



Material Remittances in the Context of Seasonal Work: Social and Economic Change in Vanuatu

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INTRODUCTION

“Remittances reflect and build the social status of the sender as funds flow to support not just family, but also community, local government, development and traditional practices as well as celebrations” (Cohen 2011, p. 106). This quote from anthropologist Jeffrey Cohen reflects my observations drawn from over a decade of research on ni-Vanuatu temporary migrant workers in Australia and New Zealand’s seasonal worker programs.¹ With the money earned through temporary work abroad, senders have provided both financial and material remittances and thus improved the living standards of thousands of families in the Pacific region. The migrants and their families have thereby become agents of change (Bedford

¹ Ni-Vanuatu is the term is for people from the island Republic of Vanuatu.

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et al. 2009). While financial remittances receive much attention in research, material remittances tend to be overlooked. However, they greatly contribute to social transformation and are, in some cases, of higher value than financial remittances, for example in the form of boats, cars, and objects used in ceremonial celebrations. Moreover, material remittances which are called gifts-in-kind or informal remittances in Pacific literature (Connell and Brown 2005) are essential in achieving or fulfilling societal obligations. The argument here is not that material remittances are superior to financial ones, but unlike other global studies and reports on material remittances, they are largely absent in literature on these seasonal worker programs.

As a new naïve researcher embarking on this academic journey 13 years ago, I aimed to examine how seasonal worker programs contributed to development. However, I soon realized that the meaning of local developments in communities in Vanuatu varied and thus readjusted my research to reflect localized forms of household and individual development. Workers viewed income from seasonal overseas work as an opportunity to improve their lifestyle and address their specific needs, as opposed to aid-sponsored programs that do not always take into consideration local contexts. Therefore, the term transformative in this chapter will reflect the local character of ni-Vanuatu ideas and concepts of change. In order to grasp the locality of social change, I use an ethnographic approach in a longitudinal study of the same communities over several years.

This chapter firstly discusses seasonal labor mobility schemes available to ni-Vanuatu citizens and the uptake in these programs, followed by a brief introduction of Vanuatu and the applied methodology. The next sections are divided into various areas of transformation: the home, education, community, customary practices, the built environment, and transportation. I will then discuss the impact of remittances on inequality. Lastly, I will link remittance practices with ways of (be)longing.

AUSTRALIA'S AND NEW ZEALAND'S SEASONAL WORKER SCHEMES

In Australia, there are two labor schemes for Pacific Island nations and those from Timor-Leste, the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), which began in July 2018.² The SWP was

² Due to the PLS being new, data from that scheme is still limited and this scheme is therefore not examined in this chapter.

introduced in 2012 after a four-year pilot, the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme (PSWPS 2008–2012). The SWP allows workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste to work up to nine months in a twelve-month period in sectors such as hospitality, agriculture, aquaculture, the cane sector, horticulture, and tourism. The PLS meanwhile offers visas to work for up to three years in rural and regional Australia in aged care, agriculture, and hospitality. However, it has been most successful in the meat processing industries.

New Zealand's Recognised Employer Scheme (RSE) was established in April 2007 to address labor shortages in the horticulture and viticulture industries. It allows workers from Pacific Island countries to stay for up to seven months in a twelve-month period, except for workers from Kiribati and Tuvalu, who can remain for nine months due to the higher travel costs associated with getting to New Zealand. New Zealand extended its labor mobility opportunities with the recent introduction of the Pacific Trades Partnership (PTP). The PTP includes two new skilled sectors, construction and fisheries, which are still in their pilot phases. The focus here is on the short-term temporary seasonal labor schemes RSE and SWP, with the objective of encouraging economic development for sending nations.

The participating countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. All eligible Pacific Island nations for these programs are members of the Pacific Islands Forum³ (except for Timor-Leste, which is the only non-Pacific country in Australia's programs). Labor from the Pacific has positively transformed New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture sectors (Bedford et al. 2020, p. 16). Before the COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, Australia and New Zealand were projected to have at least 12,000 workers in each of their seasonal worker programs (see Fig. 14.1).

