted for Vanuatu workers only, so imagine all those other Pacific nations. How are you working—all these, I guess, DEWR et cetera, I question how they work with our heads of mission that represent those nationals in this country. There's not enough transparency. The following figures, for Vanuatu—the injection of over \$65 million annually in accommodation and over \$45 million in transportation; in tax, direct and indirect, the workers from Vanuatu pay roughly \$50 to \$60 million annually. This amount represents 67 per cent of the total aid to Vanuatu given by the Australian Government.

I guess I come here in recognition of the some 40-odd babies that are born each year in Australia, 40-odd children of this scheme. I want to acknowledge that they are adopted out, while others are sent home. How can these babies claim citizenship in Australia in the future? I also sit here before you in recognition of the number of deaths since 2020 for our people. Some 36 people have died and, as history has it, some 15,000 in terms of people that died in giving their lives and working for this country for a better future. So when we talk about some of these contributions from all these wonderful people that are forthcoming and sharing the insights of what and how we can change and work together better, I think we need to be mindful about the power of balance. We need to be mindful about the fact that some of this research, in particular by Dr Stephen Howes, also could be seen as a conflict of interest, because they're paid top dollar to do this work and deliver the pastoral care services that people are reporting on. That should be really audited. But I'll leave it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Davis. I'm going to have the first question. Ms Joseph, I think you've outlined in your evidence that the PALM scheme is well regulated and provides enormous benefit both to agriculture industries here but also in terms of income going back to Vanuatu. But you have highlighted also that there is a cohort of disengaged workers that are quite vulnerable. I think it's becoming quite clear to the Committee, in my view, that this is the area of concern: not the scheme itself, which seems to be quite well regulated, but what happens with workers who leave it. I'm just interested in your experience. You began to talk about this, but what are the reasons people leave the scheme and really put themselves in quite a difficult position? Are you able to elaborate on that a bit further?

JENELLE JOSEPH: Absolutely. When I was arriving in Griffith and taking the young men to open bank accounts, there were people who would approach these young fellows and ask them whether they could come on their farm, whether they had farm work et cetera, how much were they getting, and offering them quite large sums of money to come and work for them. Of course I would shoo them away and say, "Go." The lure of a bigger dollar was sometimes, and often, the reason why they would be encouraged to disengage. The approved employers do try to find dry accommodation for a lot of the workers, but a lot of the workers prefer to drink, so therefore the freedom to drink and to go to casinos and the freedom to make adult choices is also a number of the reasons why they disengage.

Recently I bumped into young people at Wisemans Ferry, all the way from Tanna, and talked to them in their language. They were quite surprised. I asked them to meet with me but they were not interested. The freedom to just be able to stay in Australia, earn the money that they want, spend the money that they want, tell their family how much they're getting was a much better position for them, rather than being under scheme, where they felt that they were herded into a particular direction.

The CHAIR: Just to clarify, they either found another visa category—

JENELLE JOSEPH: No, they didn't find another visa category. Some of them obtained advice that getting a protection visa, and therefore you could stay in Australia under a protection visa, was fine. Therefore,

that lure was great, that it takes five years to process a visa, so don't worry, you can stay here and earn money for that period of time. Or they just hid from authorities with no visas at all.

The CHAIR: I will leave my questioning there.

Ms JENNY LEONG: Thank you both for your opening statements. Ms Davis, do you wish to comment on the question just asked by the Chair? The other thing I want to get is a sense from you as to what you see as the potential solutions around this, recognising the long history that you've talked about, both in this country and in the Pacific, when, as we heard from Ms Joseph, there is such a significant economic inequality and inequity between Australia and the countries that are engaging. I'm really keen to hear your perspective on how we start a conversation that looks at ensuring that these workers—and indeed their families and the young people that are born as a result of them working here—are respected and treated with dignity, when we know that the economic inequity is so huge that it is very difficult to know how to tackle that. I'm very happy for you to comment on the Chair's question, but I'm really keen to get your expertise on how we start to tackle some of these challenges.

EMELDA DAVIS: Thanks for that question, Jenny. I really do think that this whole decentralisation—because this management from the top and how that's—I guess, it's a government-to-government program, right? The conversations between memorandums of understanding sit with the countries—the decision-making. All levels of government should be involved in the overseeing or the implementation of this particular scheme, because all New South Wales Ministers and members of Parliament should be across the needs for our people. All local governments need to be across the needs of these people coming into these communities. When you have that transparency and greater understanding, local governments—there's a resolution of council that I brought, I don't know if you've got an opportunity to see it, on outreach services for seasonal workers.