Material and Financial Remittances in the Context of the RSE and the SWP

Based on information from interviews with RSE migrants, we can estimate that they spent between NZD500 and NZD2000 annually on material remittances from New Zealand. This does not include remittances

³The Pacific Islands Forum consists of 18 Pacific Island member nations: Australia, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, New Caledonia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

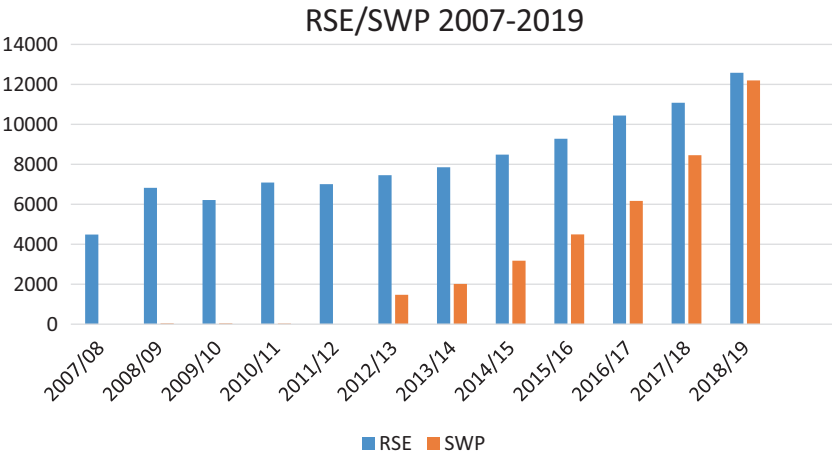


Fig. 14.1 Participation rates of RSE and SWP. (Source: Author)

purchased in Vanuatu. When using lower estimates of the 24,000 migrants in both the RSE and SWP spending NZD500 in material remittances, the total is NZD12 million—an impressive sum.

Yet these material remittances remain under-researched. The limited definitions of what material remittances encompass mean that large portions of remittances remain misunderstood. Workers that send money home for their families to spend on consumable items is recognized as a remittance, the purchase of food and other goods, typically bags of rice or household items, with overseas earnings that returned migrants distribute to various family and community members is not formally recognized as a remittance. Whether material goods are purchased in New Zealand, Australia, or the respective home countries, these items are purchased with income from seasonal worker programs. Migrants return home with these goods to provide for their families and maintain social relationships within their communities, the same way they do with cash. In this case, however, the migrant has more control over how the remittances are distributed. Nonetheless, migrants often convert their income into material remittances while in their host countries due to the perceived lack of quality and cost of goods back home.

In contrast to the gap in the literature on material remittances, financial remittances are mainstream and sit center-stage in labor mobility research.

There are various projections of how much migrants remit from these schemes. The figure used here reflects costs taken out from participating in the programs, reducing it to a lower estimate that economists use in relation to the RSE of NZD5500, totaling NZD132 million for 24,000 workers. This is a significant cash injection into the Pacific region that did not exist before the RSE and SWP. The Pacific has one of the highest remittance fees in the world and migrants from this study, therefore, preferred to return with their money in their pocket, only remitting when requested.

Another interesting outcome of the prospect of financial remitting is the fact that migrants have access to loan systems that were previously not accessible for those in informal sector employment or seasonal worker schemes, forcing potential migrants to obtain high-interest loans upwards of 24 percent interest from local lenders. Today, once migrants secure a placement and have evidence from the Vanuatu Department of Labour that they are eligible for bank loans with lower interest rates, they finance not only their upcoming trips but also leave money behind for their families. These schemes have not only transformed bank institution approaches to loans for potential migrants but also banking systems for migrants, many of whom never held a bank account prior to their participation in these schemes.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH FIELD: VANUATU

Vanuatu is located approximately 2000 kilometers from New Zealand. In 2020, the estimated population was just under 300,000. It is an archipelago comprising 83 islands and has a colonial legacy linked to both the United Kingdom and France via condominium rule (1906–1980). The historical condominium still influences many social structures and cultural and linguistic environments within Vanuatu. Since obtaining independence on July 31, 1980, Vanuatu has heavily relied on its subsistence sector, with 76 percent of the population living in rural areas. Vanuatu has a dual economy: both cash and non-cash activities shape social and economic relationships. There are limited formal sector employment opportunities in Vanuatu, making labor mobility opportunities attractive for many.

Since joining the RSE, Vanuatu has transformed into a labor-sending country, starting with 1698 workers in the RSE for the 2007/2008 season and growing to approximately 8000 workers in Australia and New Zealand

in the 2019/2020 season. Before this, there were limited opportunities for ni-Vanuatu to migrate to these countries, whereas Vanuatu is currently the largest Pacific-sending country to the RSE and SWP.

In Vanuatu, exchanges are essential for building and maintaining relationships, as these form a central part of social interactions. Transactions between ni-Vanuatu have consequences for broader economic and social relationships. Reciprocal exchanges, especially those that are obligatory, secure a sense of belonging, a social position, and an identity within communities. Within this context of reciprocity, the role of remittances is highlighted: seasonal migrants are expected to contribute to their families and communities, while failing to do so has repercussions.

METHODOLOGY

Since 2007, I have conducted ethnographical research on the RSE and SWP seasonal worker programs. I have worked and lived with communities in New Zealand and Vanuatu, while Pacific seasonal workers in Australia's SWP have also become a large part of my research since 2014. Over the years, I have participated in hundreds of interviews, spent time working in vineyards, living in Vanuatu, and documenting the lives of workers, their families, and communities and the cultural, economic, political, and social outcomes of participating in these Pacific labor mobility programs. The longitudinal research presented here started with 22 ni-Vanuatu RSE migrants in 2007 and has since expanded to hundreds more in both programs. Thus, I have been able to document changes for workers and their families and communities, whether they remained in labor mobility or exited.

During my research, I followed workers' movements in multi-sited ethnographical research (Marcus 1995). Following the flows of people also included observing the goods and money they obtained as a result of participating in the labor mobility schemes. There have been advantages and limitations to this research. I have been able to access information on people's personal choices in their finances and their decisions on employment opportunities, and I have observed how remittances from these overseas seasonal employment schemes have transformed the lives of not only households but also, in many cases, whole communities. Some of the limitations arose due to my gender and how this impacted my acceptance into particular families. Like migrants themselves, I have had to negotiate what information I can have access to and collaborate with research

participants on the information that they want to share or to be kept private. Although I have never discussed exact dollar figures on their overall earnings, which vary from season to season, workers have always shared this information with me and shown me material remittances they sent home or the results of what they produced with their earnings. I have also observed migrants purchasing goods and transporting them home, and witnessed the results of their overseas incomes, which mostly mirror the information obtained in interviews.

REMITTING MATERIAL GOODS

From 2007 to 2009, RSE workers returned material remittances in their suitcases. Many bought bigger suitcases for this purpose because the small bags and backpacks they arrived with would not hold the newly purchased goods. Two years later, workers had the opportunity to remit material goods home in containers. This opportunity dramatically changed what products migrants could purchase. There was a shift from purchasing small personal use items to larger merchandise, in greater quantities, which were collected by migrants when they returned home to Vanuatu. In some cases, the containers would arrive up to one month after their return, meaning that migrants often spent that extra month in the capital city before returning to their home island.

Exporting material goods via shipping containers was challenging in the initial years. The financial or material costs associated with remittances to the Pacific are high and can be a barrier. Migrants factored in the costs of transportation to Vanuatu, but were unprepared for the processes of offloading the items from containers, dealing with customs authorities, and the associated costs and taxes. Furthermore, there was no systematic monitoring of remitted goods, and migrants complained that belongings disappeared. Fortunately, service and protocols have improved, possibly prompted by additional prerequisite security documentation due to attempts to import illegal goods, such as guns.

Eventually, workers had the opportunity to purchase shipping containers. The cost of these containers was approximately NZD10,000 to NZD15,000. Large groups of 15 to 30 workers collectively contributed to the purchase and sold space to others. In 2012, purchasing containers became problematic. Too many were being transported, meaning fewer opportunities to sell them upon return. Migrants did not know what to do with the containers they could not sell. After observing the Christchurch

earthquake in 2011, workers had the new idea of transforming unsold containers into tourism bungalows. However, only very few took this opportunity due to limited land ownership and costs to transport and renovate.

Not all seasonal workers have access to shipping containers. Groups of SWP workers interviewed in Australia are actively discouraged to do so because it is perceived as a waste of money. Without access to this shipping method, migrants are reliant on putting goods in suitcases, which often also results in excess baggage costs. However, these workers do return to Vanuatu and purchase larger items in the main centers, which support the regional economy.⁴ The export of material remittances has expanded from suitcases to shipping freights, which has in turn enabled larger goods and higher quantities remitted to Vanuatu, thus providing various opportunities to transform different sectors of social systems.

In interviews with migrants, the emotional and social quality of remitting became evident. Material remittances are not only gifts in return for the maintenance of workers' properties or care for their family members, but compensate for absence and express guilt, especially in transnational families. Many migrants admitted to buying children gifts such as laptops, DVDs, phones, and clothing out of guilt—coined by one migrant as “a gift of forgiveness” (Gloria, Ambrym Island 2019).