Working with the heads of mission informed those people sitting in Canberra who know the lived experience and the daily challenges and the legal policies and all of those things that happen for our nationals that come to this country. I say "our" because I'm Ni-Vanuatu. It's necessary, because unless you sit down at the table and talk to each other, no-one is going to really understand. Unless you've got lived experience, how can you possibly say you can understand what we're going through? There's certain things you do understand, obviously: human rights abuses et cetera and how one person or one human being wants to treat another. But the thing is, there's a whole cultural context to the people that are coming into this country. Distinct cultural difference is paramount in how people communicate and work with their employment providers. I feel strongly that the workers should be able to work directly with farmers. I think there are mechanisms there that can be looked at where people have freedom of choice, especially if this 403 visa is changed.

Ms JENNY LEONG: Yes, we've heard a lot of issues around the exploitation risks of people being tied to one particular workplace.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes. You've got reports that I skimmed over yesterday, not really grasping all of it, but what stood out for me is that people are saying that the PALM scheme is improving. One life lost is devastating for any scheme. We can't sit here and say it's improving when there are 36 people that have been sent home since, in a box—just Vanuatu alone—since 2020. How can you even write that off? That's the distinct cultural difference, because the people that they're engaging as part of all these Pacific representation organisations, they have a disconnect. You have Polynesia—I don't know if people comprehend the Polynesia—the Melanesia and the Micronesia, three different demographics that are living in this country. I'm Melanesia. How many Melanesians have sat here and spoken to this inquiry in these last few weeks? I'm interested.

Ms JENNY LEONG: A lot of the evidence that we have heard from people with lived experience—and this Committee has been trying to do that work very hard—has meant that a lot of that has happened in camera because people don't feel comfortable talking publicly. But I also reassure you that we are trying to have conversations with some of the non-Government MPs in home countries, if you like, so that that can be exposed. I think the bigger challenge that we're facing, at least to the comments that have been made around support and how that is done, is that there seems to at least be anecdotal evidence that community members are not put with people from their own countries and so there's a lot of splitting, which may be a risk of further disempowering people.

EMELDA DAVIS: That's right.

Ms JENNY LEONG: That's something that we haven't got to the bottom of yet, but we are looking at that, as well as the potential risk of some of these slightly dodgy labour hire firms making decisions like that because it's easier to manage the collective response of people.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to clarify—you said 36 deaths since 2020 of Vanuatu people who have come over on the scheme?

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes, and people are dying from dehydration because they don't comprehend that you need to work in these conditions and have regular drinking water, and then there are other instances. I've travelled all across this country with our Vanuatu High Commission. We've been to Tully, Cairns, Townsville, Ayr, Tweed, Tweed Heads, Mareeba—all voluntary—because of fielding these calls that are coming through because people hear of Australian South Sea Islanders, but when we get in front of government officials, it's deaf ears. The thing is, the visa is the biggest issue here. We need to open it up. We live in a democratic society. No-one should be tied to anyone, and no-one should be fearful. There's a freedom of choice in this country. You can't have one rule for some—backpacker visa, where they have the freedom to walk around and leave their employers—and then you have the 403, which ties our Melanesian labourers to their overseer. It's not happening; it can't happen.

Ms JENNY LEONG: The other one I'll get you to take on notice because we're running short on time. Ms Davis, would you be happy to provide further details of individuals, organisations or others that you have worked with that you think would be useful for this Committee to hear from or to approach to get their response from? Maybe take that on notice and then share some details so we can consider that as this inquiry continues.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes.

The CHAIR: We might take that as a question on notice.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I have a question to you, Ms Joseph. I'm not sure how to phrase it. You mentioned that your organisation commenced because of the cyclones. How do you see those cyclones and disasters affecting the workers' financial decisions? When they come to New South Wales, if conditions aren't up to scratch or they're not getting what they should be getting, because of the situation back home, are they not willing to then complain about it because they don't want to upset what's happening? It doesn't have to just be cyclones. I understand that there's that inequity there in what they receive. I think you said it's another form of aid. Do we need to reframe how this scheme is packaged so that it—I don't know.

JENELLE JOSEPH: I think I understand the question. When I went over to Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam, the place was devastated. It was like a bomb had hit it, to be honest. It's quite daunting to decide that you're going to bring 33 workers out to Australia. Hopefully they're going to go to work every day and do what you have to do. Part of the charity was to teach them business, finance and those kind of things for them to be able to take home to their own families, which is what we do. We teach them how to shop very well, how to save their money, how to cheaply send their money home—all those sorts of things—and we get them food and all that sort of stuff. They are concerned, but most of them dedicate themselves to sending money home to their own families rather than spending it here.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I understand that. Because of the situation, are they putting themselves in an unacceptable situation because they have this—I won't say obligation, but they're wanting to help home. So sometimes they are putting themselves at risk but not intentionally. Because of their desire to help their families, they're at risk.