TRANSFORMING THE VILLAGE: HOMES, HOUSEHOLDS, EVERYDAY LIFE, AND SCHOOLS

“Look at my house—mi glad tumas my sister. I have many nice things now” (Sonia, Ambrym Island 2012). Many stories of transformation begin with such statements about home, whether building or renovating a house and altering the décor. These transformations are related to changing family and community dynamics. In this section, I will discuss the impact of material remittances on the built environment, households, daily lives, and schools in Vanuatu.

⁴ See Durand et al. (1996) for Mexican examples. However, the Vanuatu context does vary from Durand's work in Mexico, where nationalized production rates are higher. Ni-Vanuatu migrant remittances flow, directly and indirectly, throughout households, communities, and business operators in the islands.

*From Thatched to Permanent Homes: The Transformation
of the Built Environment*

Transformational processes are most evident in the built environment. Many villages with seasonal migrants have transformed from traditional thatched huts to permanent homes. Purchasing land and building homes was an objective for 85 percent of participants spoken to from both the RSE and SWP. In 2009, one permanent material home belonging to an RSE worker stood out among the traditional thatched houses in Fanto village. Due to an increase of residents entering the RSE or SWP, this village now, in 2020, has multiple permanent homes and few traditional housing structures. Similar transformations have been observed in all larger migrant-sending villages.

The increase in houses and cash has also contributed to a change in community labor. Initially, when questioning the costs of building homes, most people spoke of labor costs equating to the price of boarding and meals while assisting in the construction. Two years later, migrants commented on a change in this traditional reciprocity approach. Community members now ask for cash or material payments for their labor. As one participant said, “things are changing now the village asks to be paid to help build houses. It’s because we have money” (Simon, Ambrym Island 2016; for similar findings, see Zotova and Cohen 2016, p. 11). However, this has not lessened the production of new homes by migrants, who not only build homes for themselves but also for their extended families. In some cases, the houses for extended family are built beside the migrant’s houses to provide more space for growing families, while in other cases, migrants have built larger homes to accommodate extended families.

These transformations in housing production and styles have been influenced by remittances from those living abroad, with many houses on the island now being modeled on housing observed overseas. How houses are designed and built is also influenced by building courses undertaken by migrants in New Zealand (see Bailey 2019a). In addition to these changes, the materials used and the social organization have altered from previous conventional practices noted by Durand (2016) as migrants are acquiring new knowledge and skills, and their kin are demanding cash payments for what were once seen as traditional roles and obligations. Kitchen houses (those built outside the main house for cooking and storage) have remained the same, using the same customary materials (Durand 2016, p. 258). However, they are now filled with material items such as freezers, ovens, and other kitchen goods that were previously not accessible.

In a household survey of seasonal workers on Epi Island, Vanuatu, Smith found that “traditional plant materials for walls and roofs was halved” (2016, p. 46). The transformation of houses from thatched to permanent was also discussed in interviews I conducted in 2011. The migrants and their families stated that the new homes can withstand cyclones and were moreover seen as a symbol of their achievement. However, the research participants also noted that permanent houses were not always practical because of the heat (see also Smith 2016, p. 51).

Within the Household

This section examines remittances generally located within the household. Except for solar panels and appliances, the remittances discussed in this section are usually considered trivial and are rarely documented. What is seldom reflected is that these resources are targeted commodities for migrants and their respective households. Family and community members provide migrants with lists of material goods to purchase, ranging from schoolbooks, laptops, solar panels, household goods, recipe books, and in one season an organ for the church.

Second-hand clothing is the most popular material remittance and is easily transferred in suitcases. Studies have shown that migrants return with second-hand clothing not only for personal use but for trade and commercial purposes (Bailey 2019a; Hansen 2000). The migrants and their families set up stalls or have home shops selling clothing purchased in New Zealand, with high profits. In one interview, a migrant’s wife told me that she made NZD1000 in less than an hour with such a stall. Many migrants also purchase or are given second-hand clothing, which they redistribute among their families and communities, replacing torn clothing articles.

The introduction of shipping containers enabled the remittance of furniture such as beds, mattresses, sofa, chairs, tables, and drawers. Prior to participation, most household members slept on mats or thin foam mattresses. Remitted furniture and interior design goods also transformed households to resemble the “Western” homes that migrants had become accustomed to abroad. Furniture is also a status symbol reflecting the material success of their employment overseas. Observations in several households revealed that beds, sofas, and chairs are held in special esteem and are not used every day, but are kept for special occasions and guests. Often, the transformation of the household involves a combination of wanted goods and a reflection of achievable outcomes. For some, it is seen to fit into a modernization category, even if those material goods are impractical or not used.

Everyday Life and Solar Power

Since 2009, and following access to shipping containers, workers purchased solar panels and accessories. Increased power generation via solar systems remitted by migrants is notable in many parts of Vanuatu and has transformed many rural households. Prior to this, most power was produced using petroleum generators, which few homes owned as they are expensive to fuel and thus used on special occasions only. Changing to solar energy has brought many advancements like permanently available electricity in the households. Villages are now lit up at night, prolonging daytime activities like working and studying. However, changes through solar energy have also been viewed critically. Bedford et al. (2020, p. 172) described the view that although solar power has greatly changed electricity provision, it comes with negative effects like children spending too much time on electronic devices.

Village chiefs have reiterated this observation not only with regard to children but also with returning migrants. One chief told me in an interview that out of frustration he had confiscated material goods such as DVD players from younger RSE workers in order for them to conform to village expectations: “When it is time for the men to be working in the garden, many are not to be found. They were gone watching movies on their portable DVD players that they had purchased while in New Zealand” (Chief Saksak, Ambrym Island, 2011). After the men finished their obligations to the village, the chief returned their goods. These incidents occurred in the early years of the RSE and, although chiefs in Ambrym argued that they had control over these new behaviors, there was concern that these new material goods would become timewasting habits in the community that would negatively impact on traditional societal practices.

With the addition of solar energy, appliances such as ovens, freezers, microwaves, kettles, and washing machines have increased. Freezers are popular not only as storage for family and community foods, but also because they generate income from selling freezer space or using the appliance as a shop selling frozen goods, such as frozen chicken or ice cream. However, there is also skepticism toward new appliances: one migrant’s wife was given a microwave and told me that she was too scared to use it, as she traditionally cooked on an open fire and occasionally used the electric oven at her workplace. The first year, she only used the microwave to store food until she observed her husband use it and became confident. Nonetheless, these material goods have allowed migrant families to reduce cooking labor time and provide an additional source of income for many families.

In addition to these new goods, photos of household members working in Australia and New Zealand adorn the walls of living spaces. Cameras and cell phones were popular items to purchase in the first few seasons (2007–2009), though developing photos was costly. Many saved photos on their mobile phones. In the first few seasons, images of their life in New Zealand were not on display in their Vanuatu homes until costs reduced. Now migrants often develop these photos to show their journey to family and community members back home. Family members have noted that the photos help them to cope with the physical absence of their partners, and these photo displays often reflect the achievements and transformations that migrants and their families have accomplished in participating in overseas seasonal work.

Schools

Paying school fees is a priority. Like material remittances, studies have rarely focused on human capital outcomes of the RSE and SWP. Other than housing, I argue that the most significant transformation occurs in the sector of education. The opportunity to attend school, to finish high school, and, for some children, to finish tertiary studies would not have occurred without the RSE and SWP (Bailey 2019a). Furthermore, migrants are also financing extended family members' education, some even up to university degrees. Many migrants hope that these new educational opportunities may in future create new transformations for their children and communities. Additionally, a good student in Vanuatu is considered a good citizen, a motto that is written on many educational facilities.

In addition to school fees, supplies such as stationery, electronics, educational resource books, and other related resources are remitted in bulk. As will be discussed further below, migrants also remit desks, chairs, and school uniforms. In interviews, several teachers and principals mentioned the generosity of migrants returning with goods for the students and supplies for their schools like solar panels and generators, enabling students to return to school at night and continue their homework and thereby transforming the learning opportunities for ni-Vanuatu pupils (see also Bedford et al. 2020, p. 72).

New modes of transportation have also assisted with access to education. For some children, school is a long distance from their villages, up to two hours walking in some areas. Migrants and teachers commented that remittances such as bicycles, trucks, and buses have assisted in improved attendance rates.

COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The Lolihor Development Council (LDC) in North Ambrym was involved in the selection process of my original research group of 22 men for the RSE in 2007. The expectation of those selected was that they would financially contribute to community-led projects with their earnings from New Zealand. The aim was strategic recruitment for development. The LDC was established in 1993 with the aid of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to encourage cooperation between villages in North Ambrym. Several studies have noted the expectations of RSE migrants to contribute to local development projects (for a range of RSE community projects in Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu, see Bailey 2009; Bailey 2014; Bedford et al. 2020; Cameron 2011; MacLellan and Mares 2008).

In the case of the LDC, contributions were a prerequisite. Initially, there were successful projects that workers' incomes contributed to, such as a market house, the purchase of an engine for the LDC boat, scholarships, and a microcredit scheme. The market house provided a space where women from the 12 villages in the region could come together and sell their produce, and also became a local meeting place. The microcredit scheme transformed banking for local community members.