JENELLE JOSEPH: A lot of them do, but often the disengaged worker—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: They're taken advantage of.

JENELLE JOSEPH: They do get taken advantage of.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I feel like that is part of it. Because of the situation, they are being taken advantage of or put at extra risk or coerced and then their expectations aren't being met.

JENELLE JOSEPH: Absolutely right. There is disappointment. They're always ringing up and saying, "I was at this farm. Have you got other work for me? Is there somewhere else that I can—I was here for six weeks." They're always chasing the next lot of work, which means that in between times of work there could be a period of time where there is no work but they've still got to pay the rent and they've still got to pay all those kinds of things. That's why 14 and 15 in a house works.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How can we better mitigate that so that they're not placed in those horrible situations? We value the work and what they bring—the culture and everything like that. I live in a regional town. The town has changed because of the workers. We've got different foods. We've got shops now that we didn't have before.

JENELLE JOSEPH: Absolutely. They've brought wonderful cultural things to you and opened it up.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, and colour and life. But it seems to be that we're taking more than we're giving.

JENELLE JOSEPH: Yes.

EMELDA DAVIS: I completely agree with that. Also you've got to remember the liabilities for these workers that are coming here. Sometimes whole villages have contributed to their airfares, so they're already in debt. They have to make that money to pay it back and keep their word. Their word is their bond. They're under this pressure. This visa that locks them in doesn't allow them to move; so therefore they abscond—for want of a better word. I don't call it that.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So then there needs to be more flexibility.

Ms JENNY LEONG: I think there is also a risk that there is a approach that infantilises people coming over because they're in a vulnerable situation when, in actual fact, those people are seen as the key connectors to community and the key people who are delivering for entire villages. They are managing and navigating global politics, international work and are potentially supporting entire communities back home. There is a risk that it's seen over here as people needing to be taught how to behave like an adult when, in actual fact, these people are taking on a whole lot of courage. There is systemic racism that comes with that as well.

EMELDA DAVIS: One hundred per cent. Another thing I had in my notes here is that there needs to be a lens on systemic racism across this program. The other challenge is that people equate—I've spoken to workers and women across this nation about the fact that it's not Aussie if you don't drink. "You've got to have a beer, mate." You're talking about a sending country that doesn't have alcohol issues—Vanuatu, in particular, I'm saying. The other challenge is that their customary practices aren't understood, in terms of drinking kava as traditional peoples. The replacement, in some cases, is transferrable through the influence of outside workers. If you've got a real Aussie farmer who's gung-ho, it's "when in Rome", so you try to accommodate and act accordingly. There are a lot of challenges around that.

The CHAIR: I understand that, thank you very much. We've run over, but that has been important. I assume both of you would be prepared to answer questions on notice. I think Ms Leong has already flagged one, and I think the Committee will have a number of other questions to follow up. I hope that's okay. Secondly, Ms Joseph, I think you prepared a more comprehensive document. I wonder if you would consider tabling that or sending that through so that we've got that as a record.

JENELLE JOSEPH: Sure.

The CHAIR: Ms Davis, we'd ask the same for anything that you've prepared that, unfortunately, we had to cut off because of the limited time. I apologise about that.

EMELDA DAVIS: That's okay.

The CHAIR: If you had something prepared that you could table, that would be important.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes.

The CHAIR: We'll follow up with questions to you as well, to try to explore some of the key themes that have come out this morning around visa flexibility, disengagement in particular, and systemic racism. I'm sure there'll be other items. Finally, Ms Davis, you did send through resolutions of council.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes, there's "systemic racism" on there as well.

The CHAIR: Rather than publishing all of these, I wonder if we can come back to you, because there's clearly one that directly relates to this.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes, the systemic racism.

The CHAIR: Yes, but I don't want to table necessarily the others, because there are a number of other resolutions here about electrification of homes and so on.

EMELDA DAVIS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can we just clarify which parts of this with you? We can do that offline. Is that okay?

EMELDA DAVIS: And the peer review.

The CHAIR: And the peer review, perfect. The secretariat will contact you if there are any other questions—I'm sure that there will be. I thank you very much for your participation this morning.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 10:20.