However, after a while workers ceased providing financial and material remittances due to tensions and misappropriations of funds. When interviewing families of workers in 2011 about the LDC, many stated that although their husbands' overseas incomes contributed to projects, they were not directly involved. This disconnection, a change in recruitment practices, and mistrust over the financial management of migrants' incomes for community projects contributed to the decline of money given to the LDC over time.

Contributions from migrant workers to the LDC ceased during negotiations for funds to relocate a new health center to the Lolihor region. Migrants had initially provided a portion of their overseas incomes in order to purchase building materials for the new clinic. Those building materials lay waiting for over 18 months before the community gave up on the clinic project and repurposed the materials to extend the local church. However, there are also positive examples in Vanuatu of new health clinics and material supplies from migrant and employer remittances.

Although remittances to the LDC ceased, contributions to other community groups such as the church remain constant. This is in part due to membership and obligations. Migrants contribute significantly to

community needs like paying for the construction of wells, community halls, churches, and schools. Vanuatu is prone to natural disasters, cyclones, acid rain, and ash from volcanoes. Overseas incomes often support repairs and maintenance of community infrastructure. Such projects often go undocumented (Bailey 2015; Goldring 2004), yet they bring to light the reasons for participation and provide a window into remittance spending. Migrants also refer to advancements in their social status through participation, or the improvements they have made in their housing and the generosity of gifts given to their communities (Bailey and Wells 2016).

Host Country Community Contributions

What has often been neglected in studies to date are the numerous donations from workers' host communities and employers. An example is a fundraiser by a New Zealand community to complement migrant workers' fundraising and purchasing school desks, chairs, as well as school uniforms and other school materials (see Fig. 14.2).

Two months after these goods arrived in Vanuatu, a New Zealand government delegation visited the school. Not only was the school, like many others in Vanuatu, transformed through material remittances, but also became a model for other communities with RSE migrants.

New relationships are produced through the exchanges between Pacific seasonal workers and their employers and host communities. As a result of these new connections, both in New Zealand and in Pacific Island nations, employers have contributed to the workers' social, material, and financial remittances through donations such as water pumps, hospital beds, and contributions to medical infrastructure projects. Employers stated at a meeting with Ambrym communities in 2011 that they saw the RSE as mutually beneficial and as a partnership. Employers are proud of assisting migrant communities in reaching their goals through donations and providing upskilling courses, reiterating that they value the work that ni-Vanuatu have done for them in New Zealand and that in return they wish to assist the communities that sent the workers.

Since Cyclone Pam devastated Vanuatu in 2016, New Zealand government initiatives and employers have offered courses on strengthening housing structures for RSE migrants. The New Zealand government provides a suite of free educational courses for RSE migrants through the Vakameasina training program. Interviewees stated that these courses changed the way they managed money or conducted business. These small



Fig. 14.2 Remitted goods for Mele School, Vanuatu. (Credit Alex George)

yet subtle changes are powerful agents of change in the everyday life in Vanuatu.

Workers also receive gifts from local communities in Central Otago. These donations increase in size when workers have access to shipping containers. Donations have ranged from clothing and sewing machines to mattresses and televisions. For example, between 2011 and 2012, New Zealand replaced analog TV with digital TV. Communities offered migrants their redundant analog televisions to remit without considering whether they had power in their homes—at the time, the majority did not. Nonetheless, returning with televisions was seen as a status symbol.

KASTOM⁵ CEREMONIES

Cultural traditions such as rites of passages, grade-taking ceremonies, and other localized practices can decrease or increase through the process of migration. For Vanuatu, we find that local customs and rituals have been revived and reinforced through financial remittances from short-term seasonal workers. There is an expectation of sharing remittances for rituals and ceremonies. These new sources of income and material goods are enabling ni-Vanuatu to participate in *kastom* ceremonies in new ways, for

⁵ *Kastom* is the Bislama term for custom or tradition (Crowley 2003).

example in wedding ceremonies where received gifts are displayed. Gifts from families of migrant workers are often more extravagant and costly, money may be exchanged in the bride-wealth ceremony, and wealth is shown through the gifting of livestock or contributions to food in prestation piles. These piles are central to what Rio (2007, p. 186) called the “relational economy.” He argued: “[T]he heaping of food and money is the vehicle that drives all social transformations on Ambrym, creating a motion that is crucial to Ambrym *kastom* and social reproduction.” Money is also remitted as a sign of symbolic participation in ceremonies where migrants are absent. By spending money earned abroad on ritual and life-cycle events as well as by participating in relations of reciprocity, the migrants secure a sense of belonging and identity within their communities.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE BUSINESS SECTOR, AGRICULTURE, AND TRANSPORTATION

Many businesses require cash injections. However, migrants taking material goods home have enabled opportunities for microbusinesses as well as additional resources for current agricultural ventures. In the longevity study, I showed that 71 percent of workers purchased material goods to start a business (Bailey 2019a, p. 43). These ranged from agricultural tools, second-hand clothing, and kitchenware for the establishment of bakeries and restaurants, groceries to set up shop, and vehicles (mainly vans used as buses) and boats for transportation. Moreover, in that study 32 percent reported providing funds or material goods for a spouse or a family member to initiate a business.

In another study of 174 combined RSE and SWP workers (Bailey 2019b), transportation was the largest investment, followed by agriculture. While overseas, workers explore various crops and gain experience from using multiple agricultural tools. Many of these items were then remitted. These vary from small pruning cutters and chainsaws to tractors, often transforming labor practices. Many migrants form relationships in their host communities and with their employers, who offer advice on different business ideas. In New Zealand, the RSE Worker Training Program Vakameasina also assists migrants with business skills training programs.

A transformational change in workers' approaches to agriculture results from the tools they acquire and the diversification of production and work practices. Initially, migrants took home portable agricultural tools in their suitcases. Later, containers allowed for larger tools such as chainsaws, ploughs, and in one case materials to construct a sawmill—all expensive tools that are difficult to acquire in Vanuatu. Remitted tools serve different purposes and have multiple meanings and ways of contributing: For example, grass cutters are not only for personal use; workers rent them and use them to fulfill village obligations by cutting grass on church grounds or community roads. Therefore, although seen as an item for personal use, they achieve much more: earning income, meeting obligations, and establishing various interactions between individuals and the community.

Migrants credited remitted tools for easier and quicker practices on their farms. Some of the new skill sets such as varieties in pruning methods have assisted in changes. After working with various crops in Australia and New Zealand, migrants have attempted to replicate them in Vanuatu (some legally and some not). Education in biodiversity when transplanting goods internationally has been reinforced for migrants. Many transplanted crops failed, what did not fail, though, were attitudes toward diversification. Migrants still actively seek new crops and methods, many with ideas of future food security and transformation of income opportunities in mind. They also experiment with new crops that are less laborious to plant and harvest that could possibly survive localized climatic impacts. Vanuatu has been driving agricultural diversity for many years. However, consuming and working on various crops in seasonal worker schemes has encouraged migrants to diversify not only in agriculture but in other business ventures since 2007.

REJECTION OF REMITTANCES, PERCEIVED NEGATIVE IMPACTS, AND INEQUALITY

There is an encouragement of a “culture of saving” among seasonal workers. Home communities, employers, and government officials enforce this by either controlling savings or discouraging workers from spending money on goods seen as wasteful. Not all remittances are accepted. As mentioned before, a community leader in West Ambrym did not like “timewasters”

such as televisions and DVD players brought home, and insisted that the men should invest their earnings more wisely toward agricultural resources.

It is also crucial to approach the question whether remitted material items create new demands in consumption or change the social fabric of Vanuatu societies. In the interviews with RSE migrants, migrants denied this and stated that the needs already existed before the scheme (Bailey 2009). Nonetheless, migrants purchased household items and tools that they thought would enhance their home and work lives in Vanuatu and thus made these items popular. Remittances have an impact on consumer patterns, creating new desires and causing new expenses, as Zotova and Cohen observed in their research on remittances in the context of Tajikistan. At the same time, remittance receivers and the wider community members also influence the decisions of migrant senders by placing judgment values of what is and what “should be” remitted. These judgments have been placed on RSE and SWP migrants by governments, employers, communities, and households since day one, often limiting migrants’ purchases or creating deceptive remittance practices to hide material goods.

A perceived negative impact of remitted material goods is waste: “RSE workers return with goods and packaging that cannot be easily disposed of, and local communities lack the facilities to deal with the waste. Rubbish is left to accumulate within the village” (Bedford et al. 2020: pp. 107–8). This observation is especially important in rural settings, where there is no set infrastructure to deal with large quantities of waste. Waste from goods and food packaging from the capital city to rural areas was evident in my early observations in Ambrym (2011–2012). Bedford’s study (2020) highlights that additional waste from material remittances is a pressing issue in the transformation of rural environments.

Remittances can also create inequalities and dependency (Bailey 2019a; Bedford et al. 2020; Brettell 2007; Cohen 2004; Massey et al. 1993; Reichert 1981). Although not always vocalized in public domains, community members raised concerns with migrant workers’ long-term participation in labor mobility. There have been references to jealousies over opportunities to migrate and the remittances returned. This is often observed in the built environment and the material objects carried or worn. As migrants accumulate material goods, household security increases. Bedford et al. (2020, p. 108) mentioned with regard to Lamen Bay on the island of Epi that households with locks on doors now dominate the dwellings. On Ambrym, very few migrants used to lock the rooms in their homes, but migrants now understand the tensions and jealousies that are associated

with newly acquired goods and have also increased locking their properties. This transformation is not only seen in providing additional security but contributes to a relationship of mistrust. Participation and the attainment of financial and material wealth have exacerbated these tensions.

Inequality and transformations have also included gendered aspects. Initially, females were excluded from the schemes by the LDC council in North Ambrym. However, in 2012, the council approved a woman to go to Australia with her brother and since then many have followed. With the participation of women in the scheme, village dynamics including gender roles are being transformed. However, this change is not always depicted positively within communities.

Youth are now looking at the RSE and SWP when they finish school, whereas prior to this there were limited formal employment opportunities. Over half of my original 22 research participants now see the RSE as a career for seven months of the year, as opposed to limited cash work in copra, kava, or other local agricultural ventures. The seasonal worker programs have transformed ideas of work, with overseas labor being seen as valuable due to the outcomes from remittances and local employment practices being seen as lower in status because of limited cash resources and the time needed to gain income.

MATERIAL REMITTANCES AS PRACTICES OF BELONGING

Remittances are interwoven with ideas of belonging. Often, the remitted objects stand for the host country and, when moved to a new locality, represent a specific form of prestige, status, and nostalgia for workers (see also Mura and Ströhle in this volume). Evidence of working in the seasonal programs is displayed in the landscapes of Vanuatu, through symbolic motifs on houses and vehicles, architecture, and the naming of businesses. When I first visited Vanuatu in 2009, I spotted mostly symbols of Australia in Port Vila, like Australian rugby jerseys and flags in stores. Two years on, this had changed fundamentally, with the inclusion of New Zealand symbolism from returned migrants. Connections to Australia and New Zealand are displayed proudly, like the New Zealand flag or All Blacks merchandise, which are popular with those participating in the RSE. When one sees a picture of a Kangaroo or the Australian flag on a bus or taxi, it is clear that this person participated in the SWP.

This plays out in many different areas, even in sports. In 2007, RSE migrants were football fans and had limited knowledge of or interest in

rugby. Today, when New Zealand and Australia compete against each other, seasonal workers show their support for their work location on social media sites and in celebratory parades, for example in Port Vila. Parades for these rugby teams did not occur before the RSE and SWP. Participation in these schemes has provided new forms of demonstrating social ties with the host countries. Identity in Vanuatu is strongly localized and “being of place” (Hess 2009) will always remain dominant in Vanuatu societies. Nonetheless, migrants that have returned to Australia or New Zealand over several seasons also feel a strong connection to their host communities, adding this new strand to their sense of identity.

CONCLUSION

Material remittances play an important role in transformative processes. In some cases, the financial, social, and cultural values of material remittances are significantly higher than monetary transfers. Most remitted incomes are allocated to essential items such as daily consumption, living costs, school fees, building homes, buying land, or contributing to customary and community obligations. The establishment of businesses is further down the list, depending on the migrant’s positionality. Rethinking negative notions around consumable and productive remittances leads to a better understanding of remittance societies.

Remitted material goods can contribute to new income-generating opportunities and provide positive transformations in migrant households and community domains. This is obvious in the built environment through infrastructure projects and within household dwellings. Goods that add to décor are highly valued, referred to as transformative in the developmental sense of the term “modern,” and contribute to comfort in everyday life. Shipping provides migrants with the opportunities to remit larger goods. Solar equipment has been most notable in the transformative processes. The increase in solar equipment has provided electricity in rural areas, assisting with the creation of new businesses, light for homework, and household use. Migrants also ship a range of goods such as furniture and trucks and boats for transportation. Access to transportation has improved mobility and provided income opportunities.

The benefits from remittances are widespread, though not all remittances are welcomed, and there are tensions in regard to migrant participation and their remittance choices. Although there are negative outcomes from remittances, like dealing with waste, these are largely outweighed by

the positive consequences of remittances and participation in labor mobility more broadly. If given both a dollar and social value, material remittances might become of more interest in the future.

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